

J.G. Fichte, *La missione del dotto*, edited, translated, and introduced by Elena Alessiato (Naples-Salerno: Orthotes, 2020), 148 pp. ISBN 978-88-9314-239-7



This volume contains a new Italian translation of the Fichtean work entitled “Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten” (Some Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar) and is edited by Elena Alessiato. The original written German version, on which the translation is based, can be found in the third volume of the *Werke* series of the critical edition of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (see GA I/3, 25-68).

Alessiato’s translation (77-142) is accompanied by an accurate set of notes provided by the editor and preceded by a long and in-depth introduction (9-74) and a bibliography of the works cited in it (7-8). It concludes with an index of names (143-146).

The original text of Fichte contains five lectures given by the philosopher at the University of Jena in 1794: the first is devoted to the vocation of man or the human being as such (81-90), the second to the vocation of man in society (91-103), the third to the various classes in society (105-116), the fourth to the vocation of scholar (117-129), and finally, the fifth concerns the critique of the concept of culture developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (131-142).

The subject that gives the entire lecture cycle its title, the vocation or mission of the scholar, was a topic of particular concern to Fichte, who would return to the subject again later in Erlangen in 1805 with “Über das Wesen der Gelehrten, und seine Erscheinungen im Gebiete der Freiheit” (On the Nature of the Scholar and his Manifestations in the Domain of Freedom), and in Berlin in 1811/1812 with the lectures entitled “Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten” (Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar).

Although this work is written in a popular form and intended for a wider audience than specialists of philosophy, Fichte’s words are a genuine appeal addressed to the intellectuals of his time. In fact, he diagnoses a certain weakness among intellectuals who ‘work’ in the academies, and he ‘reflects’ on his own epoch: among these scholars, he identifies erudite promoters of self-referential and encyclopaedic knowledge, popular

philosophers whose reflections are based on common sense, revealing themselves to have beliefs devoid of any scientific form, and finally the sceptics who exercise doubt without constructing anything positive for life.

These conceptions of knowledge are far removed both from the worldly concept of philosophy (*Weltphilosophie*) advocated by I. Kant that is based on reason as its legislator, and from the concept of knowledge that Fichte himself sought to construct and which is identical with the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

This intellectual reluctance is unacceptable to Fichte, especially given the historical scenario that was the forge for his reflections (think of the French Revolution and its aftermath). This text is the expression of the need to rethink both the role of the intellectual and the knowledge of which he is the proponent.

The hermeneutic action that Fichte carries out in the work, in which the method of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is already practised and its principle – freedom – is expounded, generates a substantial revolution in thought of the contemporary meanings of the German terms *Gelehrter* (scholar) and *Gelehrsamkeit* (scholarship). These concepts are connoted now in a transcendental key since they are transposed from the plane of contingency to the plane of ought (*Sollen*), and thus thought of according to necessity.

Through elevation (*Erhebung*) to the philosophical point of view, the essence of the scholar and his duties reveals a substantial link with the very essence of the human being (as a natural and rational being), and with his inter-subjective nature. This is illustrated by the presence in him of a social instinct that binds him to other people, thus forming society.

Each human being, in fact, must carry out this agreement with himself, “egli è perché è”¹, for such is his vocation (*Bestimmung*): he must know his needs and aptitudes and by placing his actions under the legislation of the moral law he identifies the most appropriate means for the attainment of happiness. This is possible in two ways: either by subduing inanimate nature to rational purposes and educating sensation to moral duty, or, as a social being, by cooperating with other rational beings outside himself to achieve a perfect and advanced society. The harmony and unity characteristic of a rational society is achieved by means of a genuine mechanism of collaboration, which is characterised by reciprocal giving and receiving:

una capacità di dare ovvero di agire sugli altri come esseri liberi, e una predisposizione a ricevere, ovvero a trarre il maggiore vantaggio dalle azioni degli altri su di noi.²

Through this reciprocity, society itself, as a self-regulating organism, provides for its own perfection in each of its individual parts. Culture is the result of the sharing of knowledge, and by this term Fichte means both the apparatus of knowledge that serves as a necessary

¹ “He is because he is”. (84)

² (102). In English: “a capacity to give, i.e. to act on others as free beings, and a predisposition to receive, i.e. to derive the greatest benefit from the actions of others on us.”

tool for individual training (*Ausbildung*) and the process of collective continuing education (*Bildung*): each person is free to educate others in that specific aspect in which he or she is best trained and at the same time to allow himself or herself to be educated in those points which he or she is lacking. Culture thus understood is created thanks to society and thus remains at its service.

The theory of intersubjectivity and at the same time the dialectical interplay between the concepts of responsibility and freedom that produces the equality between all members of the community allows Fichte to demonstrate the very essence of scholar. The latter is a human being among other human beings, collaborating with them to bring about the perfecting of society: in the fourth lecture, the scholar embodies the results of the knowledge-sharing process, but at the same time he is its driving force and promoter since he performs an educational function. By virtue of this duality, on the one hand he heightens his ability to become receptive (*Empfänglichkeit*), since he himself was ‘cultivated’ by earlier teachers, whose knowledge he has now incorporated into an infinite learning process, and on the other hand he improves his ability to communicate (*Mitteilungsfertigkeit*), which he exercises in his own education and in the education of others.

Therefore, the scholar is defined as the teacher (*Lehrer*) and educator (*Erzieher*) of mankind (125-126), and acts for the purpose of the ethical ennobling of humanity as a whole (127).

As Alessiata states in the introduction, the purpose of these lectures is to make human beings understand their *own vocation*, while at the same time providing the theoretical tools necessary to achieve it (50).

On the whole, the introduction is informative insofar as it clearly identifies and develops the main conceptual nodes addressed by the philosopher in the lectures and does not neglect to place them in the historical context that profoundly marked his thought. The introduction similarly reveals the editor’s particular awareness of the conceptual revolution that the Fichtean philosophy has generated in the employment of terms such as *Gelehrter*, *Gelehrsamkeit* and *Bestimmung*:

In questa prospettiva i termini appaiono segni in cui si registrano le oscillazioni e le incertezze proprie di tempi caratterizzati dal cambiamento e dal passaggio da un passaggio codificato a un futuro ancora indefinito perché aperto. L’uso di un termine colto nel suo presente diventa allora marcatore e insieme veicolo di un cambiamento in corso.³

³ (18) “In this perspective, terms appear to be signs in which are recorded the oscillations and uncertainties of times characterised by change and the transition from a codified passage to a future that is still undefined because it is open. The use of a term caught in its present then becomes both a marker and vehicle of a change that is still in progress.”

In this sense, Fichte not only figures as an acute interpreter of his own time but furthermore as the author of that characteristic mobility of concepts and terms through which we still think and talk about the world today.

The new Italian translation also reflects this sensitivity: the text is accompanied by an apparatus of explanatory notes illustrating both the meaning of Fichte's terms by resorting to the German etymology (as is the case, for example, for the terms *Wechselwirkung*, *Vereinigung*, *Cultur*, *Mitteilung*, *Beruf*) and elucidating the philological choices made. The presence of certain expressions in German, placed after the translation and indicated in brackets, denotes the translator's desire to remain faithful to the original. Moreover, it emphasises the terms and expressions that appear as cornerstones of the specifically Fichtean model of communication. It is therefore very accurate.

Finally, one special moral aspect cannot be overlooked – the scholar is a priest of truth: “sacerdote della verità” (*Priester der Wahrheit*) (128), acting under the sign of the moral law not to deceive other people but to educate them to a sense of truth and freedom by means of his own ethical behaviour.

It is not necessary to go beyond this book to discover the model of the intellectual or scholar that Fichte is talking about: he himself provides a prime example in these pages and throughout his philosophical work. The project of a *Wissenschaftslehre* itself stems from the scholar Fichte's desire to educate humanity to freedom, taking shape as practical knowledge that maintains its connection to life as well as in the exercise of freedom for whoever practises it.

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