

J. G. Fichte as a Post-Kantian Philosopher and His Political Theory: A Return to Romanticism

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Abstract

This paper fundamentally deals with J. G. Fichte's philosophical views, which reshapes intellectual-philosophical bases of the post-Enlightenment era and makes a strong criticism of Kantian thinking. Philosophically, Fichte's philosophy, more representing a return to romanticism, will be debated on the basis of some concepts, among of which has been reason, science, tradition, religion, state, individual, and community. From his viewpoint, it will interrogate relationships among ego, morality and moral order. Based on these relationships, it will be tried to explain what man's moral nature is and how moral consciousness is conceptualized in Fichte' thought. The debates between these concepts will provides basis for a political theory framed by Fichte. Also, it will indicate how a political theory there was developed, outlined by Fichte for German nation over two basic concepts, moral nature and moral consciousness. Taking account of all these discussions, in conclusion it will argue that his political theory had more liberal-conservative implications, along with nationalist ones.

Keywords: morality, consciousness, political theory, Fichte's moral philosophy

Introductory Remarks

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) is one of the most leading thinkers that had taken part among the German Classics defined as a romantic movement, which arose in form of a reaction more after Kantian idea. Fichte was between outstanding representatives of romanticism. Romanticism, which had given its name to a reactional movement, is a philosophy of nature, mythology, and irrationalism. It is generally initiated with Descartes, one of the most prominent representatives of modern philosophy. Basically, it opposed to Descartes' Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*'s assertion that defines individual or person as a subjective and internal process, without seeing the reality of the external world. This philosophy is ego-centric and looks for its focal point in itself. At the same time, it is to be governed by a schism between thought and being, concept and reality, mind and nature, and subject and object. Fichte was against this schism and annihilated it by way of an absolute ego, which he described as a situation appearing in the world and supposing itself and its antithesis, non-ego (Schmitt, 1986, p. 52). Modern philosophy has laid the intellectual-philosophical bases of Enlightenment. For the very reason, this movement, German Classics, became prominent with its views that object to Enlightenment idea, firstly emphasizing individual's mind, science, man as authority, and individual autonomy, instead of religion, state, community, morality, and tradition and the like. This idea, which refers to a new historical, political and philosophical era, sees reason and scientific activity as a fundamental tool able to put forward true knowledge or truth, with its basic foundations mostly shaped against to religion itself and religious institutions, Church. This idea has been strongly opposed to all religions, since it regarded them as a product of ignorance and fear, and as an obstacle to intellectual progress and clear use of mind. In its view, there is no absolutely "inherent incompatibility" between religion and science (Compleston, 1994a, pp. 2–3). Conversely, romanticism is fundamentally to be comprehended as a movement that objects to the rationalism of the eighteenth century which provides a basic for modern philosophy (Schmitt, 1986, p. 53). Starting from this point of view, Romantic Movement, among of which was German thinker Fichte, formulating its own arguments in opposition to this idea, argues that there are feelings, faith, instinctive actions, mystical visions, and religious ideas or practices founded as a way of obeying to a divine authority or God. However, in an enlightened idea, a sacred authority or God has been certainly rejected, because of asserting that the main activity to discover, verify and justify a great deal of things in society and nature has been science and reason. More importantly, this idea to have an undisputed faith in the powers of human reason to reach to the truth. With its logical-mathematical method, it highlights important to apply to human reason and its scientific viewpoint based upon reason and science for explaining all everything under the sun for removing all obscurity, mystery, bigotry, and superstition. Religion, state, law, morality, language, and art have been institutions or structures able to understand and clarify in the light of human reasoning and scientific activity. Generally, the enlightened idea emphasizes the worth and dignity of human being and basically attempts at delivering him/her from the slavery of – a religious or/and divine authority and tradition, and making him or her self-reliant in thought and action (Thilly, 1913, p. 1). In Kant's words,

"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of reason, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without

guidance from another. Sapere Aude! “Have courage to use your own understanding!” – that is the motto of enlightenment” (Kant 2010 [1784], p. 1).

Therefore, along with Enlightenment, reason and scientific activity have been the foundation of all everything, included morality, religion, tradition, state, politics, law, ideology, and intellectual production, and so on, whereby laying the bases of a sociological explanation. As opposed to that, a philosophical-romantic movement historically appeared with authentic sociological statements and views, which had taken a stand against a sociology based on an enlightened philosophy and symbolizing an idea defined as The Romantic-Conservative Reaction and represented by some thinkers, among of who were Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, Burke, Hegel, and even Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte. In common with Fichte and other German Classics, they rejected Enlightenment idea grounded on rationalism and empiricism and referring to reason and scientific observation for studying man, society and nature and solving their problems. Most often, instead of reason, they pointed out to tradition, religion, imagination, feeling, and faith so as to examine whole humanistic and natural problems and resolve them. For them, these, all of which substitute for reason and science, seems as categorical tools natural and positive in analyzing and explaining man, society and nature (Zeitlin, 1968, pp. 35–55). This was a reaction that had shaped against the optimistic faith of the Enlightenment, believing in individual’s reason and scientific activity philosophically based on rationalism and empiricism for transforming them and intervening in man and society with revolutionary enterprises. This philosophical-romantic reaction paved the way for arising a new interest in historical-political order and problems and concepts linked to it. According to this reactional movement, the enlightened thought is to challenge the essential institutions of society, consisting of religion, tradition, and faith, and thus to cause the loss of the political stability. Historically and socially, the movement in question has been at the same time the source of major sociological concepts and ideas. All in all, this paper basically addresses and debates the relationship Fichte’ moral-romantic philosophy and political theory.

Ego, Morality and Consciousness in Fichte’s Philosophy

Following this reactionary movement with philosophical views and sociological implications, when coming to Fichte’s philosophical approach, we see that there has been a pure idealist point of view. Begin with, Fichte underlines morality or/and a moral law and ethic. For him, morality and a moral order were related to God, and he identifies this order with God. Therefore, we bear witness that in consequence of idealism in question these morality and ethic have a more spiritual aspect than any other thing. For instance, the world, in his view, is intrinsically a spiritual order. Fichte at the same time accepted ego, or spirit as an ultimate and absolute principle by virtue of giving a meaning and worth to the life per se. Here can be basically expressed that this ego is a transcendental ego. To be sure, as will be seen later, the foregoing ego, which has a more spiritual and transcendental aspects, is quite moral and have bases attributed to a moral framework. Besides a moral component, the ego, defined by Fichte as pure, is nothing but simply an activity. However, the pure ego is to be turned into an object of consciousness in the very same way as desire is objectified. Therefore, it is absurd to say that through introspection, we see a desire, an image and a pure ego. For, every act of objectification presupposes a pure ego (Compleston, 1994b, p. 42). In a sense, ego is an activity. For, the ego as an absolutely active, which “posit” a non-ego, is not a

notion that expresses the analytical concept of a rational logic based on abstract generalities. Therefore, Fichte's ego has been a concrete, individual concept that arises in a concrete world (Schmitt, 1986, p. 53) Thus, we become aware of the pure activity of the ego, of free action, in similar way to an intellectual intuition. But, with ego, Fichte does not only mean a subjective ego as a particular individual self with all idiosyncrasies, but also a universal ego because of manifesting itself in all conscious individuals as a universal and necessary truth (Thilly, 1913, pp. 7–8). Except for that, Fichte attributes a power to the ego in order to create an idea of non-ego existing independently, but for the very reason of fact that it is dependent on the ego, this non-ego's activity has been ultimately the activity of the ego itself. Quite simply, this power has referred to the absolute ego, rather than individual self, as long as it has been highlighted that pure-ego is more universal than particular. This power, which characterizes the ego, is described by Fichte as a power of imagination, more appropriately, as a productive power of imagination and/or power of productive imagination. As known well, the power of imagination is a principal element in Kantian philosophy, which serves as an indispensable link between sensibility and understanding (Compleston, 1994b, pp. 51–52). Once more, as we have seen here, the ego has been an activist direction in sense of having a power of imagination. It is an ego that has spiritualist and idealist bases rather than materialist ones as such. The aforesaid ego is an all-important in terms of incorporating a sense and value into our life. These major characters of ego compel it to be more moral because it has to contain moral norms or duties. This ego is fundamentally moral with ethical purposes that realizes itself in nature and in man, which Fichte argued to be universal (Thilly, 1913, p. 8).

Another significant concept upon which Fichte dwelled in his own philosophy has been consciousness. As far as we understand, this notion is closely connected with his own understanding of morality and moral order. But that connection was not merely limited to morality. There would at the same time a relation between reason and consciousness as well. Such relation can be, too, clearly seen, considering the connections among reason, imagination, judgment and consciousness. In this context, according to Fichte the occurrence of consciousness, however, necessitates that the products of the creative imagination should be made more visible. And this is also possible by using understanding and judgment. Other than this, self-consciousness, remarks Fichte, needs more than power to abstract from particular objects in favor of the universal. It presupposes power to abstract from the object in general, in order to achieve a reflection on the subject. And this power of absolute abstraction, as Fichte calls it, is reason (Compleston, 1994b, p.53). Apart from the relationship between consciousness and reason, on the ground that Fichte had a philosophical approach, which emphasizes a morality and moral order based on his own morality-centered philosophy, the word consciousness has been majorly concerned with morality, moral norms, and a responsibility of duties referring to a moral law. Before passing to this link between consciousness and morality, we should clarify what a moral action is and how Fichte defines such an action. In Fichte's view, because of being a moral activity, each particular action should fulfill a certain formal condition. Put it another way, "Always act according to your best conviction of your duty or act according to your consciousness."

This above-statement has been the formal condition of our action with moral bases. The will that acts in this manner is good will. Strictly speaking, Fichte writes under the

influence of Kant in the context of morality and moral philosophy, whereas his philosophy includes a philosophical reaction to Kantianism in the case of science (Schmitt, 1986, p. 53). An explanation regarding this influence can make more illuminating how morality is defined [no doubt we know it was a morality of duty]. However, the relation to be established between consciousness and morality has been, we think, certainly something peculiar to Fichte. At this juncture, Fichte, for instance, spoke of “acting *according to your conscience*.” Because he defined conscience as “the immediate consciousness of our determinate duty.” In other words, “Conscience would be the immediate awareness of a particular obligation.” (Compleston, 1994b, p. 65)

As a matter of fact, this last expression explicitly indicates that his concept of conscience has fundamentally a moral base. However, the main point that he departs from a Kantian thought is that in his view the conscience refers to a *feeling*, though we have expressed above that there was a relation between conscience and reason in keeping with Kantian view. Even so, Fichte insists on describing it as an immediate feeling by suggesting that conscience is directly linked with morality and a moral order. It corresponds to an ordinary man’s actions in everyday life accustomed to act as depended his/her own moral worldview. He states that, for example, a man can say that “I feel that this is the right thing to do. And thus, I feel that another course of action would be wrong.” And s/he absolutely feel certain about it (Compleston, 1994b, p. 66). Therefore, there seems that consciousness is identified with feeling. The reason why it has been so is that consciousness has a pure moral ground. As a result, taking into account all of these, if something is moral, in this case we should take account of being a consciousness there. In this way, it is seen that there has been a clear relation among feeling, morality and consciousness. All in all, we can conclude that they are concepts associated much closely with one another.

Man’s Moral Nature and Moral Consciousness

In Fichte, we see that morality and moral order is conceptualized in relation to a responsibility of duty necessary to be actualized as in a Kantian outlook. In other words, Fichte defines morality as a morals of duties. For this reason, in his opinion morality is something composed of a set of duties performed by human beings because of having a lot of norm, commands, or instructions, and the like. In parallel with this definition, Fichte argues that morality or moral law is categorical: namely, it simply tells “Do this, or do not that.” Put it another way, morality has been a concept that defines as a set of norms including an obligation by commanding individuals to do this or not to do that. In Hegel’s opinion, Fichte was not able to really succeed in overcoming the formalism of the Kantian (Compleston, 1994b, p. 60). In a sense, he states that morality or moral law become different from others owing to compulsive. Even, this diversity has been, signifies Fichte, manifested by being separated the theories of rights and political society from morality or moral law. Likewise, he emphasizes that those theories are concerned with the external relations between human beings. For, in them, for example, the fact that I have a right does not necessarily mean that I am under an obligation to exercise it. For this reason, the system of rights cannot be deducible from a moral law (Compleston, 1994b, p.60). Thereby, morality and moral law have a structure and establishment imperative to be carried out without looking at whether or not there have been external purposes, far beyond a theory of rights and political society. As said earlier, in Fichte’s philosophy there is a moral-based approach, and thus ego and consciousness are quite moral as well.

As a result of the mentioning moral base, man also has a moral nature, and this moral nature has, states Fichte, asked new questions. For instance, there has been such a basic question like “what is meant by man’s moral nature?” At this stage, Fichte expresses that man has some impulsions to carry out certain actions without an external purpose, and not to actualize others. And nature of man, in so far as this impulsion itself has necessarily manifested within him/her, has been a moral and/or ethical one. He asserts that a man can have knowledge concerning his/her moral nature and his/her subjection to a moral compulsivity in two ways. In the first place, s/he is able to possess this knowledge at the level of common moral consciousness. In a word, s/he is able to aware through his/her conscious of a moral order ordering him to do this or not to do that. And this immediate awareness has been quite sufficient for knowledge of one’s duties and moral behaviour. In the second place, a man is able to assume the ordinary moral consciousness as something given and inquire into its ground (Compleston, 1994b, pp. 60–61). Man has a moral consciousness commanded to perform certain duties by doing this, not others, because of having a moral nature. In addition to that the consciousness is moral, it at the same time demonstrates to each of us that we have duties to act in certain ways toward ourselves and others. Thus, Fichte returns his original problem concerning status of a moral responsibility. His problem is interested in reconciling what we know as the casual order of the nature with what we learn from our moral consciousness. This is because our moral consciousness says that we have been responsible for our acts (Fichte, 1956, pp. XI–XII). As in a Kantian idea, there has not been a problem of knowing, but rather we clearly see that in Fichte’s philosophy there was a problem of acting but this acting would be just fulfilled in certain norms or principles by making a feel of responsibility of duty. For him, the basic problem of philosophy has, or should be, been mainly moral. In his one book, entitled “Vocation of Man”, he speaks out that our vocation is not just to know, but to act according to our knowledge (Fichte, 1956, p. 83. Besides this, as stated before, it should be underlined that this morality and moral law is godlike. The reason is that God has been a creative for the moral order of the world and that all of us can exist “only in God and through God”. In thus, he concludes that the God has been same thing with the moral order of the world. Similar to Kant, he rejects the usual arguments purporting to demonstrate God’s existence (Fichte, 1956, p. XV). Briefly stated, morality or moral life is reflected a responsibility of duties which is obligatory to be performed by men and, and also it have a godlike character without demonstrating God’s existence.

Conclusion: Fichte’s Political Theory

From the standpoint of a political theory, Fichte’s theory carries the traces of romanticism or Romantic Movement. Politically, this movement has a conservative orientation with arguments advanced against particularly the French Revolution of 1789. As a political conservative the movement at issue alleges that law and the state cannot certainly stem from the methodical activity of the individual human beings. At the same time, for a romantic movement, nation and society are not overnight products of individual “fabrication”. On the contrary, they are created over long periods of time, involving tradition, religion, morality, feeling, faith, and community (Schmitt, 1986, p. 108–109). All the same, “Revolution ideology,” which caused the emerging of a political romantic movement and symbolizes the French Revolution, suggests that human reason is the source of eternal principles of right in line with which the present political institutions is to be judged and, if necessary, reformed or replaced. In the Foundations of Natural Right, with Rousseauian affects, principally, Fichte claims that

the possession of sovereignty is popular will and in the state the governed must have some roles while governing. This idea is at the core of Fichte's account of the state (Fichte, 2000, p. 11, p. 22). For, in opposition to his writings of 1793 on the Revolution, Fichte accepts a lawful community by asserting that all right and property resulted from the state, and that the individual possesses nothing prior to political contract (Schmitt, 1986, p. 111). On the other hand, in order to make his accounts of the state clearer, Fichte also draws a liberal political frame by separating the rights into three parts. They are original right, the right of coercion, and political right. For him, original rights are rights that individuals possess freely from any actual political order and that have to be guarded and held in high esteem in a state. The right of coercion is grounded on a necessity of state with need to form a reliable "law of coercion" that will deter individuals from violating the original rights of others and punish actual criminals. Lastly, political right is interested in *Staatsrecht*, namely civil law, the state's constitution, and constitutional law (Fichte, 2000, p. 19–20). Taking into account all these, in our opinion, it can be concluded that, within a political context, Fichte had a liberal-conservative perspective because of either defending a community in Rousseauian sense more than individual or giving priority to individual as having original rights over against state. In order to show them, we might return to his ideas again. According to him, the freedom and law were institutions inseparable from each other and ultimately same things. For instance, when one thinks of oneself as free, one would be compelled to think freedom as something taking place under a juridical order; or when one thinks of occurring a judicial order, one would be forced to feel yourself as free. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the law and freedom, and to be free is solely possible with the law. The law is to approve no exception simply because it is to express the very nature of "a free being" (Compleston, 1994b, pp. 64–65). It is a law based on the principles of right created to apply to free actions of rational beings. It is composed of normative principles, that is, a law whose efficacy depends on conscious beings recognizing it as such (Fichte, 2000, p. 18). It aims at the action of an "emancipated being" to become in accordance with the law or the present juridical principles/norms, by making feel of having to act within a responsibility of duty. In other respects, morally every good human being has a universal moral duty to spread morality beyond himself and to encourage it everywhere. However, every free being, and thus also the child, is capable of morality. What makes it possible is parents. If the parents themselves are moral, they will take advantage of every probable tools to cultivate morality in their child (Fichte, 2000, p. 310). As a matter of fact, this view was, to a large extent, conservative, though it has liberal implications. The conservative stance at issue is to become more evident with his ideas in relation to state. For one thing, as stated earlier, Fichte argued that man had moral duties towards the state, and that at the same time the state was one and only establishment irreplaceable to fulfill conditions in which a moral life could develop. If man's moral nature were fully developed, this would be more likely with the state and its institutional entity (Compleston, 1994b, p. 59). For this, Fichte ascribes to the state a further role in helping individuals to achieve moral virtue. The one reason is that man is a being that has feelings. The feelings are the necessary product of the natural drive and follows immediately from it. Thus, the state should be charged with the moral education of its citizens. This is because "the morality of its citizens is the state's highest, and only, final end." (Fichte, 2000, p. 24, p. 307). We differently see this in the thoughts which Fichte expressed in the context of community, by being influenced from Rousseauian views. Fichte's theory shares much in Rousseau's political theory, especially concerned with that of social contract. But, although the original purpose of a social contract is

defined individualistically (as the protection of each individual's original rights), its actual implementation necessitates “a high degree of social-spiritedness among its participants – particularly, the ability to subordinate one's private ends to universal aims of the just state.” (Fichte, 2000, p. 22). This is entirely a view removed from a liberal-political idea. Therefore, we can conclude that the state with aims, and morality, needed to be taught by his/her parents to each free individual, were indispensable for Fichte's political theory. Presumably, when evaluating his political views based on liberal-conservative arguments, it might, we think, be more illuminating to speak a bit of his one book, “*Addresses to the German Nation*”, which suggested a new life to the German people and laying the bases of German nationalism with the ideals of liberty and justice which opposed the despotism of Napoleon in the face of the French army of occupation (Fichte, 1922). This book has been one of his most interesting works uncovering close relationship between his moral philosophy and political theory. On the other hand, it has clearly showed us under what conditions his philosophical approach shaped, particularly considering Prussian's political and social conditions. First of all, Fichte starts with what sort of soul and conscious German people had to act, for the salvation of German nation. In the difficult conditions which the German people came across, *Addresses to the German Nation* by Fichte desires to arise a German conscious aware of its own national mission and their duty, when the French army occupied the Prussian capital (Thilly, 1913, p. 6). Given the views that he expressed in this book, which intrinsically had aimed at creating a German nation, it seems that there was an overt relation between his moral philosophy and political ideas with more conservative aspects but with liberal ones a bit. Once, since Fichte's theory of morals quite imperative and categorical was founded on a responsibility of duties, his political theory is to express a combination of his own moral philosophy and German nationalism. That theory itself embodies in a moral action defined as an unconditionally devotion to an entity (nation, state, or moral community) without an external purpose and worldly-interest. Taking his philosophy of morals and moral order into consideration, differently from a theory of rights with liberal-political implications, it is no surprised that there was developed a moral-political action, which had become apparent as a goal in itself. This way of action with moral-political bases was to play an important role in building a German nation. Likewise, it was to take shape German nationalism. In this case, such definition of morality and a moral approach appears to have been quite convenient to be used by a nationalist idea.

We can conclude some results from all these. Firstly, nationalism requires a moral approach in Fichte's viewpoint. Secondly, as a result of a liberal-conservative standpoint, we can tell that he was a nationalist thinker, considering his efforts to empower a German nationalism on the basis of his moral philosophy. Thirdly, Fichte formed his political thoughts within a liberal-conservative and nationalist political line. Lastly, generally in his philosophy the main problem has been an issue of acting according to some principles or knowledge, rather than the issue of knowing, and such an acting was more interested in what principles or rules and how human beings had act. Generally speaking, the basic framework of his philosophy consists of theory of rights and morality grounded on how individuals should act. His political ideas would be also founded on such liberal-conservative arguments.

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