

Introduction

The Checkered Reception of Fichte's *Vocation of Man*

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The Vocation of Man was published in January 1800, barely a year after the events of the “atheism controversy” that transfixed a large portion of the contemporary German reading public and eventually led to Fichte’s dismissal from his professorship in Jena.¹ In this book, which is explicitly addressed not to professional philosophers but to “anyone capable of understanding a book,” Fichte is clearly trying to set the record straight and to present a broadly accessible account of his own system, the so-called *Wissenschaftslehre* or “doctrine of scientific knowledge,” an account designed to defend the transcendental idealism of the latter against the competing claims of dogmatic realism and to emphasize the *moral* foundations of the former and its compatibility with popular religious sentiments. The book was a resounding literary success and received more contemporary reviews than any of Fichte’s other writings, and to this day it remains his most widely read and translated work.

This, however, is not to say that the original reception of this work was wholly positive. On the contrary, though it certainly had its enthusiastic admirers, it was greeted by many of Fichte’s philosophical allies and opponents with a certain amount of confusion and consternation, as is exemplified in Schleiermacher’s scathingly ironic review in the Schlegel

1. For a detailed account of these events and discussion of the significance of the same, see Yolanda Estes, “Commentator’s Introduction: J. G. Fichte, *Atheismstreit*, *Wissenschaftslehre*, and *Religionslehre*,” in *J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)*, trans. Curtis Bowman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

brothers' *Athenaeum*, which parodies the form and style of *The Vocation of Man*.² Many of Fichte's contemporaries were surprised—sometimes pleasantly, sometimes not—by what they took to be his radical departure in this work from the idealism of the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* and by his adoption, in Book III, of what appears to be a dualistic metaphysical realism. Thus, Fichte's old acquaintance from Zurich, Jens Baggesen, writing to Jacobi, expressed his astonishment at the way “each line of this book refutes the *Wissenschaftslehre*” (the standpoint of which Baggesen, like so many others, associated with Book II) and added that “it is edifying to see such an old sinner undergo such a sudden conversion.”³ This is also how the book was understood by Jacobi himself, whose public criticism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as speculative “nihilism” seems to have been at least partially responsible for Fichte's decision to publish this new, “popular” presentation of his philosophy. Indeed, Jacobi even went so far (in a letter to Jean Paul) as to accuse Fichte of plagiarizing from his own “philosophy of belief,”⁴ and he complained (with justification) that Book III employs a vocabulary and manner of expression uncomfortably close to Jacobi's own.

Rather than viewing *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* as making a sharp break with Fichte's earlier philosophy, other contemporary readers simply interpreted the latter in the light of the former. Thus, Hegel based many of his familiar criticisms of Fichte's “subjective idealism” and “philosophy of reflection” upon his critical reading of this popular work of 1800, in which he claimed to find not just an objectionably one-sided variety of transcendental idealism, but also an insurmountable and philosophically untenable epistemological dualism of knowledge and belief, as well as a pernicious metaphysical dualism of sensible and supersensible worlds.⁵ Schelling agreed

2. Schleiermacher's *Athenaeum* review is republished, along with the other thirteen contemporary reviews, in *Fichte in Rezension*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, and Walter Schieche (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), Vol. 3, 1–173. In his letter of June 28, 1800, to A. W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher describes *The Vocation of Man* as “a tricky and cursed book” (*ein verzwicktes verdammtes Buch*) (in *FiG*, vol. 2, 360).

3. Baggesen to Jacobi, April 22, 1800 (*FiG*, vol. 2, 328–29). In an earlier letter to Jacobi (April 14, 1800), Baggesen expresses his enthusiasm for *The Vocation of Man*, as well as his “astonishment” at the way the this book seems to directed “against the previous Fichte” (*FiG*, vol. 2, 323–24).

4. F. H. Jacobi to Jean Paul, March 16, 1800 (*FiG*, vol. 2, 308–309).

5. Though Hegel's criticisms of Fichte's philosophy in general and of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* in particular occur over and over again in his writings, these seldom go beyond those first articulated in 1801 in the “*Darstellung des Fichteschen Systems*” in the second part of his *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingischen Systems der Philosophie* and in 1802 in Part C of *Glauben und Wissen*. See *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977) and *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

that *The Vocation of Man* was an expression of “the lifeblood of Fichte’s philosophy,” while fully endorsing Hegel’s harsh criticism of the same in *Faith and Knowledge*.⁶

The subsequent scholarly literature on Fichte displays a similar ambivalence concerning the significance of *The Vocation of Man*. Indeed, many Fichte scholars and students of German Idealism appear to harbor something of a love/hate relationship with this work. One cannot help but admire its bold rhetorical strategy: the way it begins with a gripping depiction of the same existential dilemma that Fichte himself had experienced just prior to his “discovery” of Kant at the age of twenty-eight, when he was overwhelmed by the sharp conflict between the demands of his “heart” and his “head,” between a burning desire to affirm his own freedom and an intellectual conscience that could recognize only the rule of external necessity; the way this dilemma is temporarily resolved by dissolving reality itself into a play of mere representations, an “unbearable lightness of being” that defuses the threat of determinism but still leaves the heart yearning for meaning; and how this hunger is finally satisfied by a practical ontology that grounds all belief in reality in one’s immediate awareness of moral obligations. Of all of Fichte’s writings, this is perhaps the most artfully constructed, and Alexis Philonenko is surely right to compare it to the *Divine Comedy*, inasmuch as it conducts the reader from the hell of “doubt” through the purgatory of a one-sided “knowledge” to the final paradise of “belief.”⁷

But such admiration is often counterbalanced by severe reservations concerning the *philosophical content* of this work and by real confusion concerning its *proper place* within the overall development of Fichte’s philosophy. Many careful readers of Fichte’s earlier writings, for example, have been perplexed by the identification of “knowledge” in Book II with a purely formal and abstract variety of subjective idealism, which seems like nothing more than a cruel caricature of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Even more annoying, and apparently “un-Fichtean,” is the sharp new distinction between *Wissen* and *Glaube*, “knowledge” and “belief,” and the attendant implication that one cannot consistently believe in one’s own free efficacy and moral obligations without also believing in one’s personal immortality and in the reality of a “supersensible world” governed by a providential “father of spirits.” This has led many scholars to the conclusion that something has gone deeply awry in this work, especially in Book III of the same, which seems to be brimming with metaphysical claims sharply

6. Schelling to A. W. Schlegel, August 19, 1802 (FiG, vol. 3, 135).

7. See Alexis Philonenko, “La position systématique dans la *Destination de l’homme*,” in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System. Die Auseinandersetzung Zwischen 1794 und 1806*, ed. Albert Mues (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1989), 332.

at odds with what might be described as “the spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”—or at least of the Jena version of the same.

In his magisterial 1930 study of the development of Fichte’s philosophy, Martial Gueroult, while echoing many of Hegel’s criticisms of the content of *The Vocation of Man*, does not take these criticism to apply to earlier, Jena versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*; instead, he deploys them to support his own thesis that this popular work represents the most important *Wendung* or turning point in the internal development of Fichte’s philosophy: from the properly Critical and transcendental standpoint of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* to the more metaphysical and indeed mystical standpoint of his later philosophy, as expounded both in his later, unpublished lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* and in such later popular writings as *Die Anweisung zur seligen Leben*.⁸

According to Gueroult’s very influential interpretation, Fichte’s philosophy began to undergo a major change around 1798, when he suggested (in a few passages in *Das System der Sittenlehre* and in such occasional writings as *Ueber den Grund unseres Glauben in einen göttliche Weltregierung* and *Aus einem Privatschreiben*) that the I has to rely upon something outside itself in order to accomplish its moral ends. But in order to assimilate this “foreign” reality into the framework of the *Wissenschaftslehre* he had to reject or at least to modify substantially his previous commitment to the absolute self-sufficiency of the I and to the sovereign efficacy of action. It is, moreover, true that Fichte wrote to Schelling in 1800 that the *Wissenschaftslehre* required an “extension of its principles,” so that it could incorporate the “highest synthesis,” that of the spiritual world; and, as he further explained, even though he had not yet managed to incorporate these changes into a new scientific presentation of his philosophy, clear evidence of the changes he envisioned could be found in Book III of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.⁹

8. See Martial Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930), 2 vols. and “La destination de l’homme,” in *Études sur Fichte* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 72–96.

9. Fichte to Schelling, Dec. 27, 1800. After noting that in order to clarify his opposition to Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* he would first have to “extend the principles” of his own transcendental system, Fichte adds the following: “I have not yet been able to provide these extended principles with a scientific treatment; a clear hint regarding them may be found in the third book of my *Bestimmung des Menschen*. The working out of these principles will be my first order of business, just as soon as I have finished the new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* [i.e., the abandoned *Neue Bearbeitung* of 1800, which began as a revision of the lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*]. What is still lacking, in a word, is a *transcendental system of the intelligible world*” (GA, III/4, 406). Note, however, that six months later, in another letter to Schelling (May 31–August 7, 1801), Fichte explicitly denies that the *Wissenschaftslehre* requires any “extension of its principles,” and maintains instead that “the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not at all lacking with respect to its principles, but it is incomplete. What is still lacking is the highest synthesis, the synthesis of the spiritual world. Just as I was preparing to make this synthesis the cry of ‘atheism’ was raised” (GA, III/5, 45).

These “changes,” according to Gueroult, amount to far more than a mere “extension” or “completion” of the Jena system; instead, they mark a “fundamental change” in Fichte’s philosophy, one that lays the foundation for all the subsequent versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Now for the first time Fichte envisions the absolute (in the guise of an infinite “pure will”) as falling *outside* the I as such, and as a result his account of the relationship between the intentions and the actions of the finite I is radically modified, as in his account of the relationships between the I and the absolute and between the sensible and supersensible worlds.¹⁰ Whereas in Fichte’s earlier writings the I’s infinite quest to establish its independence was something that could occur only within the sensible world, understood as the sole venue for the actualization of the I’s supersensible nature as a free moral agent, this is no longer the case in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Even though a finite being is still described as always obliged to think of its willing in relation to some intended act in the sensible world, it is now also said to be aware of its utter inability to bring about this result on its own and of its need to rely instead for the accomplishment of its ends upon an incomprehensible external force, in the reality of which it must necessarily believe. At the same time, however, this finite I can be confident that, whatever the effect of its actions within the sensible world, they nevertheless possess full efficacy within the supersensible one and, indeed, that it is only and precisely by virtue of the will’s efficacy in the latter that it can have any efficacy within the former—all of this, again, thanks not to its own power but to that of the infinite will.¹¹ From this Gueroult concludes that the I’s true end is no longer its infinite dutiful activity in the sensible world, but lies instead in its conscious recognition of its relationship to the absolute, that is, in its acquisition of an “absolute consciousness of the absolute.”¹²

Gueroult also sharply criticizes Fichte for abandoning his earlier claim that the I simply posits or intellectually intuits its own reality and for now maintaining instead that the reality of the I as a free subject must be described as an article of faith or belief, something possible only through an act of will. Gueroult interprets the appeal to willful belief at the beginning of Book III as providing Fichte with a “magic wand,” which he can then wave at will to establish not just the reality of the I and its sensible world, but also that of the supersensible world and of that infinite will that is the “law” of the same.¹³

10. Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 366.

11. *Ibid.*, 368–69.

12. *Ibid.*, 371; see too Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 94–95.

13. “Tout est préparé pour la coup de baguette ‘magique’ qui, par l’intervention de la croyance, restaurera la réel, et un réel que ne sera plus celui du premier livre. La vraie magie n’est pas celle de Novalis, celle de l’imagination, qui est la magie des songes creux, mais celle de la croyance, source de réalité et de vie” (Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 84).

In abandoning his earlier view of the I's unconditioned self-positing, Fichte, according to Gueroult, abandons entirely the standpoint of transcendental idealism, according to which all reality is always only "reality for the I." Thus, "in order to save idealism, Fichte had to become a realist. He had never been closer to Jacobi."¹⁴ Like so many other commentators, Gueroult attributes this alleged transformation of Fichte's philosophy to the direct influence of the Atheism Controversy and, more specifically, to Jacobi's "Open Letter" of 1799 and Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion*, which was also published that same year. It is certainly true that Fichte had long been a sincere admirer of Jacobi and that as early as 1795 he had proposed an "alliance" (*Bündniß*) between his own transcendental idealism and Jacobi's faith-based realism,¹⁵ and many commentators have noted the extent to which Fichte, in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, emphasizes the parallels between his own thought and Jacobi's—going so far, for example, as to present an account of *Wissen* ("knowledge") in Book II that corresponds almost exactly to Jacobi's one-sided, purely theoretical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and employing the term *Glaube* ("belief") in Book III in a manner guaranteed to remind contemporary readers of Jacobi's apparently similar use of the term. Gueroult, however, goes farther and insists that Fichte, in his effort to respond to Jacobi's criticisms, ended up *abandoning* some of the central doctrines of his own previous philosophy, as he performed a public "about-face," which he vainly tried to disguise by means of various ineffective ruses or "alibis."¹⁶

14. Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 377.

15. Fichte to Jacobi, August 30, 1795 (GA, III/2, 393). For a detailed discussion of Fichte's relationship to Jacobi and Jacobi's attitude toward and familiarity with the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see the following: (1) Ives Radrizzani's "Présentation" to his French translation of Jacobi's *Lettre sur le nihilisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 7–38; (2) Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "Über die Standpunkt des Lebens und der Spekulation. Ein Beitrag zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Fichte und Jacobi unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Briefe," in *Idealismus mit Folgen. Die Epochenwell um 1800 in Kunst und Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Gawoll and Christoph Jamme (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 47–67; and (3) Hansjürgen Verweyen, "In der Falle zwischen Jacobi und Hegel: Fichtes *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800)," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 48 (2001): 381–400.

16. According to Gueroult, Fichte deliberately tried to disguise how far the idealistic account of knowledge in Book II differed from his earlier account of the same. He did this, first of all, by claiming that his new account preserves the "objectivity" of experience by appealing to the necessity of thinking representations according to certain a priori laws (even though this "objectivity," as the conclusion of Book II makes clear, falls far short of what is demanded by practical reason). Secondly, he tried to disguise his about-face in Book II by maintaining that the distinctive task of the account of "knowledge" in Book II is not to provide us with an account of truth but simply to eliminate the errors contained in a dogmatic conception of reality. But in doing this, claims Gueroult, he simply ignored the fact that he had already,

This view of Jacobi's influence upon *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* has recently been endorsed by Hansjürgen Verweyen, who argues that what began as a purely "strategic effort" on Fichte's part to present his philosophy—and especially the previously undeveloped portion of the same devoted to the philosophy of religion—in a form that would stress the parallels between his own philosophy and Jacobi's "non-philosophy" eventually led him to present a one-sided version of his own idealism in Book II and to make an "inflationary use of the concept of belief" in Book III. In the end, inspired, perhaps, by a remark in Jacobi's "Open Letter" concerning the essential difference between that *unity with itself* for which the I strives and that which is

in his scientific works of 1794 and 1795, provided his readers with a far richer account of "knowledge," one involving both the practical and theoretical activities of the I and not requiring any appeal to "belief" in order to establish the "reality" of the objects of experience.

The primary reason that Fichte made this about-face in Book II, according to Gueroult, was simply in order to be better able to "imitate" Jacobi's doctrine concerning the antinomy of speculation and reality. Whereas Fichte had recently (for example, in his "Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*" of 1797) celebrated the *unity* of speculation and belief, he now *opposes* two different systems of speculation—dogmatic (in Bk. I) and idealistic/nihilistic (in Bk. II)—in order to pave the way for a *salto mortale* in Bk. III, in which speculation appears to be sacrificed altogether to belief.

Book III, in turn, according to Gueroult, sets the stage for a new set of "alibis" designed to obscure this radical change in Fichte's philosophy. First, Fichte could point to the fact that he had long insisted that the *Wissenschaftslehre* presupposes a pre-philosophical belief in the reality of one's own freedom. But this, says Gueroult, obscures the radically different meanings of the terms *belief* and *reality* in these earlier writings and in *BM*. In the earlier writings, belief in one's freedom is not a matter of passive *feeling* but of direct self-awareness of one's duty (what Fichte called the "real intellectual intuition"), whereas in *BM*, "feeling seems to have completely usurped the place of intuition," and willing has lost the close association with thinking that it previously had in Fichte's philosophy. Secondly, even though Fichte had previously conceded that we are unable to "feel" our own acting, this did not then lead him to maintain, as he does in *BM*, that one must appeal to "belief" in order to establish one's own reality—something that had previously been established by appealing to the I's intellectual intuition of itself. Even though Fichte had earlier maintained that one could always doubt one's own freedom, at least in principle, and therefore had to base one's claims concerning the reality of the same on a willful act of belief, this was merely (according to Gueroult) in recognition of that fact that one might have only a weak intuition of the same, whereas it is impossible to doubt the reality established by an original intellectual intuition of the I's own self-positing. In abandoning his earlier account of how the I, through its absolute self-positing, establishes for itself its own reality (a claim that allowed him to ground speculation on intuition), Fichte found himself in *BM* propounding a doctrine "totally different from the one he had professed until then (that is, throughout the entire period preceding the Atheism Controversy)," even if he continued to use some of the same formulas to express himself. See Gueroult, "La Destination de l'Homme," 85–94.

essential and true in itself,¹⁷ this led to the positing of a metaphysical dualism between the unity of consciousness and that pure will that is the law of the supersensible world and is thus what is true in itself, namely, God.

In Book III, Fichte employs the same language to describe the infinite will as an immediate identity of act and product that he had previously used to describe the original *Tathandlung* or fact/act of the I. However, this primal self-constitutive act is no longer understood from the finite perspective of the human I, but rather from the divine perspective of the absolute will. By stressing the differences between the sensible and supersensible orders, without offering any further guidance for understanding their relation, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, according to Verweyen, embraces a “nearly Gnostic dualism” and raises the question of how to understand the relationship between the absolute, divine will and human freedom in a way that avoids the heteronymous determination of the latter by the former—a question to which, again, according to Verweyen, Fichte first arrived at an adequate answer only in the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehren*.¹⁸

On Gueroult’s interpretation as well, Book III defends a “transcendental realism” that stands in an uneasy and unresolved relationship to the subjective idealism of Book II,¹⁹ mirroring the tensions between knowledge and belief and between the sensible and supersensible worlds. Indeed, it is precisely such tensions, according to Gueroult, that mark this as a “transitional work,” one that plainly sets the stage for what he calls the “second moment of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in which the subjective standpoint of the Jena system gives way to a new transsubjective or absolute standpoint.²⁰

17. The passage in question (GA, II/3, 242–43) refers to Fichte’s doctrine of duty, understood as the I’s striving for unity with itself. After conceding that he does not deny the importance of this doctrine nor the truth and sublimity of the principle on which Fichte’s *Sittenlehre* is based (i.e., the necessary unity of the I, understood as “what is highest in the concept,” since it is an absolute condition for the very possibility of any rational being [*Dasein*] at all), Jacobi then adds the following: “but this unity itself is not the essence [*Wesen*], is not the true,” and this is why the ethical law of unity can never appeal to the human heart and lift man above himself. For this something higher, something above and beyond the unity of the I, is required: namely, God, as revealed to man through the “dependency of love”—of which, says Jacobi, he will simply not allow transcendental philosophy to rob him.

18. Verweyen, 394.

19. According to Gueroult, the “idealism” of Book II, which in some ways simply recapitulates, albeit in an utterly nongenetic manner, the account of the roles of feeling, intuition, and understanding in perception provided in Fichte’s own *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre*, is nevertheless far closer in spirit to Berkeley’s idealism, even though Book II arrives at a skeptical conclusion that is the very opposite of Berkeley’s. This leads Gueroult to suggest that the real purpose of Book II is to expose the “fanastic” or “magical” idealism of Novalis (Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 84).

20. “Avec le concept de *force étrangère* apporté par la *Bestimmung des Menschen*, la WL passé d’un point d’appui subjectif à un point d’appui transsubjectif, de l’idéalité à l’actualité de

The tension between knowing and not-knowing is closely connected with another one: namely, the tension between the “ideal ground” of our belief in reality (the feeling of duty) and the real ground of reality itself (the infinite will or absolute). Fichte’s new strategy for relieving this unresolved tension, claims Gueroult, was to incorporate them within the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself and to do this in such a way that the absolute functions as the *negation* of knowledge, which is precisely what one finds in the later versions of his system, beginning with that of 1801–02. Indeed, Gueroult interprets the latter as a “synthesis” of Jacobi’s “non-philosophy” with the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* in an attempt to find a “new way to unite the intellect and the heart.”²¹

In addition to Gueroult and Verwey, many other commentators—including Edmund Husserl,²² Richard Kroner,²³ Max Wundt,²⁴ Walter

l’Absolut, de la contradiction à l’accord du postulat . . . de l’idéalisme au réalisme (postulé par le pur moralisme). Cette transformation a sa cause dans le conflit entre la nécessité de la genèse du monde (de la nature et des individus) et l’impossibilité de cette genèse” (Gueroult, *L’évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 379–80).

21. Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 95.

22. Edmund Husserl, “Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity [Three Lectures],” trans. James G. Hart, *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995): 111–33. “In the collection of writings after 1800 . . . Fichte’s metaphysics, as well as his doctrine of religion and God, and inseparably his ideal of humanity, undergo a profound transformation. They are introduced through the spirited piece on *The Vocation of Man*. Already in this text the identification of God with the moral world-order vanishes; and thereby there falls away the identification of religion and morality. A similar advance which was realized in Greek philosophy from Plato to Neoplatonism is prepared in this writing and is completed in the later writings of Fichte, namely a progression to an inner religious mysticism” (122). According to Hart, in addition to repeating these three popular lectures (primarily before audiences of returning soldiers) on *Fichtes Menschenideale* three times in 1917 and 1918, Husserl also thrice taught a seminar on *BM*: in the summer semesters of 1903, 1915, and 1918 (“Husserl and Fichte: With Special Regard to Husserl’s Lecture, ‘Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity,’” *Husserl Studies* 12 [1995], 135). Hart also reports that Husserl was familiar only with Fichte’s popular writings and never really studied any version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

23. Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1961 [orig. 1921/1924]), vol. II, 67–76. According to Kroner, *BM* shows Fichte fully in the thrall of the new “aesthetic and religious *Zeitgeist*,” and thus represents the transition from ethical to speculative idealism. Indeed, he maintains that the standpoint of *BM* is closer to that of Schleiermacher than to that of the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* (67). Kroner further claims that the entire book is characterized by an internal dialectic between ethical and speculative idealism, or, more precisely, between ethical and religious conviction, or between the standpoint of *acting* and the standpoint of *visionary insight* into the absolute, a dialectic eventually resolved in favor of the latter. Kroner also repeats the familiar Hegelian criticisms of the “dualism” of knowledge and belief and of sensible and supersensible worlds, which allegedly permeates *BM*. He even suggests (76) that the reason Fichte did not publish any of the later versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is because he was aware of the conflict between his new speculative/religious standpoint and that of “scientific” philosophy as he construed it.

24. Max Wundt, *Fichte-Forschungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann, 1976 [orig. 1929]). Wundt also sees *BM* as a representing a critical turning point in the develop-

Schulz,²⁵ Luigi Pareyson,²⁶ and Peter Preuss²⁷—have interpreted *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* in this manner: that is, as representing a crucial transitional or turning point in the development of Fichte's philosophy and, more specifically, as deeply incompatible with the spirit of the earlier, Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. But there have also been a few critics of this view as well, beginning perhaps with Henri Bergson, who, though he begins his 1889 seminar on *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* with the stark declaration that it is man who constitutes the center of Fichte's early philosophy, whereas it is God who is the center of his later thought, nevertheless includes *Die*

ment of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Unlike Gueroult, however, Wundt was familiar with the at that time still unpublished Halle transcript of Fichte's lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, with its new doctrine of the intelligible pure will as the ultimate ground of all reality. However, Wundt maintains that in 1797 Fichte was still insisting on the *inner unity* of the sensible and intelligible worlds, which are only two perspectives on the same thing, inasmuch as the body is only a sensible presentation of the will and the will is simply what is intelligible about the body. This, however, he finds to be no longer the case in 1800, where Fichte seems to embrace (as Hegel had claimed) a genuine dualism of God and world, thus reinstating the Kantian dualism of theoretical and practical reason. The ethical demand is still the basis for all claims concerning reality, but now it demands a kind of reality beyond and superior to that of the sensible world, in which duty can never be adequately realized: namely the supersensible reality of the infinite divine will, which is both the ground of all sensible reality and the law of the supersensible world but is *not identical with* either of these worlds. Here, in Book III, according to Wundt, "for the first time, the reality of the divine as the absolute ground of all actuality comes decisively forth" (153).

25. Walter Schulz, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Vernunft und Freiheit* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1962). Schulz claims that BM occupies a "key position" in Fichte's writings and represents a real divide or *Einschnitt* in the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, inasmuch as Fichte's pre-1800 system posits the origin of knowing within the absolute I and all the later versions posit this origin in something else, something that limits and determines the absolute I, something that is referred to in BM as "the moral world order" or "the divine" (16). But Schulz, unlike most of the other commentators who see 1800 as a turning point in Fichte's development as a philosopher, does not interpret the "infinite will" or the "supersensible world" as existing in themselves over against and apart from the finite I. Instead, he interprets the absolute in this case as identical to the *community* of finite I's. "*Dieses Wir aber ist die moralische vernünftige Ordnung des Göttlichen, die Ich und Du vereint*" (21). And yet, according to Schulz, what makes this plurality of subjects into a moral community is nevertheless something *distinct* from any of them, something "*übergreifende*" and this "*Uebergreifende ist die eigentliche Realität.*" It is the discovery of this new concept of "reality" that, according to Schulz, qualifies BM as a truly *metaphysical* inquiry into the question, "What is really real?" All the subsequent versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are, Schulz maintains, dedicated to answering this new question and to resolving the new "dialectic of action and reality" first articulated in BM.

26. "*La missione dell'uomo*, che, oltre ad essere un autentico capolavoro letterario, é anche un preciso documento filosofico, che segna il passaggio del sistema della libertà da una filosofia dell'io, di esito necessariamente pratico, a una filosofia, dell'assoluto, di carattere decisamente religioso" (Luigi Pareyson, *Fichte. Il sistema della libertà*, 2nd ed. [Milano: Mursia, 1976], 406). Even though Pareyson maintains that BM documents Fichte's transition from a practically oriented philosophy of the I to a religiously oriented philosophy of the absolute, he does not,

Bestimmung des Menschen in the former. Despite the new tone of this work and despite its religious and even mystical character, this should not be taken to indicate any sort of break with his earlier system. On the contrary, insists Bergson, the doctrines presented in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* are exactly the same as those encountered in Fichte's earlier writings, albeit presented "under a different aspect."²⁸ More recently, Alexis Philonenko and Ives Radrizzani²⁹ have dissented vigorously from Gueroult's interpretation and have argued forcefully for the essential *continuity* between Fichte's earlier writings and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.³⁰

as Radrizzani points out, consider Fichte's later system wholly different from his earlier, Jena system, but instead treats the later system as one in which the finite I is no longer "absolutized," but is viewed instead as the "consciousness of the absolute" (Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002], 344).

27. In his "Translator's Introduction" to his English edition of *The Vocation of Man*, Preuss quite implausibly represents this work not as the turning point from one stage of Fichte's philosophy to another, but as a plea for *abandoning philosophy altogether* and argues that the lesson of this work is that "Fichte's philosophy [as here] ends in total cognitive skepticism, i.e., in the abandonment of philosophy proper, and looks for wisdom instead to a kind of quasi-religious faith" (VM, xii).

28. "La doctrine analysée est celle des *Einleitung des Grundlage* . . . avec lesquels nous avons pu commenter les différents passages. Mais il est aisé de voir que le principe divin dont il est question dans les derniers développements est le principe que sert de point de départ à la *Wissenschaftslehre*, mais envisagé sous un autre aspect. . . . Ce que Fichte a appelé ici le moi idée dans le 2^o Introduction, c'est ce qu'il appelle Dieu dans la *Bestimmung*" (Henri Bergson, "Fichte. *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Cours d'Henri Bergson—ENS 1898," ed. Philippe Soulez, in *Cahiers du séminaire de philosophie* [Strasbourg] 7 (1988): 201).

29. Ives Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work." This same article is also available in German and French versions: "*Die Bestimmung des Menschen: der Wendepunkt zur Spätphilosophie?*" *Fichte-Studien* 17 (2000): 19–42; and "La place de la *Destination de l'homme* dans l'oeuvre Fichteian," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4 (1998): 665–96.

30. Philonenko vehemently denies that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* represents any sort of "turn" in Fichte's development and insists that it is simply "a view of the problem of eternity in its reciprocal relationship to time and simultaneously develops in a popular form the principles acquired from the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its totality" (Alexis Philonenko, *L'oeuvre de Fichte* [Paris: Vrin, 1984], 116). Though Philonenko claims that the account of knowledge in Book II is consistent with what is outlined in the writings of 1794 and 1795, he also admits that some of the ideas expressed there are not treated scientifically by Fichte until the 1801–02 *Wissenschaftslehre*. He also denies that Fichte's view of belief in Book III is the same as Jacobi's, inasmuch as speculation (in Book II) is supposed to lead the reader directly to the standpoint of belief (in Book III), which thus requires no *salto mortale*.

Fichte and Jacobi are nevertheless, according to Philonenko, in agreement concerning the inadequacy of Kant's "purely theoretical" refutation of idealism in the first *Critique*; but whereas Jacobi relies simply upon a leap of faith to remedy this deficiency, Fichte appeals to *practical reason*, which is something very different (104). Nor, according to Philonenko, is Fichte's God the same as Jacobi's, inasmuch as the God of Book III is always purely

Radrizzani in particular has attempted a detailed, point by point rebuttal of Gueroult's interpretation, a rebuttal based largely upon a text unknown to Gueroult and to scholars of his generation: namely, the student transcripts of Fichte's lectures on "The Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) *nova methodo*." His thesis is that "the *Vocation of Man* belongs entirely to the philosophy of the Jena period and . . . reveals no significant systematic changes."³¹ Thus, he denies that the admittedly one-sided and subjective account of transcendental idealism in Book II was ever intended to be an adequate or complete exposition of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*; instead, much like Part Two of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* and like the *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre*, it deals only with the contribution of the I's *theoretical* power to the constitution of experience, and, like those earlier partial accounts, it establishes only the *possibility*, not the *actuality* of real knowledge. For the latter, one must consider the essential contribution of its *practical* power to the constitution of objective experience, which is precisely the task of Book III.

As Radizanni points out, at the very time he was writing *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* Fichte was also engaged in revising for publication his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where the practical activity of the I is seamlessly integrated from the very start with its theoretical activity—a fact that suggests the absurdity of treating Book II as if it were meant to be a complete and critical account of the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, an account allegedly designed to demonstrate, by its very inadequacy, the need to go beyond knowledge and philosophy altogether

immanent within consciousness and is neither a substance nor a part of any substantial order (106). The supersensible world described in Book III is, in turn, nothing more nor less than a synthesis of the finite wills of concrete individuals—a "great mystery," Philonenko concedes, that is not solved in *BM*, where it remains, as Fichte admits, "incomprehensible and unthinkable" (108).

31. Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 336. Radrizzani does not deny that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* gives new and fuller expression to Fichte's philosophy of religion nor that it does so in a language calculated to recall that of Jacobi and expressed "with a prophetic-pedagogic accent, which is linked to the popular character of the writing." But he nevertheless insists that the *foundation* for the same is clearly laid in §13 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, and thus maintains that "no 'conversion' to Jacobi, no romantic mysticism, no recourse to a 'transsubjective basis,' no turning from idealism to realism can be found in the *Vocation of Man*; we discover there instead a living and graphic presentation of the main results of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as they are exposed particularly in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*" (337).

and appeal to “belief” in the manner of Jacobi. Yet even Radrizanni does not deny that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, with its one-sided account of “idealism” in Book II and its adoption of the language of “belief” rather than that of “knowledge” in Book III, certainly gives the *appearance* of defending a position at odds with that presented in all of the writings published by Fichte over the preceding six years. This however, claims Radrizanni, is simply a reflection of Fichte’s specific *strategic* intentions in this work, in which he reveals himself to be “a master in the art of simulation.”

According to Radrizanni, the reason *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* has been so widely misunderstood is precisely because it is an “encoded” text, and moreover, one written in a “destructive code.”³² Fichte’s primary intention in composing this popular work was to present the elements of his philosophy in a form calculated to flatter and to entice readers impressed by Jacobi’s critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre*—if not convert Jacobi himself (whom Fichte never ceased trying to win over to his philosophy). Hence the sketch of “idealism” in Book II describes it just as Jacobi had described the *Wissenschaftslehre* in his “Open Letter.” But the conclusion of Book II does not represent, as Gueroult along with many other interpreters have assumed, an “about-face” on Fichte’s part, in which he renounces his own philosophy and endorses Jacobi’s description of the same as “nihilism,” but is simply a dramatic way of calling attention to the need to *supplement* theoretical with practical reason. And this is just what occurs in Book III, which, despite the unmistakable adoption of some of Jacobi’s distinctive language, really contains nothing new at all, at least according to Radrizanni. That all claims concerning reality must be based upon *Glaube* and *Gefühl* (“feeling”) is a doctrine already plainly stated in the 1794 *Grundlage*, for example,³³ and not a new claim that Fichte subsequently picked up from Jacobi. Similarly, the controversial account of the supersensible world and the central role of the “infinite will” in Book III, though these doctrines may well have shocked readers for more than a century, will come as no surprise to readers intimately acquainted with the contents of Fichte’s revised presentation of his Jena system in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where the “pure will” serves as the central element of the “five-fold

32. *Ibid.*, 320.

33. “As we have now demonstrated, reality is possible for the I, as well as for the Not-I only by means of a relation to feeling. . . . *With respect to reality as such*—that of the I and of the Not-I—there is only a *feeling*” (*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, GA, I/2, 429; SW, 301).

synthesis” that unites the intelligible and sensible realms and connects the finite individual with each. And even the claim that the sensible world is ultimately “grounded on” the supersensible one as its “firm substrate” is already encountered in § 14 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.³⁴ (A similar function of the pure will is at least hinted at in the *System der Sittenlehre*, though it is less prominent there than in the *nova methodo*.)

Whereas Jacobi insisted on opposing the standpoints of “life” and “speculation” (in Fichte’s language, the “practical” and “theoretical” standpoints), and whereas Fichte himself insisted upon the importance of not confusing the two,³⁵ the strategy of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is to show that reflection upon the possibility of any *real* knowledge (that is, of actual experience) requires recognition of the essential contribution to the same made by practical reason. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, his crafty strategy, according to Radrizzani, was “to play Jacobi’s game, to adopt his viewpoint and his reproaches in order to put the reply of the *Wissenschaftslehre* [to Jacobi’s critique of philosophy, as incorporated into Book II] in a better light,”³⁶ so that he could then proceed, in Book III, to present, albeit in new, more “popular” language, his true position regarding the relationship between practice and theory, life and speculation.

As for what Verweyen has called Fichte’s “inflationary use of the concept of belief” in Book III, Radrizzani contends that the “elevation to *Glaube*” is simply a means for the discovery of the same supreme condition for the possibility of consciousness that had already been deduced, albeit much more rigorously, in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: namely, the pure or infinite will, understood as the “immediately known” principle that alone “allows us to go beyond representation.”³⁷ (Though of course it is only “immediately known” in the sense that is implicit in one’s immediate knowledge of duty). But why is this same absolute principle now described as an object of “belief”? Here again, maintains Radrizzani, Fichte is only being true to the lesson of the *nova methodo*, inasmuch as the latter is based not upon any self-evident first principle, but upon a “postulate,”

34. “This new presentation also provides us with the *intelligible* world as the firm substrate for the *empirical* one” (GA, IV/2, 250; FTP, 314).

35. On this topic, see especially the 1801 *Sonnenklarer Bericht über das Wesen der neuesten Philosophie*. For further discussion see Breazeale, “‘The Standpoint of Life’ and ‘The Standpoint of Philosophy’ in the *Jena Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System*, ed. Mues, 81–104; and Müller-Lauter, “Über die Standpunkt des Lebens und der Spekulation.”

36. Radrizzani, “The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s Work,” 326.

37. *Ibid.*, 329.

which possesses no value for anyone who fails to carry out the postulated act of thinking.³⁸

As for the actual *contents* of Book III, Radrizzani professes to discover nothing there that is not already found in the second half of the *nova methodo*, albeit now presented according to a “simplified procedure,” which consists of deducing the conditions for *applying* one’s belief in freedom (the first “postulate of practical reason”), thereby making it explicit that these conditions include not only belief in the reality of the sensible and supersensible worlds, but also in one’s own immortality and in an infinite, divine will as the law of the supersensible world, in the sense of an *ordo ordanans*. Thus, according to Radrizzani’s interpretation, all of these additional claims (or beliefs) are actually included in one’s original belief in (or postulate of) one’s own freedom and independence and thus should not really be considered to be separate postulates at all.³⁹

The “practical ontology” of Book III should therefore be viewed merely as a new presentation in a popular form, one undoubtedly influ-

38. “It is precisely by making the will an object of faith that Fichte was true to the lesson of the *nova methodo*, because one must not forget the whole methodology of the *nova methodo* is based on a ‘postulate’ and is not supposed to have any value for anyone who does not carry out this postulate” (ibid., 330). Radrizzani then proceeds to cite Fichte’s acknowledgment (in his discussion of the “choice” between idealism and dogmatism in the “Second Introduction” of 1797) that one must have “faith in one’s own self-sufficiency and freedom” to support his own (Radrizzani’s) conclusion that “the idea that knowledge is ultimately based on faith implies in itself nothing religious, otherwise the whole *nova methodo* and every philosophical writing can be said to be ‘religious.’”

(I confess that I find Radrizzani’s parallel between the role of “belief” in VM and of “postulation” in *WLn* to be rather unconvincing, inasmuch as there would appear to be a very large difference between saying that the construction of a system of philosophy must begin, in the manner of a Euclidian demonstration, with a particular *act of construction* [a “postulate”] and saying that through an act of will we resolve to “believe” in our own real efficacy as free beings.)

39. Just as the postulate of immortality is, according to Radrizzani, already implicitly contained in the original postulate of freedom (333), so is the postulate of the infinite will, i.e., the postulate of God’s existence, contained in it as well: “The resurgence of the problem of the substrate allows us to establish easily the parallel with the *nova methodo*. The God of the third book of the *Vocation of Man* occupies exactly the place devoted to the pure will in the *nova methodo* and coincides with it. As such, God assumes the link among all the individual I’s, so far as each individual I is founded on the pure will. Thus the third postulate is already included in the first” (ibid., 335). Radrizzani also correctly observes that Fichte had previously affirmed in his 1798 *System der Sittenlehre* the close connection between belief in the necessity of moral progress and belief in immortality and God (333; see SS, GA, I/5, 305; SW, IV, 350, SS, 331).

enced by the Atheism Controversy and Jacobi's "Open Letter," of what was previously encountered (i.e., deduced) along the "descending path" that constitutes the second or synthetic half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Understood in this way, Book III implies no move beyond the perspective of the finite I nor does it appeal to some higher, transcendent or "transsubjective" ground of reality.⁴⁰ As for the controversial place of God or the infinite will in Book III, it, like the supersensible world itself, should be viewed as no more than an "'explanatory ground,' that is, in a strictly epistemological sense that exclude[s] any ontological connotation"—as an "idea of practical reason."⁴¹

So where does this leave us? What conclusions should one draw from this survey of the secondary literature about the place of Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* in the overall development of his philosophy and concerning its relationship to the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*? Radrizzani is surely correct in maintaining that there is far more continuity between the earlier system, particularly as articulated in the *nova methodo*, and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* than is often realized. An yet it is also difficult to fault Gueroult and others for seeing in the latter if not something radically new, then at least something that seems to fit very uncomfortably within the framework of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, something that seems to point beyond the latter, to a rather different conception of philosophy as a whole and to a new understanding of the relation of the I to a reality beyond its own limits. So what's a scholar to do?

One strategy, adopted by Paul Frank, is simply to ignore this work as an "unrepresentative" one, "not addressed to professional philosophers."⁴²

40. See Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 330–31. Radrizzani tries to support this controversial interpretation by referring to Fichte's notorious remark that "only through its relation to me does anything exist for me. But everywhere only one relation to me is possible, and all others are only subspecies of this one: my vocation to act ethically. My world is the object and sphere of my duties and absolutely nothing else" (GA, I/6, 263; SW, II, 262; VM, 77). This, however, does not *resolve* the tension between such admissions of human finitude and the claims in Book III concerning the infinite will as the substrate and determining ground of consciousness. Radrizzani's strategy for responding to this challenge is to claim that Fichte's reference to God or the "infinite will" in Book III pertains only to the "argument of belief and not of knowledge," and hence that the practical ontology presented there "remains perfectly transcendental, and thus God can only be said to be the transsubjective basis of the human community as a transcendental idea of practical reason" (336). Such a postulate directly follows, in other words, from an analysis of the original postulate of freedom itself and makes no transcendent claims. For a criticism of this interpretation, see my chapter in this volume.

41. Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 336.

This would certainly solve a problem previously noted by Richard Kroner, namely, that this work may be difficult to interpret precisely *because* it is not addressed to professional philosophers,⁴³ but this seems very problematic. It is problematic, first of all, because, as is clear from Fichte's own writings and correspondence, he did indeed claim both that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is consistent with his earlier writings *and* that it also advances the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, either by expanding its first principles or by extending its scope to include a branch of philosophy originally envisioned as an integral part of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, though never actually articulated as such during the Jena period: the philosophy of religion. Secondly, for all the difficulties it presents—and on this point I agree with Radrizzani, that, of all Fichte's writings, none are more difficult to interpret than this one⁴⁴—one cannot simply ignore or dismiss *The Vocation of Man*, not only because it provides a superb lens for surveying the vexing and vexed question of the “unity of Fichte's philosophy” and the relationship of the post-Jena versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to the earlier presentations of the same, but also because the interpretation of Book III in particular has powerful implications for the interpretation of the entire Jena system, particularly the *nova methodo* and *Sittenlehre*.

42. Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing. Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 314n.

43. “Die *Bestimmung des Menschen* ist nicht für ‘Philosophen von Profession’ geschrieben, sie will vielmehre ‘verständlich für alle Leser, die überhaupt ein Buch zu verstehen vermögen’ (II, 167). Vielleicht ist es gerade deshalb ‘für Philosophen von Profession’ sehr schwer, dies Buch zu Verstehen, es so zu Verstehen, daß sich wissenschaftlich etwas darüber sagen läßt. Man fühlt, daß Fichtes Gedanken in einen gärenden Strudel hineingeraten sind, aus dem heraus er sie auf das feste Land—nicht der wissenschaftliche Gestaltung, sondern—des lebenden Glaube zu führen sucht” (Kroner, 68–69).

44. “The *Vocation of Man* is without doubt one of the most difficult texts to interpret in the whole of Fichte's work” (Radrizzani, “The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work,” 318).