

More on Idealism

Day 21

Today—lecture first, discussion second.

On Monday we talked about how Kant laid a foundation for German Idealism and Romanticism—

What were his two key contributions in that regard?

1. A radical doctrine of free will—
Nature as the enemy (IB 88-89)
2. The Copernican Revolution

1. Transcendental Ego
2. A priori categories

The categories were transcendent and universal by virtue of being attributes of the "transcendental" Ego or Self.



Two things awe me most, the starry sky above
me and the moral law within me.

(Immanuel Kant)

izquotes.com

(So this is all very much in the Western
axial, disembedding tradition.)

The two together constitute an
active, World-Constituting Ego

So mind for Kant and those who follow him is primary—

Matter—Nature—is just the passive stuff the mind works on.

(Very much in the nominalist/
voluntarist tradition tracing back to
the 1300s.)

So once this transcendental ego is
posited as a transcultural foundation
for truth and right—

custom, convention, culture can be
judged as deficient by this
transcendental standard.

Culture and custom are baggage
that should be thrown off the bus so
that people can live freely in
alignment with their innate sense of
what is true and good.

Let's talk a little more about Schiller,
Fichte, and Schelling.

Schiller picks up on the Freedom and
Will theme as Resistance/Defiance.

Fichte picks up on the Resistance &
World-Constituting Ego theme.

Schiller is about the individual pitting himself against both Nature and Duty

Of being free from—or transcending—both to be able to choose in a way that is not determined by either.

We obey only the laws of our own creation—

Refuse to submit to any external authority, whether the authority of God, Nature, or Man.

Ideals not discovered or intuited

(as for the Renaissance elites)

but freely invented in acts of creative play—

Spieltrieb and Beauty

On the Aesthetic Education of Man

(See Berlin pp 99ff)

...if only we can convert the necessity
of obeying rules into some kind of
instinctive, perfectly free, harmonious,
spontaneous, natural operation; if we
can only do that, we are saved.

Idea of the Superfluous Human—

Operating completely outside what is
valued or useful for society.

Being sensible or practical is the worst thing you could be.

Failing is the strongest indicator that you have succeeded.

Cordelia in *King Lear* foreshadows this refusal to do what is expected of her and letting the chips fall where they may.

Who would Schiller find more worthy
—Sean or Gerry in GWH?

It assumes that the free person is in touch with his or her deepest, true self

This traces back to Rousseau's inner voice of conscience that Taylor talks about—

Conscience! Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal voice from heaven; sure guide for a creature ignorant and finite indeed, yet intelligent and free; infallible judge of good and evil, making man like to God! In thee consists the excellence of man's nature and the morality of his actions; apart from thee, I find nothing in myself to raise me above the beasts— nothing but the sad privilege of wandering from one error to another, by the help of an unbridled understanding and a reason which knows no

Conscience is not the same as Freud's "superego".

This is not Renaissance Neoplatonism,
but can you see how it kind of is?

Return of the Divine Human after its
rejection by the Reformation and
Enlightenment rationalism.

Rousseau anti-social conventions,—

anti-tribal code

but he's still a theist—

This divine voice is still grounded in an
idea of axial transcendence.

This is where Kant get his idea of the
transcendental ego and the moral law.

In other words, the free human being is truly free to the degree that his will is aligned with transcendent law, which is discerned by the conscience-awakened heart.

But the Romantics who come a generation or two later are mostly not grounded in anything—

They celebrate the groundlessness of existence.

They affirm an idea of Spirit—

but see it as this shapeless, fathomless, bottomless, open-ended, 'immanent', creative energy.

Fichte picks up on Schiller's idea about transgressing conventions, but combines it with Herder's idea of the folk spirit.

You should be familiar with Berlin's discussion of —

- expressionism
 - belonging to a volk
 - the incompatibility of cultural ideals
- (pp 67ff)

Fichte sees himself as an individual spark "belonging" to this larger spiritual flame that is the spirit of the German nation.

So the individualist theme is
suppressed in the folk-spirit theme—

Neo-tribalism that leads to 19th
Century nationalism, and eventually
National Socialism

But this comes later—

He starts by talking about the Ego—
the I—and how it comes into self-
realization only when it is resisted.

We live in our world in a dreamlike
unconscious, instinctual way until we
come up against some obstacle or
threat.

Frustration and fear heighten
awareness—wake us up—

to both the existence of the object
but also to the existence of oneself.

This foreshadows Hegel's thesis and antithesis, the dynamic that gets consciousness and history rolling.

So for Fichte it follows that the more continuously we are in a state of conflict, the more heightened our consciousness.

Conflict is good.

(Not a new idea: Empedocles d. mid 5th Century BCE)

Without the not-self, no sense of the Self—

Without the Self, no sense of the not-self.

It's their opposition that provokes self awareness.

The more aware we are of resistant otherness, the more aware we become of ourselves.

If you're not involved in a struggle, you're not alive.

So Kant's and Schiller's doctrine of the Will is pushed even further and combined with an idea of continuous action.

Fichte wants a philosophy of life, and the pursuit of knowledge for the enrichment of life—

this cannot be achieved by contemplation, but only by action.

Volo ergo sum—I will therefore I am.

It's not about thinking; it's about action.

Personality—authentic selfhood—only developed by the human will hurling itself against that which opposes it.

What is the will if it is not realized in continuous choices and actions.

Foreshadows "Triumph of the Will" theme developed by Nazis.

Fichte hates the static philosophical system.

Very similar idea developed by
American Pragmatists, C.S. Peirce and
William James—

But without all the Geist-iness.

Will and action precede knowledge—

We know because we act.

(Marxist praxis first, then reflection)

It's not about book smarts; it's about
street smarts.

In other words, the only kind of knowledge—truth—that's worth having is the knowledge that comes from experience of struggle in the world.

Epistemological implications—

Things are what they are because of the way that we use them—
Not as they exist as de-contextualized objects—

What matters about a thing is not it's Platonic essence, but its meaning in the context of our day-to-day existence.

This is the point made by Roszak in the excerpt I posted on the website.

Objective knowledge is useless for living, and it's not all that useful for understanding what is real in the world.

What matters is the meaning things have from our interacting with them, our relationships with them.

Freedom is a spiritual attribute, but the individual spirit is part of something bigger—

a nation, sect, class.

So groups have the same responsibility to self-realize as the individual.

As the individual ego is in conflict with its 'not-self', so must the collective ego of the nation—the Urvolk— be in conflict with other nations, the Outsiders.

Fichte's "Speeches to the German Nation"

Napoleon is a perfect exemplar of this action/will philosophy as it functions for the French nation.

Sounds chauvinistic, and whatever Fichte's intent, it's easily taken as such.

A word about Schelling—

If Kant and Fichte were more in the
stream of the Voluntarists—

(Living mind imposes itself on inert,
dead matter)

Schelling is more in the stream of the
Renaissance Neoplatonists—

(all of creation is alive because it
participates in the Divine Mind)

but with an interesting twist.

Nature is unconscious mind.

It is continuously striving for self-consciousness.

So Nature produces its forms not from action imposed on it from outside or from a transcendent source—

But from within its own powers.

Nature starts in brute unconsciousness, but gradually becomes conscious of itself.

How?

In and through human consciousness.

(Could this explain something like the Axial age?)

Nature is unconscious will—
the human being is Nature's will come
to consciousness of itself.

So it's through the human being that
the entire universe gradually comes to
a higher consciousness of itself.

(Retrieves Renaissance idea of the
human being as the "measure of all
things".)

Nature is therefore the human
unconscious—

The individual human consciousness
floats atop this fathomless abyss that is
continuously striving to become
conscious of itself through human
beings.

This is an early idea of evolution, but evolution driven not by random, groping, material processes, but by a groping Spirit—Geist—in the universe striving to become aware of itself.

Romanticism as 'spilt religion'

Geist is the Idealists substitute for the theistic God of revelation.

Religious feeling and longing without the
constraint of actually believing in anything
specific—

No doctrine because all doctrines are
static and limiting.

God—Geist— isn't up in some
transcendent timeless realm—

he's become immanentized, working in
history, striving for higher levels of self
awareness through human beings—

God isn't dead;

he's gone underground—

Not found up and out there, but down and
in here—

in the fathomless depths of Being—

but also in the fathomless depths of the
human soul.

Nature is no longer just inert stuff—

It's suffused with the divine—

And so is the human being divine
because she is where divine nature
becomes conscious of itself

The human being is in herself
grounded in this infinite, and so
longs for deeper sense of
connection to the infinite—

To recover it, would effect the re-
enchantment of the world

This idea of immanentized God in
the depths of Nature/Being is a
dynamic Spirit shaping history—

Opposite of the static Clockmaker
God, the *deus absconditus* of the
Enlightenment deists.

Suffusing Romanticism is this longing for
the infinite—a kind of nostalgia;

Man is a fallen god who remembers
heaven.

—Alfred de Musset

Platonic anamnesis?

References a dimly remembered eternity
from which we came and to which we
return.

This infinity always escapes our ability to
capture it, hold it, even to describe it—

Language is a cracked kettle on which we
beat out tunes for bears to dance to,
while all the while we long to melt the
stars.

—Gustave Flaubert

Longing for the infinite—

This is the counterpoint to the
world as static, grinding machine that
dominated the Enlightenment social
imaginary.

Group discussion—

Take all the time you want.