

Book Reviews

Anthony J. La Vopa. *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762-1799*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 449pp. \$54.95 ISBN 0-521-79145-6.

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This is the first biography in English of the German Idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. After working through this voluminous history, no one will be claiming that it does not do justice to the description of the life of an exciting and contradictory personality. Anthony J. La Vopa has accomplished his task of presenting “contextually” the facts of Fichte’s life. However, after closing the book, La Vopa’s persistent appeal to contextuality appears problematic. This is not say that the book is not an achievement of first rate scholarship. La Vopa handles his material with confidence and *gusto*. One hears the voice of a cogent scholar in complete control of his subject. There is no doubt that students of Fichte, especially those without the ability to peruse the German literature, will find La Vopa’s book invaluable.

Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy is organized in two parts, the first dealing with Fichte before, and second with Fichte during the appointment at Jena University. The year 1799 signifies Fichte’s move to Berlin, a period that is not dealt with by La Vopa. The subtitle says a bit more than mere dates about what is contained in the book. The reference to the “Self” is obvious, even obligatory, for the biography of the “Ich-Philosoph” *par excellence*, the philosopher who like no other concentrated on the “I.” The “Calling of Philosophy” refers to a theme that runs through the book and functions as an organizing principle. It refers to the “ascetic self mastery ... as a modern variation on the Lutheran ideal of calling” (13) that is exemplified in Fichte’s extrapolation of a moral ideal that resides within the self. The exact nature of this “calling” is developed with reference to Fichte’s *Moralphilosophie* as well as to the various controversies that he

became embroiled in. Essentially, it is the secularization of the pietist demand for a personal faith that is reworked by Fichte to the internal “moral kingdom.” La Vopa explicates several of Fichte’s key concepts in terms of the “calling,” for instance the *Strerben* or striving of imagination (203), and he also indicates that, despite its appropriation by philosophy, the “calling” retains a religious weight: “[Fichte’s] road to the calling still lay through a spiritual rebirth, though now the struggle against the natural self and the World took the form of a daunting ascent to self-understanding through transcendental abstraction. And the calling itself was still a cross, though the terms of redemption had changed” (229).

The biography starts with an account of Fichte’s plebeian origins. Although the patronage of a baron secured the prodigious youth’s schooling, it also created in Fichte a sense of alienation from his home. Especially after the abrupt cessation of the patronage, the effect was that Fichte was an angry youth, flailing between draining employments as a tutor, and trying to find a way to the pulpit. The accidental discovery of Kant turned Fichte’s attention to philosophy at the right time, when he was still young to be hopeful for the future and also mature enough to produce his *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* as a calling card to Kant. The master was suitably impressed, arranged for the book to be published, inadvertently the name of the author was suppressed and everybody assumed that the author was Kant himself. When this error was remedied, Fichte’s reputation as the *enfant terrible* of transcendental philosophy was secured. La Vopa’s relation of the events is rich in drawing from the cultural and intellectual milieu of the period. Thus, a close reading of early texts is placed in the context of the French Revolution, the philosophical debates that it generated—especially Rousseau’s sentimentalism—as well as the implications of being a Kantian and a sympathizer of the Jacobins. The first part closes with an incisive examination of Fichte’s approach to Judaism and an account of Fichte’s courtship to his wife, largely seen in terms of the rhetoric of *Empfindsamkeit*—an apt choice given that his fiancée was the niece of Klopstock, the author who propagated the eighteenth century ideal of “sensibility.”

The philosophical reader awaits to reach the second part that discusses the Jean-years. The presentation of Fichte’s philosophy

is clear with an emphasis again on the context underlying it, especially Protestantism. However, it is not burdened with fine philosophical details and it acknowledges its dependence on other authors, like Beiser, Neuhouser and Breazeale. Elsewhere philosophy is altogether eschewed in order to look, for instance, at the people and the situation relating to Fichte's clash with the student secret societies. I found the chapter on Fichte's relationship to Schiller and Weimar classicism, and the two chapters on the Atheism Controversy the most rewarding. La Vopa skilfully shows why the aestheticism of Schiller's "Letters" is incompatible with Fichte's conception of a system whose starting point is the self—and La Vopa does so without losing sight of the specificity of the clash of the two men around the journal *Die Horen*. A similar strategy of examining both the intellectual and the personal struggles informs the presentation of the Atheism Controversy, which exhausts the external details that led to Fichte's removal from Jena while doing justice to the exchanges between Fichte, his Christian and Enlightenment opponents, as well as Jacobi.

It is hard to not be annoyed with Fichte's self-righteous and arrogant contact. But it is even harder to see La Vopa *not* being exasperated by Fichte's hectoring. The shift in the Atheism Controversy from discussions about atheism to the issue of Fichte's character was Fichte's own fault. There is a suspicion that La Vopa has fallen in the biographer's trap of sympathizing a tad too much with his subject when he explains this behaviour with reference to the general manner of public debate at the time and with recourse to psychologizing (407 ff.). Or, perhaps, it is not so much sympathy that slants La Vopa's account, as an overt seriousness. La Vopa tries to be as rational about Fichte as Fichte was about himself. The contradictions entailed here are not far from the surface: La Vopa correctly observes that in the public debates Fichte "stated bluntly what Kant's irony left implicit" (411), but he fails to draw the conclusion obvious to all of Fichte's contemporaries that Fichte simply lacks a sense of irony. Such a lack was seized upon by Fichte's contemporaries, who utilized his self-important tone to reveal the absurdity of the demand for systematicity and totality. What springs to mind here is the well-known irony of Friedrich Schlegel's (obscene) use of Fichtese in *Lucinde*.

It is surely an effect of this seriousness, as well as a feat of self-discipline that figures like the Schlegels, Novalis, and Hölderlin, not to mention Schelling and Hegel, do not even merit a mention. Consequently, nothing is said about Fichte's relationship to the whole Romantic movement, the very relationship that has sustained an interest in Fichte's thought in the fields of criticism and aesthetics. This paradox is further accentuated if an excuse is sought in the historical-contextual method employed by the biographer. Is it possible to compose a genuinely contextual history when "context" is strictly limited to the immediate environs and age of the subject? Leaving aside the fact that La Vopa cannot help but to "de-contextualize" by his examination of the feminist reaction to Fichte (ch. 11), the question of "context" exhibits a more serious strain in his narrative: the *a priori* justification of method, any method, seeks to define method apart from historical or cultural specificity. How paradoxical, then, that such a justification is employed in order to do justice, supposedly, to the "context." Maybe La Vopa does not mind this strain, because it the same strain that lies at the heart of Fichte's thought: the struggle to create a system that speaks to and of the present age and audience, but without it being "arbitrary," i.e. the Kantian refusal to tie reason to historical circumstances.

This affinity between biographer and biographee leaves a disturbing feeling to the reader, when the discussion turns to Fichte's thought on natural right, the people (*Volk*), and the state (*Handelsstaat*). The sinister ring of these Fichtean words, especially as they were appropriated by the nationalist cause, is impossible to miss. How can La Vopa talk about "ideology" at this juncture, without considering Adorno's demonstration that the extreme valorization of the self, the subjectivization of nature was the starting point of the dialectic that lead to Auschwitz? Is this perhaps another feat of self-disciplined expulsion of anything that is not "contextual"? The ultimate success or failure of *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy* rests on the question: Is a disinterested discussion of the self and ideology possible *after* the critique of ideology? La Vopa implies that it is. However, the ideological nature of a narrative's extreme selectiveness seems to undermine any veneer of disinterestedness.