

AN ASSESSMENT OF GERMAN IDEALISM

The philosophers just reviewed expressed their personality and approached the gates of the spiritual world from very different perspectives: more typically in the will in Fichte, in the feeling in Schiller, and in thought in Hegel.

Steiner sees that in German idealism “the close alliance ...between poetic imagination and world conception has freed this conception from the lifeless expression that it must take on when it exclusively moves in the region of the abstract intellect.”¹ The four philosophers in this chapter bring a personal element into their world conceptions. They believe that it is possible to build a world conception, that it is possible to reach an understanding of the world in agreement with their own nature, or, conversely, that by really trusting their soul they can build an understanding of the world within themselves. They believe that in this way they can reach an objective understanding of the world, not merely a personal fantasy. And each of them does it in markedly different ways.

Fichte forgoes all knowledge that is not gained from an inner source and experienced in daily life. Schiller feels he is at the utmost of his humanity when he can creatively play and experience beauty. His outlook is emblematic of many others of his generation. Steiner summarizes that “Romanticism wants to make the whole world into a realm of the artistic.”² And further, “With them [Romantics], thinking was entirely absorbed by poetic imagination.”³ This, however, did not mean depending on belief. Only Fichte postulated a moral world independent of the human being; the others after him cultivated artistic imagination and unreservedly trusted the powers of the soul.

An artistic outlook in German idealists is closely allied with qualities of “intuition.” Recall the impressions left by Fichte or Schelling, their very personalities, the fire of their convictions, the power of their speech. And add to this what Steiner calls “...powerful thought structures of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel were expressed aphoristically as strokes of lightning...”⁴ We hear more from Steiner about the reason for these “strokes of lightning” in *The Mission of Folk-Souls in Connection with Germanic-Scandinavian Mythology*. However, in order to best understand the matter we need to look at the nature of the consciousness acquired by Germanic and Scandinavian souls in the centuries following the Mystery of Golgotha.

The people of northern Europe were closest to the state of consciousness of old Atlantis, and they experienced the transition from the old vision to the new kind of vision. While the “I” was not yet awake, they could contemplate spiritual beings. In this state of consciousness they witnessed the “I” being bestowed upon them and gradually awakening.

Until the 8th to 10th centuries AD, they could see how the soul forces started to work in the body. They could still perceive the imprinting of the soul forces into the body, and also the incorporation of the “I.” “[The Germanic-Scandinavian] was present when

¹ Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, Chapter 6: “The Age of Kant and Goethe.”

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, Chapter 9: “The Radical World Conceptions.”

the 'I' membered itself into the body and took possession of each single human being."⁵ The Germanic people awakened to the "I" at a stage in which the folk-spirits still worked upon their souls, a stage corresponding to old Atlantis. They could literally perceive the "I" as a being among other entities; they saw it clairvoyantly. In fact they "developed the vision of the 'I' long before they became conscious of the real inner striving towards the 'I.'"⁶ Through the "I" they could more consciously direct their relation to the outer world and form varied relationships with it. It was thus in Europe that the human being first began to speak of the relation of the "I" to the world.

The people of northern Europe still carried the memory of an earlier stage of life, a time when they perceived everything as if in an ocean of mist, the time of old Atlantis. They remembered the gods that were still active at the time of Atlantis (whom they called the Vanas). And they perceived the later working of the Angels and Archangels (Asas) upon their souls. This second set of gods they saw still at work, forming the soul's forces and impressing them upon the body, as if this were happening in the moment, as late as the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries after Christ. The memory of the spiritual world did not lie in a far distant past, as it did for the old Indian or successive civilizations.

The philosophies of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel are "the result of the most penetrating old clairvoyance, acquired by man when he worked in cooperation with the divine spiritual beings. It would otherwise have been impossible for a Hegel to have looked upon his ideas as realities." And further, "Hegel's world of ideas is the final, the most highly sublimated expression of the spiritual soul, and contains in pure concepts that which the Northman still saw as sensible-supersensible, divine spiritual powers in connection with the 'I.'"⁷ This also explains how all of Fichte's philosophy takes its start from the idea of the "I," which was a gift from the God Thor to the old people of the north.

Based as it is on the substratum of the Northern Mysteries, German philosophy does not fall into empty abstraction. German idealism shows that German culture is in essence ready to receive the ideas of spiritual science, once the times allow for them. And the German soul is also the best suited to understand the revelations of the coming of the Christ in the etheric.⁸

German classical philosophy is built upon the "idea-experience." In Steiner's assessment, "In Goethe, Fichte and Schiller, the experienced idea—one could also say, the idea-experience—forces its way into the soul."⁹ Remember Fichte's emphasis on soul activity: "Think about the wall" and "Now think about the one who thought about the wall." It is this idea-experience that creates the solid ground for a worldview that sees the human being as perfect and as free as possible.¹⁰

The fruit of German classical culture is a world of ideas in which one can awaken consciousness of self. "With Fichte, world conception is ready to experience self-consciousness; with Plato and Aristotle, it had arrived at the point to think soul

⁵ Steiner, *The Mission of Folk-Souls in Connection with Germanic Scandinavian Mythology*, lecture of June 14, 1910.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Steiner, *The Mission of Folk-Souls*, lecture of June 16, 1910.

⁸ Ibid, lecture of June 17, 1910.

⁹ Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy*, Chapter 6: "The Age of Kant and Goethe."

¹⁰ Ibid.

consciousness.”¹¹ And further, “Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel conceived the idea of the self-conscious soul to be so comprehensive that it seemed to have its root in a higher spirit nature.”¹²

All of the above could remind us of the School of Chartres, in particular of what has been said of Alain de Lille, but also of all other people of the school, who lived in the fire of a world of ideas to which they could relate intuitively, and which they could still perceive in imaginations. Whereas Chartres gathered the fruits of the ancient Celtic Mysteries and the Mystery knowledge and traditions of the Middle East, German idealism gathered in a similar fashion the experience of German-Scandinavian initiation, and rendered in ideas the experiences that had taken form in the German soul and given shape to its mythology.

In the philosophers we have outlined in this chapter, as in Alain de Lille, rhetoric occupies a greater place than logic. Even in Hegel, the thinker par excellence, logic falls short of the mark. It seems the time is not yet ripe for the redemption of thinking. The German idealists counter, with all their energy, the foundations of the natural scientific outlook. But they cannot do so on epistemological grounds. Goethe, whose thinking goes the farthest in this direction, can only express himself in aphoristic and artistic terms. The others each contribute their brick to the building of a new worldview.

It is important to keep in mind that the fruit of German idealism would have found its fullest expression and culmination in the social sphere in German liberalism, had it not been for the effective counter-impulses of the western brotherhoods. Whereas British liberalism had its roots in economic thinking, German liberalism had a broader scope. It embodied a larger vision of the human being, as we have partly seen when Schiller’s views from his *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* were taken into the social realm. Schiller considered the work of the politician to be the highest kind of art, the social art. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1767-1835) *The Sphere and Duties of Government* is, according to Steiner, “...the first attempt at constructing an independent life of rights or of the state, an endeavor to find independence for the political realm.”¹³ The attempts that took shape in central Europe were founded on impulses that could evolve into the ideas of the threefold social order.

The elaboration of ideas that took shape in German liberalism could have found political expression through someone like Kaspar Hauser (1812-1833). Count Polzer-Hoditz recorded a conversation he had with Steiner, in which the latter indicated that Hauser’s reign would have ushered in a “new Grail castle” in Southern Germany, in the area of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and also Austria.¹⁴ The united principalities could have resisted the rise of materialism and the threat of Prussian hegemony.

Materialism countered liberalism in Marxism. In 1848 Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, continuing the impulse of the denial of the spirit of the Constantinople Council of 869, and furthering it with the denial of the existence of the soul. For Marx only the struggle for economic well-being occupied center stage; culture

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, Chapter 9: “The Radical World Conceptions.”

¹³ Steiner, *Ideas for a New Europe: Crisis and Opportunity for the West*, lecture of December 15, 1919.

¹⁴ Sergei Prokofieff, *May Human Beings Hear It*, 711.

mirrored this trend, becoming a mere “superstructure.” From 1848 on, the liberal impulse fought against both the Bismarckian central state and socialist impulses. Repression of the liberal impulse occurred as early as the year 1850, and this was followed by the restoration of the German Confederation, bringing the reactionary Bismarck to power against the wishes of the liberals. By 1871, when Wilhelm I was crowned German emperor, Germany had turned its back on the legacy of Goethe and on its spiritual task. “Since that event, the throat of the German spirit has indeed been well and truly cut” is Steiner’s assessment.¹⁵

¹⁵ Steiner, *Ideas for a New Europe*, lecture of December 15, 1919.