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UNITY OF FICHTE'S
DOCTRINE OF KNOWLEDGE**

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Radcliffe College Monographs, No. 7; The Unity of Fichte's Doctrine of Knowledge by Anna Boynton Thompson & Josiah Royce

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ANNA BOYNTON THOMPSON & JOSIAH ROYCE

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No. 7

THE UNITY
OF
FICHTE'S DOCTRINE OF KNOWLEDGE

BY
ANNA BOYNTON THOMPSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
By JOSIAH ROYCE, Ph.D.,
PROFESSOR OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY

BOSTON, U.S.A.
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1895

TO

ALICE MARY LONGFELLOW,

Associate of Radcliffe College,

I DEDICATE THIS WORK

AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE I BEAR HER,

FOR FRIENDSHIP,

FOR UNFAILING SYMPATHY,

FOR PROFOUND HELP IN THOUGHT AND LIFE.

P R E F A C E.

THE following paper is a portion of an exposition of Fichte's Doctrine of Knowledge upon which the writer is at work. It was read before the Graduate Philosophical Seminary of Harvard University in the winter of 1893-94, and, as the view it presents of Fichte's system differs somewhat from the current one, it was deemed best to give the paper printed form at once, that criticism might show where it must be mended before falling into final shape. The exposition is the result of several years' study of Philosophy under the stimulating guidance of Professor Josiah Royce of Harvard University: its central thought, the unity of Fichte's system, has been much influenced by his criticism. For opportunity to do work of a kind impossible elsewhere, a debt of gratitude has long been owed to the authorities of Radcliffe College, which renews itself year by year and which can never be adequately acknowledged. To the College thanks must again be given for the use of its imprimatur. The many friends who have patiently listened and kindly criticised when Fichte's views have been thrust upon them, have had large share in helping the writer to see his deeper meaning. To one of these friends, whose daily living has been perpetual preparation for the comprehension of the most spiritual doctrine, whose forgetfulness of self gives that depth of insight which is promised to the pure in heart, and whose generosity of nature makes the giving of help an unconscious office, much in this paper is due.

He who knows Fichte knows that the essentials of Fichte's system could be "bounded by a nut-shell," and to him the length of the paper will be a prophecy of the repetition it contains. But efforts toward exposition have made evident to the writer that Fichte's point of view is so subtle and so elusive as to be kept before the mind only by restatement at every turn of the argument. The thinker who grasps it at once and holds it fast is begged to forgive what to him must seem wearisome prolixity.

The citations in the appendix will, it is hoped, lead the student to a closer study of Fichte's works. The proofs of the German text have had the advantage of revision by Dr. Max F. Blau. For this friendly assistance the writer owes hearty thanks.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,

October 27, 1894.

INTRODUCTION.

I HAVE learned so much from following the growth of this monograph as it has taken shape in the author's mind, and am so much indebted to its ingenuity and scholarship for new light upon Fichte's doctrine, that my little task in writing this introduction limits itself to an acknowledgment of my own debt to the author, and to the statement of a few considerations that may help to prepare the reader to face its problem. Miss Thompson's presentation, I think, speaks for itself. It is an historical study, and has aimed only to be faithful to Fichte's thought. Yet faithfulness is in general the road to originality; and Miss Thompson's interpretation will be found to be, in plan and in execution, as independent and original, within the limits possible in an expository essay, as it is devoted and painstaking. For my own part, in following the growth of this essay, I have, indeed, suggested from time to time criticisms as to matters of detail, and have discussed some of the problems at considerable length with the author; but the outcome has been in many ways an unexpected one to me, and as instructive as unexpected. Accepting, as I now do, the main theses of this exposition of Fichte as being a fair presentation of his central thought, and avoiding at present any discussion of the actual finality of Fichte's own form of idealistic doctrine, I may still venture to indicate, in general terms, the historical and philosophical interest of the whole enterprise.

Fichte always asserted that he had, from the beginning of his independent labors as a philosophical teacher, to the very close of his career, but one system, always called by himself the *Wissenschaftslehre*. He admitted that his own comprehension of its

significance was a growing thing, or, as he once stated the case, that this doctrine had done much to alter him, as a thinker and as a man, since first he held and taught its main principles. But this alteration produced *by* the doctrine was not, he declared, a real alteration *of* the doctrine; for he strenuously denied that the essential insight upon which the whole was founded had itself ever changed since first he reached this central idea. To be sure, his own statement of the sense in which his doctrine is stable and continuous is subject to certain fluctuations. In his correspondence with Schelling¹ there are two passages which, when compared, illustrate how, even in the earlier half of his philosophical career, he could already vary in his own account of the degree to which the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself was to be viewed as identical in its various successive presentations. For in one of these passages, occurring in a letter to Schelling, dated Dec. 27, 1800, Fichte, looking back, of course, upon his own productions up to that time, admits that there are certain important propositions stated in Schelling's immediately previous letter which Fichte himself has long understood, while, as he adds, "I believe that these propositions do not follow from the principles of Transcendentalism as heretofore stated, but are, on the contrary, in opposition thereto, and that they can only be demonstrated through a still wider extension of the transcendental philosophy, *even in its principles* [the italics are Fichte's], — an extension which, for the rest, the need of the present time most urgently demands of us. I," continues Fichte, "have not yet been able to bring these more extensive principles into scientific form. The plainest indications in regard to them occur in the third book of my 'Vocation of Man.' Their development will be my first work so soon as I have completed the new exposition of the Doctrine of Knowledge. In a word, I lack still a transcendental system of the intelligible world." Fichte here adds a few words which Schelling was disposed to regard as an approximation to his own theory of the Absolute. But less than six months later, Fichte, of whose concession Schelling had naturally taken a dialectical advantage, —

¹ I cite from *Fichte's und Schelling's Philosophischer Briefwechsel, hrag. v. I. H. Fichte und K. Fr. A. Schelling* (Stuttgart, 1856).

Fichte himself, forgetting, with characteristic indifference to the letter, his own previous form of expression, complains, under date of May 31, 1801, of Schelling's method of reply. "I haven't your letter at hand," says Fichte, "but if I remember rightly you said in that letter that I admit that certain questions are not disposed of by the principles heretofore stated. Now, I don't admit that at all. The Doctrine of Knowledge is not at all lacking in its principles. What it does lack is completeness. The highest synthesis is not yet accomplished,—the synthesis of the spiritual realm [*Geisterwelt*, identical, of course, with the "intelligible world" of the former letter]. When I undertook to accomplish this synthesis, the cry of atheism was raised."

Thus Fichte does indeed waver in his expressions as to the degree of his own fidelity to the system with which he introduced himself to the public. Certain it is at any rate that he admitted the necessity of supplementing the first exposition, or rather of substituting for it a far completer expression of his system. Certain, on the other hand, it is that, whether the needed supplement was to concern "principles," or only the application of principles, Fichte felt always sure that the old foundations would not be done away with in making the needed alterations. There was held to be a "unity" in his doctrine, from one end of his career to the other; this, at all events, was his own thesis.

It is well known that this thesis has received comparatively little support from the historians of philosophy. Few philosophers have suffered more from the influence of mere cant phrases than Fichte has done. Not without his own fault, but surely against his own intention, he very early laid himself open to the deadly dangers of seeming too comprehensible as to the general outline of his system. The whole of his philosophy, as he first expounded it, came to be reduced, in the minds of his average critics, to the one proposition, "The Ego creates the world." No other of the thinkers of his generation suggested any summary of such a fatal simplicity. Kant, Schelling, Hegel, nobody could pretend to reduce to any single phrase. But Fichte,—him any one could understand, and refute, in five minutes. One could state this theory "succinctly" and even "in French." Having stated the supposed