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From the Jena period to the *Reden*: Philosophical and historical developments

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Abstract: This paper surveys the major themes of Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* with a view to situating them within Fichte's earlier practical philosophy. In these lectures Fichte defines 'nation'; defends a principle for determining a nation's true ("inner") borders; argues for a view of the relation of culture to language; argues for the superiority of the German to the French language as a vehicle for culture; offers an account of why an individual should be concerned with the survival of his nation and with the progress of its culture; argues that political independence is a necessary condition of the survival of a nation; argues that education is the only path to political independence (for Germans in their historical situation); and outlines a system of education aimed in part at advancing that end. Little of this is prefigured in the practical philosophy of the Jena period, though much is consistent with it, and some is prefigured by certain of Fichte's writings post-1800.

Keywords: Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, *Addresses to the German Nation*, nationalism, language, education, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi

1 Cosmopolitan Patriotism

The practical philosophy of the Jena period had admitted obligations concerning two collectivities: other members of the political commonwealth of which the agent is a citizen, and the human race as a whole. In the years following the battle of Austerlitz, Fichte attempted to construct an account of obligations that would concern a third collectivity: fellow speakers of one's own language, regardless of whether they are politically united in a commonwealth.

Properly political duties, Fichte had held, are hypothetical imperatives, their normative force stemming from the value of coordination with others in action toward a wide variety of ends both moral and prudential. Political duties simply *per se* could not require outright self-sacrifice of an individual for the sake of fellow citizens. Fichte took it to be a rational constraint on political organisation that it

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function without relying on any such sacrifices. Moral duties, by contrast, are categorical, and could require self-sacrifice. Individuals were morally obligated not only to obey the law, but also to defend the political rights of fellow citizens where these are threatened, in circumstances in which the state is unable to intervene, even at the cost of their own life.¹

On the Jena account, neither kind of duty extended to citizen defence of the commonwealth against foreign invaders. Fichte had distinguished sharply between citizens and soldiers; assumed conquest to be carried out by a non-pillaging, non-marauding, paid professional army (I,4, 158–159);² and described the inhabitants of a conquered territory as (unproblematically) becoming rights-bearing members of the conquering state and acquiring political obligations therein (I,4, 158). No duty to defend their neighbours' rights would be triggered by such conquest; no duty to defend their commonwealth *per se* from attack existed; and there could be no duty of post-conquest resistance for members of the conquered population, unless the conquering state were so defective simply *qua* state as to trigger justified revolution. That there might be obligations to other German-speakers *qua* German-speakers, or to the collectivity of German-speakers, was something Fichte had never considered.

In the first of the *Dialogues concerning Patriotism and its Opposite*, written in July 1806, the character representing Fichte makes three new claims that are retained in the *Addresses*.

First, he asserts the identity of cosmopolitanism and patriotism, where cosmopolitanism is defined as “the prevailing will that the goal³ of the existence of the human race be accomplished in the human race” and patriotism is defined as “the will that this goal be reached first of all in that nation whose members we ourselves are, and that starting from this point this success is spread over the entire race” (II,9, 399). The identity of the two is said to follow from the fact that the will can “intervene as living force only in the closest surroundings in which it immediately lives and exists”. Any properly motivated moral agent therefore “must necessarily, through his confinement to a nation, become a patriot” (II,9, 400).

Second, he defines “nation” as the set of individuals sharing a common language and a common “national character” (II,9, 402–403), and argues that the dis-

1 Cf. Kosch (2018), ch. 3, for arguments supporting these claims.

2 Parenthetical page numbers refer to the *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie* (Fichte 1962–2012). Translations are mine.

3 By this he means the moral end as defined in the *System of Ethics*: independence both in formal (in deliberation and decision) and material (from all substantive limitations along the dimensions of finitude essential to rational agents) senses. Cf. Kosch (2018), ch. 3 and 4, for details.

inction between the German nation and other European nations is “grounded in nature”, whereas that between Prussia and other states is “artificial” (II,9, 403).

Third, he asserts that “only the German can be a patriot” in the cosmopolitan sense (II,9, 404). This is said to follow from the fact that the next step (in the historical moment) on the path toward the goal of the human race is the widest possible spread of the system of knowledge based on the foundations laid by Kant and the *Wissenschaftslehre*. These texts having been written in the German language, the view they defend must take hold in Germany before it can be expected to spread to the rest of the world. Thus, only the German-speaker can rationally expect the goal of the human race to be advanced first of all in the nation whose member he is. Every other patriotism must be “selfish, narrow-minded, and hostile to the rest of the human race” (II,9, 405).⁴

The second *Dialogue*, written in June 1807 (notably, after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire by Francis II on 6 August 1806 and the battle of Jena on 14 October 1806) adds two further new elements.

The first is a distinction between duties concerning one’s own commonwealth in the ordinary course and those that arise when it is under threat. The latter include the duty to defend the state and to put personal interests aside in so doing, a duty of “active patriotism, free self-sacrifice and a disposition to heroism” (II,9, 420). The rationale Fichte offers appeals to the importance of a stable political structure as a necessary condition of communal life, individual rational planning, moral progress, and the fulfilment of most moral duties. This would be a moral duty, most closely linked to the duty to ensure that a political commonwealth exists, but sharing the force of the moral duty to defend the bodies and property of fellow citizens where the state cannot. (Notably, Fichte has replaced his earlier conception of the situation of a conquered population with the more realistic one in which security of life and property have been lost.)

A moral duty of selfless sacrifice to prevent this right-less state of affairs from obtaining would not, it is worth noting, justify an uprising against stably established foreign rule simply *qua* foreign. Fichte at this point appears to see the struggle against France as ongoing and the German nation as still effectively under attack. In the *Addresses*, read before the public in winter semester 1807/1808, the essentially backward-looking regret over the failures of self-defence that charac-

⁴ Indeed Fichte goes so far as to say that the German nation must “through science” take up the “government of the world”, lest it be taken up by non-European nations and Europe be left to fall into “ignorance and idiocy” (II,9, 415). This German supremacism is absent from in the *Addresses*, which instead advocate on cultural grounds (cf. I,10, 267) the self-sufficient isolationism Fichte had earlier defended on economic grounds in *The Closed Commercial State*.

terises the second *Dialogue* is replaced by a forward-looking imperative to justify the (perhaps violent) overthrow of French rule and re-establishment of the political independence of the German-speaking world. To support this stronger claim, Fichte will recruit an elaborated argument for German exceptionalism.

The second new element of the second *Dialogue* is a call for educational reform, both as a way of producing a populace prepared for the self-sacrifice required by a duty of defence, and as a means to continued progress toward the final goal of humanity. Germany alone among European nations is capable of “rescuing the cultural situation (*Kulturstand*) of humanity” (II,9, 436), and this rescue necessitates the education of “a generation capable of understanding Kant and the *Wissenschaftslehre*” (II,9, 438–439) – whose failure to gain traction in the consciousness of the general public is the topic of a full two thirds of the text of the second *Dialogue* (II,9, 422–439). If there is a core message of the *Addresses*, around which every other element of the text revolves, it may well be this one: that without widespread uptake of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the final goal of humanity cannot be achieved.

2 The Nation

In the eighth *Address*, “What is a people, in the higher sense of the word, and what is love of fatherland?”, Fichte posits a ‘natural’ drive of the rational agent simply *per se* to “find heaven already upon the earth, to infuse something of eternal duration into his earthly daily work, to plant the eternal within the temporal itself and to nurture it there” (I,10, 199).⁵ He explains the religious striving for an other-worldly afterlife as a distortion of this more basic drive, produced by a situation of oppression: a person unable to see a path to an earthly afterlife embraces an ideology counselling resignation in earthly life and promising an inscrutable replacement for the drive’s proper object (I,10, 198–199).⁶ He also explains the desire for (genetic) posterity as a manifestation of this drive to earthly immortality. But the manifestation on which he focuses in the *Addresses* is the desire to leave a cultural legacy (I,10, 200). This would be a modification of the “intellectual law of nature of

⁵ This drive has no obvious antecedents in earlier work, and seems specifically motivated by the task of the eighth *Address*.

⁶ Fichte explicitly deplores religious ideology as a hindrance to progress, especially among the lower classes, in many places in this period (for instance in the political fragments composed winter 1807, at II,10, 378).

his nation" (I,10, 200) – its intellectual culture⁷ – which would “become an enduring determining ground of all of its future development” (I,10, 200–201). In this way the intellectual culture would carry the trace of the individual for as long as it persists.

A “nation” is defined as a group that collectively reproduces itself “both naturally and intellectually” (I,10, 201) – the former by biological reproduction and the assimilation of new arrivals, the latter by the reproduction and modification of the intellectual culture particular to it. The nation is not a racial or ethnic unit. The foundation of intellectual culture is language; and the “inner/intrinsic” boundaries of the nation are linguistic ones (I,10, 267).⁸

If intellectual culture is the medium in which a legacy can be left that would be both earthly and eternal, and if there is a fundamental drive to leave such a legacy, it follows that there is a hypothetical imperative to support the continued existence of the medium: to ensure that one’s nation persists and maintains the spiritual culture that it has (I,10, 200–202). Fichte concludes that an individual “must be willing even to die in order that it may live and that within it may live the only life he ever desired” (I,10, 202).

Much of Fichte’s argumentation in the *Addresses* is aimed at showing that this imperative justifies violent overthrow of foreign rule, even when such rule is already established and not seriously defective by the standards of right. The nation is more significant than state or social order, he argues, and love of fatherland must govern the running of the state and be the final court of appeal (I,10, 203). The state is a mere means, if a necessary one, to the nation’s preservation (I,10, 209–210). Though Fichte argues that a nation can persist only if it is governed by

7 I call this intellectual ‘culture’, though Fichte does not use the German cognate (*Kultur*) to refer to it. In 1794, Fichte had defined *Kultur* as skill in mastering irrational nature in oneself and in the world around one (I,3, 31). *Kultur* in this sense was something of which there could be different (quantitative) levels, but not different (qualitative) kinds. It was fully cosmopolitan, transmissible without limitations from one individual or group to another. Fichte’s topic in the eighth *Address* is precisely what is not cosmopolitan.

8 In saying that Fichte’s nationalism is cultural and not ethnic in nature. I am agreeing with the early 20th century French reception, and disagreeing with the German. I am unconvinced by Abizadeh’s (2005) argument that Fichte’s linguistic nationalism collapses into an ethnic one at the points in the argument at which Fichte makes appeal to concern with posterity. Abizadeh takes “posterity” to refer to genetic posterity. But it is clear both that the concern is one for cultural posterity alone and that Fichte takes cultural posterity to have a linguistic, and not an ethnic, root. The text of the eighth *Address* is explicit about these things; but I will add that if genetic posterity were the foundation of earthly immortality, for Fichte, the Germans could not differ from the French in their capacity for it, since descended from the same genetic stock (I,10, 143), and every element of the theory of language in the *Addresses* would be, strictly, beside the point.

one or more properly constituted commonwealths that are politically independent of the governments of any foreign nation (I,10, 207 and 259–261), the *Addresses* do not advocate the creation of any state corresponding to the German nation. (In fact, Fichte praises German political fragmentation: I,10, 247.)

It is clear, then, that this imperative to preserve the nation and to re-establish its independence cannot articulate a political duty in the sense of the Jena period. Its status appears rather to be that of an associative moral duty, akin to moral duties to uphold, defend, and (re-)institute political rights (and other role-based duties), but with national survival rather than coordination as the intermediary value. But the argument in the eighth *Address* alone leaves unclear what the moral basis of this value could be, from the standpoint of the practical philosophy of the Jena period. The drive on which it rests appears a selfish one, directed to one's own immortality *qua* one's own, and action on the drive has no obvious instrumental value in pursuit of the moral end. This seems to be what Fichte says of the drive in general in the first *Dialogue*. His argument for German exceptionalism in *Addresses* 4 and 14 is aimed at showing that for Germans in particular, action motivated by the drive is *per se* action promoting the moral end.

3 German

The *Addresses* replace appeal to the mere fact that Kant and Fichte wrote in German with an argument for the superiority of the German cultural medium to the French based on (purported) differences in the history of development of the two languages.

Fichte takes modern-day French and Germans to be descended from the same original nation. Three events produced the present-day distinction between them: those who became French migrated from their original home territory, mixed with a different indigenous population, and gave up their original language in favour of Latin. The first two changes are, Fichte tells us, insignificant; but the third is decisive for the distinctness of the two cultural media as substrates for an earthly afterlife (I,10, 144–145).

His account rests on a theory of the development of language that is new with the *Addresses*. It begins from a distinction between two parts of a language and of the emergence of their respective representational capacities. Terms in the 'sensible' part of language – linguistic representations of objects and events available to the senses – can be taught and learned by direct ostension. Terms in the 'supersensible' part – linguistic representations of objects of pure thought, for example mathematical objects, or moral or political ideals – must be taught and learned through

a symbolic analogue of ostension that combines extant terms in such a way that, in the context of the social and material life of the people, the listener is prompted to encounter, in thought, the same object (I,10, 148). The supersensible part of language emerges and is built out in tandem with the development of thought in a culture, and it depends at every point on the symbolic potential of extant terms in the given social and material context (I,10, 149).

The importance of a people's way of life in the development of the supersensible part of language is underscored in Fichte's consideration of how immigrants to a linguistic community are incorporated into it:

Any number of individuals of different tribes and languages may be incorporated into this original people; [but] if they are not allowed to raise their horizon of intuitions to the point of view from which the language would develop from that point on, they must remain mute in the community, and without influence on the language. [This is so] until the point at which they have themselves entered the horizon of intuitions of the original people. (I,10, 150)

To “remain mute” in the community is to be unable to modify its intellectual culture. But Fichte's claim is not that an immigrant is condemned to muteness in virtue of her ancestry or origin. It is instead that a kind of cultural assimilation to, and lived rootedness in, a linguistic community is necessary for full linguistic mastery and so full participation in the supersensible part of the language of that community. Only full participants are able to advance the intellectual culture of the people beyond its existing level, and thereby to plant the seed of their own earthly immortality.

When an individual, or a group, adopts a foreign language without being assimilated into the horizon of intuitions of its speakers, “it imposes its own horizon of intuitions upon the [new] language, and that language must progress from the point at which they found it in this new horizon of intuition” (I,10, 150). This is what happened, Fichte claims, in the case of the French. Their introduction of Latin into the Germanic mode of life was unproblematic so far as the sensible part of the language was concerned; but since the symbolism of the supersensible part had been intelligible only in a very different social and material context, its terms were never properly understood. Because not attached to the full set of behavioural expressions, beliefs, and motivations that made them meaningful in the Roman context, they were never properly action-guiding either (I,10, 150–151).

Although the supersensible part of their language continued to develop from that point, it did so in a way that maintained this gap between higher thought on the one hand and everyday life on the other. Intellectual development occurred in its own isolated sphere, incomprehensible to those who had not acquired – by specialised education available only to elites – facility with the abstract concepts of the adopted language.

Fichte's claim is that a cultural medium fractured in this way is necessarily limited. The social, moral, and political concerns of the present day will find it difficult to break into this closed sphere and have influence there. The sphere of higher thought will in turn be unable to offer guidance in navigating new concerns. It will be locked to some degree into the concerns of the past, its inquiries "historical and interpretive", their focus on resolving problems left unsolved in the ancient world (I,10, 166–167).

In the sixth *Address*, Fichte argues that every cultural advance that has taken place in the German-speaking realm from the Middle Ages has proceeded from the common life of the common German people (I,10, 179–180). He had long held that progress toward the moral end is not primarily the work of elites, but depends substantially on technological innovations that occur in the labouring classes (I,5, 300–301 and 314–317). The specific role of intellectuals is to develop a systematic understanding of human capabilities and needs, to locate current society in the timeline of human progress, to archive past advances for future use, and to promote progress through these functions and through scientific research and education (I,5, 300–301 and 302–303). An intellectual class cut off from the rest of society could not fulfil these roles. This is part of the background for Fichte's claim that the continued progress of intellectual culture is possible only in a language that is "living" (I,10, 155–156) – that is, one in which the mutual influence of intellectual life and the rest of life is maintained.

In an intellectual culture fractured in the way described, the possibility of meaningful modification – and so an earthly afterlife – would be closed off, even were the linguistic medium to persist forever. But (and this is the morally significant consideration) progress toward the moral end would be blocked as well. If one now adds, as Fichte does, the (undefended) assumption that German is the only living language remaining in Europe,⁹ it follows that only if it survives is the moral end achievable at all. "If it sinks, all of humanity sinks with it, with no hope of regeneration" (I,10, 298).

This is the argument supporting the first *Dialogue's* claim that cosmopolitanism is identical to patriotism only for Germans. It is not an argument for nationalism, in the usual sense, at all.¹⁰

⁹ Kohn notes that the implausibility of this claim was obvious to early readers, reporting that Jean Paul, who reviewed the *Reden* in the *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* in 1809, asked why the modern Greeks did not share the status of the Germans in this respect (Kohn 1949, 337–338n).

¹⁰ Ries (2018) and Taver (2012) agree in reading Fichte's *Reden* as fundamentally cosmopolitan in the sense of the *Dialogues*. Zöller (2008) also seems sympathetic to this view.

4 Education

Fichte's concern for the continued relevance of German intellectual culture, and of German philosophy in particular, is central to the educational proposals he makes in the *Addresses*, insofar as they are based on the further claim that if higher thought is to remain in contact with the circle of intuition that is its living basis, that circle of intuition itself must be cultivated. That the German language persist as a cultural medium is a necessary condition, but it is no longer a sufficient one. The latest in philosophy will never have widespread intelligibility and application until the system of education he proposes makes this possible (I,10, 179).

This is Fichte's reason for demanding an education aimed at the entire populace (including the agricultural and urban working classes).¹¹ The same concern animates his detailed curricular suggestions. He had long held that his moral philosophy relies on his theoretical philosophy for its foundation, and this order of dependence is reflected in the order of instruction he proposes. Elementary education must begin by "inciting [the child's] mental activity to the projection of images, and allowing him to learn everything that he learns only from this free imagining: because intuition is possible only of that which has been freely projected" (I,10, 219). The imagination is rule-governed, and the student learns its rules in the course of exercising it, thereby gaining actual knowledge of "universal and exceptionless law" and simultaneously developing his cognitive capacities (I,10, 120–121). Mathematics is the paradigm case of such projection-and-discovery (I,10, 123), and mathematical education forms a framework into which sensible intuition is later linked (I,10, 225).

So conducted, education harnesses the child's intrinsic motivation (I,10, 121): the exercise of the imagination is a central instance of self-activity, a drive to which is inborn and essential to rational beings, a "universal" and "fundamental" law of the human mind (I,10, 122). Such an approach also paves the way for the cultivation of the (similarly innate) drive to specifically moral self-activity:

[The child so educated] is driven by a love that is directed [...] toward mental activity for the sake of activity, and the law of [that activity] for the sake of the law. [...] Thus this manner of mental cultivation is the immediate preparation for the moral [manner]; and it extirpates entirely the root of immorality, insofar as it never allows sensible pleasure to act as a motivation. (I,10, 126–127)

¹¹ The *Addresses* thus add new support for his longstanding commitment to educational equality, first voiced in the *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation* and reiterated in a stronger form in the *System of Ethics* (I,5, 244).

Fichte's framework for cultivation of students' specifically moral self-activity follows the order of moves outlined in the Jena period.

First the child's political disposition is cultivated, by directing his attention to the social order and encouraging him to project that order as it ought to be according to the laws of reason (I,10, 127–128). The material of such projection is the school itself, which should in every way function as a self-enclosed small society, which is made to appear to the child to be materially self-sustaining, and which must actually involve him in a range of agricultural and pastoral activities and in the handicrafts required for them. The aim is that each child develop a well-founded confidence in his own ability to support himself by his own contribution to a whole whose success or failure determines his own material fate, and thus to be motivated to become a responsible, law-abiding citizen of this small society (I,10, 236–238).

The child's moral disposition is then cultivated by the provision of opportunities for supererogatory performance (I,10, 129), permitted only to those who have reliably submitted to the law (I,10, 232), and rewarded not materially nor even by praise, but only by the opportunity for further supererogatory performances in the future. Those pupils who gladly take on this additional work are the successes of the educational system; sent out into the larger community they will retain this disposition (I,10, 130).

Thus are formed, in a two-step process, individuals who are at once good citizens and disposed to self-sacrifice: law-abiding in times of peace, willing soldiers in times of war (I,10, 216; cf. I,10, 178–179). These are the patriots of the second *Dialogue* (II,9, 445), cosmopolitan patriots because of the luck of their place in a living intellectual culture. They are also, as it happens, young philosophers of a specifically Fichtean variety.

5 Conclusion

This brief overview does not come close to doing full justice to the text of the *Addresses*. I have left out discussion of Fichte's sources¹² as well as the text's influ-

¹² Fröhlich (1907) describes the circumstances of the text's composition in some detail. But Léon's (1922–27) discussion in his vol. 2 pt. 2, especially 61–108, is the most thorough examination of the immediate influences on it with which I am familiar. The view of the expressive power of language in particular clearly had antecedents, and may be entirely derivative.

ence on later German nationalism¹³ and educational theory and practice.¹⁴ Considerable work has been done on all of these topics. Instead, I have focused on the main argumentative moves that are novel as compared with Fichte's writings in the Jena period. These are not, on the whole, compelling additions, and are motivated to a large degree by Fichte's concern with his own philosophical legacy. But the text does contain more of interest to the Fichte scholar than is generally assumed. The discussion of education in particular sheds interesting light on Fichte's theory of child development, his view of the relation between moral and theoretical philosophy, and his view of the relation between language and thought.

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¹³ The influence of the text in the succeeding 130 years has been the topic of many studies. Later 19th and early 20th century German political thinkers tended to read it as a kind of German nationalist manifesto. The text had a different, and to my mind more accurate, reception in France, with Basch (1927), 98–99 and 102, pointing out that Fichte explicitly rejects the aspirations of 1920s pan-Germanists – colonies, freedom of the seas, global commerce, universal monarchy – in the thirteenth *Address*.

¹⁴ Of the works referencing the *Reden* up to the first decades of the 20th century, the vast majority are works on educational theory, where Fichte is often discussed alongside Pestalozzi, whom he references frequently in this text and the *Dialogues*. The two agreed on several core ideas: that education should be conducted in progressive stages according to a fixed system, should be available to children regardless of ability to pay, and should take place in closed residential institutions. But Pestalozzi was an empiricist, and his specific curricular proposals were largely unsuitable to provide the main result at which Fichte aims. The editors of the *Gesamtausgabe* appear to see the influence as a unidirectional one, of Pestalozzi on Fichte (II,10, 390). But Fichte had known Pestalozzi personally for nearly two decades at that time, and indeed may have influenced the development of the latter's views himself. Cf. Pestalozzi (1894), xviii, and Pinloche (1901), 28–29.

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