

THE FICHTEAN IDEA OF THE SCIENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

AND THE HUSSERLIAN PROJECT

by Jean Hyppolite¹

Translated from the French by Tom Nemeth

Introduction to Hyppolite. The following article by Hyppolite appeared, along with other articles by a number of distinguished philosophers, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Husserl's birth in 1859. The name of Jean Hyppolite is most likely already known to most of you due in part to his massive commentary on Hegel's Phenomenology and his collection of essays on Marx and Hegel.

Hyppolite,* who was born in 1907 and died in 1968, rose to the very top of French academic life receiving an appointment to the College de France in 1963 after having previously taught at both the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. For most of his life his interests centered around what Engels called "Classical German philosophy" becoming especially interested in Hegel at the age of 22. At that time there was no French translation of the Phenomenology and almost no translations of any of Hegel's writings. Hyppolite, not knowing the German language, was thereby forced to learn German by reading the Phenomenology in the original. His interest was further heightened by the publication of Jean Wahl's Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel and articles by Koyré (a student and friend of Husserl) on Hegel. In the 30's Kojève's lectures on Hegel (which were purposely avoided by Hyppolite) further, and in fact greatly, increased French interest in that old German. One cannot help but imagine that someone who was as interested in Hegel as Hyppolite would seek out the various, most important influences on Hegel, one of whom was Fichte.

Around the same time as the Hegelian Renaissance in France the growing influence of Husserlian phenomenology also became manifest. By the late 20's the influence of Bergson had already peaked and the younger generation of philosophers were ready for something new, a philosophy which dealt with the concrete. Through the investigations of Jean Cavaillès, Maurice de Gandillac, and

*What follows is largely taken from John Heckman's "Hyppolite and the Hegel Revival in France" in Telos, Summer 1973, #16, pp. 128-145.

Emmanuel Lévinas, Husserlian phenomenology was brought into France and immediately recognized by a host of young intellectuals, among whom Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Aron are perhaps best known, as just what they were looking for. After this, Husserl's philosophy spread like "wild fire" among French philosophes. Even the Hegel Revival was influenced by this discovery as is evidenced by the work of both Koyré and Kojève who saw Hegel employing a "descriptive phenomenology" (in the Husserlian sense of the expression) in the Phenomenology of Mind.**

Such then was the intellectual climate which formed the background against which the work of Hyppolite appeared. In our own time and setting a similar revival is occurring both with regard to Husserlian phenomenology and German idealism. Yet in the U.S., and the world in general, scholarship on Fichte has been very scarce indeed. His chronological position between that of Kant and Hegel coupled with his metaphysical, almost mystical, doctrines can perhaps account at least in part for this neglect. Many simply overlook the rather "pure objective idealism" of Fichte out of sympathy for the more "Marxian-izable" philosophy of Hegel. Such attempts almost inevitably lead to an occlusion of the telos in Hegel or a utopian state, in theory, at some future time whose connection to the concrete historical processes is unfathomable. Thus in order to clarify Fichtean epistemology for those who might otherwise be repulsed Hyppolite suggests a Husserlian mediation which will hopefully both clarify the great originality of Fichte and show him as a thinker who still has something to say today.

**Kojève, in his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, writes: "The Hegelian method, therefore, is not at all 'dialectical': it is purely contemplative and descriptive, or better, phenomenological in Husserl's sense of the term."

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and the Husserlian Project

Comparisons of philosophical systems are always artificial when they are done from the outside. Such comparisons cause us to lose sight of the differences and resemblances found in the original intentions of the systems themselves. Our purpose here, therefore, is not to compare the Idealism of Fichte and Husserlian Phenomenology. The differences between the systems are too readily apparent. This is why, following the lead of Husserl in the Cartesian Meditations, we will attempt a Fichtean mediation; we will try to investigate the philosophical plan of Fichte in the first Science of Knowledge of 1794. It is in freely seeking to understand the intention and philosophical project of Fichte that we hope to rejoin from the interior with the theme of rigorous science found in Husserl and that of the relationships between this science and lived experience.

We begin with Fichte's idea of a science of science, of a "science of knowledge" (Wissenschaftslehre), put forth in the remarkable opus of 1794, On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge or What is called Philosophy, which is his "discourse on method". From this project of a science of science we proceed until we reach the fundamental problem of the relation of this science to lived experience and to the primordial² (l'originaire) in the human spirit.

I. The Concept of the Science of Knowledge. Fichte shares the commonly held opinion, admitted by all philosophers prior to him, that philosophy is a science, but it is on the content and the object of this science that divergences are manifest. But Fichte says, "Doesn't this divergence come about because the idea of science, which everyone wishes to confer on philosophy, is not completely developed?" "How does the full determination of the characteristics of science thereby determine the concept of philosophy itself?"³ In this case the determination of a single characteristic--that which makes a rigorous science a rigorous science in the strict sense--clearly suffices to determine philosophy. Philosophy would be the clearly developed idea of science as such, the very project of science. This is what Fichte calls the science of science or the science of knowledge. It is, then, first of all a matter of living or experimenting up till the end of science, of explicating from it the project and fundamental theme even before realizing it. Its realization would then be the proof of the project's soundness. Fichte's opus, On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge, is precisely the exposé of

the project of such a science before its effective realization. We first of all follow the project up to the point where it will lead us to the problem of the relations between this theme of science and the primordial experience of the human spirit, by which we see that this science of the conditions of science is not just formal.

What should a science be in order to be an effective science? It should be rigorously founded, the systemization being only a second condition. This is why the problem of an apodictic foundation is the central problem of Fichte's thought. A particular science represents a particular domain of learning, a specific region of knowledge, and it then rests on a foundation whose solidity is admitted in order to substantiate the consequences from it. But it is this very foundation which in its turn must be established, and the project of science then becomes the project of an absolute foundation to all the foundations. This absolute foundation would give the other foundations legitimacy, and they would be articulated in relation to this absolute and unique foundation. The latter in its turn would not be founded on any other thing than itself. One could then speak of a situation of particular sciences, of an articulation of these sciences which would discover their place in this supreme foundation, which could no longer be placed anywhere since it would be the condition of each situation.

What we have seen thus far is the theme of a science of knowledge, of an epistemology in the literal sense of that word.

One remark becomes necessary here--Fichte does not mean by epistemology, or science of knowledge, a study of the particular sciences which after him will become epistemology, a sort of history of the sciences or the posteriori reflection on them, but a study of the plan of science, of the exigency of an apodictic foundation to science as such.

A science has at the same time both a content and a form--what is known and what one knows of it--the object of the knowledge and the knowledge of this object. In a particular science the content and the form are distinct, in the science as such, which is absolutely founded, the content and the form should identify themselves; knowledge and its object should no longer be able to be distinguished. An absolute foundation cannot be such that it is its own proper object and its proper guarantee. I have no reason to speak, not of a first logical principle, but of a fundamental medium of knowledge! Thus the knowledge is itself known; it is absolute knowledge in being knowledge of the knowledge, or knowledge of itself. It is in this sense that Fichte places the consciousness of self at the summit of his science of knowledge. Of course, it is not a matter of a psychological subjectivism. Fichte seeks, then, the sources of what is uncontestedly shown as the being, as the non-I, in a consciousness of the transcendental self. The Fichtean project of a science of knowledge is therefore the project of a total reflection in the immanence of all the

sciences of experience and of the experience itself. This is the Kantian question, radically posed: "How is science possible; how is experience possible?" But whereas the method of Kant is apagogical, the method of Fichte wants to be ostensive, i.e., to join to the knowledge of the truth that of its sources.

The pursuit of the absolute foundation should therefore be accompanied by a discovery of this foundation, of a relation between philosophical reflection and the primordial thus placed in the light. That way, in spite of the constructive idealism of Fichte, of the dialectical deductions of his system, there is always in it a problem of the relationship between the exposition of this system (which is the work of philosophical reflection) and the primordial experience of the human spirit. The most characteristic phrase of Fichte in this regard appears to me to be the following: "We are not the legislators of the human spirit, but its historiographers."⁴ In order to explain this in a systematic way we must concern ourselves with discovering the very medium of the fundamental knowledge which bases all knowledge. That a like reflection, that a like return to knowledge on itself will sprout from it into all particular knowledge, into every experience, is not doubtful. But the effectuation of this total reflection which allows the various sciences to remain elsewhere protecting them from it, is what requires an arbitrary decision, a free act which starts the movement of philosophy.

II. The Diverse Problems of a Science of Knowledge. In the opusculé Of Fichte, to which we have referred and which alone contains the explication of a project of philosophy as a rigorous science, Fichte considers four essential problems to such a project.

- 1.) "How can the science of knowledge be sure to encompass all human knowledge including the knowledge to come?"⁵
- 2.) "Each foundation of a particular science of knowledge thus constitutes part of the science of knowledge." "How therefore can the latter be distinguished from the particular sciences?"⁶
- 3.) "The science of knowledge claims to give to all the particular sciences their form,"⁷ how then is it distinguished from logic which has the same claim?
- 4.) Finally the science of knowledge is itself a science--the science of science--it therefore has an object, this object is the primordial system of knowledge; how does it act with regard to its object?

We could not imagine examining these diverse problems to the extent that Fichte does in his exposé; we would only like to show the essentials of his project and the spirit which appears to us to motivate it.

Philosophy being the science of science as such, should be absolute knowledge; it should contain the foundation of all the particular sciences and exhaust this foundation. But doesn't the same claim go against the sense of experience which is always unfinished, which is always implied of new encounters? It is known how, after Fichte, the Hegelian notion of an "end of knowledge," or the Marxist notion of an "end of history" arose from discussions and objections. Fichte always wants to preserve the absolute apodictic knowledge, which is the very requirement of a science and the "open" character of an unfinished experience. He wants to lay the foundation for the openness of experience which is encountered in absolute knowledge itself. The Hegelian critique of the Fichtean false infinite appears to us to disregard the fruitful import of Fichte's intention. Absolute knowledge thus would not be the historical end of knowledge, but the justification of its openness. If one wonders "how is experience possible," this amounts to asking "how is encounter possible without so much as implying an absolute transcendence?" "We only encounter what we understand, but we understand only what we encounter." The encounter and the comprehension are mutually conditioned--this is the profound theme which Fichte abstractly presents, but the significance of which we cannot escape. The encounter of the Other is the condition of the understanding, and the understanding the condition of the encounter of the Other. "One has then," writes Fichte, "to have no fear of it concerning the perfectibility of the human spirit; it is clearly assured by it and placed beyond doubt."⁸ Absolute knowledge, the knowledge in immanence, is not opposed to the indefinite richness of experience; it shows how this richness is possible; the "closing of absolute knowledge does not exclude the openness of experience." This Fichtean conception appears to us to be particularly remarkable. It justifies precisely what one expects from experience, the encounter, without falling into an empiricism or a scepticism; it establishes in immanence the very possibility of this encounter. In being a transcendental science, a science of the conditions of experience, absolute knowledge justifies the experience itself. One would almost be able to say that the transcendence of the encounter in experience finds its guarantee in an integral immanence placed at its base; it is what would signify the transcendental.

But this immanence, this consciousness of the primordial self, can be seen as the absolute philosophical life; or is it only constructed, laid down by an act of reflection and a proper abstraction of the philosopher? It is this point in the thought of Fichte which appears to us to be the most difficult to understand. The science of knowledge is for him a systematic exposition, a rigorous deduction, however it refers to a primordial experience that it discovers and hides. It is this very coincidence between the systematic exposition and the primordial which constitutes the proof and the supreme test of his thought. In this idea of science, then, it is not a matter of a construction analogous to a mathematical one, of a previous logical system, but of an exposition that always refers to a fundamental experience which it explicates;

we have already cited this characteristic phrase, "We are not the legislators of the human spirit, but its historiographers". The Fichtean project becomes a little clearer to us in the distinction which it makes between logic, the science of form, and the science of knowledge, which cannot isolate the form from the content, the form from its sense. Logic studies the form as such, that which composes the validity of the rigorous chains in the diverse sciences or in the diverse regions of knowledge, but the science of knowledge lays the foundation for this form. Logic is a particular, even artificial, science which decides to isolate the form from its authentic sense and which has the right to do it. But then it ceases to be a philosophical science, for it ceases to consider the very meaning of the form. "It is far from the case that logic lays the foundation for the science of knowledge; rather it is the reverse that it is true."⁹ The logical propositions can be abstract but they are only guaranteed by their transcendental significance. Formal logic does not constitute an ensemble of necessary laws which, as such, would first determine being, but their necessity first rests in a transcendental experience of the necessary. The Kantian idea of a transcendental logic envelops the idea of a formal logic. It still remains to be asked what the word "logic" signifies in the expression "transcendental logic." What is this supreme logic which transcendentially bases all logic?

If the science of knowledge is not a logic, is it then a psychology of knowledge? Certainly not! The idea of the supreme science which Fichte envisages goes beyond, at the same time, both the idea of a pure logic and that of a psychology. On the contrary it is starting from it that one should be able to comprehend the logical forms, as well as the key concepts of which the whole of empirical psychology makes use. It seems to us then that one can already discover in Fichte, particularly in his conception of the transcendental imagination, the idea of a science which would be the science of meaning (even more than of essence) and of the origin of all meaning. The passage from logic to the transcendental would be the passage from form to meaning; but the supreme science would not be given the entire meaning as the other sciences, it would seek the very meaning of meaning for us. Fichte interprets the discovery of the transcendental of Kant as the discovery of a new milieu, of a new reference overtaking at the same time both logic and psychology. Wouldn't this milieu be the milieu of meaning, and wouldn't the new ontology be the reduction of being to meaning and the study of the problems implied by this reduction, more specifically that of the very meaning of being?

III. The Science of Knowledge and the Primordial. The science of knowledge is for Fichte the systematic, and then deductive, account of this universal science of science, but insofar as it is science it has an object. The question is posed then of the relations which can exist between this systematic account and this object which cannot be an object like the others, since it could not be radically distinguished from its exposition.

If we are only the historiographers of the human spirit, it is that the primordial knowledge exists prior to its exposition and then that it is already known before being encountered. The explicit system is born from a formal decision, that of raising to a clear consciousness of self what consciousness is in itself. This free decision cannot give to itself the rules for recovering the primordial knowledge, the object and the form implicit in the science of knowledge, some groping and even a sort of genius is necessary, moreover it is necessary that a primordial experience be revealed to us, and that our exposition can rejoin it and cover it up, from which a historicity in Fichte's thought can be seen to arise with a theory of the primordial and of repetition. All philosophies, said Fichte, have had this sense of the primordial, but they have not succeeded in exposing it. There is, then, a sort of roving in the human spirit around this pre-existent primordial knowledge. The method of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is already outlined by Fichte: The philosophical consciousness and the ordinary consciousness should be reunited. The philosophical consciousness reflects on the ordinary consciousness, but its reflection is valued only in the measure where the ordinary consciousness can understand itself in the philosophical consciousness. The philosophical consciousness alone can only build an abstract construction; its proper object is the experience lived by the ordinary consciousness, this is what must be realized and what must be understood, but this understanding is only possible because the ordinary consciousness is already in itself the philosophical consciousness. It is already in itself reflection on itself and knowledge of knowledge. Thus the philosophical knowledge and the lived experience of the ordinary consciousness should form a circle which guarantees the validity of a science of knowledge, but it is necessary to go farther. "The representation," writes Fichte, "is the supreme and absolutely first action of the philosopher as such; the absolutely first action of the human spirit could well be another action."¹⁰ The philosopher can only explain the representation, the form, but the latter can only find its foundation beyond itself. We know that for Fichte the primordial action of the human spirit is not the representation but the practical action. The absolute genesis of meaning presupposes for him a passing of every purely theoretical perspective.

It is precisely in the exposé entitled "Doctrine of Practical Science" that we see Fichte devoting himself to a genetic deduction and no longer to a construction of human knowledge; he attempts to show why consciousness instead of being reflected on itself, is perpetually open on the outside. The direction of the ego as consciousness of the absolute self, should be centripetal, should alone be knowledge of the self; why then is its direction also centrifugal? Why does the activity of the ego aim for an object instead of being directed solely toward the self? This direction toward the Other, the opening for an encounter, which again could be called "intentionality" is what Fichte finds necessary to explain. Therefore, he has not ignored this "intentionality" which he has called "the objective direction of consciousness," he has wanted

to explain it genetically. If the ego should also be reflected, it is only able to do it by being open for an encounter; the encounter and the reflection are some mutual conditions. Each entire experience is this encounter with the Other which is at the same time a discovery of the Self; one understands only by encountering; one encounters only what one understands. Reflection in immanence is only possible by the indefinite opening of a transcendental field. But this field is not only open so that the ego succeeds in representing to itself its own infinite richness; it is open so that the action is possible, for the finished meeting is also the obstacle to surmount, and the fundamental in the human spirit which philosophy represents is not itself a representation.

Here at the end of our exposé we may be allowed to proceed beyond our initial project--the conditions of a science of knowledge in Fichte--so that we may approach the very content of Fichtean thought. We have wanted to show based on an example--a sort of absolute genesis of intentionality in the works of Fichte--the richness of this thought. One today often has the tendency to reproach the abstract character and construction of Fichte's dialectic, but it is necessary to go beyond this exterior aspect and to notice in the Fichtean dialectic both a sort of meaning of logical forms and a logic of psychology. The notions of transfer, of forgetfulness, of encounter, of alienation, of primordial, and of repetition are explained in the course of Fichte's deduction. These concepts which are found at the base of so many contemporary philosophies are presented by Fichte as of the moments of a supreme logic of philosophy which is its science of knowledge.

To seek a medium in the midst of which to situate all thought and all science, and to attempt to establish a relation between this rigorous science and lived experience, and even primordial experience is the double intention of Fichte. He seeks to reunite in depth lived experience and rigorous science. Yet isn't this also the very intention of Husserl in the Philosophy as a Rigorous Science, in the Formal and Transcendental Logic, and in the final theme of a "phenomenological reduction?" The exterior comparison would surely be deceptive and artificial, while the thorough investigation of the two projects does not appear to us to be so. But in this way we only want to open a discussion.

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NOTES

¹This essay is to be found in the French in Husserl et la Pensée Moderne, "Phenomenological Series", The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1958, pp. 173-182.

²This word has been translated in various ways. Though "originary" is probably closer to the original intention of Husserl, it would appear in this context somewhat clumsy and strange. "Primordial" is a word found often in common speech and yet carries the particular connotation that seems just right here.

³Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Fichtes Werke, Erster Band, Leipzig, Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1911, p. 166. This and all subsequent quotations of Fichte have been translated from the German.

⁴Ibid., p. 208.

⁵Ibid., p. 186.

⁶Ibid., p. 185.

⁷Ibid., p. 196.

⁸Ibid., p. 195.

⁹Husserl et la Pensée Moderne, op.cit., pp. 186-187. The translator has not been able to find the reference in Fichte.

¹⁰Fichte, op.cit., p. 211.