

**Johann Gottlieb Fichte**

*Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green, ed. Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

192 pages

US\$80.00 (cloth; ISBN 978-0-521-11279-6);

US\$27.99 (paper; ISBN 978-0-521-13018-9)

In 1792, Kant's publisher issued a text containing an *a priori* 'deduction of religion' that purported to reconcile the concept of religious revelation with philosophical speculation. Interestingly, and for reasons still unknown, the publisher omitted both the preface and the author's name from the first edition. Since Kant was known to be preparing a critical work on religion, the philosophical public assumed he was the author. When the previously unknown J. G. Fichte was revealed to be the actual author, his philosophical fame was secured. While closer inspection of the text reveals important departures from Kant, as well as a prefiguring of Fichte's own 'critical' system, the *Wissenschaftslere*, this text is important both historically and in its own right as an attempt to investigate religion from a transcendental standpoint.

This new edition of Fichte's *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, which is part of the Cambridge Tests in the History of Philosophy series, is an important addition to the resurgence of interest in Fichte that has taken place in the last 30 years. The translation itself is not new—Garrett Green's translation from a previous Cambridge edition (1978) is utilized. This is not a weakness, however, since Green does an admirable job of faithfully rendering into English Fichte's notoriously difficult prose. What is new, and what serves as an important scholarly resource, is Allen Wood's informative and insightful introductory essay. Wood carefully situates Fichte's text in its historical context, both in terms of Fichte's own early philosophical development in Jena and Zurich and in terms of his relation to Kant. Of particular interest is Wood's masterful analysis of Fichte's important contributions to the interpretation of Kant's conception of the will. Fichte, as Wood notes, endorses the conventional Kantian claim that our desire for happiness itself necessarily involves a moral motivation. But Wood usefully points out that Fichte's focus on the unity of the whole human being (i.e., the attempt to reconcile our practical and theoretical needs and interests) prefigures some of the themes that will become central to later versions of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslere*.

Readers also will benefit from Wood's interpretation of the method Fichte utilizes in the text. Fichte himself spent a good part of his philosophical work focusing on questions of method, and in this regard Wood's analysis of Fichte's 'synthetic method' helps the reader to make sense of Fichte's reception and transformation of Kant's critical methodology. Fichte recognizes that transcendental inquiry necessarily produces contradictions and antinomies that threaten to bring philosophizing to a stand-still. By

deducing new concepts that ‘synthesize’ apparently contradictory concepts, Fichte’s ‘synthetic method’ aims to transform potential dead-ends into productive and indispensable conceptual resources for thinking about consciousness and our world. While Fichte is often passed over in the rush from Kant to Hegel, Wood shows how Hegel’s own ‘dialectical method’ is in fact a modification of Fichte’s synthetic method. Finally, Wood provides readers with a useful exposition of Fichte’s influence on subsequent thinkers, from Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer to Heidegger and Habermas.

It is easy to see why its first readers mistook the text for Kant’s long-awaited treatise on religion. (Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was published one year later in 1793.) Fichte’s text begins with a ‘Deduction of Religion’ that makes use of Kant’s conceptual and linguistic resources. Indeed, Fichte wrote the text as a means of ingratiating himself toward Kant, and Kant subsequently was so impressed by the effort that he recommended the text to his own publisher. The text itself is oriented by a concern with the compatibility of religion and morality. Like Kant, Fichte was concerned with both systematic unity and the unity of the person. Regarding the latter, transcendental inquiry must investigate whether the varied needs and interests of theoretical reason are compatible with the needs and interests of practical reason. Indeed, this concern with the unity of the person is antecedent to and a foundation for establishing the unity of a philosophical system. Thus, while Fichte’s text may seem to address a question of marginal philosophical interest (i.e., religious revelation), it is actually addressing what both Kant and Fichte took to be perhaps the basis of all philosophizing: namely, the aforementioned concern with unity. Fichte’s text is thus interesting and of philosophical significance in its own right as an attempt to extend the Kantian standpoint by addressing this question: Is religious belief consistent with morality?

Fichte’s text begins with a consideration of the will in relation to a proposed deduction of religion. The latter proceeds from a deduction of the concept of religion, to an analysis of the concept of revelation, and, finally, to an investigation into the nature of genuine revelation. The initial deduction of the concept of religion will be familiar to readers of Kant, as it situates itself squarely within a Kantian conceptual framework characterized by the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, the role of postulates of reason in relation to reason’s dual theoretical and practical employments, and the nature and function of the concept of God. But prior to this deduction of religion, Fichte offers an innovative investigation of the concept of the will, and as Wood notes, this is perhaps the most interesting section of the text. Whereas Kant focuses on the feeling of respect for the moral law as the locus of affection (i.e., modification of our sensibility), Fichte focuses on that feeling in terms of a striving to unify the self. This striving is what Wood calls ‘a normative requirement to unify’ (xix). Fichte’s discussion of the will and its project of unification is certainly the most original part of the text, prefiguring some core doctrines that appear in the ceaseless revisions that Fichte would make during his Jena and (early) Berlin periods to his *Wissenschaftslehre*. The later focus

on ‘striving’ is, in the present text, seen in its first manifestation. But also prefigured is Fichte’s later focus on the task of unifying the self via an ongoing project of self-creation oriented by the need to transform the world in the image of the moral law.

In addition to his analyses of religion and the will, Fichte’s insights into revelation and its relation to morality are intriguing. Revealed religion, Fichte argues, must serve morality, and genuine revelation must accord with morality. The spirit of Fichte’s argument is easily obscured by the Kantian letter in which that spirit is expressed. Indeed, Fichte’s argument entails that certain core features of orthodox Christian revealed religion are illegitimate (i.e., they are not, in fact, *genuine* instances of revelation). Presumably, revelation referring to God’s command to exterminate Canaanites (*Deuteronomy* 7:1-2) would be deemed illegitimate, as would, it seems, the doctrine of original sin itself (which seems to assign a kind of metaphysical guilt to the descendants of Adam and Eve). These, and other, implications of his argument foreshadow the controversy Fichte will later experience concerning his alleged ‘atheism’, which arose after he explicitly identified God with the moral law, and nothing more.

English-language Fichte scholarship has been quite vibrant in recent decades, ranging from new translations of key Fichte texts to the activity of the North American Fichte Society. This new edition of *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, especially as it includes Wood’s excellent introductory essay, is a fine addition to this resurgence of interest in and attention to Fichte’s work.

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