**Johann Gottlieb Fichte** was born in Ramenau, Oberlausitz, May 19, 1762, the son of a poor weaver. Through the generosity of a nobleman, the gifted lad was enabled to follow his intellectual bent; after attending the schools at Meissen and Schulpforta he studied theology at the universities of Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg with the purpose of entering the ministry. His poverty frequently compelled him to interrupt his studies by accepting private tutorships in families, so that he never succeeded in preparing himself for the examinations. In 1790 he became acquainted with Kant's philosophy, which two students had asked him to expound to them, and to which he now devoted himself with feverish zeal. It revolutionized his entire mode of thought and determined the course of his life. The anonymous publication of his book, *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation*, in 1792, written from the Kantian point of view and mistaken at first for a work of the great criticism, won him fame and a professorship at Jena (1794). Here, in the intellectual center of Germany, Fichte became the eloquent exponent of the new idealism, which aimed at the reform of life as well as of *Wissenschaft*; he not only taught philosophy, but *preached* it, as Kuno Fischer has aptly said. During the Jena period he laid the foundations for his "Science of Knowledge" (*Wissenschaftslehre*) which he presented in numerous works: *The Conception of the Science of Knowledge*, 1794; *The Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, 1794; *The Foundation of Natural Rights*, 1796; *The System of Ethics*, 1798— (all these translated by Kroeger); the two *Introductions to the Science of Knowledge*, 1797 (trans. by Kroeger in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*).

The appearance of an article Concerning the Ground of our Belief in a Divine World-­‐ Order, 1798, in which Fichte seemed to identify God with the moral world-­‐order, brought down upon him the charge of atheism, against which he vigorously defended himself in his Appeal to the Public and a series of other writings.

(Note: This is significant because it clearly illustrates both Goethe’s and Steiner’s vision of the relationship among consciousness and the universe as a type of emergent evolution in which WE are the experience and reflection of God or as Fichte states below, “we become conscious of the universal moral purpose.”)

Full of indignation over the attitude which his government assumed in the matter, be offered his resignation (1799) and removed to Berlin, where he presented his philosophical notions in popular public lectures and in writings which were characterized by clearness, force, and moral earnestness rather than by their systematic form. There appeared: *The Vocation of Man*, 1800 (translated by Dr. Smith); *A Sun-Clear Statement concerning the Nature of the New Philosophy*, 1801 (trans. by Kroeger in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*); *The Nature of the Scholar*, 1806 (trans. by Smith); *Characteristics of the Present Age*, 1806 (trans. by Smith); *The Way towards the Blessed Life*, 1806 (trans. by Smith). After the overthrow of Prussia by Napoleon, in 1806, Fichte fled from Berlin to Königsberg and Sweden, but returned when peace was declared in 1807, and delivered his celebrated *Addresses to the German Nation*, 1807-08, in which he sought to arouse the German people to a consciousness of their national mission and their duty even while the French army was still occupying the Prussian capital.

Fichte was appointed professor of philosophy (1810) in the new University of Berlin, for which he had been invited to construct a plan and in the establishment of which he took a lively interest. During the last period of his life he devoted himself to the development of his thoughts in systematic form and wrote a number of books; most of these were published after his death, which occurred January 27, 1814. Among them we mention: *General Outline of the Science of Knowledge*, 1810 (trans. by Smith); *The Facts of Consciousness*, 1813; *Theory of the State*, published 1820. *The Complete Works*, edited by his son, J.H. Fichte, appeared 1843-46. New editions of particular works are now appearing.

The world for Fichte is at bottom a spiritual order, the revelation of a self-determining ego or reason; hence the science of the ego, or reason, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, is the key to all knowledge, and we can understand nature and man only when we have caught the secret of the self-active ego. Philosophy must, therefore, be *Wissenschaftslehre*, for in it all natural and mental sciences find their ultimate roots; they can yield genuine knowledge only when and in so far as they are based on the principles of the Science of Knowledge—mere empirical sciences having no real cognitive value. The ego-principle itself, however, without which there could be no knowledge, cannot be grasped by the ordinary discursive understanding with its spatial, temporal, and causal categories. Kant is right: if we were limited to the scientific intellect, we could never rise above the conception of a phenomenal order absolutely ruled by the causal law. But there is another source of knowledge: in an act of inner vision or intellectual intuition, which is itself an act of freedom, we become conscious of the universal moral purpose; the law of duty or the categorical imperative commands us to be free persons. We cannot refuse to accept this law without abandoning ourselves as persons, without conceiving ourselves as *things*, or mere products of nature; the choice of one's philosophy, therefore, depends upon what kind of man one is—upon one's values, upon one's will. The type of man who is a slave of things, who cannot raise himself out of the causal mechanism, who is not free, will never be able to conceive himself otherwise than as a cog in a wheel. Fichte accepts the ego, or spirit, as the ultimate and absolute principle, because it alone can give our life worth and meaning. Thus he grounds his entire philosophy upon a moral imperative, which presents itself to the ego in an inner vision. He also tells us that we can become immediately aware of the pure activity of the ego, of our free action, in a similar act of intellectual intuition. But we cannot know this free act unless we perform it ourselves; no one can understand the idealistic philosophy who is not free; hence philosophy begins with an act of freedom— *im Anfang war die Tat*.

In order that we may rise to free action, opposition is needed, and this we get in the spatial-temporal world of phenomena, or nature, which the ego creates for itself in order to have resistance to overcome.

Fichte conceives of nature as "the material of our duty," as the obstacle against which the ego can exercise its freedom. There could be no free action without something to act upon, and there could be no purposive action without a world in which everything happens according to law; and such a causal world we have in our phenomenal order, which is the product of the absolute spiritual principle. By the ego Fichte did not mean the subjective ego, the particular individual self with all its idiosyncrasies, but the universal ego, the reason that manifests itself in all conscious individuals as universal and necessary truth. In his earlier period he did not define his thought very carefully, but in time the absolute ego came to be conceived as the principle of all life and consciousness, as universal life, and ultimately identified with God. His philosophy is, therefore, not subjective idealism, although it was so misinterpreted, but objective idealism; nature is not the creation of the particular individual ego, but the phenomenal expression, or reflection, in the subject of the universal spiritual principle.

Upon such an idealistic world-view Fichte based the ethical teachings through which he exercised a lasting influence upon the German people and the history of human thought. The universal ego is a moral ego, an ego with an ethical purpose, that realizes itself in nature and in man; it is, therefore, the vocation of man to obey the voice of duty and to free himself from the bondage of nature, to be a person, not a thing, to cooperate in the realization of the eternal purpose which is working itself out in the history of humanity, to sacrifice himself for the ideal of freedom. Every individual has his particular place in which to labor for the social whole; how to do it, his conscience will tell him without fail.

And so, too, the German people has its peculiar place in civilization, its unique contribution to make in the struggle of the human race for the development of free personality. It is Germany's mission to regain its nationality, in order that it may take the philosophical leadership in the work of civilization, and to establish a State based upon personal liberty, a veritable kingdom of justice, such as has never appeared on earth, which shall realize freedom based upon the equality of all who bear the human form. The Fichtean philosophy holds the mirror up to its age. With the Enlightenment it glorifies reason, the free personality, nationality, humanity, civilization, and progress; in this regard it expresses the spirit of all modern philosophy. It goes beyond the *Aufklärung* in emphasizing the living, moving, developing nature of reality; for it, life and consciousness constitute the essence of things, and universal life reveals itself in a progressive history of mankind. Moreover, the dynamic spiritual process cannot be comprehended by conceptual thought, by the categories of a rationalistic science and philosophy, but only by itself, by the living experience of a free agent. In the categorical imperative, and not in logical reasoning, the individual becomes aware of his destiny; in the sense of duty, the love of truth, loyalty to country, respect for the rights of man, and reverence for ideals, spirit speaks to spirit and man glimpses the eternal.

Among the elements in this idealism that appealed to the Romanticists were its anti-intellectualism, its intuition, and the high value it placed upon the personality, its historical viewpoint, and its faith in the uniqueness of German culture. They welcomed the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a valuable ally, and exaggerated those features of it, which seemed to chime with their own views. The ego which Fichte conceives as universal reason becomes for them the subjective empirical self, the unique personality, in which the unconscious, spontaneous, impulsive, instinctive phase constitutes the original element, the more extravagant among them transforming the rational moral ego into a romantic ego, an ego full of mystery and caprice, and even a lawless ego. Such an ego is read into nature; for, filled with occult magic forces, nature can be understood only by the sympathetic divining insight of the poetic genius. And so, too, authority and tradition, as representing the instinctive and historical side of social life, come into their own again.

Fichte's chief interest was centered upon the ego; nature he regarded as a product of the absolute ego in the individual consciousness, intended as a necessary obstacle for the free will. Without opposition the self cannot act; without overcoming resistance it cannot become free. In order to make free action possible, to enable the ego to realize its ends, nature must be what it is, an order ruled by the iron law of causality. This cheerless conception of nature—which, however, was not Fichte's last word on the subject, since he afterward came to conceive it as the revelation of universal life, or the expression of a pantheistic God—did not attract Romanticism. It was Schelling, the erstwhile follower and admirer of Fichte, who turned his attention to the philosophy of nature and so more thoroughly satisfied the romantic yearnings of the age.