

## Against Art?

### Fichte on Aesthetic Experience and Fine Art

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As has been frequently noted, Fichte has the dubious distinction of being the sole representative of classical German philosophy (so-called “German Idealism”), to have made no significant contribution to philosophical aesthetics. Why is this?

One popular answer is that any serious focus upon the autonomy and value of purely aesthetic experience would have been in serious tension with the decidedly practical/moral thrust of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*. According to this interpretation, Fichte was either utterly *indifferent* to art and beauty or else valued aesthetic experience only *heuristically*, that is to say, for its potential capacity to assist human beings in becoming conscious of their own freedom and thereby capable of genuinely moral action. Thus Hegel, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, passes directly from Kant to Schiller, without even mentioning Fichte by name, though it is clear that it is precisely Fichte whom he has in mind when he contrasts the “aesthetic sense” with “that abstract infinity of ratiocination, that duty for duty’s sake, that formless intellectualism, which apprehends nature and actuality, sense and feeling, only as a barrier, something opposing and hostile to it.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its purely heuristic or pedagogic function (which we shall be considering below), it might well appear that Fichte’s view of art is summed up in a comment from the *System of Ethics*, where he observes that the value of “the moderate and appropriate employment of aesthetic pleasure and the fine arts” is simply “to enliven both the body and the soul and strengthen them for further efforts,”<sup>2</sup> thereby appearing to endorse the purely *instrumental* value of art and aesthetic experience. On this view, the reason why the *Wissenschaftslehre* does not include a portion devoted to aesthetics is because Fichte simply had no serious interest in art and saw no place for the same within his system of ethical idealism.

Another way of explaining the absence of a genuinely Fichtean aesthetics is to claim that Fichte took to heart Schiller’s contention, in his influential *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that some sort of *mediation* is required between the theoretical and practical domains, as well as Schiller’s identification of *politics* and *art* as the two possible domains within which such mediation might be possible. According to this interpretation, which was vigorously advanced a few decades ago by several influential French scholars, including Alexis Philonenko and Alain Renault, Fichte deliberately *replaced* aesthetics as a potential mediating domain with a new philosophical discipline, one neither wholly theoretical (like the philosophy of nature) nor wholly practical (like ethics): namely, *Rechtslehre* or “doctrine of right.” As Philonenko puts it, “the theory of right plays the same role in Fichte’s system that aesthetics does in the whole of the Kantian critique,” viz., the role of connecting or mediating between the realms of nature and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Renault goes even further in referring to Fichte’s “devaluation of aesthetics,”<sup>4</sup> which he claims has no systematic place within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, though it does retain a certain purely *educational* function for Fichte. Though this interpretation has recently been subjected to thorough and, in my opinion, devastating criticism,<sup>5</sup> it does have the merit of at least appearing to offer an explanation of why Fichte made no major

contributions to the field of aesthetics.

A more plausible explanation for Fichte's neglect of this topic appeals to purely *circumstantial* reasons for its absence from the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In 1794 Fichte submitted the first three of his *Letters on Spirit and Letter in Philosophy* for publication in Schiller's new journal, *Die Horen*.<sup>6</sup> Despite their title, these first three *Letters* deal almost exclusively with the aesthetic standpoint or aesthetic "spirit," which Fichte intended to compare and contrast with the philosophical standpoint in subsequent *Letters* in the same series. To Fichte's dismay, however, Schiller brusquely rejected his manuscript, which set the stage for a rather acrimonious exchange of letters and a personal rift between the two Jena colleagues. According to some interpreters, this unexpected controversy fatally *derailed* Fichte's previously announced plans to develop his own and original philosophical aesthetics. These three *Letters*, which were intended to be the first installment of a much larger whole and which Fichte himself finally published in his own journal six years later, contain his most sustained *published* remarks on art and aesthetics.

We will consider the contents of these *Letters* below; the point here is simply to suggest that the fact that Fichte never actually published an independent treatise on aesthetics may not be sufficient evidence that he never *intended* to produce such a treatise or that he has nothing important or original to say on this topic. Indeed, according to the interpretation we are now considering, Fichte's failure to produce his own aesthetic theory was largely due to purely *external* circumstances beyond his control: first the dispute with Schiller, then the fact that he was so busy during his tenure at Jena developing the other systematic sub-disciplines of the *Wissenschaftslehre* -- philosophy of nature, philosophy of right, ethics, and philosophy of religion -- that he simply had no time to develop the projected philosophical aesthetics. He was, if anything, even busier during his career in Berlin, and he died at the relatively young age of 51, never having found the time to develop the theory of art and aesthetic experience that he had long intended to develop.<sup>7</sup>

That Fichte at least *intended* for aesthetics to form an integral part of his complete system is evident from the text he published just prior to his arrival in Jena in May of 1794, *The Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*. In this short work he not only introduces readers to the aim and distinctive method of his new system and relates it to other scientific disciplines, but also includes a few brief remarks concerning the overall structure he envisioned for the same. It would, he explained, consist of two parts, one "theoretical," grounded upon the concept of *representation* (*Vorstellung*) and another, "practical," portion, grounded upon that of *striving*. The latter, he maintained, would be by far the more important portion of the whole, not only because it would provide the first part with its requisite foundation, but also because it would, in turn, serve as the foundation for what he described as "new and thoroughly elaborated theories of the pleasant, the beautiful, the sublime, the free obedience of nature to its own laws, God, so-called common sense or the natural sense of truth, and finally, for new theories of natural law and morality, the principles of which are material as well as formal."<sup>8</sup>

There are two points to make about this passage: First of all, not only does Fichte here declare that aesthetics is a major philosophical discipline that will be an integral part of his complete system; it is the very first such systematic subdivision that he mentions. Second, he explicitly indicates that his new aesthetics will be grounded upon the concept of *striving*, that is, upon the *practical* portion

of his system. We will return to both of these points.

Fichte's commitment to incorporating the science of aesthetics within the overall system of the *Wissenschaftslehre* remained strong throughout his career at Jena, as is evidenced by the discussion of the "systematic subdivisions" of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, with which he concludes he lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* in the Winter Semesters of 1795/96, 1796/97, and 1797/98, where he stresses the similarities and differences between the standpoint of philosophy and that of aesthetics and reiterates his intention to include a "scientific" treatment of aesthetics within his philosophy.<sup>9</sup> However, until the recent publication of student transcriptions of these lectures, these remarks remained completely unknown to the wider philosophical public.

In the light of the evidence we have just considered, it is no wonder that Fichte's "influence upon aesthetics has remained precisely zero,"<sup>10</sup> nor is it at all surprising that Fichte scholarship should have maintained a virtual silence on this topic.<sup>11</sup> In recent years however there has been a surge of new interest in Fichte and aesthetics, a surge that has been largely inspired by the availability of previously unknown and unpublished manuscripts, including Fichte's unfinished 1791 commentary on Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the lengthy and important manuscript from the winter of 1793/94, "Private Meditations on Elementary Philosophy/Practical Philosophy," which includes a sustained effort to work out some of the details of a new and original account of aesthetic experience.<sup>12</sup> As a result, there has emerged what one might characterize as a new consensus among scholars that even though Fichte's ideas on this topic had no actual historical influence, he nevertheless developed at least the rudiments of "an autonomous and original aesthetic theory."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, some scholars, such as Ives Radrizzani, go so far as to speak of "Fichte's Copernican Revolution in Aesthetics."<sup>14</sup> Guided by this recent research, I will, in what follows, try to sketch some of the main features of Fichte's undeveloped and unpublished theory of art and aesthetic experience.

### **I. The Extra-Systematic or Practical Functions of Art and the Aesthetic Standpoint**

There are frequent references in Fichte's published and unpublished writings to the positive contributions art and aesthetic experience can make to human life. Like Schiller (and following Kant), he sometimes emphasizes what one might call the *unifying* or *mediating* role of aesthetic experience and the way it helps to reconcile theoretical and practical reason, the realms of nature and freedom. At other times, and also like Schiller, he stresses what one might call the *heuristic* or *pedagogic* value of art and of aesthetic experience, though he does not always characterize this function in precisely the same way.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Schiller, however, Fichte places much more emphasis upon the pedagogic than upon the mediating function of art in relationship to ordinary human life and emphasizes the ways in which aesthetic experience can help elevate one to a practical awareness of one's freedom as well as to the purely theoretical standpoint of transcendental philosophy.

In the *System of Ethics* Fichte describes aesthetic *feeling* as occupying a middle position between the feeling of sensual pleasure and that of moral respect, and thus as a feeling that can help the individual to overcome the tension between his experiences of the sensible and intelligible worlds.<sup>16</sup> In this same text, as well as in his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* and elsewhere, Fichte describes the aesthetic *standpoint* or *point of view* as lying *between* the ordinary and the transcendental

or philosophical standpoints. It is, he says, the standpoint from which the *transcendental* standpoint is itself *natural*.

[Fine art] addresses itself neither to the understanding nor to the heart, but to the mind [*Gemüt*] as a whole, in the unity of its powers [*Vermögen*]. It constitutes a third power, composed of the other two. Perhaps one cannot express what fine art does in any better way than by saying that *it makes the transcendental point of view the ordinary point of view*. -- The philosopher elevates himself and others to this point of view by means of work and in accordance with a rule. The beautiful spirit [*der schöne Geist*, that is, the creative artist] occupies this viewpoint without thinking of it in any determinate manner; he is acquainted with no other viewpoint. He elevates those who open themselves to his influence to this same viewpoint, and he does that just as unnoticeably, so that they are not even aware of the transition.<sup>17</sup>

As this passage suggests, there is an intimate relationship between the mediating and the pedagogic functions assigned by Fichte to fine art. It is only *because* aesthetic experience occupies such an intermediate place in the overall economy of human experience that it can play such a crucial, educational role in *liberating* one from the confines of the purely natural standpoint and in *elevating* one to both the moral and the philosophical standpoints (though Fichte firmly rejected Schiller's suggestion that "aesthetic education" is the *only* way in which one can become aware of oneself as a free moral agent).

Attending more closely to the "intermediary" character of the aesthetic standpoint, we can say that what it has in common with the ordinary standpoint is that it views the world as something "given" (i.e., as something sensibly apprehended); whereas what it has in common with the philosophical standpoint is that it views this same world as something "freely produced."

From the ordinary point of view, the world appears to be something given; from the transcendental point of view, it appears to be something produced (entirely within me). From the aesthetic point of view, the world appears to be *given to us just as if we had produced it* and to be just the sort of world we would have produced. [...] To the aesthetic sense, the world appears to be free; to ordinary sense, it appears to be a product of compulsion.<sup>18</sup>

As Fichte explained in a letter to one of his ex-students, though the philosopher and the artist can both be said to occupy the "transcendental standpoint," there is a crucial difference between them, inasmuch as the artist does not *realize* that he is occupying this standpoint, which is for him, as an artistic *genius*, simply his *natural* one. He naturally views the world, not as a product of mechanical forces, but as something containing within itself the principle of life and freedom -- which is to view it as a product of the original productive activity of the I (though the artist himself may well not realize this).<sup>19</sup>

In his published letters *On Spirit and Letter in Philosophy* Fichte advances a multi-stage model of human spiritual development, both as an individual and as a species, in which aesthetic experience is described as a means for elevating oneself from a life of desire to one of reason and thus as

initiating an entirely new stage in the history of human development. This account is presented in the context of a distinction between the cognitive, aesthetic, and practical “drives” (*Triebe*). First, the cognitive drive allows us to become better acquainted with our world and thereby obtain the knowledge and master the techniques required to lift ourselves above our original natural state of bare need and to develop a drive for knowledge for its own sake. This is the stage of human development that Fichte describes as that of “open mindedness” [*Liberalität der Gesinnung*].

Then, once when we have acquired the leisure necessary for moments of aimless contemplation, we have the first occasion for the expression of our aesthetic drive and the cultivation of our aesthetic sense. At first this occurs under the guidance of impressions received from nature, but eventually the aesthetic sense breaks loose from any reference to reality whatsoever and simply contemplates certain images (i.e., representations [*Bilde, Vorstellungen*]), with no reference to any external objects and purely for their own sake. At this point, says Fichte, the power of productive imagination takes over and creates entirely new internal images on its own, images that go beyond anything that is actually given through sensible experience. In such a case, “our object has our approval quite without interest, i.e. we judge it to be in conformity with a certain rule (which we will not go into any further) without attaching any greater value to it.”<sup>20</sup>

The ability to recognize and to approve of such aesthetic representations is called “taste.” More essential to this second stage of human development, however, is the creative process by means of which these aesthetic representations that “harmonize with our spirit” are actually *produced*. Though this process may well begin with the kind of contemplation that still clings to the “thread of reality,” it eventually gives way to a realm in which the power of imagination is totally free. This level of individual and cultural development is that of the aesthetic drive (which includes, first, the cultivation of mere “taste,” and secondly, that of creative “spirit”).

This free creative ability is called ‘spirit.’ Taste judges the given, but spirit creates. Taste is the complement and fulfillment of liberality, spirit is the fulfillment and compliment of taste itself. One can have taste without spirit, but not spirit without taste. By means of spirit, the sphere of taste, which is confined within the bounds of nature, is enlarged. The products of spirit create new objects and further develop taste, albeit without elevating it to the status of spirit itself. [...] The aesthetic] spirit leaves the boundaries of reality behind it, and in its own special sphere there are no boundaries. The drive to which it is entrusted passes into the infinite; through it, the spirit is led ever onwards from one vista to another<sup>21</sup>

This is where the unfinished letters *On Spirit and Letter* break off, though the final paragraphs of the “Third Letter” clearly indicate that Fichte by no means considered the aesthetic stage to be the final stage of human development. On the contrary, even though the artistic genius “does not address himself to our freedom,” and even though his creations do nothing “to make us better,” he nevertheless, says Fichte, manages to “open up the unploughed fields of our mind,” so that we may someday -- for other, i.e., strictly *moral* -- reasons manage to “take possession of them.”<sup>22</sup>

Aesthetic sense is not virtue; for the moral law demands self-sufficiency in accordance with

concepts, while the former arises on its own, without any concepts. It is nevertheless a preparation for virtue; it prepares the ground for it, and when morality comes on the scene it finds that half the work -- liberation from the bounds of sensibility -- has already been accomplished.<sup>23</sup>

The important point is that here Fichte seems to treat aesthetic cultivation as a crucial element of human development as such -- both intellectual and practical. This is perhaps what his student, J. F. Herbart was referring to when he wrote that “ever since I have become acquainted with Fichte, I have clearly felt how essential the culture of the aesthetic faculty is to the cultivation of human beings.”<sup>24</sup>

## II. The Relationship between the Aesthetic and Transcendental Standpoints

We have already taken note of Fichte’s claim that the aesthetic way of looking at the world is *similar* to the philosophical, in that both view objects as constructed by the I and *differs* from it in that, for the artist, this perspective does not conflict with his natural view of those same objects. For the artist, it is simply “natural” to view objects as freely constructed. But the similarities and differences go still deeper, and the relationship between the standpoints of art and philosophy are even closer than we have previously indicated, inasmuch as Fichte at least occasionally appears to claim that cultivation of one’s aesthetic sensibilities is an essential condition for elevating oneself to the purely speculative standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. This is why he concluded his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* with a discussion of “aesthetics,” or rather, with a consideration of two different aspects or meanings of this term. On the one hand, he unequivocally reiterates his earlier claim that aesthetics is a systematic sub-discipline of the entire system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*:

This science has a transcendental form, {for} it is philosophy. The science of aesthetics describes the aesthetic way of looking at things, {[and] it establishes the rules of aesthetics}. A “beautiful spirit” is therefore not required for this sort of aesthetics. Aesthetic philosophy is a principal part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and, it is the opposite of all the other [divisions of this] philosophy, which one could call “real philosophy.” The basis for this division lies in the different standpoints of these sciences. In respect to its content or material, aesthetics occupies the middle ground between theoretical and practical philosophy. {The concept of the world is a theoretical concept. [The concept of] the way in which the world ought to be made lies within us and is practical. Aesthetics is therefore practical as well. However,} it does not coincide with ethics; for we are obliged to be conscious of our duties, whereas the aesthetic way of looking at things is natural and instinctive and does not depend upon freedom.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, Fichte has almost nothing more to say on this occasion about the actual content and deductive strategy of this projected philosophical discipline; instead he devotes most of his discussion not to the *philosophical science* of aesthetics, but to the *aesthetic “sense” or “standpoint”* and to the *pedagogic* role of the same in preparing the way for elevation to the properly philosophical standpoint. This is where he makes the claim, cited above, that the transcendental perspective on

things is, as it were, “natural” to the artist, who, unlike the philosopher, “makes the transcendental standpoint into the ordinary standpoint.”<sup>26</sup> This suggests that the philosopher and the artist are each engaged -- albeit via very different means -- in communicating “the very same standpoint.”<sup>27</sup>

This similarity helps explain Fichte’s ill-fated effort, in his rejected letters *On Spirit and Letter in Philosophy* and in his subsequent correspondence with Schiller, to emphasize the close similarities between the philosophical and artistic “spirits.” As he complained to Schiller, “you have no idea of the full scope of what I have provisionally designated the ‘aesthetic drive.’”<sup>28</sup> Rather than sharply distinguishing the aesthetic from the philosophical drive, Fichte claims that these are both expressions of the same *drive to represent simply for the sake of representing*, and that philosophy and art are therefore “as closely related as two species of the same genus.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact, Fichte emphasized the parallels between the standpoints of art and philosophy in order to respond to a very specific and obvious *challenge*: namely, *how* does the philosopher (who is, after all, a human being who himself occupies the ordinary or “real” standpoint) originally elevate himself from the ordinary to the transcendental standpoint? It would, Fichte concedes, be impossible to explain this transition unless there were some “middle term” between the ordinary and transcendental standpoints, some way, so to speak, of elevating oneself to the transcendental standpoint from *within* the natural one. From such an intermediary standpoint the ordinary and the transcendental standpoints do not appear to be “absolutely opposed to each other” (as they do when viewed from the purely speculative standpoint of philosophy), but are instead “united through some middle term.”<sup>30</sup> This midpoint, he declares, is that of *aesthetics* -- here understood not as the philosophical science of art and beauty, but as a certain way of looking at things or state of mind: the aesthetic *attitude* -- the standpoint of *aesthetic experience*.

It is by means of this aesthetic point of view that one raises oneself to the transcendental viewpoint; and thus it follows that the philosopher has to possess an aesthetic sense, i.e., “spirit,” {for without this he will not succeed in raising himself to the transcendental viewpoint}. This does not mean that the philosopher must necessarily be a poet or a fine writer or an accomplished orator, but he must be animated by the same spirit that, when cultivated, serves to develop one aesthetically. Without this spirit one will never make any headway in philosophy, but will trouble oneself with the letter of the same without penetrating its inner {spirit}. {Lack of such spirit is the [reason why] so many people remain at the level of the latter and are not allowed to penetrate into the spirit of the subject}.<sup>31</sup>

Precisely *how* do art and aesthetic experience prepare us for the *Wissenschaftslehre*? They accomplish this by turning our attention away from the world and directing it *within ourselves*, which is precisely where transcendental philosophy *begins*. As Fichte explains in the letters *On Spirit and Letter*, “we must be at home in our inner selves if any of our actions upon the outer world is to possess worth [...], and the aesthetic sense gives us our first firm standpoint within ourselves.” Indeed, he here maintains that it is *only* the cultivation of this aesthetic sense that can provide us with the prerequisite “firm standpoint within ourselves.”<sup>32</sup> Aesthetic experience, under the guidance of an *internally generated Idea [Idee]* of “primal beauty, to which nothing in the material world is

equivalent,”<sup>33</sup> is therefore the first step on a trajectory that leads not only to an awareness of ethical and religious feelings, but also to the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself. In this sense, the artistic attitude can be said to be a *presupposition* for the possibility of philosophy.

The fundamental claim of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that the principle of all life and consciousness is to be found solely and entirely *within the I itself*.<sup>34</sup> By focusing one’s attention upon nothing but *oneself* and the inner play of one’s representations, aesthetic experience can be said to open the door to the entire realm of transcendental inquiry. Thus, despite his clear recognition of the pedagogic value of aesthetics, Fichte is far from embracing Schiller’s notion of “aesthetic education” as a means of overcoming the antinomy between nature and freedom. For him, cultivation of one’s aesthetic drive or sense is simply a *means* that can (or even must) be employed by the *philosophical* educator in order to lead the student to a clear grasp of his own self-consciousness and its relationship to the world, thereby preparing the way for both practical self-awareness and transcendental speculation.<sup>35</sup>

Another thing that the transcendental and aesthetic standpoints have in common is that both of them encourage us to consider ourselves not as particular concrete *individuals* (which is how we always view ourselves from the ordinary standpoint of life), but as “universal” subjects.<sup>36</sup> Fichte makes this point as well in his letters *On Spirit and Letter*, where (clearly writing under the influence of Kant’s remarks about “common sense” in the third *Critique*) he describes the artist as drawing from within himself those things (representations, ideas) with which others will also agree. “To the extent that he is an artist,” writes Fichte, “he must have in him that which is common to all cultivated souls, and he must, as it were, be animated not by the individual disposition [*Sinn*] which differentiates and divides others from the universal disposition [*Universalsinn*] of collective humanity, but by the latter and by this alone.”<sup>37</sup> This is why aesthetic judgments -- like those of transcendental philosophy -- always lay a claim to being universally binding and at least potentially recognizable as valid by everyone [*allgemeinwendig*].<sup>38</sup> And this is also, Fichte explains, why we call the artist a “genius”: i.e., because of his inexplicable *natural* ability to raise to consciousness and give expressive form to those common characteristics shared by us all, thereby “awakening and engaging this common sense [*Gemeinsinn*] and silencing individuality for as long as he has us under his influence.”<sup>39</sup> Precisely the same could be said of the philosopher, of course, except for the fact that the philosopher and the artist each wield their “influence” in very different ways (a point to which I shall return at the conclusion of my remarks). This striking similarity is underlined in one of Fichte’s letters to Jacobi, in which he distinguishes the “absolute” from the “individual” I and remarks that we always view ourselves as *individuals* from the ordinary standpoint of life -- adding that “only in *philosophy* or in *poetry* do we regard ourselves any differently.”<sup>40</sup>

One final similarity between art and philosophy as human activities is also worth noting: namely, both are ultimately grounded in *feelings*, which it is their task to convert into representations by means of the *productive power of imagination*. “Spirit” [*Geist*] is broadly defined by Fichte as the ability to employ one’s power of productive imagination<sup>41</sup> to raise to full consciousness something that is originally present only as an inchoate feeling. This, as is demonstrated in *The Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, is what happens in the case of all ordinary experience. But there is a still higher modality of this same spiritual power, by virtue of which we raise to consciousness not empirical sensations but our more profound feelings, ones connected with the supersensible inner

world of freedom rather than with the sensible outer world.

This is how we are able to produce “ideas of reason” in the Kantian sense, and to express them in representations. Unlike the philosopher or popular teacher of morality, the artist communicates such universal ideas neither by means of rational argumentation nor by means of personal example. Instead, aesthetic communication “addresses, in some mysterious way, neither reason alone nor the moral feeling alone, but the entire mind (*Gemüt*), and presupposes a special sense, the aesthetic sense, which has the power to make us feel ‘at home’ in our inner being.”<sup>42</sup>

Where then is the world of the beautiful spirit? [It lies] within, within humanity, and nowhere else. Fine art thus leads a human being into himself and makes him feel at home there. It tears him loose from nature as something given and depicts him as self-sufficient and existing for himself alone. Our ultimate end, however, is the self-sufficiency of reason.<sup>43</sup>

From this it follows that what the artist really communicates is a particular standpoint or way of looking at the world, that is, an aesthetic *Stimmung*. The criterion of beauty or aesthetic value is therefore whether or not a particular art-product actually succeeds in producing this way of looking at oneself and the world. What matters for the artist is thus not any change in the world, but rather, a change in the mind of the artist and his audience, an alteration in the manner in which one views both oneself and one’s world.<sup>44</sup> And again, much the same can be said of the transcendental philosopher. For Fichte, as Claude Piché writes, the task of art lies “in returning the acting subject to itself and making it conscious of its sovereign independence toward the world.” And thus “we realize in what sense an aesthetics based on the active faculties of creative genius and spirit coincides exactly with the orientation of Fichte’s philosophy.”<sup>45</sup>

In his discussion of the “Duties of the Fine Artists,” in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte concludes that it is the artist’s particular and direct duty to present the ideal that hovers before his soul in order to express what is purely *inner* in a manner that can be shared by *all rational beings* -- thereby doing his part to promote the self-sufficiency of reason itself.<sup>46</sup> It is this higher sense of “spirit” that philosophy and art have in common,<sup>47</sup> and this is why Fichte could say that “genius” (i.e. the specific imaginative power in question) is required in philosophy no less than in art.<sup>48</sup>

### III. Fichte’s Aesthetics of Artistic Production through the Productive Power of Imagination

On April 23, 1795, David Veit, a medical student at Jena and frequent dinner companion of Fichte’s, reported to his friend Rahel Levin that anyone who thinks that Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education* are actually based on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* has clearly failed to grasp the actual foundations of the latter in the *activity* of the I. “Fichte,” he reports, “says that, rather than referring to the ‘play drive’ [*Spieltrieb*] [as the foundation of aesthetic experience], Schiller should have referred instead to the *productive power of imagination*.”<sup>49</sup> This points to what is perhaps the central and most original feature of Fichte’s ideas for his new science of aesthetics: namely, that it would be grounded upon the creative or productive activity of the power of imagination: i.e., upon precisely the same inner power or activity of the I upon which the *Wissenschaftslehre as a whole* is founded.<sup>50</sup>

As several recent interpreters -- including Henrich, Radzizanni, Oncina Coves, Lohmann, and Traub -- have pointed out, what is unique and original about Fichte's approach to aesthetics, in contrast to that of Kant and his followers is that, whereas the latter were primarily concerned with *judgments of taste*, Fichte's new aesthetics focuses instead upon the function of the *power of imagination* both in the production of art-products and in the reception of the same. This is significant, since an aesthetics, such as Kant's, that treats the mind as something passively bound to what is given is quite unable to lift one to the transcendental standpoint and thus incapable of fulfilling the pedagogic role assigned to aesthetics by Fichte. In contrast, as Radzizanni has observed, "to base aesthetics upon the power of imagination is to liberate it from actuality."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, it is precisely his strong emphasis upon the genuinely *creative* elements in aesthetic experience and his transformation of aesthetics from a theory of *aesthetic judgment* into a theory of *artistic production* that constitutes Fichte's "Copernican revolution" in this field.

Such a production-oriented science of aesthetics is, of course, fully in line with Fichte's self-described "system of freedom."<sup>52</sup> To be sure, he himself never worked out in any detail this new conception of aesthetic experience and precisely how it might be systematically grounded by deriving its first principle (as an expression of a unique and distinctive mental act or *Tathandlung*) from the previously established grounding principles of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* (as he actually did in the case of the first principles of the sciences of nature, right, and ethics); nevertheless, his writings do provide some valuable hints concerning some of the features of such an aesthetics of production.

For example, in the first of his published letters on *Spirit and Letter in Philosophy* Fichte characterizes the aesthetic drive by contrasting it sharply with both the knowledge drive and the practical drive (while insisting that all three drives are simply expressions of a single, underlying and original *Grundtrieb*, understood as "the one and individual primary force within man"<sup>53</sup>). Both the knowledge drive and the practical drive posit a correspondence between representation and things; in the former case, the representation ought to conform to the thing; in the latter, the thing to the representation. This is not the case, however, with the aesthetic drive, which, explains Fichte:

is directed at a representation, and toward a determinate one at that, simply for the sake of its determination, that is for the sake of its determination *purely as a representation*. As far as this drive is concerned, the representation *is its own end*. It does not derive its value from harmonizing with the object, to which it pays no heed, but possesses it within itself. What is sought is not a copy of anything, but *the free and independent form of the image itself*. Without any reciprocal determination between it and the object, such a representation stands there isolated, as the final goal of the aesthetic drive and is not directed at anything to which it is supposed to conform or which is supposed to conform to it.<sup>54</sup>

It is the production and apprehension of such an inner image that is the real object of the aesthetic drive, not the physical exhibition of the same in the sensible world, though the latter might indeed be called for. Such an external exhibition is achieved by the practical, not by the aesthetic drive, whose task is completed with the creation of an image in the soul -- first in the mind of the creative artist himself and then in that of his audience (to whom it is communicated by external, physical means).

According to Fichte, the original drive of every I is the drive to self-activity for its own sake, or for the complete self-sufficiency of the I. This drive is active everywhere, of course; but in the aesthetic realm, with the production of the art-object, this original activity expresses itself as the productive power of imagination, which here achieves its “total freedom.”<sup>55</sup>

This gives us an important clue concerning the unwritten Fichtean treatise on aesthetics: it would be grounded entirely in that same basic human power (the productive power of imagination) on which Fichte’s account of ordinary representations was grounded in the foundational portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. As Claude Piché has noted, “Fichte can see no other basis for a philosophical aesthetics than the productive imagination left to its own freedom”<sup>56</sup>; and, as both he and Ives Radrizzani have observed, this requires a reorientation of the entire science of aesthetics: from a theory of taste and aesthetic judgments concerning the beautiful to a theory of creative, aesthetic production. Fichte’s aesthetics is therefore first and foremost a *theory of art*. (It is significant that, unlike Kant and his 18th century predecessors, Fichte has very little to say about *natural* beauty, inasmuch as he explicitly identifies the true art-object with an internally produced image that corresponds to nothing in the natural world.<sup>57</sup>)

This strong emphasis upon the creative nature of both aesthetic production and appreciation suggests a further kinship between philosophy and art, inasmuch as both are concerned with the acts and products of the productive power of imagination (representations, intuitions, concepts, ideas, ideals, and images), products that are all, according to Fichte, ultimately grounded on the I’s most profound *feelings* -- namely, its inner feelings of its own self-activity. As Dieter Henrich explains, “both art and philosophy raise to consciousness the self-activity of man, in its entire scope; and this explains why the power of imagination has to play the central role in the process by which man learns how to grasp himself.”<sup>58</sup>

From this it follows that one of the principle tasks of a Fichtean transcendental aesthetics would be to provide a full “genetic” account of precisely which *feelings* underlie aesthetic experience and of precisely *how* -- that is, through which acts of the I -- these same feelings are transformed, in accordance with the I’s own necessary laws,<sup>59</sup> into and posited as beautiful and sublime mental images, images stimulated by but not identical with the sensible art-product. This also implies that the role of “feeling” in Fichte’s aesthetics is quite different than in Kant’s, where the feeling of aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful is a *product* of the “free play” of our mental powers. For Fichte, in sharp contrast, aesthetic experience *starts* with feeling, which always *precedes* the work of the productive imagination and provides it with its content.<sup>60</sup> Like ordinary experience, both art and philosophy obtain their original content not through concepts and thinking, but through feeling.

These parallels between philosophy and art also explain why Fichte thought that artists should have an easier time grasping his system than philosophers, since so many of his professional colleagues seemed to him to suffer from a pronounced “deficiency in their power of imagination.”<sup>61</sup>

#### IV. Concluding Observations

I have argued that Fichte not only recognized the pedagogic value of art and aesthetic experience in preparing one for both moral action and transcendental speculation, but that he also recognized

*aesthetic experience* as an altogether unique domain of human experience, one quite distinct from and not reducible to either theoretical or practical experience. He therefore recognized it to be part of the task of any complete system of transcendental idealism to provide a systematic elucidation of this kind of experience by providing a transcendental derivation of the conditions of its possibility from the first principle of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*. Sadly, he never actually constructed this portion of his system, though he did leave behind some valuable suggestions concerning what such a philosophical aesthetics would -- and would not -- include and concerning the proper strategy for the construction of the same. With the help of these clues and guided by the efforts of recent scholars to interpret them, we can, I believe, gain a new appreciation of the originality and implications of Fichte's aesthetics and evaluate its potential contemporary appeal -- despite the undeniable fact that it has had no detectable influence on the history of this discipline. This is what have attempted to do in the preceding remarks.

In conclusion, I would like to call your attention to three implications of the Fichtean aesthetics I have been encouraging you to imagine.

(a.) A striking feature of the kind of aesthetics we have been considering is that it conceives of the true object of art not as the sensible art-product but as a purely *internal* image or idea. More decisively than any previous theorist of art, Fichte severs the bond between art and nature, thereby clearing a space for an utterly non-mimetic or non-representational conception of artistic activity and the products of the same. As several commentators have noted, this suggests that Fichte's conception of art might prove to be particularly apt for making sense of some of the varieties of non-representational, "abstract," and even "conceptual" art with which we have become familiar over the past century or more.<sup>62</sup> (Indeed, one might carry this line of thinking even further and apply it to the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself, interpreted not as a rigorous a priori "science" of consciousness, but as a form of conceptual art -- though its author would surely reject such a proposal out of hand.)

(b.) The reason Fichte would be unhappy with this last proposal becomes clear when we consider his *critique* of art and the artist: namely, the lack of *clear self-awareness* that he attributes to both the artist and his audience. To be sure, the artist directs our attention back within ourselves, not as individuals, but as "universal I's," allowing us to take pleasure in images representing the activity and self-sufficiency of I-hood as such, and the *Wissenschaftslehre* can be said to accomplish something of the same. The crucial *difference* is that the philosopher, unlike the creative artist, is clearly conscious of *what* he is trying to accomplish and of precisely *how* he proposes to accomplish it. This is not so in the case of the "inspired" [*begeistert*] artist, who -- even though he presents us with images of our own freedom -- does not, says Fichte, "*address himself* to our freedom at all. Indeed, so little does he do so that, on the contrary, his *magic* [*sein Zauber*] begins only when we have given up our freedom."<sup>63</sup> His audience is "enchanted," or "put under a spell" [*Enzückung*]<sup>64</sup> -- and not just the audience: to be "inspired" in the manner of the artist is to be under such a spell oneself, and thus to be lacking in both freedom and clear self-awareness. Both the inspired artist and his "willing victims" surrender their freedom to the art-work and thus are in danger of losing it.<sup>65</sup> This, for Fichte, represents the most serious shortcoming and danger of art -- as well as one of the reasons he would surely object to any effort to reduce philosophy to the same. In direct contrast to the work of art, the *Wissenschaftslehre* explicitly address itself to the freedom of its students and calls

upon them to become ever more clearly self-aware.

(c.) A final, equally striking feature of a Fichteian aesthetics is that it can never recognize the self-sufficiency or ultimate adequacy of purely aesthetic values: no “art for art’s sake,” for Fichte. On this point, his writings are indeed “just as clear as the sun”: all values -- including the value of philosophy itself, no less than that of art, are ultimately subordinated to ethical value. “What,” asked Fichte of Jacobi, in the same letter in which he identified philosophy and art as occupying the same transcendental or speculative standpoint, “is the purpose of the speculative standpoint, and indeed of philosophy as a whole, if it does not serve life?”<sup>66</sup> By “serving life,” he means contributing toward the accomplishment of the ultimate, practical end of reason itself in its endless progress toward complete self-sufficiency by means of willing and acting in accordance with the dictates of moral duty.

To be sure, one can engage in speculation purely for the pleasure and self-satisfaction of obtaining such knowledge for its own sake, just as the artist and his audience can enjoy the products of art purely for their own sakes.<sup>67</sup> This is understandable and even necessary as long as one is actively engaged in such contemplation. But, warns Fichte, it is accompanied in both cases by a grave danger -- namely, that of “surrendering oneself” entirely to such a way of thinking. Though Fichte thinks that the artist is more likely to succumb to this temptation than the philosopher, he nevertheless recognizes it to be an omnipresent danger for the latter as well.<sup>68</sup> Thus he concludes that “from what has been said one may draw the general conclusion that the life of contemplation, whether that of the thinker or the artist, is connected with a very great danger for the health of one’s soul, i.e., for the virtue and righteousness of those who dedicate themselves to such a life.”<sup>69</sup>

The way to avoid this danger and to resist this temptation, according to Fichte, is to follow the directive implied in Fichte’s question to Jacobi: namely, to engage in artistic activity and philosophical speculation only in such a manner that one’s efforts are always ultimately directed at cultivating one’s own ethical character as well as that of others.<sup>70</sup> Thus, in the final analysis, Fichte is just as hostile to the idea of “philosophy for its sake” as he is to that of “art for art’s sake” -- though in both cases he recognizes that one can only *engage* in these activities by (temporarily) ignoring the larger ethical horizon within which such pursuits must ultimately justify themselves.

#### NOTES

*Note:* in this paper and in the notes, all German and French quotations have been rendered in English by the author. Even where reference is made to standard English translations, these translations have in most cases been modified.

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke im zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), Vol. 13, p. 89; *Hegel’s Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Vol. I, p. 61.
- 2 *System der Sittenlehre* [henceforth = *SS*], in *J. G. Fichte -- Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth†, and Hans Gliwitzky† (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964ff.) [henceforth = *GA*], I/5: 241; *Science of Ethics*, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) [henceforth = *SE*], p. 257. See too the allusion, later in this same text, to the “grace and serenity that this way of thinking confers upon our entire life (*SS*, *GA*, I/5: 308; *SE*, p. 335).

- <sup>3</sup> Alexis Philonenko, *La liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte* (Paris: Vrin, 1966), p. 41.
- <sup>4</sup> Alain Renaut, *Le système du droit. Philosophie et droit dans la pensée de Fichte* (Paris: PUF, 1986), p. 102.
- <sup>5</sup> Against the thesis advanced by Philonenko and Renaut, Faustino Oncina Coves argues that: (1) in fact, Fichte never placed politics or philosophy of right at the center of his system, either explicitly or implicitly; (2) it is a mistake to make one part of a larger system into the center and exclusive focus of the whole to the neglect of that same whole; and (3) a one-sided overemphasis upon the synthesis of right as the focus of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* prevents one from considering the function of other possible syntheses -- including that of *aesthetics* -- within the context of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*. See Faustino Oncina Coves, "Recht oder Ästhetik als Vermittlung zwischen Natur und Freiheit: Ein Dilemma bei Fichte?," in *Der transzendental-philosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit: Beiträge aus der aktuellen Fichte-Forschung*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Marco Ivaldo, and Giovanni Moretto (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), pp. 361–79. Moreover, argues Oncina Coves, there is no need to accept the "Manichean dualism" implicit in the proposed "juridical-aesthetic antinomy" and thus no reason to treat art, religion, and politics as mutually exclusive alternative forms of mediation (Coves, pp. 369 and 374). He concludes that "Fichte's remarks on aesthetics are, in fact, not so unimportant after all" (Coves, p. 369).
- Ives Radrizzani argues that the mistake made by Philonenko and Renaut is to have identified the realm of human intersubjectivity -- which is certainly central to the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* -- as the proper subject of the "philosophy right" (i.e. social and political philosophy) *alone*. This ignores the fact that one also finds an *ethical* derivation of intersubjectivity in *SS*, a religious derivation of it in *The Vocation of Man*, and yet another derivation of intersubjectivity, this one from the first principles of the entire system, in Fichte's lectures on *The Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo* [henceforth = *WLnm*]. Thus, concludes Radrizzani, "if Fichte had written his aesthetics, then he would undoubtedly have provided an aesthetic derivation of intersubjectivity as well" (Radrizzani, "Von der Kritik der Urteilskraft zur Ästhetik der Einbildungskraft, oder von der kopernikanischen Revolution der Ästhetik bei Fichte," in *Der transzendental-philosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit*, pp. 346–47). See too Radrizzani, "La place du droit dans la première philosophie de Fichte selon Alain Renaut," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 121 (1989): 79–89.
- <sup>6</sup> Über Geist und Buchstabe in der Philosophie. In einer Reihe von Briefen [henceforth = *UGBP*], *GA*, I/6: 332–61; "The Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy," [henceforth = *SL*] trans. Elizabeth Rubenstein, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel*, ed. David Simpson [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984], pp. 74–93). Fichte composed these three *Letters* in 1794, using material from his similarly titled, unpublished lectures at the University of Jena, *Ueber den Unterschied des Geistes und Buchstabens in der Philosophie* [henceforth = *UUGB*], *GA*, II/3:307–41; "Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy" [henceforth = *CDSL*], in Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) [henceforth = *EPW*], pp. 192–215. He never completed the projected series, but eventually published the first three letters in 1800 in his own *Philosophical Journal*. Concerning Schiller's reasons for rejecting them and Fichte's response to the same, see Petra Lohmann, "Grundzüge der Ästhetik Fichtes. Zur Bedeutung der Ästhetik für die Wissenschaftslehre anlässlich des Horenstreits," *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism* 4 (2006): 199–224.
- <sup>7</sup> In the words of Claude Piché, it was entirely due to such "contingent circumstances" that Fichte never actually published a "completed aesthetic theory (Piché, "The Place of Aesthetics in Fichte's Early System," in Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore, *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002], p. 306).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* [henceforth = *BWL*], *GA*, I/2: 151; "On the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" [henceforth = *CWL*], in *EPW*, p.135).
- <sup>9</sup> See *WLnm*, *GA*, IV/2: 266; *GA*, IV/3: 523; *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 473–74.
- <sup>10</sup> Radrizzani, "Von der Kritik," 342.
- <sup>11</sup> The only significant exception to this historical claim is provided by Georg Temple's inaugural dissertation, *Fichtes Stellung zur Kunst* (Mainz: Buchdruckerei des "Messin," 1901).
- <sup>12</sup> "Versuch eines Erklärenden Auszugs aus Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft," *GA*, II/1: 325–73 and "Eigne Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie/Practische Philosophie" [henceforth = *EM/PP*], *GA*, II/3: 21–266. The former manuscript is devoted entirely to the first (aesthetic) half of Kant's third *Critique* and ends with Fichte's commentary on § 13 of the same. The "Practical Philosophy" portion of *EM/PP* includes a lengthy

section (*GA*, II/3: 203-32) that has been described as “a first sketch of an autonomous aesthetics, that is, of an aesthetics cut loose from the theoretical yoke of the *Critique of Judgment*” (Piché, p. 304). Here one finds detailed notes for a new scientific aesthetics, grounded upon an original account of the basic human drives and focusing upon the role of the productive power of imagination in aesthetic experience.

As Hartmut Traub has observed, the two most distinctive features of these notes are: (1) the manner in which Fichte, even at this very early date, clearly intends to provide a *practical*-transcendental foundation for aesthetic experience by connecting such experience with the I’s original striving for complete independence; and (2) his efforts to discover the rules of aesthetic judgment by relating these to pure mathematical forms. In the end, what aesthetic experience allows the I to do, according to these notes, is to experience for the first time its own active and striving nature. Unlike the ethical drive, the aesthetic drive does not aim at external causality, but only “at establishing a certain *condition of the mind*, by means of the intuition of the form of an object” (Traub, “Über die Pflichten des ästhetischen Künstlers. Der § 31 des *Systems der Sittenlehre* im Kontext von Fichtes Philosophie der Ästhetik,” *Fichte-Studien* 27 [2006], p. 76).

Fichte thus here attempts to provide a new, non-Kantian account of what is involved in appreciating the purely “formal” aspects of experience. According to this account, what happens when we take pleasure in the mere *form* of an object is that we become aware, via inner intuition, of the free self-activity of the I (see *GA*, II/3: 209, 212). The aesthetic drive thus aims at self-sufficiency in sensing and in intuition (*GA*, II/3:229), and it has as its ultimate and guiding end the infinite concept of “primal beauty“ [*Urschöne*], the fully adequate and imaginatively generated representation of the idea of the self-sufficiency of the I. For a detailed analysis of this early sketch of an aesthetic theory, see Part II of Giorgia Cecchinato, *Fichte und das Problem einer Ästhetik*, pp. 41-83.)

- <sup>13</sup> Piché, p. 300. In the lengthy forward to their Spanish translation of Fichte’s writings on aesthetics, J.G. Fichte, *Filosofía y estética. La polémica con F. Schiller* (Valencia: University of Valencia, 1998), Faustino Oncina Coves and Manuel Ramos argue that Fichte developed an original aesthetics of his own. See too Hartmut Traub’s contention that “it definitely makes sense to speak of philosophy of art and aesthetics in the case of Fichte. Fichte’s philosophy contains a genuine beginning, indeed more than one, where he tries to ground and to explain the artistic and aesthetic in accordance with the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.” From this Traub concludes that the time is now right for a reconstruction of Fichte’s aesthetics and philosophy of art (Traub, “Urphantasie; wahre Creation und absolute Beschreibung. Transzendente Strukturelemente für die Grundlegung einer Philosophie der Kunst im zweiten Vortrag der Wissenschaftslehre von 1804,” in *L’Etre et le Phénomène. Sein und Erscheinung*, ed. J.-C. Goddard and A. Schnell [Paris: Vrin, 2009], p. 286).
- <sup>14</sup> See the title of the previously mentioned paper by Ives Radrizzani: “Von der Kritik der Urteilskraft zur Ästhetik der Einbildungskraft, oder von der kopernikanischen Revolution der Ästhetik bei Fichte” (“From the Critique of the Power of Judgment to the Aesthetics of the Power of Imagination, or Fichte’s Copernican Revolution in Aesthetics.”)
- <sup>15</sup> Concerning these two functions of art and their complex interdependence, see Petra Lohmann, “Die Funktionen der Kunst und des Künstlers in der Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes” *Fichte-Studien* 25 (2005): 113-32.
- <sup>16</sup> *SS, GA*, I/5: 137; *SE*, pp. 138-39. See Lohmann, pp. 125-26.
- <sup>17</sup> *SS, GA*, I/5: 307; *SE*, p. 334.
- <sup>18</sup> *WLnm, GA*, IV/3: 523; *FTP*, p. 473 (emphasis added).
- <sup>19</sup> “The aesthetic spirit and the philosophic spirit share the transcendental point of view. The former adopts the transcendental point of view unconsciously, for this is the natural standpoint for the aesthetic spirit, which has no other standpoint which it might distinguish from the transcendental one. The philosophic spirit, on the other hand, adopts the transcendental point of view with full knowledge that it is doing so, and this constitutes the entire difference between the two. The philosophic spirit demonstrates that you yourself produce the world, whereas the aesthetic spirit only perceives the world as we have made it. Every object can be looked at from two sides. On the one hand, any object can be considered as a product of the rest of the world, and, considered as such, it is simply what the rest of the world is not. This gives us a view of the object as something merely limited, pressed together, and distorted -- a very unaesthetic view of the world. On the other hand, this same object can also be seen as the product of its own inner force. This gives us a view of the object in its fullness and life, and this view is the aesthetic one. But from where does the thing obtain its strength and life if not from you? The more strength and life a man possesses, the greater his share of the aesthetic and of the philosophic spirit. But if, like some people, we were to identify the philosophic view of the world with the

- former view [i.e., with the view that takes the object to be no more than a product of the rest of the world], then the aesthetic spirit and the philosophic spirit would, of course, be antipodes” (Fichte to J. E. von Berger, October 11, 1795 [GA, III/3: 37; EPW, pp. 414-415]).
- 20 *UGBP*, GA I/6: 351; *SL*, p. 87.
- 21 *UGBP*, GA I/6: 352; *SL*, pp. 87-88.
- 22 *UGBP*, GA I/6: 361; *SL*, pp. 93.
- 23 *SS*, GA, I/5: 308; *SE*, p. 335.
- 24 J.F. Herbart to G.A.von Halem, August 28, 1795. In *Fichte im Gespräch: Berichte der Zeitgenossen*, ed. Erich Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978ff.). [henceforth = *FiG*], Vol. I, p. 300. See too Fichte’s remark, in *SS*, concerning the manner in which fine art cultivates neither the understanding nor the heart, but rather “cultivates the entire unified person” (GA, I/5: 307; *SE*, p. 334).
- 25 *WLnM*, GA, IV/3: 523 and IV/2: 266; *FTP*, pp. 473-74.
- 26 *SS*, GA, I/5:307; *SE*, pp. 334.
- 27 Howard Pollack-Milgate, “Novalis and Fichte on the Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics,” *Philosophy Today* 52 (2008), p. 336.
- 28 Fichte to Schiller, June 27, 1795, GA, III/2: 338; *EPW*, p. 394.
- 29 Fichte to Schiller, June 27, 1795, GA, III/3: 336; *EPW*, p. 392.
- 30 *WLnM*, GA, IV/2: 266; *FTP*, p. 473.
- 31 *WLnM*, GA, IV/3:523; GA, IV/2: 266; *FTP*, p.574.
- 32 *UGBP*, GA I/6: 353-54 and 235n.; *SL*, pp. 88 and 263n.
- 33 *UUGB*, GA, II/3:319; *CDSL*, *EPW*, p. 195. See too Fichte’s discussion in *EM/PP* of spirit’s ability to raise itself freely above the necessary forms of bodies in space in order to “sketch out freely” the contours of primordial beauty [*zur freien Begrenzung des Urschönen*] (GA II/3: 319).
- 34 See *GWL*, GA, I/2: 406; *SK*, p. 241.
- 35 “The harmonious unity of the various faculties in the aesthetic condition is indeed emphasized by Fichte, but this is brought under the premise of reason, and it serves ultimately as an instrument that makes it possible to penetrate the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and to transform it practically -- i.e., to modify the sensible world in accordance with rational concepts in such a way that the sensible world, qua feeling, can be grasped as a product of the I.” “The problem horizon of his model of education consists less in the autonomy of the aesthetic than in determining the conditions under which autonomy might be established by means of aesthetics” (Lohmann, pp. 219-20).
- 36 “The realization of reason through art consists in the reestablishment of the sundered totality of human totality. Art calls upon what is to come and addresses itself to the totality of men as a antidote to their individuation and fission” (Oncina Coves, p. 378-79).
- 37 *UGBP*, GA, I/6: 338; *SL*, p. 78.
- 38 See *UGBP*, GA, I/6: 354; *SL*, p. 89.
- 39 *UGBP*, GA, I/6: 338; *SL*, p. 79.
- 40 Fichte to Jacobi, August 30, 1795; GA, III/3: 392; *EPW*, p. 411.
- 41 In his lectures on the difference between spirit and letter in philosophy Fichte explicitly *identifies* “spirit” with “the productive power of imagination” (*UUGB*, GA, II/3:316; *CDSL*, *EPW*, p. 193).
- 42 Pollack-Milgate, p. 336.
- 43 *SS*, GA, I/5: 308; *SE*, p. 335.
- 44 “To adopt the aesthetic viewpoint is to see the world as a work of freedom, a world of objects, as Fichte describes it, not determined by their mutual boundaries but as products of their inner fullness. This aesthetic perspective applied to the moral law, allows us to see ourselves as the authors of the moral law which expresses our inner essence, rather than projecting it outward as an external imposition upon us. Hence the subject matter of art, considered in this respect, is our own inner being. The true object of the aesthetic viewpoint is thus the world of freedom, the inner world” (Pollack-Milgate, p. 336-37).
- 45 Piché, p. 305.
- 46 As Traub points out, this involves a clear repudiation of all “mimetic-empirical” accounts of the task of art. See Traub, “Pflichten,” pp. 99-100.
- 47 See *UUGB*, GA, II/3: 315-22; *CDSL*, *EPW*, 192-99.
- 48 See *BWL*, GA, I/2: 143n.; *CWL*, *EPW*, p. 128n. Thus “art and philosophy both, each in its own way, and by means of the productive power of imagination, raise to consciousness something that is already present in

- consciousness itself, albeit in the form of unclear feeling (Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794-1795)* [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992], pp. 337-38).
- <sup>49</sup> *FiG*, 272. See too the April 26, 1796 draft of letter from Jacob Zwilling, presumably addressed to Fichte himself, in which Zwilling refers to what he characterizes as Fichte's "sublime thought of the power of imagination" as the basis of the "aesthetic point of view" and his description of the latter as "the highest standpoint of all" (cited in Henrich, pp. 331).
- <sup>50</sup> "Fichte envisions neither a *salto mortale* from the aesthetic to the philosophical spirit, nor a devaluation of art, but the elevation of its philosophical standing, since both art and philosophy spring from the very same source (*GA*, III/3: 336). Art, with its drive toward representation for its own sake, is not ill-disposed toward philosophy, but has the closest kinship with it, since it illuminates the heart of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. [...] The aesthetic drive achieves the greatest transparency of the human spirit, inasmuch as it becomes a self-reverting activity, the drive for self-activity *par excellence*, and thus kindles the flame of Fichteanism" (Oncina Coves, p. 377-78).
- <sup>51</sup> Radrizzani, "Von der Kritik," p. 359.
- <sup>52</sup> See the draft of Fichte's April/May, 1795 letter to Jens Baggesen, in which he describes the *Wissenschaftslehre* as "the first system of freedom" (*GA*, III/2: 298; *EPW*, p. 385). This implies that Fichte not only viewed aesthetics (pedagogically or instrumentally) as a means for the cultivation of human freedom, but that his new conception of the science of the same "allows aesthetics to liberate itself from actuality and establish itself in the system by means of absolute freedom" (Lohmann, pp. 200-1).
- <sup>53</sup> *UGBP*, *GA*, I/6: 341; *SL*, p. 80.
- <sup>54</sup> *UGBP*, *GA*, I/6: 343; *SL*, p. 81 (emphasis added).
- <sup>55</sup> *UGBP*, *GA*, I/6: 352; *SL*, p. 87.
- <sup>56</sup> Piché, p. 303.
- <sup>57</sup> "Natural beauty's appearances in Fichte's texts are scattered, since original beauty, *das Urschöne*, does not find expression in the external world. Archetypical beauty, in truth, can only be found in the deepest spheres of the human soul, where the artist discovers his raw materials and gives them aesthetic expression. [...] The aesthetic phenomenon takes place within the intimacy of the soul" (Piché, p. 305).
- <sup>58</sup> Henrich, p. 343. According to Henrich's insightful interpretation of Fichte's ideas for a science of aesthetics, philosophy and art have the same ground, inasmuch as they both purport to exhibit the unconditioned activity of the I, an activity that can unfold itself only in the presence of a limitation and thus in relation to a not-I. "Aesthetic experiences are then explained by the fact that pure self-activity is here presented in the medium of intuitable images, which implies that this activity is affected by the limitation. In *what* art presents, the limitation upon pure self-activity is present in such a way that the purity of the activity can be intuited only in the form of the activity of forming or shaping the manifold." In contrast, philosophy possesses a more subtle medium; the language of philosophy is a chain of abstract representations that is itself simply a product of the power of imagination (unlike things in space and time, which are products of the power of imagination only in part). "To this extent one can say that in beauty, art, and philosophy one and the same thing comes to presence; only the manner in which it is present allows us to distinguish them" (Henrich, pp. 339-40).
- <sup>59</sup> Fichte explicitly warns his readers and students not to conclude that the operation of creative imagination in the production of art-products is an arbitrary or lawless process. (See *UGB*, *GA*, II/3: 324-25; *CDSL*, *EPW*, pp. 199-200.) Though he does not indicate what the laws in question might be, he insists that there are such laws, and presumably it would have been one of the chief tasks of his aesthetics to uncover them.
- <sup>60</sup> "That which the imagination shapes and presents to consciousness is discovered in feeling. Feeling, which I neither can nor should explain at this point, is the material of everything that is represented. Thus spirit as such, i.e., the productive power of imagination, may be described as *a capacity for raising feelings to consciousness*" (*UUGB*, *GA* II/3: 317; *CDSL*, *EPW*, p. 194). "Compared with imagination and its product, that is, representation, feeling accesses the unknown territories that lay underneath our conscious representations. It is exclusively on the basis of such obscure feelings that productive imagination becomes capable of constituting images" (Piché, p. 310).
- <sup>61</sup> J.F. Herbart to G.A. von Halem, August 28, 1795 (*FiG*, I, p. 300). In this letter Herbart reports that Fichte considers this imaginative deficiency to be the most severe shortcoming of contemporary philosophers, "and therefore he expects very much for his philosophy from the poets"
- <sup>62</sup> On this point see Traub, "Pflichten," pp. 99-100 and Anthony Curtis Adler, "The Practical Absolute: Fichte's Hidden Poetics," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (2007): 407-33. Adler, however, then goes on to interpret

Fichte as a forerunner of the view, associated with Nietzsche and Heidegger, which conceives of *truth* primarily in terms of art, rather than of scientific rationality. There is no evidence for such an interpretation.

<sup>63</sup> *UUGB, GA, I/6: 361; SL, p. 93* (emphasis added).

<sup>64</sup> See *UUGB, GA, I/6: 338-39 and 361; SL, pp. 78-79 and 93*.

<sup>65</sup> On this point, see Pollack-Milagate, p. 337 and Oncina Coves, p. 376.

<sup>66</sup> Fichte to Jacobi, August 30, 1795; *GA, III/2: 392*

<sup>67</sup> "Ascetik als Anhang zur Moral" [henceforth = *A*], *GA, II/5: 74*. Though the standpoints of speculation and of art have this in common, art, explains Fichte, takes pleasure "in the mere observation of the mind's inner play," whereas speculation takes pleasure in knowing and in detailed familiarity with the activity of the mind.

<sup>68</sup> *A, GA, II/5: 75*.

<sup>69</sup> *A, GA, II/5: 76*.

<sup>70</sup> *A, GA, II/5: 77*. For a rather different interpretation of the implications of Fichte's new aesthetics regarding ethics and morality, see Traub's contention that the application of the aesthetic principle to the ethical domain actually leads to an extension of the realm of moral philosophy to that of nature (viewed aesthetically). Without such an "extension," argues Traub, the I is caught in a direct and painful conflict between the way things are ("theory") and how they ought to be ("practice") and can strive only to *dominate* the not-I of the sensible world and to *suppress* its own sensible desires (see *SS, GA, I/5: 308*). In contrast, when we look at nature aesthetically, it no longer appears to be so utterly hostile to the I, and this transforms the "slavery of the ethical" to the "open fullness" of the same. Now we can recognize the ethical law for what it truly is: viz. not something foreign to the I, but the true I itself -- and this is something grasped by the "beautiful spirit" as well. "Reflected upon aesthetically, i.e., not in a dichotomous way, the ethical law transforms itself from 'an instrument for repressing desires into the essential core of human identity' (Traub, "Pflichten," pp. 85-8). See *SS, GA, I/5: 308*.