

**FICHTE**

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Fichte by Robert Adamson

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**ROBERT ADAMSON**

# **FICHTE**



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THE account of Fichte's system in the latter part of this volume has no pretensions to be regarded as more than an introduction to his philosophy. When it is remembered that Fichte's works appear in eleven substantial volumes, and that many of them are elaborate and detailed expositions of special branches of philosophy in general, it will be evident that a summary or compressed statement would have but small value, and that a short sketch must of necessity be introductory in character.

I have to thank Dr William Smith for the kind permission to use his translations of certain of Fichte's works. The passage quoted from the 'Reden,' is taken, with one or two verbal alterations, from his 'Memoir of Fichte.'

The delay in the appearance of this volume of the series of 'Philosophical Classics' is due to causes for which I am alone responsible.

R. ADAMSON.

THE OWENS COLLEGE, June 1881.



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# F I C H T E.

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## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

It happens but rarely that the life of a philosopher has been so closely connected with the historical development of his people, that his name should be remembered rather on account of his practical activity than for his speculative researches. Yet if one does not misinterpret the evidence supplied in ample quantity by the numerous speeches, addresses, essays, memorials, and other documents which marked the celebration of the centenary of Fichte in 1862, circumstances in his case must have combined to bring about this result. Many occasional references were made by various speakers and writers to the philosophy of Fichte, and much was said of the speculative depth and richness of his writings, but all such remarks were manifestly external and by the way. The subtle metaphysician of the 'Wissenschaftslehre' had evidently, in the estimation of his admirers, been overshadowed by the patriotic orator of the 'Ad-

dresses to the German Nation.' There exists not now, there never did exist to any extent, a school of followers of Fichte; it may well be doubted if there are at present half-a-dozen students of his works. As a patriot, as representative of what seems noblest and loftiest in the German character, he lives, and will doubtless continue to live, in the grateful remembrance of his countrymen; as a metaphysician, he lives not at all beyond the learned pages of the historians of philosophy.

That such should be the case will not appear surprising when there are taken into consideration the nature of the historical surroundings of Fichte's career, and the relations in which he stood to them. His life coincided in time with the rise and partial development of the two events which have most affected the current of modern history,—the revolution in political ideas which originated in France, and the birth of intellectual activity in Germany. His life's work was the part he played in the furtherance of these movements, and the durability of his fame has of necessity depended on the significance of his contributions to them, and the way in which they have worked themselves out.

Although the revolution in political and social organisations and the rise of new forms of intellectual life in Germany differed widely in external features,—for they belonged to diverse spheres of practical activity,—they were in fundamental agreement, not only as regards their ultimate aim, but also as regards the idea on which they proceeded. Both were in character reconstructive; in both the foundation for the new edifice was sought in the common, universal nature of humanity itself. The new

political idea of the French Revolution—an idea expressed clearly, though with some contradictoriness, in the *Contrat social*—was that of the human agent, endowed by nature with certain primitive and inalienable rights, as the unit in the organisation of the state. The individual, on this view, was no longer to be regarded as receiving all state-rights by historical accident; distinctions of rank among citizens were no longer to be accepted on mere ground of fact; the state itself was to be looked upon as the mechanism in and through which the primitive rights of all individuals may receive due and adequate realisation; and the final standard of judgment as to the forms of the state organisation was placed in the reason of the individual. The body politic thus appeared not as the accidental result of the conflict of individual, arbitrary volitions, but as the necessary product of the conjoint will of individuals with common characteristics, with primitive and equal rights. The individual was thought of, not as the embodiment of pure arbitrary caprice, but as the expression of a certain common nature, to the development of which he has an original, indefeasible right. A doctrine like this is liable to misuse, for the notion of rational liberty may easily degenerate, and historically did degenerate, into the apotheosis of mere power of will; and the positive element in it, the idea of the abstract rights of the individual, probably requires much modification: but it was an important advance upon the previous theory and practice of politics.

When one examines the general characteristics of the new intellectual productions of Germany, more especially in the sphere of philosophy, one is struck by the close resemblance in fundamental idea to that just