

Resolutio of Idealism into Atheism in Fichte

Introduction

Cornelio Fabro's *God in Exile*, traces the progression of modern atheism from its roots in the *cogito* of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) to the current day. The ethical idealism of Fichte is a monistic and immanent development of the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He makes reality the product of creative thought and reduces God to a moral world order. This reduction was recognized as atheistic even by Fichte's contemporaries. Despite Fichte's belief otherwise his idealism is a *resolutio* into atheism.

Historical Background

Johann Gottlieb Fichte was born in Saxony in 1762. He studied theology at the University of Jena and was influenced by the thought of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). After completing his studies, Fichte worked as a private tutor in Zurich. During this time, he read the works of Rousseau and applauded the French Revolution. At the request of one of his students, Fichte began to study the critical philosophy of Kant. In 1792, Fichte published anonymously *Essays towards the Critique of all Revelation*, which was widely considered to have been authored by Kant himself. Impressed by the work, Kant recognized Fichte as the true author and Fichte's name at once became widely known. He was appointed professor at Jena in 1794 where he wrote the first edition of his central work *Basis of the Entire Theory of Science (Wissenschaftslehre)*. Fichte however was forced to resign in 1799 after a public controversy over charges of atheism, although he vehemently denied the accusations. The charges arose largely from his publication of *On the Grounds of our Belief in a Divine World Order*, written in 1798. After his expulsion from Jena, Fichte continued to write and teach philosophy at Erlangen and Berlin until his death on January, 29th 1814.

The Philosophical System of Fichte

Fichte was deeply influenced by the thought of Kant, Spinoza and the French enlightenment thinkers. His main goal was to systematize and give consistency to Kant while removing the apparent contradictions found in his predecessor's thought. One such contradiction was Kant's positing of the thing-in-itself. Fichte and the German Idealists felt that the thing-in-itself created an untenable dualism within Kant's philosophy¹. For the Idealists, it was inconsistent to claim that the thing-in-itself was a cause of the material element of sensation because causality itself could not extend knowledge beyond the phenomenal sphere. Kant's retention of the thing-in-itself was considered a remnant of the very dogmatism the Idealists sought to overcome. To avoid this dogmatism, Fichte searched for a unifying first principle of philosophy that would create a completely certain, thorough and immanent system while also providing the ground for experience. The result of this search would form Fichte's *Basis of the Entire Theory of Science (Wissenschaftslehre)*.

Fichte follows Kant's critical philosophy to its ultimate conclusions and entirely rejects the possibility of the thing-in-itself. He removed the distinction between the subject and object of experience and argued that the whole notion of the thing-in-itself was a "piece of whimsy, a pipe-dream, a non-thought."² Reality in its entirety is instead the product of creative thought, for Kant's premises leave no room for "an unknowable entity" independent of the mind. It is of note, however, that Fichte did not consider the world to be the product of any one finite intelligence but that it was rather the product of a "supra-individual intelligence"³.

Fichte's unifying foundational principle then is an absolute intelligence, self or ego. Reality is the process of self-manifestation of this absolute ego. The absolute ego is an unlimited, self-positing activity⁴, as Fichte puts it, "The ego simply posits in an original way its own being." With this first proposition, Fichte is creating a monistic system that places reality in its entirety is within the absolute ego. He then

¹ Americk, 117

² J. G. Fichte, "Review of Aenesidemus," in Daniel Breazeale (ed. and trans.), Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings p. 71

³ Copleston, 4

⁴ Americk, 124

seeks to ground experience in terms of his foundational principle. The absolute ego becomes the activity from which both subject and object proceed. The ego is productive of its own object, and the base for every object of knowledge. Fichte expresses this with his antithesis: “A non-ego is simply opposed to the ego.” This opposition occurs within the absolute ego itself. With this second proposition, Fichte means to account for the so-called distinction of objects outside of a knowing-subject. He states that it belongs to the very nature of the ego to organize reality in terms of this subject–object distinction through the ego/non-ego opposition.⁵ Lastly Fichte gives his synthesis: “I posit in the ego a divisible non-ego as opposed to a divisible ego.” The positing of the finite ego and non-ego is necessary because it prevents the unlimited ego/non-ego from canceling each other. With these three basic propositions, Fichte believed he had succeeded in giving a non-dualistic account of the most fundamental operations and concepts constituting reality. Fichte’s philosophy is a “pure philosophy, an absolutely immanent philosophy...where the reason alone must deduce everything from itself alone.”⁶

Fichte’s thought on the God-problem

For Fichte and the German idealists the idea of a personal and yet transcendent God was illogical.⁷ Within idealism there is a tendency to refer to God as the Absolute, or some other all-encompassing totality. Fabro notes that “the substitution of the abstract deity for the concrete God is the patent indication of the change of course in the handling of the whole God-problem.”⁸ The “divine” that Fichte accepts is a moral world order that cannot be conceived as a particular being with personality and consciousness. For Fichte, such a concept of God would be “impossible and contradictory”.⁹ God is thus reduced to the laws and structures found within the practical reason. Fichte’s work, *On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine World Order*, in which he elaborated these views, resulted in a public scandal and charges of atheism. Fichte vigorously protested these charges by restating his main contentions. Firstly, morality and religion are

⁵ Americk, 126

⁶ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 534

⁷ Copleston, 12

⁸ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 519

⁹ *Ibid.*, 528

identified. One expresses the suprasensible by action, the other by faith. Religious faith is the fulfillment of moral consciousness. We imagine God as being do to our own finite nature and imagination. God's existence cannot be proven from sensible things, in contrast to the traditional scholastic contention, and Fichte will claim that this assertion is to safeguard the transcendence of God. Following the same line of thought it is equally impossible to attribute substantiality and being to God for these are tied to space and time. Fichte accuses his opponents of being the true atheists stating, "What they call God is to me an idol. For me, God is a being entirely free of all sensibility and all sensual admixture, to whom I therefore cannot even ascribe the attribute of existence, accessible to me only as a sensible concept."¹⁰ Fichte denies all reality that is temporal and transitory, by following Kant's idealism to its metaphysical consequences.¹¹ Thus he finds it strange that his philosophy should be condemned as atheistic when it professes to deny not the existence of God but the world itself (at least as asserted by dogmatism). A last distinction that Fichte claims will be between the philosophy of religion and religion itself. Fichte separates faith and reason, "two religions can be spoken of, one taught by God in scripture and one founded on the principles of reason," and these two religions can maintain differing principles without difficulty. Fichte rejects the God of religion and "any and every belief in a divine that contains... more than this concept of the moral order..."¹²

The Moral World Order

Returning to Fichte's first principle, the absolute ego, sheds more light on his identification of God with the moral world order. Fichte asserted the foundational principle, the absolute ego, could only be reached after making a clear and uncompromising choice between the thing-in-itself and creative thought. Such a choice is entirely subjective and depends on the individual man: "the kind of philosophy one chooses thus depends on the kind of person one is...Someone whose character is naturally slack...will never be able to raise himself to the level of idealism."¹³ The choice of the thing-in-itself would lead to dogmatism which Fichte considered to represent "materialism, the complete denial of human freedom and the overturning of

¹⁰ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 531

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 531

¹² *Ibid.*, 542

¹³ Pinkard, 131

all moral responsibility.”¹⁴ On the other hand, Fichte believed that the philosopher who was “maturely conscious of his freedom as revealed in moral experience” would choose idealism. This belief reveals Fichte’s preoccupation with man’s free moral activity and follows Kant’s primacy of the practical reason or moral will.

The absolute ego is not itself conscious but grounds consciousness. It can be represented as striving towards consciousness of its own freedom¹⁵. Consciousness itself can only be expressed in the form of individual, finite consciousness. The result is one infinite Activity expressing itself in and through finite selves, each of which strive toward the attainment of true freedom. Fichte’s concept of faith is the very actuation of this freedom. The absolute ego, posits nature as a field for moral activity and faith “effects a self-liberation from any influence on the part of the sensible world.”¹⁶ The absolute ego is not a reality but rather an ideal that becomes the goal for the striving of the finite ego.¹⁷ This concept is central to Fichte’s *Theory of Science*. “All that is left for the finite ego is constant striving, the ceaseless struggle to make nature conform to the demands of its rational activity. If the finite ego strives to control nature, it approaches, even though it never attains, the ideal of the absolute ego.”¹⁸ Fichte’s idealism could be properly termed as an ethical idealism that is the goal of moral activity. God is the moral order in which this activity occurs. Fichte states, “Thereby does the divine of which we have spoken become vital and real for us, every one of our acts is accomplished on the presupposition of this divine reality and the consequences of these same acts are preserved in it alone.”¹⁹ The true faith is the belief in this divine moral order and the fulfillment of one’s duty.

Cornelio Fabro on Fichte

There is an implicit atheism to Fichte’s philosophy. It is immanent and monistic. To conceive of God as the moral world order reduces him to a rational morality and eliminates him as a metaphysical

¹⁴ Americk, 29

¹⁵ Copleston, 46

¹⁶ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 525

¹⁷ Americk, 30

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 30

¹⁹ Fabro, *God in Exile* 527

Absolute. Fabro is clear, “a God reduced to a moral world order is not and cannot be God.”²⁰ Fichte reduces all reality to a process of the mind in a radical idealism where the ego is the foundation of being. In such context, God could not be without man. The human mind becomes the creator of the world and thus the creator as well. As the moral order, God is but the basis and term of human actions, a rationality that is a fulfillment of man’s moral perfection.²¹ The monism of Fichte’s philosophy essentially destroys the distinction between transcendent Creator and finite creature. “It is the assertion of a single homogenous reality that constitutes the ontological structure proper to atheism.”²² Fabro points out that according to Fichte, “God cannot be said to be substance or cause or person or providence or anything of this sort, for these are all categories that refer to the sphere of sensible intuition and would therefore reduce God to a material substance.”²³ The negations of God’s essential attributes indicates that Fichte held an inherently atheistic position despite his personal convictions otherwise.

Conclusion

The philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte is atheistic at its roots. It is a metaphysical, ethical idealism that reduces God to an abstract and ambiguous moral world order. The resolution of idealism into atheism is a result of the “onward march of the principle of immanentism”²⁴ that began with Descartes’s *cogito*. Fichte himself professed belief in God to the end, one contemporary noted that “even though I would have to call his theory atheistic, even as that of Spinoza, I personally could not consider him an atheist nor yet a godless man.”²⁵ This insight reveals that Fichte thought he was expressing something quite different from the actual implications of his philosophy. Despite his intentions, and from its

²⁰ Ibid, 542

²¹ Ibid., 549

²² Pintado, *Studia Fabriana: Cornelio Fabro, Essential Thinker*, 143

²³ Fabro, *God in Exile* 548

²⁴ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 516

²⁵ Fabro quoting Jacobi, 536

foundation, Fichte's idealism leads to atheism, it not only "discovers no God but even makes belief in him impossible"²⁶.

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²⁶ Appendices, 615