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Eri Svenson
Harper College

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THE PURPOSE, PRAXIS, AND FUTURE OF ACADEMIA: FICHTEAN APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

Eri Svenson, Harper College

Abstract

Following the publication of Schulze's "Aenesidemus", which detailed a skeptical critique of transcendental idealism, philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte found himself undergoing an "intellectual revolution". Having agreed with many of Schulze's arguments, he concluded that to preserve the spirit of Kantianism he would have to establish a foundationally reworked conceptualization of it. Fichte emerged from this process with a framework grounded upon the innovative claim that we should regard that there is nothing for us beyond our own consciousness, which creates both ourselves, and the world that we experience. Furthermore, because we create our own experiences, it is possible for us to access direct knowledge about our experiences through our "productive imagination", and gain knowledge through experience. This approach piqued my interest because prevailing academic approaches to knowledge production are based upon materialist assumptions, Baconian procedure, and production-based outcomes, often at the expense of qualitative and experiential procedures. Wondering if Fichte's philosophies might be able to offer alternative, more balanced approaches for academia, in this paper I participate in an exploratory process examining Fichte's perspectives on pedagogy, scholarship, and education. Beginning with the question: if he wrote on the matter, what were Fichte's perspectives on pedagogy? I discuss his relational pedagogy and the challenges he experienced balancing his students' autonomy with his position as an instructor. Next, I ask: did Fichte address the purpose of scholarship and education in the broader, social sense? I suggest that his writings conceptualize scholarship as a public good necessary for the progressive development of humankind. Finally, I reconsider Fichte's place in contemporary academia, wondering: where do we go from here and can Fichte help us get there? Ultimately, I argue for the relevancy of Fichtean approaches in addressing the problems facing academia today.

**The Purpose, Praxis, and Future of Academia: An Exploration of
Fichtean Approaches to Education**

I. Imagination, Experience, and Creative Genius: Fichte's "Intellectual Revolution"

Following its publication in 1792, G. E. Schulze's "Aenesidemus", which details a skeptic's critique of Kant and Reinhold's transcendental idealism, was forwarded for review to Kantian philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Though initially promising that his analysis would be promptly returned, he ultimately spent months toiling over the text as he wrestled with the realization that he found himself in agreement with many of Schulze's critiques. Specifically, among other claims, "Aenesidemus" interrogated Kant's concept of "the thing in itself", which he used to describe objects as they exist outside the limits of our own consciousness and, consequentially, outside of what can be considered knowable. If we cannot develop knowledge of truths outside of our own consciousness, however, how can we presume to know the thing in itself exists at all? By the same principle, Schulze also rejected Kant and Reinhold's argument that we can deduce knowledge of objective realities from our mind's representations of them, as that not only presupposes the existence of particular objects, but also an unknowable causal link between the "thing in itself" and our experiences. In addition, he critiqued Reinhold's establishment of consciousness as the "highest principle" of metaphysics, calling into question if philosophy could ever establish such a thing in the first place. Combined, Schulze concluded that these problems pointed to irreconcilable contradictions in transcendental idealism, which had failed to protect itself from skeptical critiques.

While Fichte conceded to the soundness of many of Schulze's arguments, he remained committed to the continuation of transcendental idealist philosophy. Schulze's critiques, however, called for him to undergo an "intellectual revolution", from which he emerged dedicated to preserving the spirit of Kantianism, but having concluded that to succeed in doing so he would have to develop a foundationally reworked conceptualization of it. By the time his "Review of Aenesidemus" was complete, it contained an articulation of the framework that would allow him to engage in a thorough undertaking of this project. Specifically, Fichte's revolution of thought lead him to take the innovative philosophical leap of arguing, contrary to Kant's consistent presumption of the existence of the thing in itself, that we should in actuality regard that there is nothing for us beyond consciousness. Because our minds are the creators of both ourselves and the world we experience, to speak of anything outside of them contradicts the spirit of transcendental idealism. Through making this claim, Fichte deactivated the contradictions that Schulze had highlighted in his critique.

From this innovation, he made two more claims. First, that because we are producing experiences for ourselves, we can develop experimental techniques that will allow us to observe and curate firsthand knowledge of how the experiences are being produced. Through these procedures, we can develop knowledge about representations without having to default to unfalsifiable concepts like "the thing in itself". Second, while Fichte agrees that consciousness is a poor "highest principle", he nonetheless defends Reinhold's claim that we ought to develop such a principle. To defend against skeptical critiques, however, we should not construct a principle that demands upon claims of fact, but on an act that we can each experience for ourselves. In other words, rather than a claim of *fact* about consciousness, we should aim to establish a replicable "highest principle" that speaks to the *act* of creating consciousness. For Fichte, this is necessary because if philosophy is to become scientific, it must be more than thought about; it must be experientially *done*. It is free, experienced discovery, rather than discarnate arguments, that should be at the heart of the discipline.

The establishment of this framework is also the place where my own exploratory project began. From my first encounter with Fichtean philosophy, I found myself fascinated with his claim that we should consider the use of our productive imaginations to be a source of truth about the world, rather than as a distraction from objective analysis. He insists that it is possible for us to, and that we in fact should, experience the merits of philosophical conclusions for ourselves, granting an exceptional amount of agency to individuals in the academic process. Not only are we actively creating our own conscious experiences, but we should also be involved in discovering truths about them. While this approach to philosophical knowledge production is inclined strongly towards the scientific in its focus on experimentation and duplication, it nonetheless remains a procedure that puts qualitative experiences and contributions at its center. For Fichte, in this regard the “creative genius” is something that should be encouraged and regarded as valuable, rather than dismissed as impractical or out of touch with true knowledge.

While this claim is interesting on its own, it was particularly noteworthy to me because contemporary academia takes a markedly different approach to knowledge production. Rather than centering imagination, “creative genius”, and qualitative experience in its scientific processes, academic research is organized around the aforementioned materialist assumptions, Baconian procedure, and production-based outcomes. Claims of truth from lived experiences are often considered, at best, insufficient, and at worst, inadmissible because this form of data is normatively considered to be more biased than data obtained through classical Baconian procedures, such as experimentation within the natural sciences. In addition, students are taught to be receivers of information and are often not encouraged to be active participants in its discovery. Knowledge is something that is externally adsorbed and parroted, not experienced or created.

While I cede that there is value in these procedures, it is troubling when they produce an uncritical valorization of the natural and quantitative sciences at the expense of qualitative and participatory discovery. Contrary to popular mythos, these “realer” sciences are not immune from bias and have been culturally shaped along with qualitative forms of knowledge production. Furthermore, if we were to completely accept this materialism, there would be no space for human freedom, rendering us mere products of matter and denying recognition of our exploratory agency. As I continued reading Fichte’s work, I often wondered if his approach to knowledge production might be able to offer more balance to these methods, offering alternative approaches for the broader academic community that would synthesize opportunities for scientific methodology and qualitative experiences. This inquiry is what I have sought to explore through this paper, beginning with the question: if he wrote on the matter, what were Fichte’s perspectives on pedagogy?

II. Language, Autonomy, and Manipulation: Fichte’s Relational Pedagogy

In searching for potential sources on Fichtean pedagogy, the first article that I found was written by Sean Franzel and titled “‘Welches Gesetz ist der Mensch in seiner Wirksamkeit?’: Pedagogy and Media in Fichte’s Encounter with Mesmerism.” Franzel’s piece examines the parallels Fichte perceived among the relationships between mesmerists with their patients, and instructors with their students. While the article offered rich and complex analyses on a multitude of topics, much of it initially seemed to only be peripherally related to my specific

inquiry. Fortunately, I was able to recognize on closer reexamination that nestled among this content was a direct and salient explanation of Fichte's pedagogical approach. The authors write that "For Fichte, education is first and foremost to awaken a student's ability to think actively and freely" (7), a perspective he grounded in a fundamental concern for freedom and autonomy. The paper goes on to further explain that Fichte specifically believed that reading only lead to passive learning, and so instead he opted to utilize interactional and experimental lectures, engendering his students' independent thinking through relational pedagogical approaches.

Given the content of Fichte's metaphysical philosophies, learning this was unsurprising to me, but it nonetheless was still exciting to imagine the possibilities for learning and creativity that such a classroom, if successful, would engender. While it was often implicit throughout his groundbreaking works, his pedagogical philosophy makes it clear how central themes of agency are to him, recognizing the inextricable link between freedom and the capacity to engage in authentic intellectual discovery. This is something that is ignored in many normative forms of instruction, which can be highly dictatorial and inflexible. Consequently, students never truly experience or develop a sense of ownership over their learning, making it more difficult for them to value, internalize, and contribute to the knowledge they encounter. They become trained to accept the status quo and struggle to become aware of the complexities of the world they experience and their place within it. By seeking to facilitate opportunities for guided, independent study, Fichte flips this script, respecting his students' creative processes, giving them the necessary tools to experience truth for themselves, and opening up the space for the dialectical process to continue.

Franzel's article does, however, describe instances in which this underlying philosophy was challenged and created inner conflicts for Fichte. After observing a mesmerist patient begin speaking in a manner that seemed out of her control under the influence of her practitioner's words, he became troubled about the potential manipulative power of spoken language. Rethinking his own belief in the freeing capacities of oral instruction, he was reminded of students who were successful at an activity while he was facilitating it for them, but who quickly lost that capacity once out of the classroom. The power of the relational authority inherent in his position became a tension for him as his deep commitment to autonomy and clashed with the practical realities of his profession. He taught so that his students could learn to engage in a process of free discovery for themselves, but he was bound to doing so in a way that seemed to inherently reduce students' autonomy.

While considering Fichte's struggles on this matter, I could not help but recognize the relevancy to the contemporary academic classroom. Regardless of the discipline, it has become a nearly universal experience to hear faculty express frustration over the difficulties many students have when expected to think and participate without direct and immediate guidance. Even with this guidance, if the activity asks students to take the reins on their rational capacities, they will often hesitate or even stop participating altogether. The possibility strikes me that many of these faculty likely share in the spirit of Fichte's aims in that they deeply respect and seek to bring out students' own critical thoughts but are then forced to reconcile that with students who struggle after being offered intellectual freedom. If an instructor accepts that at least one of the purposes of education is to foster students' freedom of thought, it seems as if it this would quickly become a pressing pedagogical challenge by creating a

conflict between one's intellectual, professional, and moral ideals, and the lived realities of the relationships between students, their instructors, and the institutions that form them.

Even based within my own experiences as a student, if I were asked to imagine what an ideal classroom experience would be, I can say with confidence that I would find Fichte's approach inspiring, but I am only cautiously hopeful about the possibility of it being realized on a broader scale after having watched a multitude of instructors experiment with similar approaches and come up against walls that were seemingly of students' own creation. If we sincerely are, as Fichte posits, agents of our own experience, why have we been so quick to deny it and cede to the manipulative power of others' language? Why do we shy away from embracing opportunities to take agency over our own experiences and knowledge? The roots of this phenomenon are clearly multifaceted, and I would not seek to deny the complex assortment of relational, intellectual, and sociocultural dynamics producing them. That being said, though Fichte's relational concerns did intuitively resonate with me, I could not help but think about what else might be shaping this experience.

What I kept coming back to is what, at least in contemporary times, we have been taught about the purpose of scholarship. Either as a cause itself or as a missed opportunity to generate solutions, the value of our inherent imaginative and creative capacities is rarely given experiential space. We are increasingly taught that our education is merely a means to more imminently "practical" ends, such as credentials and employable skills. The arts, literature, and humanities are demeaned, while students are pushed to enter technical fields regardless of their individual preferences or aptitudes. The purpose of the instructor and the classroom is no longer to assist students in fully experiencing their freedom, but to merely prepare them for more materially functional demands. The expectation that our education and work will be hierarchal and rote is normalized, and we dismiss as naïve those who aspire to more creative pursuits. These approaches clearly contradict Fichte's pedagogical philosophy and would prevent its incorporation throughout contemporary academia. Consequentially, I began to wonder: did Fichte provide a counter-perspective to this, addressing the purpose of scholarship and education in the broader, social sense?

III. Scholarship, Education, and Human Progress: Fichte's Scholarly Vocation

To begin exploring this question, I searched for sources on Fichte's "The Scholar's Vocation", a series of lectures articulating his perspectives on the social purpose of the scholar and their work. Written by David James, the article "Fichte on the Vocation of the Scholar and the (Mis)use of History" provides a discussion of these lectures. While James is specifically critical of Fichte's use of history as an instrumental tool, he offers a broader discussion of his philosophies, as well. According to the article, Fichte believed humans have been tracked onto a series of predetermined stages of development, which will ultimately culminate in a perfect reflection of rationality. At the time of his lectures, he believed that humans were on the precipice of entering a higher stage of the process, and that it was the scholar's moral obligation to grow a complete understanding of history and philosophy so that they could facilitate the elevation. For Fichte, the purpose of scholarship was to cultivate the capabilities of humankind as progressive beings.

This claim should not be mistaken to mean that he did not also recognize the pursuit of truth as its own end; as articulated in his pedagogical philosophies, such a value is in actuality at

the heart of his work. Consequentially, he would likely respond to James's concerns by arguing that his use of history as an instrument should not be taken as being a means to that end only or that its integrity would be sacrificed. Rather, his claim that the purpose of scholarship is in part to bring about human progress simply grounds the scholarly pursuit of truth in an additional, broader context. In its essence, "The Scholar's Vocation" articulates the social application of Fichte's metaphysical and pedagogical philosophies. Whereas in the classroom he sought to awaken individual students' critical capacities, here he positions that individual growth as one piece of a larger humanitarian puzzle. I consider the most meaningful contribution of this insight to be its recognition of intellectual exploration as a moral concern. The strengthening of our productive imaginations and the experiences they unlock are such an innate part of our humanity and such an inextricable part of our quest for human progress that there is an obligation to bring those skills and revelations to a larger, more accessible forum. Thinking back to his groundbreaking metaphysical philosophies, I would suggest this task should be regarded as a step in Fichte's project to reconceptualize philosophy as a participatory process, rather than a mere argumentative discipline, as it takes its conclusions into the public sphere where they can be experienced and applied. Through this, scholarship itself becomes a public good.

This provides a compelling counter perspective to the growing chorus of voices decrying the liberal arts as disconnected from the experiences and necessities of societies, claiming that liberal arts studies merely distract from "real" work. Of course, this is not to suggest that more "practical" disciplines, such as technology or trade work, are not of human value, as they are vital to the functioning and development of civilizations. Rather, what this is said to suggest is that the scholar's vocation should also be considered an uncompromisable pillar in the activities of human society. While building roads and innovating technology help us advance in production and trade, it is through the embrace of intellectual freedom and an imaginative pursuit of truth that we will progress in our humanity.

After "The Scholar's Vocation", Fichte gave a series of lectures titled "Addresses to the German Nation", through which he sought to inspire an increasingly demoralized and faltering nation. In the article "Fichte on Education", G. H. Turnbull highlights the central place that education occupied in this vision. While the lectures do contain a form of nationalism that in historical context we would now find troubling, I believe the core of his message can still be abstracted and breathed a more contemporary life. At their heart, Fichte's addresses advocated that education should be regarded an essential foundation for a successful nation, and consequentially should be made universally accessible to all regardless of their class. Rather than to create a skilled workforce, however, Fichte's educational vision sought to develop the innate capacities and characteristics necessary for humanity to reach progressively higher states. Relegating economic efficiency to a secondary role, the spirit of this system was a pedagogy based in our potential as whole, free, and imaginative beings, capable of taking ownership of those experiences if given the necessary training and opportunity. Thinking back to Fichte's trouble with his students, it is hard for me to imagine that a nation built upon such a foundation, valuing intellectual exploration as a necessary and universal right, would not be more likely to have developed the classroom experiences he was seeking for his students.

IV. Technology, Economics, and Changing Institutions: Fichte's Modern University

This brings us to my project's final question: Where do we go from here and can Fichte help us get there? While I would not posit to have a definitive answer, I can look back at where this exploratory process has taken me. Though I had always expected to find material that would contribute meaningfully to my understanding of the praxis and place of academia, I could not have anticipated it would be so imminently salient to the conversations we are having now. From his struggles in the classroom to his educational visions, it has become clear that the conflicts and potentials of Fichte's ideals are very much alive and poised for our present moment.

This is, furthermore, no coincidence. Writing in the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, Chad Wellmon reveals that Fichte was facing a landscape not entirely dissimilar to our own. At the time of Fichte's writing, the recent development of the printing press was making texts accessible to a degree not previously possible, rapidly expanding the percentage of the literate public that could access them. Prior to this point, universities had functioned primarily as "oral substitutes" for books that would have otherwise only been available in small, scattered libraries. With the printing press, however, this oral practice was no longer necessary, and consequentially the basic purpose of the university was being called into question. Many were arguing that academia should abandon its place as a home for ideas entirely, as they were no longer seen as economically relevant, and academia should instead transform into highly specialized vocational schools. Fichte, however, advocated against this, proposing a model that would place free, intellectual exploration at its heart: the university, according to him, should become a place where those with specialized disciplinary knowledge could go to teach, experiment, and create new ideas, rather than simply recite existing ones. This vision would become the basis for the university system we know today.

The internet has catalyzed society in previously unfathomable directions, making information and learning accessible in ways that it never was before. Idea exchanges that were once considered the hallmark of the academic institution are now happening throughout the web, and each new technological advance drives the need for workers skilled in developing and implementing them. As it was then, politicians, administrators, and consumers are increasingly calling us to step back from intellectual discoveries, marking the current model of instruction obsolete, and advocating for the creation of technical, skill-based universities. Even within my own institution, I have become increasingly conscious of and disheartened to hear conversations about innovative pedagogical proposals turn into nothing but an assessment of their impact on completion, retention, and employability. While these outcomes are undeniably important, the most meaningful academic experiences I have had, the ones that inspired me and caused me to grow as a thinker, have been those that have taken place in classrooms that sought to be laboratories for discussion and discovery, not those that imparted to me skills which I could list on a resume. Furthermore, as I have entered deeper into the workforce, it is the creative and synthetic abilities I developed in these classrooms that have most contributed to my professional success.

In his article, Wellmon argues that Fichte's innovations and their parallels to the contemporary moment should help us recognize the value in keeping academia as it is. By doing so, we will be able to ensure that scholarship's free exchange and creation of ideas is protected from the societal currents seeking to question its basic value. Though I concur with the importance of this latter mission, I respectfully disagree with Wellmon's conclusions. Rather

than as a reason to remain stagnant, the message of his article ought instead to be that, in the face of changing circumstances, we must remain willing and able to reimagine our purpose; if we don't, our home of ideas might be devalued entirely. With academia once more at this precipice of change, however, Fichte's philosophies should remind us that this reimagining does not have to come at the expense of our inalienable pursuit of creativity, imagination, and truth. Though we might be required to change, we should be thinking about how to do so in ways that allow us to preserve the spirit of our institution: institutions that value intellectual exploration for its own sake, while also recognizing that without intellectual exploration we cannot discover knowledge or imagine greater possibilities for human beings. Far from being distractions, in an information age increasingly overwhelmed with falsities and subsumed with bottom lines, preserving these values is more important than ever before. Rather than reimagining the university as a technical institute, we can reimagine it as a space that encourages opportunities for relational pedagogy, experiential pursuits of truth, and generations of new knowledge and ideas.

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