Editor's Introduction

In recent decades the work of J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) has received sustained, serious, and sympathetic consideration. In the Anglophone world, this development has been fueled, in part, by new and authoritative translations of all of Fichte's important works from what is arguably the most influential period in his tumultuous intellectual career (1793–1800).[1] The situation is, however, somewhat different with respect to the period of Fichte's career that began with his move to Berlin and ended with his untimely death in 1814. Some of his later, more "popular" writings were translated in the nineteenth century, though these editions do not reflect the decades of serious textual work that have gone into the creation of the authoritative critical edition of Fichte's writings by an editorial team at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. Fortunately, three of his works from the period after his departure from Jena in 1799 have recently been translated: (1) *The Closed Commercial State* (1801), an enigmatic treatise on political economy; (2) one series of lectures given in Berlin in 1804 on the *Wissenschaftslehre*; and (3) his epochal *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808. Yet, it remains largely the case that Fichte's thought after 1800 is *terra incognita* to English speakers. The principal goal of the present translation is to begin to change this situation by providing an English edition of one of the most important pieces from Fichte's later years in Berlin, his lectures on the theory of ethics (*Sittenlehre*) delivered in the historically momentous year of 1812.

Why this text in particular? After all, there are other important works from this period, such as lectures on the core principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* delivered in 1810, 1811, and 1812, that furnish a crucial window into this stage of Fichte's career and thus into a key phase of the development of German Idealism more generally. There are several reasons for the selection of the 1812 lectures on the theory of ethics. For one, as is discussed in more detail later, Fichte always regarded the development of practical philosophy (including ethics) as one of the key motivations of his entire philosophical endeavor. Moreover, his lectures on ethics address issues of serious

philosophical import that are still alive in the present, including the nature of the will and of action, moral education, philosophy of history, and religion. Further, as his train of thought progresses through the lectures, Fichte takes time to engage with some of his contemporary rivals (e.g., Schelling). The lectures are, therefore, an important source for the way significant ideas were treated during this phase in the development of German Idealism.

Another reason is that, as mentioned previously, Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* are available in English, and scholars are beginning to reassess Fichte's place in the history of moral and political philosophy in light of this text. The 1812 lectures on ethics provide philosophical depth to many of the most prominent ideas in the *Addresses*, which, given the nature of the latter as a public speech, do not receive the same level of argumentative grounding as they do in the lecture course. To take one example, the lectures include a discussion of universal love or benevolence as the core of the moral point of view that forces one to carefully consider the nature of the messianic nationalism expressed in the *Addresses*.

In what follows, I introduce the lectures on the theory of ethics by contextualizing them, both historically and within Fichte's own system. I then provide an overview or outline of the content of the lectures themselves. To begin with, I describe the way in which the lectures can be profitably read against the background of the foundation of the new, reform-oriented University of Berlin. Fichte's vision of a reformed institution of higher learning influenced many of the key players in this momentous event, and the significance of the 1812 lectures emerges most clearly in light of his ongoing commitment to this vision. Next, I briefly review Fichte's other work in moral philosophy, as well as the overall place of ethics in his philosophical system. Having thus set forth the historical, institutional, and systematic background to the lectures, I conclude the main portion of my introductory comments with an outline of the lectures themselves. The outline is not meant to provide an exhaustive analysis of the content of the lectures. Instead, my hope is that this translation will spur others to undertake just such an analysis. What the outline is meant to accomplish is more modest, namely, the furnishing of a kind of orientation or road map that brings into focus some of the main ideas and argumentative transitions that belong to Fichte's train of thought.

The Context of the Lectures

For more than a century prior to Fichte's delivery of the lecture course on ethics in 1812, pressure had mounted within German academic and

political circles for a radical reform of the nation's institutions of higher learning.[2] This reformist spirit had already resulted in the foundation of two new institutions at Halle (1694) and at Göttingen (1737). In fact, for a few years prior to the inauguration of the new university in Berlin in 1810, the former institution had been the place where many of these new ideas were implemented. The Treaty of Tilsit (1808), however, stripped Prussia of its premier university and so brought the experiment to an end. This geopolitical setback nevertheless cleared the path forward to the opening of a new university only two years later in Berlin.

Two aspects of this reformist spirit are particularly relevant to Fichte's teaching activities in Berlin after 1810, in general, and to the present lecture course, in particular. First, there was an effort to liberate the philosophical faculty within the academy from its subordinate position in relation to the "professional" faculties of law, medicine, and theology. Not only was philosophy to be granted the same level of prestige and support as the other faculties, it was to become the *central discipline*. One of the most influential arguments in this regard was provided by Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), a series of essays in which Kant made public some reflections rooted in his own struggles for academic freedom. Fichte's erstwhile friend and ally in the post-Kantian movement, F. W. J. Schelling, offered his own defense of the primacy of philosophy in lectures delivered in Würzburg in 1802 on "the method of academic study." Finally, Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense* (1808), published just prior to the actual establishment of the University of Berlin, likewise argued for the primacy of philosophy. As will become clear, Fichte shared this aspect of the reformers' program, and his lectures on ethics from 1812 closely follow both his own ideas regarding the centrality of philosophy within the academy as a whole and the carefully delineated architectonic of his own system, which was partially designed to reflect his view of the special function of philosophy.

The second element of this reformist spirit went beyond academic issues in a narrow sense, encompassing a vision of the moral vocation of university education within the whole of society. This feature of the reform agenda comes into stark relief when set against the background of the often riotous nature of student life in German universities, which was both lamented and satirized in the century prior to Fichte's teaching in Berlin. The tavern scene in Goethe's *Faust* is perhaps one of the most well-known depictions of the general moral climate of eighteenth-century universities. Starting in the 1780s, during Fichte's own time as a university student, he was steeped in literature that targeted the moral shortcomings of academic institutions, as well as in other works that championed new

approaches to pedagogy more generally. This is apparent in an enigmatic fragment, most likely dating from 1788, called "Accidental Thoughts on a Sleepless Night," where, among other things, Fichte vigorously attacks the stultifying and corrupting influence of the contemporary educational system (II/1, 103–110). He cites a number of reformist works, such as Christian Gotthilf Salzmann's popular satirical novel, *Carl von Carlsberg, or On Human Misery* (published between 1784 and 1788). In an eerily prophetic section of the text, Salzmann relates a student riot occasioned by an effort to curtail the activities of fraternal organizations that closely parallels conflicts that Fichte himself faced regarding student discipline at Jena and at Berlin.

Further evidencing his own early commitment to the cause of educational reform, Fichte also enthusiastically refers in this fragment to the Swiss pedagogical reformer and theorist J. H. Pestalozzi's *Leonard and Gertrude: A Book for the People* (first edition, 1781). Over two decades later, Fichte still refers to Pestalozzi's ideas in a letter to his wife as "the true means of healing sick humanity" (III/6, 121). The 1808 *Addresses to the German Nation* contain lengthy discussions of Pestalozzi's later treatise, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801). Fichte's commitment to the reform of the universities along both academic and moral lines endured throughout his entire life.

The University of Jena, where Fichte taught between 1794 and 1799, was a place where many of these reformist trends coalesced, and where, for a time, new ideas about education reform found a sympathetic hearing from those in power. Fichte was in the vanguard of the reformist movement in Jena, and from his privileged position as the leading exponent of post-Kantian idealism, he was able to influence many others. Following his relocation to Berlin, Fichte delivered several cycles of public lectures between 1804 and 1806 that drew individuals who wielded both cultural and political authority in the Prussian capital. Fichte continued to influence his contemporaries' thinking about the reform of German higher education. This period in Fichte's career reached its famous pinnacle in the 1808 *Addresses to the German Nation*, in which he argues that a new system of national education is the key to overcoming the moral and intellectual stagnation that he, like many others, blamed for the humiliation of Prussia by Napoleon's army.

In 1807 (the same year that Fichte praised Pestalozzi in the letter to his wife quoted earlier), the chief of the Prussian cabinet, K. F. Beyme, commissioned essays from some of the leading reformist academics of the realm, including Fichte (whom Beyme admired). What resulted was Fichte's

Deduced Plan of an Institute of Higher Learning to Be Established in Berlin (II/11, 65–170).[3] The statutes that were eventually adopted in founding the university owed more to Schleiermacher's 1808 essay referenced earlier. Nevertheless, the vision of the university that Fichte presents continued to guide his own activity as a teacher (and, for a brief period, university administrator) in ways that are still apparent in the 1812 lectures on ethics. Thus, it is useful to have in hand an overview of some of the main ideas presented in the *Deduced Plan*.

In §5, Fichte draws a distinction between accidental intellectual acquisitions and those that emerge from free conscious activity. The former are, for Fichte, not our own, as they derive from an obscure natural mechanism rather than from deliberate agency. As a corollary (made more explicit in the 1808 *Addresses to the German Nation*), Fichte maintains that only ideas of the latter sort can effectively ground a moral character. Such ideas are to be acquired through a dialogical process guided by a unifying idea (§§7–8). The idea that ultimately unifies this process ought to be the "root" of one's life as a whole, the core of the personality from which one approaches all activities. As such, this idea must be prior to, rather than derivative of, given realities (§10). Further, Fichte insists that this dialogical process must be animated by moral "respect [*Achtung*]" on the part of both teachers and students.

Following in Kant's footsteps, Fichte likewise attempts to subvert the traditionally subordinate status of the philosophical faculty within the hierarchy of disciplines in the university. Fichte argues that philosophy embraces and cultivates all of a person's intellectual powers, and that the conduct of genuine "science [*Wissenschaft*]" in any particular domain of inquiry requires that one be first of all a "philosophical artist" (§16). Among the consequences of this reversal of the traditional hierarchy is the fact that theology must become more philosophical, namely, that it cannot claim special authority on the basis of an inscrutable "mystery," and that its fundamental texts are no longer the only sources of moral insight (§22).

In February 1809, almost two years after Fichte and others submitted their reports to Beyme, Wilhelm von Humboldt assumed his own ministerial post. Humboldt knew Fichte and his ideas well, having interacted with him in Jena between 1794 and 1797 as a coeditor of Schiller's journal, *Die Horen*, and as an audience member at Fichte's "Morality for Scholars" lectures in 1794. The latter represent Fichte's first public presentation of many of the reformist ideals gestured at in "Accidental Thoughts on a Sleepless Night," including an insistence on the moral vocation of the university. Humboldt shared Fichte's lofty conception of this moral vocation, as well

as the impulse to overturn the traditional disciplinary hierarchy in favor of philosophy. Later in 1809, Humboldt partly planted the seeds of the new university in Berlin by recruiting Fichte to deliver yet another series of public lectures in a disused palace that became the physical location of the institution upon its inauguration. Late in 1810, the University of Berlin opened its doors, with Fichte giving some of the very first lectures. In July 1811, Fichte began a brief tenure as the first elected rector of the university, and he used the occasion to deliver an inaugural address that further articulated and defended many of the ideas found in the 1807 *Deduced Plan*.[4] Thus, not long before the lectures in 1812 were delivered, Fichte clearly remained committed to these ideas.

History was not kind to Fichte and his 1812 lectures on ethics, nor indeed, at first, to the new University of Berlin. In June 1812, Napoleon's army crossed the Russian frontier. With the disintegration of his forces during the march back from Moscow, the so-called War of Liberation (or "War of the Sixth Coalition") began in earnest. Geopolitics thus overshadowed the first years of the new university and helped to distract most of the educated public from Fichte's first detailed treatment of ethics since his departure from Jena in 1799. Nonetheless, the foundation of a new university explicitly committed to many of the ideas Fichte himself cherished provides a context that helps to illuminate much of what he says in the 1812 lectures.

To begin with, the lectures contain a number of observations regarding the overall architectonic of Fichte's system. In the 1807 *Deduced Plan*, Fichte had argued that, in order to play its role as the unifying and guiding discipline of the entire academy, philosophy needed to be itself systematic. The professor of philosophy needs to have a clear sense of how his basic principles imply positions on every matter of philosophical import. In the 1812 lectures, this emphasis on a systematic architectonic shows up right away in Fichte's clarification of the distinction between *Wissenschaftslehre*, or the foundational layer of the system as a whole, and particular philosophical sciences such as the theory of ethics (*Sittenlehre*) (this point recurs, among other places, in Lecture 9).

The lectures on ethics also reflect Fichte's commitment to the primacy of philosophy within the constellation of academic disciplines. In Lecture 28, Fichte argues that the development of science must not be fettered by the requirement that scholars both profess and teach a creed (*Symbol*). He clearly defends the general necessity of a creed in articulating the deliverances of the moral consciousness in a way that can be agreed upon by the members of a community. Yet, he also insists that the creed can-

not be regarded as immutable, and that the process of moral improvement within a community requires that the creed undergo continual refinement in light of the progress of moral and scientific insight. The responsibility for this refinement devolves upon a "scientific public" within the church community. In Lecture 29, Fichte explains the general division within this scientific public into *historical* and *philosophical* branches. In the *Deduced Plan* (§26), he had examined how the former is rooted in the more general disciplines of history (inclusive of the burgeoning discipline of the "history of the development of religious concepts and philology," the latter incorporating the study of biblical and "Oriental" languages with classics). Here, in the lectures on ethics, Fichte grants the historical branch of the "scientific public" a merely contingent significance, dependent on the role of sacred texts in a particular community. As in the *Deduced Plan*, Fichte rejects any effort to render a particular ancient text immune to critical analysis.[5] He also argues that none of the peoples of antiquity can claim a monopoly on moral truth, and that their textual legacies should all be mined for insights.

Fichte concludes the entire train of thought of the lectures by reminding his audience that philosophy encompasses the very same moral consciousness articulated (in a continually perfectible way) by a community's creed. Indeed, he argues that the rigor and clarity of philosophy is ultimately what is demanded by the underlying moral concept itself, and that the basic moral faith expressed in the creed ought to develop in the direction of philosophical insight. Philosophy thus becomes the highest judge of a historical faith (and, by extension, of its texts and creeds). In short, "the doctrine of philosophy regarding the supersensible is the pure faith toward which every ecclesiastical doctrine and creed must be elevated [. . .]."

As mentioned previously, Fichte was deeply committed to a central plank of the reformist agenda, namely, that the ultimate vocation of the university as an institution is a moral one. Thus, one is not at all surprised to see that his 1812 lectures on ethics articulate this guiding moral vision and its relationship to the scientific and educational enterprises of the university. For example, in Lecture 11, Fichte argues that pedagogy, or the science of the "reflective art [*besonnene Kunst*]" through which humanity is elevated to morality, falls out of the theory of ethics more generally. He distinguishes two senses of pedagogy: (1) a universal-historical sense that examines the way in which the human species as a whole progresses morally (borrowing from Lessing, Fichte calls this "the theory of education [*Erziehungslehre*] of the human species"); and (2) "pedagogy in the narrower sense," concerned with the education of children, the art of legislation, and

religious education. The theory of ethics demands some account of how the "merely apparent I" comes to be a "true I," while it likewise furnishes the kind of clarity regarding the moral goal that is necessary for the formation of these subordinate disciplines in a rigorous, systematic manner.

As Fichte's train of thought unfolds in the lectures, he articulates the moral vision behind the reformed university. An important step is attained in Lecture 20, where Fichte makes explicit the connection between morality and science. The capacity to grasp ideas and goals that transcend one's private sphere (characterized by a mechanically functioning drive for self-preservation) is expressed and exemplified by science, an enterprise that is premised on the recognition of a common reason and a universal perspective toward which all should gradually converge. Fichte argues that this underlying recognition implies that knowledge must be shared and communicated, that is, it must be subjected to the public dialogical process that he had identified as the essence of activity in the university in the 1807 proposal. Science, like morality, involves a shared striving for a kind of rational identity (*Gleichheit*) beyond the idiosyncrasies of history and personality. This shared enterprise obliges those engaged in it to communicate their own points of view (*Ansichten*) and to confront and appropriate the challenges of others' points of view with the goal of cultivating a kind of rational harmony. Fichte goes on to argue that this harmony, brought about through reciprocal interaction, is a condition of the full realization of the moral concept, for only in this way can a perfected image of the ideal come to be. As he puts it in Lecture 22, the moral will strives for the "exhibition [*Darstellung*]" of the unity of reason through the "moralization of all, the upbuilding [*Erbauung*] of all."

In Lecture 21, Fichte contrasts this picture of a dialogical process inclusive of scientific debate with the approach of people who, while indeed inspired by rational ideas possessed of a kind of universality, seek to force this process of harmonization to its conclusion with "fire and sword." In Lecture 25, Fichte says that what morality demands is an attitude of "universal philanthropy" as the animating and controlling impulse behind the process of scientific-moral improvement. A direct consequence of this demand is that "no one can be moral for himself alone," that no one can be committed to the goal of morality without an active concern for the moral improvement of all. Thus, in the same lecture, Fichte qualifies the "separation" from the world recommended in the 1807 proposal (Fichte argues there that students should live in a kind of quasi-monastic community, insulated as far as possible from civic obligations, family life, etc.). This separation can only be temporary, a time in which one is dedicated

to self-cultivation as a *means* for carrying out the philanthropic will. As he puts it in Lecture 25, "all scientific efforts must, without exception, be subordinated to the fundamental goal of earthly life, to the formation of the community for morality [. . .]." There are few more direct statements in Fichte's writings of the ultimate purpose of university studies.

The 1812 lectures on ethics can, therefore, be profitably read against the background of Fichte's lifelong interest in educational and university reform. Fichte is an important figure within a larger movement that had been gathering strength for some time. Napoleon's conquests, and the upheavals and dislocations they brought about, while regarded by many liberal-minded intellectuals as betrayals of the spirit of revolutionary France, nonetheless provided an opportunity for some of these same intellectuals' ideals to be tested in practice. The founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 can be seen as the culmination of the reformists' efforts, and Fichte was a central player in this cultural watershed. Fichte's 1812 lectures on ethics not only articulate the philosophical commitments underwriting his activities as an educator, they also document the way in which Fichte attempted to carry out these commitments in practice.

Fichte's Work on Ethics

In his own estimation, Fichte certainly regarded the theory of ethics (*Sittenlehre*) as the heart of the philosophical system that he endeavored to articulate and defend throughout his professional life.[6] While they may disagree about what precisely this entails, scholars tend to agree with Fichte that his particular brand of idealism is shaped at its deepest level by the "primacy of practical reason." In this introduction, I do not argue for my own views regarding what Fichte means by the primacy of practical reason, or about the substance of Fichte's theory of ethics. Here, I have the more modest aims of (1) indicating some of the facts regarding Fichte's treatment of ethics over his career and (2) substantiating the very general claim that ethics is the touchstone of Fichte's overall system.

During the periods of his career in which Fichte found himself steadily employed in an academic position, he devoted considerable energy to lecturing and publishing on ethics. In both of these periods, Fichte followed a similar pattern of lecture activity. Roughly, he divided his courses into (1) introductory lectures, (2) lectures on the fundamental principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and (3) lectures on specific domains of philosophical inquiry. His teaching activity thus reflected the architectonic of his system, as well as

the claim, made explicit in the 1807 *Deduced Plan*, that such an architectonic is a necessary condition for successful philosophical education. Based on his vision of the nature of his philosophical system, Fichte was convinced that students (or even the general public) could only fully appreciate its central claims if they had been educated in the proper way. This entailed (1) coming to understand the social role of the intellectual in general and (2) achieving the proper standpoint from which to engage the intricacies of transcendental philosophy. Once this had been accomplished, Fichte could then present the most basic principles of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, in which he endeavored to articulate the transcendental conditions of human experience. The basic concepts and explanatory structures revealed by the *Wissenschaftslehre* could then be used to construct an idealist account of the traditional domains of philosophical investigation, which Fichte typically divided into nature, society (including law and politics), morality, and religion.[7]

While in Jena, Fichte lectured on the theory of ethics during the summer term of 1796, the winter term of 1796/97, and again during the winter term of 1797/98. During the winter term of 1798/99, which proved to see the ignominious conclusion of his professorship in Jena, Fichte gave a combined lecture on natural right and ethics. During this period, Fichte published his first and only systematic treatise devoted entirely to the subject. *The System of Ethics according to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* first appeared in printed fascicles for the use of students attending his 1797/98 course. It was published as a book in its own right in June 1798. As is true of the lectures translated here, it would be a mistake to regard the *System of Ethics* of 1798 as a work narrowly focused on moral theory as it is usually understood and pursued by philosophers today. Instead, Fichte's discussion ranges much more broadly, ultimately encompassing some of his clearest discussions of his basic philosophical orientation as well as key aspects of the foundational portion of his system.

Other than a brief academic appointment (in Erlangen in 1805), Fichte did not resume formal teaching in an institution of higher learning until 1810, when he took up his chair at the University of Berlin. During this final phase of his career, Fichte's teaching activity followed a pattern largely similar to the one he had first pursued in Jena, namely, introductory lectures, *Wissenschaftslehre* proper, specific philosophical disciplines. He did, however, add two new components. The first, called "The Facts of Consciousness" (held four times, in the winter term 1810/11, summer term 1811, winter term 1811/12, and winter term 1812/13) explicitly aimed to provide his students with a thorough initiation into philosophy. The second new element consisted in lectures on transcendental logic (held

twice, in summer term 1812 and winter term 1812/13), which had both an introductory and a more systematic purpose.[8] Unlike in Jena, Fichte only offered one course on ethics, in the summer term of 1812. The reason for this lies in historical exigencies. On June 23, shortly before Fichte began the lectures, Napoleon's army crossed the Russian frontier. Early in 1813, Fichte's teaching was curtailed by the start of the so-called War of the Sixth Coalition, which continued until the following spring, concluding after Fichte had died. No doubt, Fichte would have followed the pattern begun in Jena and delivered many more lectures on ethics had these events, which led directly to his death, not intervened.

As in the case of the *System of Ethics* of 1798, the 1812 lectures on the theory of ethics range across a great many topics. These include the nature of idealism (in contrast to other systems, such as Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*), the structure of the will and of action, practical reasoning, moral education, the relation between morality and religion, the philosophical analysis of revelation (a topic Fichte had been contemplating since even before arriving in Jena), and even, albeit inexplicitly and somewhat *sotto voce*, Napoleon's crossing of the Russian frontier in June 1812.

The Position of Ethics in Fichte's Thought

As mentioned previously, there is no question that ethics stands at the very center of Fichte's philosophical project. Fichte maintains that his idealism is the only philosophical position that can fully justify and explain morality. By the same token, grasping the significance of Fichte's idealism ultimately requires coming to terms with his account of morality. This is something that Fichte makes abundantly clear, both in the earlier and later parts of his career.

Just prior to embarking upon his tumultuous professorship in Jena, Fichte writes to a friend, disclosing that he sees his primary contribution to philosophy in the wake of Kant to lie in his ability to render a consistent account of "freedom" and of the "practical imperative" (III/2, 28). Elsewhere, he confides that the ultimate outcome of his new idealism is meant to be "a new, nobler, more worthy species" (III/2, 50–51). In a draft letter from the spring of 1795, Fichte likewise points to ethics as the domain in which his primary contribution lies:

> My system is the first *system of freedom*. Just as [France] has shattered the chains of human beings, so too my theory frees the

> person from the fetters of the thing-in-itself and its influence, which more or less constrained him in all previous systems; and through the exalted attitude [*Stimmung*] that it communicates, it gives the person power to also free himself in practice. (III/2, 300)

More famously, in a 1797 essay called *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte has this to say about the relationship between his idealism and ethics:

> The kind of philosophy one chooses thus depends upon the kind of person one is. For a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; instead, it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it. Someone whose character is naturally slack or who has been enervated and twisted by spiritual servitude, scholarly self-indulgence, and vanity will never be able to raise himself to the level of idealism (I/4, 195/IW, 20).

People have been debating just what it is that Fichte is claiming in this passage virtually since the moment it was printed. While the scholarly debate is outside the scope of this introduction, it is safe to presume that at least part of what Fichte is saying here is that there is an intimate connection between a certain moral character and idealism as a philosophical outlook, and that the latter in some sense expresses or does justice to the former in a way other philosophical positions do not.

Comments to this effect are by no means isolated to writings from the Jena period. In his lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1810, Fichte maintains that the "real life of the *ethical* person" is the true touchstone of philosophy, a claim he attributes also to Kant (StA I, 90). "In the dominant schools [of philosophy] that were maintained [prior to Kant] there was no longer any talk of genuine morality [*Sittlichkeit*], of a purpose beyond all nature and time, or of elevation above these" (StA I, 90). While an "obscure intimation" of morality and "even religiosity" are possible aside from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the latter brings with it the "clarity of the concept" (StA I, 94). In the lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1812, Fichte asserts the superiority of idealism in similar terms. It alone can account adequately for our "moral nature," for the fact that we "are and *ought to be* free," that reason is "practical and moral" (II/13, 163). This account is nothing less than "[t]he high point and the purest expression of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* for which I wanted to prepare the way [. . .]. The

scales of dogmatism and *Naturphilosophie* will fall from the eyes of whoever understands this" (II/13, 163). If we take these and other statements made by Fichte throughout his career seriously, then it must be concluded that a proper understanding of his distinctive approach to philosophy can only be achieved by carefully attending to his theory of ethics.

Outline of the Lectures

The entire course of lectures was offered by Fichte in twenty-nine installments, beginning on June 29, 1812, and concluding on August 13. Fichte had concluded his lectures on the theory of right (*Rechtslehre*) on June 17. Both of these lecture series had been announced in the university's catalog for the summer term as "philosophical sciences." Overlapping with the theory of ethics, Fichte delivered the first of two lecture courses on transcendental logic (between April 20 and August 14). A heavily edited text of the lectures on ethics, combining both Fichte's own manuscript and material from a student transcript, was published by Fichte's son I. H. Fichte in 1835 and reissued in 1912. There are three extant original versions of the lecture material apart from this earlier edition: (1) Fichte's own manuscript, (2) a transcript by Jakob Ludwig Cauer, and (3) a transcript by an unknown hand, called the "Halle transcript" due to the fact that it is preserved in the city archives of the old university town of Halle.

Fichte begins the lecture with a brief discussion of the relationship between the theory of ethics, as a particular "philosophical science," and the foundational portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The theory of ethics is the analysis of the claim that "the concept is the ground of the world," or rather, it is the derivation of the conditions for the possibility of the concept being the ground of the world. Fichte links this part of his discussion with the theory of concepts developed contemporaneously in his lectures on transcendental logic. The concept that is supposed to ground the world cannot, in this instance, be copied from the world but must be "absolute" or "pure." This starting point parallels that of the 1798 *System of Ethics*, where Fichte explicates the conditions upon which reason can be practical. In this way, despite the distinctively Fichtean idiom, the 1812 lectures also reflect Fichte's Kantian heritage.

The first condition that Fichte derives is that the pure concept cannot become the ground of the world unless we assume that there is *life*, or self-determining activity. For the concept to become the ground of the world there must be something that brings this state of affairs about. But, it turns

out that sheer life in the biological sense is not sufficient; for the *concept* to become the ground of the world, we need to add consciousness; the life that is required is one that determines itself according to a "paradigm" (*Vorbild*) or a representation of some state of the world. As Fichte puts it, we need life with an "eye." Fichte now explains that self-determination in accordance with a concept is what he means by the *will*. A will that is capable of bringing about a state of affairs in accord with an "absolute" or "pure" concept, however, must be something that is not solely or entirely determined by the natural drive.

With these conditions in place, Fichte goes on to argue that ethics becomes "real" only when this capacity for self-determination according to a pure concept is seen as the "absolute determination of the I." That is, one comes to see that any action that one pursues must ultimately be consistent with this essential feature of I-hood. This purely *intelligible* concept is precisely the pure concept in accordance with which some state of affairs in the world is to be brought forth. According to Fichte, this condition is what Kant tries to express by means of the categorical imperative. An agent acts according to a "paradigm" or image of some state of the world, and for this action to be properly moral, this state of the world has to be consistent with the "absolute determination of the I" just described.

Fichte next argues that moral action is only possible on the condition that this supersensible or intelligible concept of the essence of the I "appears," that is, is somehow present for an agent in her consciousness. According to Fichte, this point is expressed theologically by the doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet, it is not sufficient that the concept in question merely be grasped or recognized; rather it must appear with obligatory force, as an "ought." Moral action rests upon an agent's cognition of this absolute norm *as a norm*. At this point, Fichte finds himself required to differentiate two standpoints on the entire topic: (1) that of the *theory of being* and (2) that of the *theory of appearance*. The former standpoint, according to which the I and its freedom are deduced from the absolute concept, leaves no room for obligatory force, since the very being of freedom is a necessary product of the concept. The latter standpoint, on the other hand, is the one from which it makes sense to inquire about moral normativity and its bearing on the wills of finite agents.[9] This theory of appearance, or moral phenomenology, as Fichte calls it, becomes the main focus of the discussion throughout the remainder of the lectures. He sets out the formal structure of this theory in Lecture 13, distinguishing between moral appearance (which always involves the I's reflective awareness of

itself as the expression of the concept) and immoral appearance. Fichte then goes on to discuss how moral appearance involves the establishment of an enduring character or disposition that, as it were, anticipates one's future acts of willing to do one's duty.

One of Fichte's central claims is that the cognition of the pure concept as normative requires moral formation. He first explains that the moral formation of the individual is something that presupposes the formation of the human species as a whole. The latter, Fichte maintains, can be thought of as something that falls ultimately under the power of God. The end result of the process of moral formation for any particular individual is that one should come to see oneself as the "appearance" of the pure concept, or as the "image of God." God's education of the human species, given the goal at which it aims, must obviously be consistent with self-determination. More specifically, the content of the educative process is supposed to be the motive of one's action, but this content must be consistent with the nature of agency as described earlier. This means that mechanical causal influence is ruled out as a means for moral formation.

Fichte next turns to a consideration of the stages of this process of moral formation, a process that he retraces elsewhere in his lectures on the "facts of consciousness." The first stage is simply the awareness of oneself as an agent capable of influencing the states of affairs of the empirical world (corresponding to the bare biological concept of life described previously). Next, one must come to think of oneself as more than a merely natural being, since only in this way can a person begin to comprehend the idea of freedom. According to Fichte, this requires the concept of a "community of I's" sharing a common rationality and thus capable of being bound by principles that are genuinely universal.[10] At this point, we have reached the first glimmering of the properly moral standpoint. This is expressed by the idea that each individual should be brought to harmonize with others in a way that gradually abstracts away from their particularities as natural beings, leading to a state more closely approximating the common rationality referred to previously. More concretely, this means that any state of affairs of the empirical world must be seen as subservient to this harmonization. Fichte points out how there are many goals or ends—economic, political, aesthetic, or religious—that are not reducible to merely natural desires and that in many cases produce profound and lasting changes in the empirical world. Here he refers to the Prophet Muhammad's zeal for monotheism. He also alludes in a more subtle way to Napoleon's recent invasion of the Russian Empire, an event of undoubted historical

significance and yet, on Fichte's view, of dubious moral value. Indeed, Fichte insists that the fact that great deeds result from these motives is beside the point from a moral point of view.

The goal of the harmonization of humanity as a whole in accord with our shared rationality must be present to an individual in the first instance in an "image" or "representational concept." That is, a person must have some particular idea of a state of affairs that accords with duty, which can be thought of as a kind of limitation or determination of the universal goal described in the preceding paragraph. Fichte argues that, for most people, this is entirely sufficient, though it is not the highest form of the moral point of view. For the latter, one must explicitly take as the object of one's will the morality of every person, that is, each person's complete identification with his or her being the "image of God." Or, as he puts it further on, one's explicit aim ought to be "the moralizing of all, the upbuilding [*Erbauung*] of all into a single ethical community." One's action should be for the sake of the freedom of all. For Fichte, this is what it means to say that *love* is the highest form of morality. Given the content of this aim, it is evident that it cannot be achieved through violence or coercion, since genuine morality must be consistent with free self-determination. This claim is particularly interesting in light of the appropriation of Fichte's earlier *Addresses to the German Nation* in the cause of militaristic nationalism in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Internally, that is, to the moral agent, the moral character is manifest first of all as self-denial, or the relinquishing of mere survival as one's highest end. Second, it is expressed by "universal philanthropy"; that is, humanity, not one's contingent desires as a natural being, forms one's highest object. Finally, this universal philanthropy is incompatible with simply avoiding interference in other people's affairs. It is an active concern with the morality of all, one that requires full engagement in a community. This is not to say, of course, that there is no room for self-cultivation (e.g., scientific study) in a more private manner, though this must always be subordinated to the end of morality. Fichte goes on to specify honesty or truthfulness, as well as simplicity, as defining features of the truly moral character.

In the final portion of the lectures, Fichte argues that a further essential condition for the realization of morality is a *church*. The church first of all preserves the collective wisdom of humanity, for history as a totality embodies a cultivated humanity. Second, the church must be unified by a creed, by a determinate vision of the moral community or of the vocation of humanity. The creed itself rests ultimately on revelation, which Fichte

conceives of as the process whereby an inspired individual becomes conscious of this vision and then communicates it to other people in such a way that their "moral sense" concurs with it. Any particular creed may come to deviate from the original revelation; Fichte maintains that we can see that this has happened when we compare the teachings of Jesus in John's Gospel with some of the later dogmas of the church. The possibility of this kind of deviation, however, does not entail that the particular insights or interpretations of individuals could somehow replace the creed. Rather, the duty of the educated members of the church is to progressively perfect the creed in the light of the initial revelation.

In line with what he had argued previously about the inconsistency between coercion and the end of morality, Fichte argues that consent to the creed can only rest on the moral sense or on an "inner demonstration," never on *force majeure* or some other external authority. It may turn out that a church founded on authority does promote the moral progress of humanity, but Fichte regards this as a matter of luck, whereas a church united by a creed that people accept on the basis of conscience does not have the same sort of merely contingent relation to this progress. Historical knowledge (e.g., of the authorship of texts) plays no role in producing conviction here, though it might be of use in the process of revising the creed to accord with the original inspiration. Philosophy, on the other hand, since it shares the "same content" with the creed, is much more central to this revision process. Interestingly, Fichte argues that "moral faith" is the presupposition for philosophy, that the church is the "fold" from which the philosopher springs. Moral faith is the initial mode in which the content of morality is given; only when it is given can it be philosophically clarified.

Note on Translation

As mentioned earlier, there are three extant original texts of Fichte's 1812 lectures on ethics. The authoritative critical edition of Fichte's works, produced by an editorial team with the Bavarian Academy of the Sciences, contains two of these in complete form: (1) series II, volume 13, contains Fichte's own manuscript; and (2) series IV, volume 6, contains the Halle transcript. Cauer's transcript is not reproduced in its entirety but is instead occasionally included in footnotes to both of these texts. The state of this transcript is reflected in the present translation by the absence of pagination when it is cited. More recently, a new critical edition of Fichte's manuscript has appeared in StA, under the general editorship of Hans Georg von Manz,

which makes several (unspecified) corrections to the GA version. The present translation is a complete, continuous rendering of Fichte's manuscript according to the newer StA version. Supplemental materials from both transcripts are included in footnotes. I have provided pagination for both the GA and StA versions for the benefit of those who read German and are interested in comparing the translation with both versions.

I have organized the translation into chapters corresponding to the date on which the lectures were originally delivered by Fichte. I have endeavored to produce a text that is both accurate and readable. This has turned out to be no small task, as Fichte's manuscript often reads more like a series of shorthand notes to himself than a polished text. The 1812 lectures on the theory of ethics is a challenging text; indeed, it represents some of the most difficult prose Fichte ever produced.

In addition to the pagination, other notations in the text are as follows: {. . .}, supplemental interpolations provided by the editors of the GA volumes; [. . .], supplemental interpolations provided by me, including reproductions of the original German text; and |, page breaks in the originals of Fichte's manuscript.[11]

Selected English and German Bibliography

There is virtually no English-language scholarly literature that directly deals with the 1812 lectures on the theory of ethics. There are several works that engage moral and political philosophy and Fichte's later philosophy more generally, which I have listed in this section. Readers who know German might also find it useful to have some additional orientation toward the text through a bibliography of recent (i.e., from the last two decades) scholarship.

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