

Fichte's "empty form of knowledge"

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This paper deals with Fichte's *Grundzüge*, and in particular with his discussion of the "empty form of knowledge" he claims stands at the centre of the third — i.e., the present — age. Fichte speaks of a fundamental principle that forms the "common denominator" between the third and fourth main epochs. This fundamental principle — the "maxim of comprehensibility" (*Maxime der Begreiflichkeit*) — makes knowledge and comprehension the measure of all that "counts as being valid and as really existing". But the question arises: How can one and the same principle act as the "unifying concept" for two different "main epochs of human life"? Does this not go directly against Fichte's claim that two main epochs *differ from each other in every respect*, precisely because they produce two entirely different "unifying principles", and because everything in them must reflect the difference between their "unifying principles"? Fichte's answer to this question is as follows: a) the fundamental maxim in question allows for two diametrically opposed interpretations, so that each of them provides the principle or the "unifying concept" from which the third and fourth main epochs arise, and b) the third main epoch only gives rise to the *empty* form of science, as opposed to "truly real science": it stands for a careless and easy-going, shallow, conventional, trivializing and incorrect conception of the "fundamental maxim of comprehensibility" — so that it misses what is essential, does not do justice to the fundamental maxim, overlooks its implications, and indeed goes against its innermost meaning.

Keywords: Fichte, Wissenschaftslehre, philosophy of history, form of knowledge, principle.

1. Introduction

This contribution deals with Fichte's discussion of the "empty form of knowledge" he claims stands at the centre of the third — i.e. the present — age.

First, let us recall that Fichte's "philosophical picture of the present age" [1, S. 196] involves an attempt to deduce "the main epochs of human life on earth" (cf. [1, S. 197]) from a single principle, or rather from a "unifying concept of the entire human life on earth", which "can be clearly comprehended in its unity, and from which the main epochs of human life on earth can be fully deduced and clearly understood, both in their origin and in their connection with each other" (cf. [1, S. 197]). According to Fichte, this "unifying concept of the entire human life on earth" consists in humankind being able to "order all its relations with freedom according to reason" (cf. [1, S. 198]). That is, it consists in freedom "appearing in the entire consciousness of the species" and emerging "as its own freedom,

as a true and actual deed and as a product of the species in its own life, proceeding from its own life” (cf. [1, S. 198]). This freedom-oriented goal forms the all-encompassing connection in which every essential aspect of human life and every significant turn of events can be integrated.

Let us recall, moreover, that Fichte’s entire conception of the “main epochs of human life on earth” hinges on the claim that, “according to the basic idea presented, mankind’s life on earth is divided into two main epochs or ages”: “one in which the species lives and exists without as yet having ordered its relations with freedom according to reason; and another in which this rational ordering is accomplished” (cf. [1, S. 198–199]). The first main epoch is a precondition for the second one, insofar as complete freedom cannot be merely *given*, but must come about as something *self-acquired* — i.e. as the result of a kind of *self-liberation* or *self-release* — and requires, therefore, a preliminary stage or starting point (the “whereof”, so to speak, without which there can be no self-liberation or self-release).

But this is not all. Fichte also points out that the transition from the first to the second main epoch *cannot come about immediately*. Since the first main epoch is characterized by the *absolute domination by a blind drive or instinct*, it leaves no room for the transition to the opposite state of freedom (cf. [1, S. 199–200]). According to Fichte, this transition is impossible without the intervention of *two mediating elements*, namely:

1. an epoch in which “the results of the rational instinct [*des Vernunftinstinkts*] (...) are made into an external ruling authority, upheld through coercive means (...) by the strongest individuals of the species, in whom — precisely on account of their strength — that instinct speaks in its loudest and broadest tones” (cf. [1, S. 200]), so that it takes the form of a “coercive authority” (cf. [1, S. 200]), i.e. a form that differs from absolute or “unconditional authority” (cf. [1, S. 201]) (from the “soft coercion of personal instinct” (cf. [1, S. 200])); and
2. an epoch in which the “drive to free oneself from rational instinct” (cf. [1, S. 200]) gains the upper hand and “rebels against the pressure of a foreign instinct that interferes with one’s own right; and through this awakening it breaks the chains, not of rational instinct in itself, but of the instinct of foreign individuals, which has taken the form of an external source of coercion” (cf. [1, S. 200]).

The first of these two “mediating elements”, or “transitional ages”, corresponds to a kind of *attenuated form* of instinct (cf. [1, S. 243])¹, which, by introducing a distance between the individual and “externalized” instinct, so to speak, provides the track switch leading to the revolt against instinct perceived as a “foreign authority”, or as “coercion” — and therefore also to the second mediating element. The latter is characterized, in turn, by generating a *preliminary form* (or a *weak, ill-conceived, immature form*) of freedom, which falls far short of freedom’s full development. According to Fichte, the latter can only be attained in the fourth, or even in the fifth main epoch.

Let us recall, finally, that the succession of stages we are talking about reveals two main aspects expressly emphasized by Fichte.

The first one relates to the fact that the different epochs under consideration are also distinguished by the role they ascribe to the *species*, or the *individual*. The “rational in-

¹ Diejenige, da dieser Instinct, schwächer geworden, und nur noch in wenigen Auserwählten sich aussprechend, durch diese wenigen in eine zwingende äußere Autorität für Alle verwandelt wird.

stinct” that permeates the first main epoch “refers (...) only to the relations and the life of the species, and by no means to the life of a mere individual” (cf. [1, S. 210]). The same also applies to the second main epoch, but in such a way that the “rational instinct” relating to the species is for most individuals no longer the “soft coercion of personal instinct” (cf. [1, S. 200]). Rather, it takes the form of an *external coercive authority*, or of a “blind faith and unconditional obedience” (cf. [1, S. 201]). The third main epoch, which frees itself from rational instinct, is characterized, on the contrary, by “not letting absolutely anything count as real” “other than the life of the individual and whatever relates or refers to it” (cf. [1, S. 210]). According to Fichte, the fourth (and a fortiori the fifth) main epoch is characterized, on the contrary, by bringing about a *reversal* of this development. For “rational instinct — and indeed reason in any of its forms — embraces only the life and relations of the species” (cf. [1, S. 210]).

The individual (or the fact that the individual takes over the *leading role* and becomes the centre around which everything else revolves) is thereby an essential condition for the emergence and the discovery of freedom as such. This does not mean, however, that the species no longer plays any part. On the contrary, according to Fichte, reason and species are found to belong to each other in an essential way, so that the aim of human life on earth (i.e. humankind’s ability to “order all its relations with freedom according to reason”) implies restoring the *primacy of the species*. And this is what Fichte’s *fourth* and *fifth* main epochs are all about.

The second main aspect of the succession that is expressly emphasized by Fichte has to do with the fact that each main epoch is characterized by a specific relationship with *knowledge* and *cognition*. The first main epoch, which acts as the precondition or the starting point for self-liberation or self-release, is characterized by the unbounded *coercion of personal instinct*. It translates into a *dark drive* or a *blind coercion* (the “soft coercion” of personal instinct) that is not in the least related to *insight*, *knowledge*, or the like. The same applies to the second main epoch, which differs from the first one in that in its case the authority of instinct takes the form of the external ruling and coercive authority of foreign individuals or that of “*blind faith and unconditional obedience*”. The third main epoch is characterized, on the contrary, by the fact that its “release from instinct” is intimately tied to the “creation of science” (*Erzeugung der Wissenschaft*) (cf. [1, S. 199]). As Fichte emphasizes, the third main epoch is “the epoch of release (*Befreiung*): an immediate release from the external ruling authority, and a mediate release from the power of rational instinct and from reason in general, in any of its forms” (cf. [1, S. 207]). Its essence is the discovery or the emergence of freedom as freedom (of the fact that freedom as such emerges and takes over the leading role). In short: this epoch is characterized by having the notion of freedom as its cornerstone.

The crucial point here is the essential connection between *freedom* and knowledge. The discovery or emergence of *freedom* as freedom entails the discovery or the emergence of *knowledge* as knowledge. Or rather, as one might also put it, the concept of freedom relates to the concept of knowledge in such a way that the former presupposes the latter. The self-liberation or self-release takes the form of a drive to rebel “against the pressure of a foreign instinct, which interferes with one’s own right” (cf. [1, S. 200]). That is to say, the self-release is directed both against the *instinct* and against what is *foreign* — and “knowledge” is the weapon, as it were, it resorts to against both.

Of great importance in this context is the *interweaving* of the two concepts in question (and especially the fact that the concept of *freedom* presupposes, by its very nature,

the concept of *knowledge*). Equally important is the fact, related to the previous one, that the release around which the third main epoch revolves — namely, the release from the “foreign authority” or from the “external coercion” — *invokes* the concept of *knowledge* or *appeals to* this concept (so that it *devises knowledge* as such and what is required by it). In other words, the said release carries high the flag of knowledge, so to speak — and thereby knowledge not only emerges, but is also granted, together with freedom, the main role.

Yet there is also a third point that is no less important, namely the fact that the *concept of knowledge* that hereby emerges is only a *preliminary form* (or a *weak, ill-conceived, immature form*) of this concept, which falls far short of its full development. According to Fichte, the latter can only be attained, in the fourth main epoch. This is another characteristic aspect of the doctrine presented by Fichte: the essential connection between freedom and knowledge also translates into the fact that both the realization of freedom and the realization of knowledge begin with a *flawed development*, so to speak. To “empty freedom” (*leere Freiheit*) (cf. [1, S. 209]) corresponds an “empty knowledge” (*leeres Wissen*).

We will see below that this fact determines the form and direction of Fichte’s “philosophical picture of the present age”. For now, however, the question of why the concept of freedom starts by assuming — or must assume — an *ill-conceived* and *defective* form, which Fichte terms “empty freedom”, will not occupy us any longer. We will concentrate on Fichte’s discussion of “empty knowledge” and the reason why the concept of *knowledge*, too, must start by appearing as an *ill-conceived* and *defective* concept.

2. The “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” and its two diametrically opposed conceptions or interpretations, which underlie the third and fourth main epochs. The contrast between the “empty form of science” and “truly real science”

So much for the preliminary remarks. They delimit the scope of this paper and allow us to understand what the third “main epoch of human life on earth” is about, and why Fichte can claim that the principle or the fundamental maxim that characterizes this main epoch runs as follows: “(...) to accept as being and binding absolutely nothing other than what one can understand and comprehend clearly” (cf. [1, S. 209]). This fundamental maxim, to which comprehending (*Verstehen, Begreifen*), comprehensibility and knowledge are the alpha and omega, is supposed to give rise, according to Fichte, to the “unifying concept” where from everything else — i.e. all other essential features and characteristic phenomena of the third (that is, the present) main epoch — derives.

At first glance, then, it seems quite amazing to see Fichte add, immediately afterwards, that the very same principle also underlies the *fourth* main epoch of human life on earth: “Regarding this fundamental maxim, — taken exactly as we have enunciated it, without any further specification, — this third main epoch is entirely equal to the one that must come after — the fourth one, the epoch of rational science, — and precisely through this equality paves the way for it. From the standpoint of science, as well, nothing but what is comprehensible is deemed valid” (cf. [1, S. 197]). But the question arises: How can *one and the same* principle, or the *same* fundamental maxim act as the “unifying concept” for *two different* “main epochs of human life”? Does this not go directly against what Fichte writes about the “monadic” character of the main epochs: namely, that two main epochs

differ from each other in every respect, precisely because they produce two entirely different “unifying principles”, and because everything in them must reflect the difference between their “unifying principles” — or, to borrow Leibniz’s words, the difference between their “monadic identities”?

On closer inspection, however, this objection is found to rest on a misunderstanding. For Fichte also points out, emphatically, that the fundamental maxim in question allows for *two diametrically opposed conceptions or interpretations*, and that each of them provides the principle or the “unifying concept” from which the third and fourth main epochs arise: “Only with the *application* of this principle (*in Absicht der Anwendung dieses Princips*) is there *this* contrast between both ages, [namely] that the third — which we shall call, for now, simply *the age of empty freedom* — makes its fixed and pre-existing comprehension (*sein stehendes, und schon vorhandnes Begreifen*) the measure of being; while the age of science, on the contrary, makes being the measure, not of the comprehension (*Begreifen*) that is already available, but of that it is required to achieve (*keineswegs des ihm schon vorhandnen, sondern des ihm anzumuthenden Begreifens*). To the former, there is nothing other than what it already comprehends; the latter seeks to comprehend, and does comprehend — all there is. The latter, the age of science, penetrates with its concept everything without exception, even that which remains absolutely incomprehensible, [in that it penetrates it]as incomprehensible; [it penetrates] the first, the comprehensible, to put in order the relations of the species; it penetrates the second, the incomprehensible, in order to be sure that the realm of comprehensibility has been exhausted, and that it has taken possession of the limits of comprehensibility. The former, the age of empty freedom, knows nothing of the fact that only with effort, diligence and skill can one learn to comprehend. Instead, it possesses a certain repertoire of concepts, and an established common sense already at hand, which it inherited without the least effort; and it uses these concepts and this common sense as the measure of what counts as being valid and as really existing (*als den Maaßstab des geltenden und seyenden*). It has a great advantage over the age of science: it knows everything without ever having learned anything and can thus pass judgement on whatever comes before it, immediately and without further ado, with no need for preliminary enquiries” (cf. [1, S. 209]).

We will limit ourselves to the main point.

To begin with, Fichte speaks of a fundamental principle that forms the ‘common denominator’, as it were, between the “unifying principles” of the *third* and *fourth* main epochs. This fundamental principle, which he also terms the “maxim of comprehensibility” (*Maxime der Begreiflichkeit*) (cf. [1, S. 282]), makes knowledge and comprehension the measure of all that “counts as being valid and as really existing”. That is, *comprehension* (*Begreifen*) or *comprehensibility* (*Begreiflichkeit*) is the standard whereby everything is measured (the basis on which everything stands, the form which everything must acquire). All that “counts as being valid and as really existing” must prove to be *knowledge* and *comprehension* (to be the *correlate* of knowledge and comprehension).² Otherwise, it is deemed null and void.

However, this ‘common denominator’ — *the “maxim of comprehensibility”* — takes on *two opposite forms*. And so it happens that the third and the fourth epochs have a ‘common denominator’ while remaining, nonetheless, *toto coelo* different. Fichte speaks of two

² As something *justified* and *legitimized* by knowledge and comprehension.

“applications” of the fundamental maxim in question. One should not forget, though, that at stake here are neither a) two applications that only differ from each other because they refer to different fields of application (in such a way that the applied fundamental maxim remains *unchanged*), nor b) two *equally legitimate* applications, that fulfil the fundamental maxim *to an equal extent*, and are therefore *equally valid*. On the one hand, Fichte wishes the “applications” in question to be understood as two opposite conceptions or interpretations *of the fundamental maxim*, according to which comprehension and comprehensibility stand for very different things, so that the common denominator itself (i.e. the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility”) becomes *something different*. On the other hand, Fichte also emphasizes that the two opposite conceptions or interpretations in question exhibit a sharp ‘difference in quality’, as it were, and that one of them is *defective*. In the 8th Lecture, he writes: “(...) for this [the age of rational science]³ does not in any way reproach this maxim of comprehensibility in and for itself, — rather, it recognizes it as its own; what it does reproach is only the erroneous and unsuited concept underlying this mode of comprehension and converted into the measuring standard for everything valid”⁴ (cf. [1, S. 282]).

But how do the two opposite conceptions or interpretations of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” differ from each other?

The first one tacitly presupposes a pre-existent sphere of comprehension and knowledge, which is not to be questioned, and makes this established comprehension (or rather this *alleged comprehension*) the standard whereby everything else is measured. It fails to raise the question concerning the essence of comprehension (*Begreifen* and *Wissen*) as such and lets itself be guided by a pre-existing *concept of comprehension*. The concept of comprehension that decides everything is, therefore, itself *already pre-decided*, as it were, and everything is subordinated to the authority of what is already *pre-decided* — or *in the stranglehold of what is already pre-decided*.

The second conception or interpretation of the fundamental maxim follows a completely different approach. It lets itself be guided by the question of *what is required for comprehension (Begreifen) as comprehension or for knowledge (Wissen) as knowledge: what, according to its own nature, must belong to it* (the high threshold that must be met in order to achieve *real Begreifen* or *real Wissen*). To “comprehend” stands here for the totality of *conditions* or *requirements* intrinsic to this concept (for the programme inherent in it, or the *work description* it gives rise to — in short, for the *set of specifications* proper to the concept of comprehension): what must be attained if there is to be any comprehension (*Begreifen*) or knowledge (*Wissen*).⁵ From this it follows 1. that this conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility” is *in no way presupposed* (it *assumes nothing*, it *presupposes*

³ The 4th main epoch, and hence also the second conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility”.

⁴ “(...) denn dieses [das Zeitalter der Vernunftwissenschaft] tadelt keineswegs jene Maxime der Begreiflichkeit an und für sich, — es erkennt sie vielmehr an als ihre eigene; sondern es tadelt nur den schlechten und untauglichen Begriff, der bei diesem Begreifen zum Grunde gelegt und zum Massstabe aller Gültigkeit gemacht wird” (underlining added). Incidentally it should be noted that this passage from the 8th lecture is actually meant to describe how the *fourth* main epoch views the third. But one must not forget that Fichte intends the fourth main epoch to be understood as the remedy for the insufficiency of the third (and, in particular, for the insufficiency of its understanding of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility”) — so that its view of the third main epoch also coincides with Fichte’s own claims.

⁵ Perhaps we can borrow one of Fichte’s expressions and speak of the “determining ingredients” (*die bedingenden Ingredienzien*) of comprehension and knowledge as such (cf. [1, S. 195]).

nothing) and must *start from scratch*; 2. that it checks everything — not least all apparent comprehension and all apparent knowledge— to see whether it corresponds to the essence of comprehension and knowledge as such and whether it meets the conditions and requirements in question; and this is done in such a way that 3. this conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility” does not merely find out what it takes a) for a *minimum* of actual comprehension (*Begreifen*), or b) for an *all-encompassing* comprehension (*Begreifen*). Rather, it is also committed to *fully undertaking* what is thus brought out — i. e. the programme contained in the very concept of comprehension or knowledge.

The difference between the two conceptions or interpretations of the “maxim of comprehensibility” that are at stake here can also be summed up as follows: in the first case, the pre-established sphere of comprehension is broadened in such a way that that which is added to it and incorporated in it must be compatible with the pre-existing comprehension, or similar to it; what is more, it must have the form of the pre-established comprehension; in the second case, on the contrary, all pre-established and alleged comprehension must be compared with, and measured against, that which is required by the concept of comprehension and knowledge according to its own nature. That is to say, everything must take on a form pursuant to the “work description” inherent in comprehension as such.

Fichte summarizes the contrast between the first and the second conception of the fundamental maxim in the following way: “What I, through the concept that is immediately present within me, do not comprehend, *is not*, says the empty freedom; what I, through the absolute concept that has become its own end, do not comprehend, *is not*, says science” (cf. [1, S.209]). This contrast can also be summed up by a variation of a well-known dictum by Baco of Verulam⁶ [2, S.397]): the first conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility” (namely, that which underlies the *third* main epoch) amounts to claiming that everything *ad angustias intellectus arctandum* (where “intellectus” stands for comprehension in its *immediate* form⁷), whereas the second conception (i.e. the “unifying principle” of Fichte’s *fourth* main epoch) understands the “maxim of comprehensibility” to the effect that the *intellectus* (i.e. all comprehension) *expandendus et laxandus ad ideam intellectus recipiendam, qualis invenitur* (where “*idea intellectus*” stands for everything that is required by comprehension or knowledge as such — for a *minimum* of actual comprehension or knowledge just as much as for *full* comprehension and knowledge).

It is therefore no accident that Fichte terms the first conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility” (and therefore, at the same time, the “unifying principle” of the third main epoch) the “*empty form of science*”: “this age is, therefore, in its own separate existence, [the] *concept of the concept*, and has the form of science; but in fact only the empty form thereof, since it lacks that through which alone science is given a content, namely the Idea” (cf. [1, S.247]). Fichte underlines both a) that the third age becomes acutely aware of *comprehension* (of the concept, of knowledge, of science) and indeed so much so that comprehension as comprehension (knowledge as knowledge, science as science — or, as Fichte says, *Begriff des Begriffes*: the “concept of the concept” (cf. [1, S.247]) moves to the centre; and b) that that which the third main epoch thus moves to the centre only gives

⁶ Neque enim arctandus est mundus ad angustias intellectus (quod adhuc factum est), sed expandendus intellectus et laxandus ad mundi imaginem recipiendam, qualis invenitur [2, S. 397].

⁷ I. e., for the “fixed and pre-existing comprehension” (*stehendes, und schon vorhandnes Begreifen*) or for the comprehension that is “already at hand” (*schon fertig, und bei der Hand*) [1, S. 209].

rise to the *empty* form of science (the *empty* form of knowledge, the *empty* form of the concept) — in short, that the whole is afflicted with a kind of *emptiness*. Fichte stresses this point in various places, speaking of the *empty form of science* (*leere Form der Wissenschaft*) (cf. [1, S. 247]), of *empty formal knowledge* (*leeres formales Wissen*) (cf. [1, S. 281]), of “formal science” (*formale Wissenschaft*) (cf. [1, S. 255, 259, 260, 262]) and of the “*formalism of the bare irrational concept*” (*Formalismus des blossen vernunftlosen Begriffs*) (cf. [1, S. 276]) as opposed to “truly real science” (*wahre reale Wissenschaft*) (cf. [1, S. 251]).

But what does “*empty*”, in this case, mean? First of all, it means that the form of knowledge in question (the form of science, of comprehension or of the concept) lacks the appropriate *content*, precisely because the third age has no appreciation for what Fichte terms the “*Idea*”.⁸ But this is not all. The emptiness that is at stake here must also be put down to the fact that, even though the *form* of knowledge is placed in the centre, the relationship with it remains fundamentally *superficial*: it does not penetrate its essence, and indeed misses the main point altogether. In other words, the problem does not lie simply in that the form in question is not “fulfilled” as it should be: it lies also in that *the form itself* (the form of comprehension, or the form of knowledge) is basically *not taken seriously enough*: it is *diluted or watered-down*, as it were; it is *submerged or blocked*, or *only apparently considered*. Put differently, the problem comes down to two facts. On the one hand, it comes down to the fact that the first conception of the “maxim of comprehensibility” has no idea of what it takes to achieve real *Begreifen* or *Wissen* (of all the requirements that must be met by *comprehension* or *knowledge* viz. of all that is entailed in the very *form* or in the very *concept* of comprehension or knowledge). On the other hand, the problem comes down to the fact that, in the end, the unifying principle of the *third* main epoch only gives rise to a *careless and easy-going, shallow, conventional, trivializing and incorrect* conception of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” — so that it *misses what is essential, does not do justice* to the fundamental maxim, *overlooks its implications*, and indeed *goes against its innermost meaning*⁹.

This cannot be stressed enough: it is not as if the conception of the *form* itself were correct, and only the appropriate *content* were lacking — it is not as if the form in question (the very form of *Begreifen* and *Wissen*) were *empty* only in this particular sense. It is rather that *the conception of the form itself is defective*. Herein lies the main point: The form itself is *grossly mistaken*, and therefore, in this sense, *empty*. That which is regarded as the form of knowledge and cognition is not the *genuine* form of knowledge and cognition — it is not the true “concept of the concept” (*Begriff des Begriffes*)! As it turns out, it only generates the correlate of an *incorrect* perception of the form of knowledge and cognition. And from this it follows that Fichte’s third main epoch does *not* stand for an actual *supremacy of the concept*, but only for its *seeming* supremacy — namely, for the *supremacy of the empty concept*.

This is also connected to the reason why Fichte terms the third main epoch the “*state of complete sinfulness*” (*Stand der vollendeten Sündhaftigkeit*) (cf. [1, S. 207]). It goes with-

⁸ Or because this age is quite simply “*incapable of the Idea*” (*der Idee unfähig ist*). Cf. 254. On Fichte’s understanding of what he terms *Idea* (cf. [1, S. 235, 244, 287]).

⁹ All of this can be summed up as follows: The conception of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” underlying the third main epoch is afflicted by the fact that the form of comprehension and knowledge does not become an *Idea*, in the Fichtean sense. And this, in turn, relates to the fact that the *Leichtnehmen* (viz. the ‘lightheartedness’) discussed in the 5th lecture (cf. [1, S. 249]) — i.e. the flaw of *taking things too lightly or too easily* — also hinders the understanding of the fundamental maxim itself.

out saying that this characterization has to do with the *supremacy of the individual* — and that Fichte means above all the *sin of egoism* — i.e. a sin *in the 'moral' sense*. This is also why the second main epoch (which has nothing to do as yet with “empty formal knowledge”) is called the “*state of mounting sin*” (*Stand der anhebenden Sünde*) (cf. [1, S. 201]). One must not forget, however, that Fichte’s description of the third main epoch concerns above all a *cognitive ‘sin’* (a ‘sin’ *against the concept*, or a ‘sin’ *against the true form of comprehension*): the ‘sin’ of “empty formal knowledge” (i.e. the ‘sin’ of the empirical way of thinking, the “art of thinking away incessantly” (cf. [1, S. 201]), etc.). It is thus no exaggeration to speak of two ‘sins’, closely connected to one another — or of a *double ‘sinfulness’*.

**3. A third essential element of “empty formal knowledge”:
the “natural drive for self-preservation and personal well-being”.
Fichte’s claim about the *double* nature of “empty formal knowledge”.
The sphere of the *secondary, indifferent* and *non-binding* form of what
“is and counts as valid”**

But this is still not all. A further element now comes into play. What has been described as the first conception of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” is also characterized by something else, which is equally decisive for the nature of the third main epoch. This further trait relates to the fact that the *suppression of the power of instinct*, which triggers the transition from the *second* to the *third* main epoch, falls far short of a complete removal of all instinct. As mentioned earlier, this suppression takes the form of a refusal of all *foreign, external ruling authority* and leaves a *core of personal instinct untouched*, namely the instinct that refers to individual life: the instinct that Fichte terms the “mere natural drive for self-preservation and personal well-being” (*blossen Naturtrieb der Selbsterhaltung und des persönlichen Wohlseyns*) (cf. [1, S. 201]).

Here, two elements are equally important: a) that the release from instinct leaves behind a sort of *residuum*, and b) that the remaining part of instinct revolves around the “existence and well-being” (*Daseyn und Wohlseyn*) of individual life. But something else is also important: This remaining core of instinct is characterized, among other things, c) by the fact that it entails a sphere of *alleged Begreifen* or *comprehension* (i.e. something like a *knowledge claim*), and last but not least d) by the fact that it *can* (and indeed *tends* to) play the role of the pre-established comprehension or knowledge tacitly presupposed by the first interpretation of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility”. That is to say: The sphere of *immediate evidence* that corresponds to this drive is the one that can act (and indeed tends to act) as the “fixed and pre-existing comprehension” (cf. [1, S. 209]) which the first interpretation of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” “uses as the fixed measuring standard¹⁰ for all that is and counts as valid” (*als den sicheren Maasstab alles seyenden und geltenden anwendet*) (cf. [1, S. 212]).

This adds a final touch to the picture of the third age and its underlying maxim. Fichte’s third age possesses a *double nature*, so to speak. It rests both a) on what we have termed the *careless* and *defective* conception of the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility”, and b) on a kind of “primary moving principle” (*Grundtriebfeder*), (cf. [1, S. 212]) namely, on the continual “drive for self-preservation and well-being” (cf. [1, S. 212]) — or,

¹⁰ Viz. the *reliable* measuring standard.

as Fichte also writes, on the drive “to promote self-preservation and personal well-being to the greatest possible extent” (*die Selbsterhaltung und das persönliche Wohlseyn möglichst zu befördern*) [1, S. 213].

Fichte himself emphatically highlights the *double* nature of the third age and speaks of *two premises*: “Firstly, the fundamental maxim of the age, as indicated above, is now further determined; and it is clear that from its established premise — ‘What I do not comprehend is not’ — there must immediately follow this other: ‘Then I do not comprehend anything whatsoever other than that which concerns my personal existence and well-being;¹¹ and hence there is nothing more than this; and the whole world really only exists for this reason: that I should exist and feel good. Whenever I do not understand how something relates to this end, that something *is not*, and does not concern me” [1, S. 213]. Yet the reference to two premises must not make us lose sight of the fact that Fichte is actually speaking of the “*fundamental maxim of comprehensibility*” and of *two additional elements*, which modify the fundamental maxim in such a way that 1. the latter is viewed through the lens of the aforementioned “ill-formed and unsuited” (*schlechten und untauglichen*) conception, which uses an alleged comprehension, pre-existing and ready to use, as the measuring standard of comprehensibility (cf. [1, S. 376]); and 2. the role of the alleged, pre-existing comprehension (whereby everything that “is and counts as valid” is measured) is played by a knowledge claim *stemming* from a specific *drive* or instinct¹².

This particular characteristic of the “unifying principle” that gives rise to the third main epoch enables us to dispel a possible misunderstanding. Fichte speaks of the third main epoch as the “age of absolute indifference to all truth, and of complete and absolutely unguided freedom”¹³ (*Zeitalter der absoluten Gleichgültigkeit gegen alle Wahrheit, und der völligen Ungebundenheit ohne alle Leitfaden*) [1, S. 201, 207]. But what is this supposed to mean? And how does it relate to the previous description?

The statement in question does not necessarily mean that in the third main epoch *all* knowledge is basically *indifferent*, and that absolutely *nothing* of what counts as “being” or “valid” is *binding*. It is already clear that in the realm of Fichte’s third stage one’s personal situation, one’s “own existence and well-being”, together with everything that is meaningful to one’s existence and well-being — and hence also the core of *drive-related* or *instinct-related* knowledge claims (the alleged *Begreifen* of one’s own situation, and of what is at stake in it), which tacitly acts as a measuring standard — is *by no means indifferent or non-binding*. For the pressure of the “natural drive for self-preservation and personal well-being” makes such an indifference and such a freedom absolutely impossible. The indifference and freedom of which Fichte speaks refer only to the *remaining* knowledge, to the *remaining* comprehension, to the *remaining* part of “what counts as being valid and as really existing”. It refers, therefore, to that which lies outside of the said core or centre — i.e. to the opinions of the third main epoch about what appears to have no actual or significant effect on personal “existence and well-being”.

To be sure, this point is not specifically highlighted by Fichte. But it should be borne in mind that his description of the maxim underlying the third main epoch is tantamount to saying a) that everything is divided into *two* regions of “what counts as being valid

¹¹ The second premise.

¹² Namely, the *knowledge claim* entailed in the “mere natural drive for self-preservation and personal well-being” [1, S. 207, 210].

¹³ “Boundlessness” or “independence”.

and as really existing” (cf. [1, S.209]), and b) that the second region revolves, as it were, around the first one, forming a kind of *periphery*. What is essential here is that all *remaining* knowledge (all knowledge other than the knowledge of what has a significant effect on one’s personal “existence and well-being”), along with the remaining part of “what counts as being valid and as really existing”, *stands under the aegis of personal “existence and well-being”* (i. e. of its knowledge) and is *completely subordinated* to it. We can speak, therefore, of an *additional, secondary* and *second-rate* knowledge, or rather of an *additional, secondary* and *second-rate* version of “what counts as being valid and as really existing”. What appears to be irrelevant to personal “existence and well-being” counts only as a *further determination* of that which, in its essence (i. e. with regard to personal “existence and well-being”), is *already determined*. And indeed, no such *further* determination is ever regarded as essential and binding — it is basically *indifferent*.

And so it happens that Fichte’s discussion of the “whole system of thought and opinion” (*des gesammten Denk = und Meinungs = Systems*)¹⁴ of the third main epoch deals primarily with *science, art, politics, morality* and *religion* (cf. [1, S.215–216]), insofar as they belong to this *subordinated — indifferent* and *non-binding* — sphere of “what counts as being and valid”. Indeed, the original feature of all that belongs to the “system of thought and meaning” in question¹⁵ consists precisely in its being reduced to playing this *subordinated (non-binding, indifferent)* role¹⁶.

So much for Fichte’s discussion of the *double* nature of the third age, or rather of the two main components determining its essence.

4. The misunderstood form of knowledge as an *essential* requirement for the emergence and development of the very form of knowledge

But there is still a particular point that is worth highlighting.

Fichte’s main focus lies in a sort of *ambiguity* of the fundamental maxim — in the *ambiguity* due to the fact that the “fundamental maxim of comprehensibility” (i. e. *one and the same* fundamental principle) can be interpreted in *two opposite senses* and thereby legitimize two wildly different attitudes and perspectives¹⁷. In other words, Fichte emphasizes two different points. On the one hand, he claims that the form of knowledge is bound to emerge sooner or later, and indeed to take over the leading role and become the central concept around which everything else revolves. On the other hand, he also claims that the said central concept (the “*Begriff des Begriffes*”) starts by appearing in an *empty* form — i. e. in an *ill-conceived, immature, misunderstood* or *distorted* form.

This main point can also be expressed in the following manner. Fichte’s fundamental claim about the necessary historical development goes hand in hand with the view that the

¹⁴ One could also speak of the whole *opinion-system* (or of the whole *system of beliefs*) of the third main epoch (cf. [1, S. 243, 258]).

¹⁵ The defining feature that gives rise to all others.

¹⁶ Our discussion of “empty formal knowledge” does not focus on the different ‘figures’ — the *dramatis personae*, or the ‘main characters’, as it were, of the third main epoch (its *science*, its *art*, its *politics*, its *morality*, its *religion*, its *writers*, its *books*, its *critics*, its *readers*, etc.) — which Fichte examines gradually and with great care. We turn our attention away from these different ‘characters’ and seek rather to outline the structural features that form their ‘common denominator’.

¹⁷ Namely the opposite conceptions and the wildly different attitudes and perspectives that are characteristic of Fichte’s third and fourth main epochs.

concept of knowledge (viz. what he terms the “concept of the concept”) emerges *in certain, precisely defined circumstances*, which strongly influence the shape it takes. His discussion of the third main epoch aims to show that the form of knowledge or cognition — i. e. “the concept of the concept” — is not discovered and does not become the central concept in a *neutral* medium. It happens, rather, that the form of knowledge and cognition is discovered (or *must* be discovered) and becomes the central concept in a medium that is bound to *distort* it considerably and to reduce it to a *shadow of itself*.

This *misunderstood form* of knowledge and cognition is characterized a) by overlooking the essential implications of the maxim of which it is made up of, so that the form of knowledge or cognition does not fully develop and is not understood in all its fullness; b) by placing the concept of knowledge *under the aegis of a presupposed knowledge* (i. e. of an alleged knowledge that is *immediately available*), which is used as the standard of measurement of everything else; c) by the fact that this presupposed knowledge is determined by a *drive*, for it is nothing other than the cognitive claim that emerges from (and is inherent in) the “drive for self-preservation and personal well-being”¹⁸. And this, in turn, means that d) the form of knowledge and cognition is initially seen through this “lens” or “filter” (through this “double filter”: the frivolous and defective conception of the form and the boundless authority of the drive for “self-preservation and personal well-being”). The *genuine* form of knowledge and cognition is thus *blocked*, as it were, and indeed so much so that e) the *misunderstood* form of knowledge becomes self-evident and remains completely ignorant of its peculiar nature (of its double nature, of its wrongness, etc.) and of every possible alternative.

Fichte thus holds that this *gradual* development of the form of knowledge or cognition is *essential*: that the form of knowledge must start by appearing as the *empty* form of knowledge (as a *distorted* and *incorrect* form), and that only a *further development*, which takes the “empty” form as a starting point and reacts against it, can lead to the *full* development of the concept of knowledge, or of the form of knowledge as such. In other words: by its very nature, the emergence and discovery of knowledge must occur *in two stages*. It requires as a precondition something like a *flawed development*: a defective conception of the form of knowledge (a *defective “concept of the concept”*). Fichte’s point is that this defective “concept of the concept” lies, as it were, in the very nature of things. And this is the reason why there must be not only the first and the second main epochs (and immediately afterwards the fourth¹⁹) but also a *third*, acting as a *mediating element* or *transitional stage* between the second and fourth main epochs. Conclusion: the *empty form of science*— “*empty formal knowledge*”, “*formal science*”, the “*formalism of the bare irrational concept*” — is a “*necessary stage in human education*” (*notwendige Bildungsstufe der Menschheit*)²⁰ so “*that our species also has to cross it*” (*dass unsere Gattung eben auch da hindurchmüsse*)²¹.

¹⁸ So that the form of knowledge and cognition (the “concept of the concept”, etc.) falls prey to this drive, which *leaves its mark* on it.

¹⁹ Which in that case would be the *third* one.

²⁰ And indeed, because it reveals, as one might also put it, a “*necessary educational stage*” of *knowledge* itself (of *Begreifen* viz. *Wissen*).

²¹ Important in this context is also the fact that Fichte intends the flawed interpretation of the “*fundamental maxim of comprehensibility*” that is characteristic of the third main epoch to be understood not only as a necessary misunderstanding, but also as the misunderstanding *that paves the way for the development of a genuine “concept of the concept”*. According to Fichte, the third main epoch is by no means a dead end. Of course, it can also become one, but only as long as it fails to produce the *reaction* that provides

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«Пустая форма знания» Фихте

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Статья посвящена работе «Основные черты современной эпохи» И. Г. Фихте, и в частности его трактовке «пустой формы знания», которая, по его утверждению, является центральной для третьей эпохи мировой истории, т.е. Фихте говорит о фундаментальном принципе, образующем общий знаменатель третьей и четвертой ее эпох. Этот фундаментальный принцип — «максима понимания» (*Maxime der Begreiflichkeit*) — делает знание и понимание мерой всего, что считается действительным и реально существующим. Но возникает вопрос: как может один и тот же принцип как «объединяющее понятие» быть фундаментальным для двух разных «основных эпох человеческой жизни»? Не противоречит ли это прямо утверждению Фихте о том, что две главные эпохи отличаются друг от друга во всех отношениях именно потому, что они производят два совершенно разных «объединяющих принципа», и потому, что все в них должно отражать различие между их «объединяющими принципами»? Ответ Фихте на этот вопрос таков: а) рассматриваемая фундаментальная максима допускает две диаметрально противоположные интерпретации, так что каждая из них дает свою версию принципа, или «объединяющего понятия», из которых и возникают третья и четвертая основные эпохи мировой истории; и б) третья эпоха порождает только пустую форму науки, в противоположность истинно реальной науке, первая означает небрежное и легкое, поверхностное, условное, тривиальное и неправильное понимание «фундаментальной максимы постижения» — таким образом, она упускает существенное в познании, не отдавая должного фундаментальной максиме, упускает из виду ее следствия и даже выступает против ее глубочайшего смысла.

Ключевые слова: Фихте, наукоучение, философия истории, форма познания, принцип.

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the key for overcoming the "empty formal knowledge" and for the emergence of the fourth main epoch, i.e. "truly real science". In a word, the third age is like the *face of Janus*, turned simultaneously to empty knowledge and to "truly real science". This aspect can at present only be briefly mentioned, as there is no room to discuss it here in detail (cf. [1, S. 267]).