

Introduction

The *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (hereafter *Contribution*), published in 1793, is the second major published work of the young, up-and-coming philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte made a splash in the academic community already in 1792 with his *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, an analysis of the justification and limits of claims to religious revelation that drew heavily on Kant's critical philosophy (and, indeed, it was mistakenly thought to be authored by Kant at first). However, the French Revolution and the debate surrounding it in the German states quickly drew Fichte's attention, leading him to write in a more popular vein in an attempt to rekindle public support for the Revolution. The *Contribution* was written in winter 1792–93 (the first part or booklet, comprising the preface, introduction, and chapters 1–3) and summer 1793 (the second part, comprising chapters 4–6), during some of the bloodiest periods of the Revolution.¹ The work represents Fichte's first sustained popular writing, characterized by his distinctive blend of abstract philosophical language and concrete, passionate calls for reform. After completing the second part of the first book Fichte accepted an offer for a prestigious professorship in Jena in critical philosophy and so abandoned this project, leaving the entire second volume unfinished.² He then proceeded in Jena

1. See the editor's introduction to the *Contribution* in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Reihe 1, Band 1, *Werke 1791–1794*, ed. Hans Jacob and Reinhard Lauth (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964), 196–97.

2. Fichte abandoned the project before writing the second book because of the considerable expectations of his academic position in Jena, as well as a desire to avoid further controversy as a radical when Fichte was revealed to be the author of the *Contribution*. See especially his letter to Goethe, translated in the first appendix, requesting political protection from the prince, in exchange for not writing any more pamphlets.

to develop his philosophical system in a series of works—above all the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794—which made him one of the most profound and influential philosophical minds of post-Kantian idealism.

The *Contribution* is an important text for several reasons. First, it sheds light on the German debate about the French Revolution, much less widely known than the contemporaneous debates in France, England, and the United States. Second, it is an innovative work in the history of political theory, as it synthesizes Locke’s and Rousseau’s social contract theory and Kant’s moral philosophy, yet applies contractualist principles in a much more individualistic, even anarchist, direction. Finally, the work provides insight into the development of Fichte’s thought, not only in his political philosophy, but also in his foundational theoretical work, the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In what follows, we will take up each of these topics, placing the work in the context of the German debate over the French Revolution (section 1), in the context of modern social contract theory (section 2), and in the context of Fichte’s philosophical development in the 1790s (section 3).

1. The French Revolution in Germany

The early response of the German public to the Revolution was celebratory. The year 1789 seemed to mark a new stage in humanity’s history for many thinkers, providing hope for the creation of a regime founded on reason, merit, and the “rights of man” rather than superstition, corruption, and privilege. Indeed, even moderate to conservative thinkers weighed in with their support. Friedrich Gentz, for example, who would go on to be one of the most vehement critics of the Revolution after translating Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* into German in 1793, wrote in 1790:

The Revolution constitutes the first practical triumph of philosophy, the first example in the history of the world of the construction of government upon the principles of an orderly, rationally-constructed system. It constitutes the hope of mankind and provides consolation to men elsewhere who continue to groan under the weight of age-old evils.³

3. Quoted in Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 436.

As the Revolution proceeded, however, many authors found the increasing radicalism and violence of the revolutionaries abhorrent. The French revolutionary army occupied Mainz in 1792–93, and peasant revolts broke out in Saxony in the wake of revolutionary enthusiasm, further dampening support. Conservative governments of many of the German states promulgated repressive policies against political subversion. Nevertheless, in journal publications throughout this period, the debate between Burke and Thomas Paine became well-known and well-rehearsed.⁴

One of the most important and influential critics of the French Revolution in Germany—and a target of Fichte’s polemic in the *Contribution*—was August Wilhelm Rehberg. Rehberg hailed from the electorate of Hanover in Northwest Germany, which had a close relationship dynastically and hence politically with Great Britain. Like many fellow Hanoverians, Rehberg studied and was influenced by Britain’s moderate constitutional monarchy and its empiricist philosophy, embodied above all in the skepticism of David Hume. Rehberg’s friend and fellow writer Ernst Brandes travelled to England, struck up a friendship with Edmund Burke, and attempted to shape Hanoverian politics according to the model of British constitutional monarchy. Rehberg himself was commissioned by the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* to review the latest French and English pamphlets about the Revolution. These reviews became the basis for Rehberg’s influential work, *Untersuchungen über die Französische Revolution* (hereafter, *Untersuchungen*), published in January 1793.⁵

Rehberg’s *Untersuchungen* consists of two parts: the first volume takes aim at the underlying principles and the deleterious consequences of the Revolution, while the second examines the history of the Revolution, its causes and missteps. Rehberg’s main critique of the Revolution’s fundamental principles concerns its overreliance on abstract reason. For Rehberg, reason can discern formal, abstract legal principles such as the rights of man or the general will, but, because of its abstractness, it cannot provide any determinate political guidance: “The laws of reason,” according to Rehberg, “are not sufficient as a basis to derive the laws of civil society”

4. On the Revolution and its reception in Germany, see Epstein, *German Conservatism*, ch. 9.

5. August Wilhelm Rehberg, *Untersuchungen über die Französische Revolution*, 2 vols. (Hannover: Ritscher, 1793). On Rehberg’s thought and life, see Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 302–9; Epstein, *German Conservatism*, ch. 11.

(*Untersuchungen* 1:12). Rehberg uses Rousseau's distinction between the general will and the will of all as an example. It is a crucial distinction in Rousseau's view, but Rehberg claims that Rousseau gives us no tools for identifying the general will as over and above the aggregation of the interests of each. Reason's impotence in practice, however, paradoxically has a dangerous effect. Since it cannot be constructive in practice, it ends up being destructive, tearing down all institutions that fail to live up to its unattainable standard (1:21). Rehberg's skepticism is at work here in his critique of the Revolution's excessive faith in reason. Reason thus must be supplemented by a deference to inherited tradition, to "arbitrary determinations and orders" that have stood the test of time (1:16). Instead of exclusively relying on universal reason, Rehberg argues, we should attend empirically to the distinct traditions and histories of each country. Our governing principles should be informed by the institutions, mores, language, and religion that animate each regime's history.

Whereas Rehberg's background inclined him to be critical of the Revolution, Fichte's background moved him in the opposite direction. Fichte was born in 1762 in crushing poverty, son of a poor ribbon weaver in a tiny village in Saxony. His remarkable intellectual abilities landed him a spot at the prestigious Pforta boarding school, but, after graduating, he had to scrape by as a private tutor to aristocratic families who treated him with contempt. Fichte was headstrong, ambitious, with a keen sense of self-respect, which meant he did not stay employed with one lord for too long.⁶ His personal hatred of inequality was given a philosophical grounding through his reading of Rousseau and Kant in 1790. His reading of Kant, as often noted, was transformative, and Fichte became a convert to Kantianism and its rational defense of the equality and freedom of all humanity.

As such, when Rehberg's *Untersuchungen* appeared in 1792, as public opinion turned against the Revolution, Fichte was moved to respond to it. Fichte's plan for the *Contribution* was that he would establish the Revolution's legitimacy in the first volume and discuss its "wisdom" in the second volume (14),⁷ thereby taking on Rehberg's critique of

6. For more on Fichte's biography, see Allen W. Wood, *Fichte's Ethical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 1; Anthony J. La Vopa, *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

7. Page numbers in parentheses are from this volume's translation.

the Revolution's principles and consequences. Fichte never wrote the second book, and so the *Contribution's* main focus is on the underlying principles and their application. This focus partially explains a strange feature of the work, which is that it references the Revolution itself exceedingly rarely. Fichte scrupulously maintains a distance from the details on the ground in France, in part because of censorship worries in the German states (Fichte published the work anonymously, though he was outed as the author rather quickly after its publication—see the letter to Reinhold, translated in the first appendix), and in part because his aim in the work is to defend universal principles applicable beyond this particular time and place.

Fichte's response to Rehberg in the *Contribution* is frequently ad hominem, yet he does set out to provide a substantive reply to Rehberg's skepticism of rationalism in politics. In the introduction, Fichte challenges Rehberg's empiricist approach to political principles. For Fichte, the appeal to history and tradition does not settle the question of how one's country ought to be governed. It only describes how it has been governed. To settle the question of justice, we can never appeal to the changing content of experience, but only to the universal, formal nature of our subjectivity. Chapters 1–2 of the *Contribution* defend the universal principles underlying the Revolution, thereby justifying the French people's claim to have a right to change their constitution. In these chapters, Fichte develops his distinctive synthesis of Lockean and Rousseauian social contract theory with Kantian moral teleology, which we will discuss in the next section. Finally, chapters 3–6 of the work are explicitly an "application" of his principles (67), and so aim to meet Rehberg's challenge that rational principles are inapplicable to politics. Fichte applies his social contract theory to private property, the family, and civil society (chapter 3), the estates (chapters 4–5), and religion (chapter 6). In each case, he argues that the freedom and equality of all human beings mean that our places in society are not fixed by nature or social authority, but we are free to enter, exit, and form associations as we see fit, ones that redound to the benefit of all, not simply the few.⁸

The *Contribution* saddled Fichte with a reputation as a political radical, even a Jacobin, which did not sit well with government authorities

8. For more on Fichte's response to Rehberg, see La Vopa, *Fichte*, ch. 4.

when he took up his university post.⁹ Indeed, Fichte's reputation caught up to him in 1799, when he was dismissed from the university on charges of atheism.¹⁰ There is some merit to the claim of Fichte's radicalism in the *Contribution*. The work was published in 1793, after the execution of Louis XVI (January 1793), the establishment of the dictatorial Committee on Public Safety (April 1793), and its purges during the summer of 1793. These events were well-known to the German public, and nevertheless Fichte defended the Revolution. In contrast, consider Kant's critique of the Revolution in his "Theory and Practice" essay, published in September 1793: Kant categorically condemns all revolution as the "highest and most punishable crime within a commonwealth," and states that once a people violates their constitution, then a "condition of anarchy arises with all the horrors that are at least possible."¹¹ Personally, Fichte also flirted with Jacobinism. For example, when he arrived in Jena, he helped found the Association of the Free Men, which sought to advance the ideals of the revolution and whose "prominent members" included "the Jacobin spy Johann Franz Brechtel."¹²

At the same time, these charges could be overblown. Fichte did not write the second volume of his *Contribution* in which he promised to discuss the "wisdom" of the Revolution's means. It is, of course, quite possible that Fichte could have defended the ends of the Revolution while critiquing its means (Kant in a different way takes this view in the 1798 *Conflict of the Faculties*). Indeed, in a letter to Kant after the first volume of the *Contribution*, Fichte admits he is searching for "proposals concerning the means for remedying these injustices [of the ancien régime] without disorder, since I have not yet advanced to that

9. See the letter to Stephani, mid-December 1793, where Fichte related that "it is said in public that we held meetings of a Jacobin Club at Ott's country house." Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 370. In the letters from Hufeland and to Goethe, translated in the first appendix, the controversies surrounding the *Contribution* are prominent.

10. See Yolanda Estes and Curtis Bowman, eds., *J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)* (London: Routledge, 2010).

11. Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 299–302.

12. Frederick Beiser, "Fichte and the French Revolution," in *Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, ed. David James and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 38–64.

point.”¹³ Moreover, in his “Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought” essay, written just before the composition of the *Contribution*, Fichte adopts a much more gradualist as opposed to radical or revolutionary approach to politics. The essay critiques government censorship, especially Wöllner’s Religious Edict of 1788, and argues that freedom of thought helps a country make “gradual steps forward,” a “more certain path to greater enlightenment” (121). Censorship dams up the public passions, while freedom of thought alleviates them in a constructive way, “so that the waters do not forcefully break through and horribly ravage the fields,” in the way we see in the “dreadful spectacle” of the French Revolution (122).¹⁴ In other words, Fichte in this essay adopts the moderate, liberal view that freedom of thought, rather than revolutionary violence or conservative repression, is the best means to achieve the ends of the people and the princes.¹⁵ Since Fichte never wrote the second volume of the *Contribution*, however, we may never know his views about the prudence of revolutionary action.

2. The *Contribution* and Social Contract Theory

The *Contribution* makes very little mention of the French Revolution itself, its personalities, events, and institutions. Instead, the work’s ambition is more universal—to develop and defend a novel approach to social contract theory that could justify revolution.¹⁶ It is novel in two ways: first, in its resolute argument for individualism as the basis of revolution, as opposed to popular sovereignty, and, second, in its account of the benefits of freedom for moral and spiritual culture.

13. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 364–65. Cf. *Contribution*, 9: “Worthiness for freedom must grow from the bottom up; [while] the liberation without disorder may only come from above.”

14. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, Who Have Oppressed It until Now,” in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press), 119–42.

15. For more on the debate over Fichte’s Jacobinism, see Beiser, “Fichte and the French Revolution”; La Vopa, *Fichte*, 83.

16. This universality of the text was admired by reviewers—see, for instance, the introduction to the review by the conservative Friedrich Gentz, translated in the second appendix.

Political authority in the ancien régime was justified by an appeal to the natural inequality of human beings. Some individuals or groups deserved to rule in virtue of being graced by nature or God with certain attributes. The social contract theory of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau challenged this account of natural inequality, holding instead that all human beings were equal, that no individual had a rightful claim to rule over any other. The only basis for political authority, then, lies in the free consent of individuals. Government's legitimacy derives not from nature or God, but from the consent of the governed. It is clear how revolutionary these principles were to the ancien régime, and, indeed, these principles become embodied in the central revolutionary documents—the Declaration of Independence and Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Indeed, Jefferson expresses this revolutionary character well when in the Declaration of Independence he writes, “when a long train of abuses and usurpations . . . evinces a design to reduce [the people] under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

However, social contract theorists differ as to whether their principles can indeed justify revolution. On the one hand, John Locke famously argues that the people contract with one another to entrust some of their rights to a limited government. If this government manifestly fails to achieve or contravenes its purpose, the people can forcibly replace that government. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant—whose view of revolution appeared, as we saw above, a few months after Fichte's—vehemently denies that the people have the right to revolution. Revolution is based on a judgment of the people. Yet the people never gather together in one place to make such a judgment. Rather, it is an idea claimed by one group or another, that this or that group speaks for the people. On Kant's view, the only group that has a legitimate claim to speaking for the people is the government itself, which would not license a revolution against itself.

Fichte's approach is different. Unlike Locke and Rousseau, Fichte seldom appeals to popular sovereignty or the general will.¹⁷ He does not develop principles to identify the judgments of the people. Instead,

17. Schottky notes that Fichte uses the term only once in the entire work. See his introduction to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution*, ed. Richard Schottky (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1973), viii–ix.

in chapter 3, Fichte justifies revolution at a point prior to the people's creation of government, namely, the point at which individuals contract with one another to form a people. At that point, individuals stand toward one another in the state of nature. In the state of nature, they are governed only by the moral law and must follow their rational "will" (*Wille*) when that law commands them. Where the moral law is silent, however, individuals possess the freedom to act as they wish, according to their "arbitrary will" (*Willkür*) (109).¹⁸ They can enter into any contract they wish—familial, business, political, religious—and thereby alienate certain rights to enjoy the benefits of that contractual relationship. Fichte's innovation here is to argue that individuals can exit contracts at any time. If an individual exits a contract before either party has fulfilled its duties, then each can freely go its separate ways (74). If an individual exits a contract after the other party has fulfilled its duties and before he or she has, then the individual owes compensation to the other party (75). Much of Fichte's discussion consists in a careful analysis of when such compensation is owed, and when it is not. In contrast to conservatives such as Rehberg Fichte argues that individuals owe very little to the state, for its role either in protecting or educating them.

Fichte applies this right to unilateral exit broadly, and it becomes the basis of the right to revolution. What we refer to as revolution is in fact separate individuals exiting a contract that they find unsuitable to them (101). Moreover, he argues in chapters 4–5 that some contracts, such as the contracts the privileged have made with the less privileged, were so thoroughly unequal and exploitative that no rational being could be assumed to consent to such contracts. Indeed, Fichte argues, the less privileged cannot be assumed to have consented to these contracts at all, as they involve the inheritance of debt and outright servitude. In this case, these contracts violate the inalienable rights of individuals and so cannot be consented to at all. Fichte touches on inequality in a contractual society, arguing that individuals could consent to inequality so long as their basic needs are met (130). If any one peasant goes hungry, the "luxury" of the privileged "must be limited with no mercy" (131). In this way, Fichte justifies forcible redistribution of the Revolution as in accordance with the moral law.

18. Fichte's distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* derives from Kant. See Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 7.

Fichte's novel approach to social contract theory has been described as a form of anarchism, as it circumvents any sort of collective authority or self-determination in its resolute emphasis on individual freedom. In this way, Fichte stands much closer to Locke than Rousseau or Kant, and could be appealing to those theories of liberalism that uphold individual freedom of contract and denigrate communitarian or collectivist views, and that defend inalienable rights and reciprocity in contractual exchange. At the same time, the anarchism involved in the unilateral right to exit contracts may exact a cost for collective action. If any individual at any time has the right to exit from an association, then who would sign up for such associations in the first place? In his review of the *Contribution* (translated in the second appendix), Friedrich Gentz makes such an argument, which might have caused Fichte to change his view in his mature Jena political philosophy, the 1796–97 *Foundations of Natural Right*.

Finally, it must be said that Fichte adopts an eccentric Lockean approach to property rights, discussed in chapter 3 (76ff.).¹⁹ Like Locke, he justifies private property based on self-ownership and the labor of the first occupant, that this individual impressed upon mere matter her form, which thereby stamped this part of the earth with her freedom. Unlike Locke, however, Fichte argues that once all the land on earth has been claimed, then subsequent individuals have no rightful claim to that land—it is unlucky for them (80, 83). In other words, Fichte does not conceive of all of humanity as sharing in the original, common ownership of the earth, as Locke and later Kant would (instead, for Fichte, no one owns the earth; 78). Furthermore, also unlike Locke, Fichte holds that children can be claimed by any adult who arrives first after the child is born and takes responsibility for their rights and duties (95–96). Fichte severs the natural relationship of parent and child, again underscoring his individualism and his radicalization of the social contract tradition, which seeks to challenge the claims to authority resting on nature or the divine.

Let us shift to the second novelty of Fichte's social contract theory, which is that he defends his account in part through the benefits of freedom for the development of a moral culture. In this way, Fichte synthesizes a deontological justification of rights with a teleological

19. For more on Fichte's account of property, see David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy: Property and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), chs. 1–2.

account of the purpose of the free community. Such a synthesis was unusual, even though Kant himself would develop a version of it in his political philosophy later in the 1790s. Since Fichte's writings preceded Kant's, however, he set out to combine the social contract tradition with the teleological account of culture he found in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In the appendix to the second half of that text, the "Critique of Teleological Judgment," Kant seeks to understand the "purposiveness" (*Zweckmässigkeit*) of the natural world, and argues that the "final end" (*Endzweck*) of nature is the cultivation of all our capacities and skills, which he calls "culture" (*Kultur*). Nature's "ultimate end" (*letztes Zweck*), however, is the perfection of humanity's moral freedom. Kant conceives of political conflict and even war as providentially ordered such that these evils can nonetheless be turned to the good.

Fichte appropriates and expands Kant's understanding of culture. Culture is the community responsible for the general "exercise of all forces to the end of complete freedom" (49), which for Fichte is the purpose or end of our I, or subjectivity, and the only basis of "value" for all things (49). Culture must not only discipline our sensible or embodied nature, but also put it to use in the achievement of humanity's freedom. In addition, Fichte employs the notion of culture not strictly in the context of a theodicy in his philosophy of history, but rather as a moral ideal, a normative standard by which to judge the goodness of a regime and the purpose that regime sets for itself. In other words, in the *Contribution*, Fichte is concerned with evaluating not only the justice of political regimes but also the effect of those regimes on the good life of its members. This dual concern is most evident in the first chapter, in which Fichte first discusses the right of individuals to freedom of their "arbitrary will" (43–48) and then, second, the cultural consequences of a regime that favors or oppresses such freedom (48–60). According to Fichte, the cultural track record of the ancien régime is not good. Culture may have been slightly advanced, but only despite the tendency of the regime. The absolute monarchy's constant desire for power exploited culture for its end, rather than the end of humanity, and the Church's religious repression constrained the mind, hampering artistic, scientific, and moral progress. For Fichte, a government that respects the freedom of individuals would, by contrast, indirectly contribute to the progress of humanity. While the state, Fichte argues, cannot force individuals to believe anything in particular, it can remove the obstacles to their moral progress, eliminating those temptations to self-seeking activity that

corrupt culture.²⁰ By doing so, it can set out to “advance the highest final end of each individual, if the entire union [of the state] shall not be completely useless” (26).

Fichte’s treatment of the aristocracy in two chapters (chapters 4 and 5) may be understood in light of these two tasks. Chapter 4 is devoted to an accounting of the injustice of the social contract with the aristocracy. However, he also is concerned with the effects of the aristocracy on culture, which is why he needs another chapter, the longest of the book, on this topic. In chapter 5, his seemingly irrelevant foray into the historical origin and development of aristocracy and the distinction between the aristocracy of opinion and the aristocracy of right can be understood in this context. On Fichte’s view, the ancient aristocracy emerged from the noble deeds of individuals, whose noble reputation passed from father to son and down through the generations. This aristocracy of opinion contributed to the development of culture, as individuals respect and are inspired by the exemplary deeds of others. By contrast, the aristocracy of right emerges when noble families seek to consolidate what they have accumulated under law, to preserve what is theirs rather than contribute to the common good by demonstrating their excellence. The aristocracy of right—and here Fichte is thinking about early modern forms of aristocratic privilege—is rife with corrupt, small-souled, self-seeking individuals. These aristocrats arrest the development of culture because they arouse hatred rather than respect.

His discussion of religion in chapter 6 also has this dual character. In the second half of the chapter, Fichte analyzes the rightful basis and scope of church authority, and its relationship to the state. Fichte’s view on this matter is liberal—the state’s purview is the protection of material rights and it has oversight only of human action, not belief. By contrast, religion’s purview is the protection of our soul and so it has oversight of belief. The state’s kingdom is that of the visible world, the church’s, the invisible world, and so the two do not overlap. Indeed, if the church does attempt to coerce belief by employing the state, it violates the rights of individuals, subjecting them to an association without their consent.

In the first half of the chapter, however, Fichte develops a psychological account of the basis and development of religion. For Fichte, religions

20. See David James, *Fichte’s Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch. 3, for more on Fichte’s view of culture and its teleological aims.

have their origin in the noble drive of human beings to unify around the truth. Different religions profess different truths. However, religions face the challenge that they can never be sure whether their members are fully honest in their profession of faith. As a result, each religion has an incentive to compel its members to profess ever “more fantastical, absurd, and contrary to sound reason . . . teachings,” because then a church can be “more firmly convinced . . . of the devotion of such members” (184). As a religion becomes more fantastical, Fichte holds, it requires a system of belief that can defeat the doubts of reason, and it does so by piling absurd doctrines on top of absurd doctrines until our reason tires itself out in analysis. In this way, Fichte’s account of positive religion is much more skeptical than Kant’s in his *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, published contemporaneously in 1793. Whereas Kant holds that many positive religions can help advance the aims of natural, rational religion, Fichte holds that positive religion tends to run at cross purposes with religion. Fichte’s anti-Semitic screed against Judaism can be read as well in this context (102–103). In sum, rather than furthering the moral aims of humanity, religion seems to arrest our progress.

Fichte’s incorporation of culture into social contract theory addresses a powerful conservative worry about contractualism present in Edmund Burke and A. W. Rehberg. A common anxiety of conservative critics of social contract theory is that the development of human reason and contractual exchange leads to the destruction of traditional institutions and practices that would provide some purpose and guidance for our spiritual longings, an unleashing of our self-interested, materialistic drives, and an isolation of one generation from those before and after it. Once the ancien régime fades away, as religion declines, what will fill the void in the human heart? What will keep us from a spiritual barbarism that will then lead to a political barbarism? Many German thinkers, including Lessing, Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Kant, and others, sought to conceive of new, distinctively modern forms of association, as well as a new type of “education of the human race” (as Lessing puts it) to shape and advance human culture. The French Revolution poses this problem in a particularly acute way, with its vivid displays of the destruction of the old and the installation of reason as the new divinity. In the preface to the *Contribution*, Fichte reveals that his aim is not simply to defend the Revolution and its “political consequences” (5). Rather, he is interested in how the Revolution serves as an “instructional portrayal, which the great educator of humanity sets up so that humanity may learn what it

is in need of knowing” (5). Far from representing a decline into atomism or anarchy, the Revolution points toward a new form of community, the moral culture of humanity. This culture connects humanity with “links” that “tie into eternity” in an intergenerational pursuit of moral perfection (100). The truth, in other words, is the opposite of what Burke and Rehberg claim: the ancien régime corrupts human character and destroys the sources of moral and spiritual satisfaction, while modern culture promises to improve us artistically and scientifically, morally and spiritually.

3. The *Contribution* and Fichte’s Development

The *Contribution* represents a crucial point in Fichte’s philosophical development. Before the *Contribution*, Fichte adhered more or less scrupulously to the letter of Kant’s critical philosophy. This work, however, effected a fundamental change in his thought, as Fichte himself attests in a famous 1795 draft letter to Jens Baggesen:

My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves, which is to say, from those external influences with which all previous systems—including the Kantian—have more or less fettered man. Indeed, the first principle of my system presents man as an independent being. During the very years when France was using external force to win its political freedom I was engaged in an inner struggle with myself and with all deeply rooted prejudices, and this is the struggle which gave birth to my system. . . . Indeed, it was while I was writing about the French Revolution that I was rewarded by the first hints and intimations of this system.²¹

While writing the *Contribution*, Fichte conceived what would become his mature Jena system of knowledge, or *Wissenschaftslehre*. Let us examine a few ways in which this work anticipates the *Wissenschaftslehre*, before turning to its influence on Fichte’s subsequent views of culture, rights, and the nation.

21. Quoted in Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 385–86.

The story of Fichte's development in the first half of the 1790s is well-known in the literature.²² In short, Kant's critical philosophy was transformative of the German philosophical scene in the 1780s. However, skeptics nonetheless took issue with many of Kant's claims. One of Kant's defenders and popularizers, Karl Reinhold, sought to reconstruct Kant's philosophy on the basis of a single indubitable principle of consciousness or "representation" (*Vorstellung*), such that it became immune to skepticism. In response, a reviewer under the pseudonym Aenesidemus (G. E. Schulze) argued that Reinhold's reconstruction was subject to skeptical doubt, as Reinhold could not provide a way to bridge the gulf between our representation of being and being itself. Aenesidemus's arguments unsettled Fichte, and led him to abandon the letter of Kant's philosophy, while still defending its spirit. Fichte published his response to Aenesidemus in February 1794, a review he began while writing the *Contribution*. Fichte sought to ground critical philosophy on the I, on the nature of subjectivity. He bridged thought and being by denying the "mischief" of the thing-in-itself. For Fichte, it is "downright impossible" for us to "think of a thing independent of any faculty of representation at all."²³ As recent scholars have argued, Fichte does not deny the reality of being, but its conceivability independent of an observing subject.²⁴

What role does the French Revolution play in this rather abstract philosophical debate? Fichte notes in his letter to Baggesen that the Revolution taught him to liberate human beings from all "external shackles," and these shackles include not only those visible to us, but also those ideas that we invest with an independent authority over us, especially "things-in-themselves." The Revolution pointed toward a form of authority no longer based on nature or God, but on the autonomous will of individuals. In the wake of his *Contribution*, Fichte realized that he must apply this basic insight to philosophy itself, since philosophy has assumed that the authority of nature or God is supreme, and the philosopher's task is to discern what nature or God has to say on this or

22. For helpful discussions, see Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 2; Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 2; Günter Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

23. Quoted in Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 72–73.

24. See, e.g., Wood, *Fichte's Ethical Thought*.

that matter. For Fichte, human beings can only be truly free when we liberate ourselves not just from the visible shackles of political authority, but the invisible shackles of our own ideas. For this reason, Fichte radicalizes Kant's claim as to the primacy of practical reason—that is, philosophy is first and foremost not a theoretical discipline, which passively seeks to understand what is independent of it, but rather it is a practical discipline, which aims to grasp the purpose or aim of human subjectivity, and how it can best achieve this end. In this way, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, often understood to be an extravagant exercise in a precritical metaphysics of some superhuman ego governing the world, is instead an account of the practical ideal of humanity, that the world should be governed by the purpose or aim of human subjectivity.²⁵

An example of the influence of the *Contribution* on the *Wissenschaftslehre* project appears in the preface, in which Fichte argues that his aim is not to coerce readers into belief, but rather to the “awakening of independent thinking” (9). One of Fichte's signature approaches in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is to proceed in his argument by asking the reader to perform the same intellectual exercise that Fichte himself undertakes to make his point. In the first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte states, “Attend to yourself; turn your gaze from everything surrounding you and look within yourself: this is the first demand philosophy makes upon anyone who studies it.”²⁶ Already in the *Contribution*, Fichte “ask[s] him [the reader]—if he wants—to practice the application [of Fichte's principles] through his own attempts” (9).

The *Contribution*, then, shaped Fichte's view of the nature and aims of philosophy itself. In addition, the work also anticipates several developments in Fichte's practical philosophy. As we saw above, Fichte expanded Kant's notion of culture, which in Fichte's hands becomes the modern community responsible for the cultivation of the “purpose” or “vocation of humanity” (48), the perfection of our cognitive powers and moral nature. The ultimate aim of culture is the overcoming of the differences among human beings that are the causes of our conflicts, and the creation of the “highest unanimity of dispositions” under the moral law (61). Similarly, in 1794, Fichte set out in his second set of lectures

25. See Beiser, “Fichte and the French Revolution,” for more on the relationship between the French Revolution and the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

26. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings, 1797–1800*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett), 7.

in Jena—delivered in much more public, accessible language than his first set of lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre*—to describe the “vocation of man as such” and in particular the “vocation of the scholar.”²⁷ The vocation of humanity is to realize the purpose or aim of human subjectivity, a moral perfection of our freedom. The “ultimate and highest means to [our] final goal” of “complete harmony with [ourselves]” is “culture,” that form of community in which each can contribute her own distinctive excellence for the advancement of humanity.²⁸ By contributing to this community, we connect our labor to the eternal. The lectures on the “Vocation of the Scholar,” then, further develop the notion of a unifying, intergenerational moral culture mentioned first in the *Contribution*.

Fichte did, however, reconsider some of his views, particularly on the nature and basis of right. In the *Contribution*, Fichte grounds right on the Kantian moral law. According to the moral law, each human being ought to be treated as an end in himself, which grounds certain inalienable rights, as well as the respect for the arbitrary will of each. By the time Fichte writes the *Foundations of Natural Right* in 1796–97, he developed a justification of right independent of morality. Instead of grounding right on the moral law, Fichte grounded right on the conditions for the possibility of individual self-consciousness. In that work, Fichte also revisited the extreme individualism of the *Contribution*, arguing instead that revolution is justified based on the judgment of the people as a sovereign whole, assembled at regular intervals according to the constitution, not on the judgment of each individual. Indeed, those individuals who put their “private wills” before the “common will” represent “a rebellion and must immediately be punished as such.”²⁹

Finally, Fichte scholars often see a break between his Jena period work of the 1790s, and the post-1800 writings. This assessment is often motivated by an inability to understand how a philosophical radical of the 1790s could morph into an originating figure of German nationalism in the *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808.³⁰ Already in chapter 5 of

27. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 146.

28. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 150.

29. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 149

30. See James, *Fichte's Republic*, for a recent effort to find commonalities between the *Addresses* and Fichte's Jena period writings.

the *Contribution*, however, Fichte intimated a theory that would become more fully developed in the *Addresses*. In chapter 5, Fichte envisions a historical development from a simple, honorable aristocratic epoch of the ancient world, to the corrupted aristocracy of feudal Europe, to, finally, the emerging era of the self-interested bourgeois. Fichte would systematize this historical narrative in his *Characteristics of the Present Age* and the *Addresses*. However, in the *Contribution*, he also adumbrates a “higher” aim he hopes for from future citizens, which is embraced by neither bourgeois nor aristocrat, namely, the “mightier incentives of altruistic virtue and love of the fatherland” (173). This nationalistic love can serve the end of justice by reconciling the different classes to equality under the law, and it can also unify an otherwise divided civil society toward their common moral aims. In this way, Fichte was already thinking quite early in his career about the role of national spirit in fostering humanity’s moral end.

There are several editions of the *Contribution* in German, and the work has been translated twice into French, once in the nineteenth century, and again in the 1970s. It has never been translated into English. This translation makes Fichte’s important work accessible to an English audience, where interest in Fichte has grown considerably over the past twenty years.