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Rousseau, Fichte, and the Romantic Roots of the Totalitarian Logic

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Rousseau, Fichte, and the Romantic Roots of the Totalitarian Logic

MA Thesis – Philosophy (Philosophy of Law Governance and Politics)

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1. Introduction

The question of totalitarianism is a relevant one. Even (or, I could perhaps better say: even more so) to us in the 2020s. Many people in the contemporary West may feel tempted refer it back to the twentieth century, dismissing it as a phenomenon either of the past or the other. They associate it with concentration camps, show trials, gulags, and sudden disappearances – for which the Dionysian racist rage of Hitler’s Germany and the failed utopian experiment of Stalin’s Soviet Union serve as prime examples; with Mussolini, Franco, Mao, and Pot as honourable mentions in the margin. Perhaps only North Korea and China have retained some of their totalitarian tendencies up until this day, some may argue; and after recent developments on the world stage, there appears to be a tenor in the West to think of Russia in fascistoid terms, thus putting that country also in the quasi-totalitarian box. But with this, everything has been said. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantlement of the Eastern Bloc, the optimistic tenet of Fukuyama and consorts has been that the model of liberal democracy has triumphed and that we will never succumb to the totalitarian temptation again. Hence, totalitarianism was referred either to the past, when people had not embraced the model of liberal democracy yet; or to the other, where had yet to embrace the model of liberal democracy. That this idea by now has turned out to be childishly naïve, I consider to be proven sufficiently by the political developments of the last few years. The charges between the West and Russia go back and forth, so the Russians suspect the West of fascistoid tendencies too. Now does ‘fascism’ appear to be undergoing an inflationary process in which it is turned into a synonym for any standpoint with which the accuser disagrees – so I do not consider this the proper place to unpack such bold claims further. Yet, it is beyond question that the West has repeatedly put to the test the strength of its own constitutional and democratic principles. The Covid-crisis is the most straightforward example, in which governments bountifully sprinkled curfews, vaccination requirements and fake news accusations by reason of the fact that there is a crisis, that there is no alternative, and that it is absolutely necessary to be all on the same page now. Since the word ‘crisis’ appears to be turning into the political watchword of our times, I cannot rule out that similar feats will not be repeated. From the political right, one commonly hears the complaint that a left-wing elite is implementing a wokist agenda in the government, universities and media. That can be nothing other than *Gleichschaltung*. In turn, the political left anxiously observes how the Trump administration is boldly sweeping through the very same government, universities and media in order to undo these from gender ideologists, climate activists, cosmopolitan feminists and what swear words have you more. In the process court rulings are handily ignored, for the

judicial power apparently is not considered to have the authority to stand in the way of the great MAGA revolution.

But let us not stand still too much by these anecdotal examples. The actuality of totalitarianism has also been demonstrated *philosophically*, perhaps most aptly by Claude Lefort (1924-2010) – whose ideas will play a central role throughout this thesis. Among the most important of these, is the notion that democracy and totalitarianism are inextricably intertwined. A democracy is by its very nature invariably exposed to the totalitarian temptation – sometimes a little less, sometimes a little more. In that sense, democracy and totalitarianism are two sides of the same coin. As a consequence, one should consider totalitarianism to be a *postdemocratic* phenomenon, rather than an *antidemocratic* one. It is an argument that I will unfold in more depth later on. What is important to recognize for now, is that one must understand democracy in order to understand totalitarianism; and one must understand totalitarianism in order to understand democracy. In other words: we must understand totalitarianism in order to understand ourselves.

If one genuinely wants to understand a phenomenon such as totalitarianism, I consider it insufficient to examine the plethora of concrete historical forms in which it manifested itself. This would be interesting enough, of course, but it would lack the power to get a firm grasp of the phenomenon as such. In order to do the latter, one must dig a spade deeper. Like an archaeologist one must try to lay bare some of its fundamental, structuring ideas. Rather than to study the particular excesses of the Hitler and Stalin regimes, one must seek to find out which ideas have philosophically grounded these at a more foundational level. The latter is precisely what I will be attempting to do in this thesis.

Now, I could rightfully be accused of megalomania were I to pretend that I will lay bare the *one* deepest philosophical root of totalitarianism in a modest thesis such as this one. Therefore, I will not do so. But I will try to work as an ‘archaeologist’ nonetheless, laying bare at least one intellectual line I consider to be philosophically foundational of what I will later on call the totalitarian logic. The hypothesis is as follows: the totalitarian logic is at least partially grounded by the romantic notion of the ‘Self’ – more particular as developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814). I will argue that the former discovered a Self which was profoundly different from the Self as it was known before, and that the latter consequently upgraded this Self into a transcendent super-I which has absolute validity of itself. As will become evident, the latter is one of the core ideas on which the totalitarian logic is grounded.

I am under the strong impression that philosophically connecting romanticism with the totalitarian logic *as such*, has been done remarkably little. Isaiah Berlin's *The Roots of Romanticism* (1965) appears to be an exception to this rule – yet being nothing more but a collection of six lectures on the broad topic of Romanticism, it remains rather superficial from an analytic point of view.¹ Compare that with the truly staggering amount of literature that has appeared connecting romanticism with national socialism as a particular historical manifestation of totalitarianism. Especially in Germany, numerous intellectuals have taken great pains to prove that national socialism was some sort of derailed manifestation of political romanticism. To name only a few: Paul Tillich², Victor Klemperer³, Thomas Mann⁴, György Lukács⁵, Fritz Strich⁶, George Mosse⁷; and of a more recent date: Ralf Klausnitzer⁸, Eric Vieler⁹, Rüdiger Safranski¹⁰, and (in the Netherlands) Frits Boterman¹¹.

I must admit that I have some objections to this group of authors and the strand of thinking they represent – which are in need to be addressed. Most of them stress what is apparently the most obvious link between romanticism and national-socialism: its nationalism. The name – national-socialism – after all implies that it was nationalistic. And nationalism, obviously, is a product of romanticism – with Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) as its primary source in Germany. The line of argument is well-known. I will leave the further inquiry into the rightness of this line of thought aside for now. What it is important to understand, is that by stressing the link between Nazism and nationalism one is easily enabled to bypass the communist ideology, which was, after all, international in scope. This gives way to a larger problem, namely that the romantic roots of communism appear to be relatively underexposed.¹² This is remarkable, provided that the totalitarian excesses of national-socialism and communism are more similar to one another than one may surmise at first glance. Indeed, I

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy, ed. (London: Pimlico 2000).

² Paul Tillich, 'Die sozialistische Entscheidung' (1933), in: *Paul Tillich: Main Works/Hauptwerke. Volume 3/ Band 3, Writings in the Social Philosophy and Ethics / Sozialphilosophische und ethische Schriften*, Erdmann Sturm, ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter 2020), pp. 273-420.

³ Victor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, 3. Aufl. (Halle (Saale) 1957).

⁴ Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag 1947).

⁵ György Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Munich: Luchterhand Verlag, 1962).

⁶ Fritz Strich, in his later added foreword to *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik* (Bern/Munich: Francke Verlag 1962).

⁷ George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology, Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap 1964).

⁸ Ralf Klausnitzer, *Blaue Blume unterm Hakenkreuz* (Paderborn: Schöningh 1999).

⁹ Eric Vieler, *The Ideological Roots of National-Socialism* (Lausanne: Peter Lang 1999).

¹⁰ Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag 2007).

¹¹ Frits Boterman, *Cultuur als Macht: Cultuurgeschiedenis van Duitsland, 1800-heden* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers 2013).

¹² A positive exception to this general rule: Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, P. S. Falla, transl. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2005).

consider national-socialism and communism to be two sides of exactly the same coin, namely: totalitarianism.¹³ Hence, my aim is not to commit myself to any particular form of totalitarianism, such as national-socialism; but to look for certain philosophical foundations of a totalitarian logic connecting all concrete manifestations of it, communism as well as national-socialism (or any other form).

In line with this is the point that the concrete historical reception and (mis)use of particular romantic ideas by certain regimes do not form the centre of this thesis. Hence no investigation into the use of Herder, Heine, Wagner or Nietzsche by the Nazi's or the application of the notions of 'class', *Entfremdung* and the 'second revolution' within Stalin's Soviet Union. As already said, such an investigation – as interesting as it may be – would fall back into particularities and therefore miss the common logic underlying them. It is precisely this common logic which I want to connect with romanticism – in my case the discovery and the development of the Self in Rousseau and Fichte.

In order to do so, I must first clearly define what I consider to be the totalitarian logic – a term I have been throwing at the reader multiple times by now. This will be the subject of the second chapter, in which I owe a lot to Claude Lefort's conception of totalitarianism, as well as (but to a lesser extent) Hannah Arendt's. In the third chapter I will define that other yet elusive term: 'romanticism'. I will show that romanticism is not merely a concept in the history of thought, but also a state of mind that carries through today; hence its relevance for this thesis. Once made clear, I will also make evident why the ideas of Rousseau and Fichte fit the definition. In the fourth chapter I will take a further look at the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who could be considered to be the 'father' of the romantic movement thus defined. More particularly, I will look at his conception of the Self, which is argued to be a philosophical requisite of the totalitarian logic. Yet, albeit necessary, Rousseau's conception is not sufficient. The Self still needed the elevation into the transcendental I it eventually got in the philosophy of Fichte, which will be the theme of the fifth chapter.

As already mentioned, I am not under the illusion that I will ever be able to trace either the one, or all philosophical root(s) of the totalitarian logic. Hence in the limited space I have at my disposal here, I will aim to lay down some new threads, to connect previously diffuse thoughts, and to give an impetus to a novel way of thinking about romanticism and totalitarianism by drawing a line between the totalitarian logic and the idea of the Self in Rousseau and Fichte. Undoubtedly, many more lines could be drawn. Such must be the

¹³ Besides Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort, we find this thesis also in Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: HaperCollins 1991).

undertaking of another work. Hence no comprehensive treatment of the subject matter here. Rather, the reader should approach it as an incitement for novel thoughts; as an impetus for critical investigation; and as an invitation for further discussion.

2. The totalitarian logic

Before we can delve into its ‘romantic’ roots, we must first get a firm grasp on the ‘totalitarian logic’. It is a concept that has been analysed and expounded extensively by Claude Lefort – as well as Hannah Arendt. It is especially the former on whom I will rely upon heavily throughout this chapter; although I will refer back to the latter from time to time as well. Hence, the analysis of the totalitarian logic I am going to give, is a profoundly *Lefortian* one.

Before turning towards the problem of totalitarianism, Lefort first addresses a prior question: what is politics? According to Lefort, totalitarianism cannot be studied separate from what it is embedded in: politics. Although Lefort is by no means a systematic thinker and his work is exceptionally diffuse – his ideas are spread like crumbs across many different texts, and unequivocal definitions are often lacking – one might say that the first distinction to be made is that between *la politique* and *le politique*. The former concerns the factual, concrete political actions conducted and institutions present within a society at a particular time and place. In order to understand *la politique*, one must understand *le politique*, which concerns more fundamental constituent principles that precede all that happens within a particular society. Asking the question: what is politics? – is primarily asking for *le politique*.¹⁴

Le politique, then, is constituted by the public space in which different individuals proclaim different views, without the debate ever ending. Thus, without reaching a final solution or unity, people continue to exchange different views and disagree with one another until the end of time.¹⁵ In contrast to *la politique*, *le politique* is not to be located *in* society. Instead, it is its foundational principle. Society is never given; it is always questioned.¹⁶ *Le politique* exists by the grace of never-ending conflict, discussion and plurality. It exists by grace of what Arendt refers to as *πρᾶξις* – *action*. Unlike *work* (*ποίησις*), political action knows no goal to which it must move – neither an immanent one, nor a transcendent one. Rather, the political is the incessant game in which numerous intersecting and interwoven actions result in the chaos which is human reality. It does not conform to any presumed historical logic; nor to some preconceived teleological plan. After all, to act is to take initiative – it is to *begin anew*. History can never be ‘made’. It just happens: discontinuously, without external goal. Hence,

¹⁴ Claude Lefort, ‘La question de la démocratie’, in: Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique. XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), pp. 17-32, at 19.

¹⁵ This clear-cut definition is nowhere given by Lefort, but it is contained in his essay ‘La question de la démocratie’, as well as his ‘Permanence du théologico-politique?’, in: Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique. XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), pp. 251-300, at different places, among which pp. 268-9; a similar definition is given by Pol van de Wiel & Bart Verheijen in their introduction in: Claude Lefort, *Wat is politiek?*, Pol van de Wiel & Bart Verheijen eds. (Amsterdam: Boom 2016), p. 11.

¹⁶ Lefort, ‘Permanence du théologico-politique?’, p. 256; also: André van de Putte, ‘Macht en maatschappij: Cl. Lefort over democratie en totalitarisme’, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 49:3 (1987), pp. 395-433, at 399.

there is also no preexisting truth; it emerges within the political arena. It does not exist beyond humans; it arises between them. Precisely herein lies the *raison d'être* for democracy. For Arendt, it is the only political regime that seeks to guarantee that in being with one another, everyone has and keeps having his chance to make a new beginning. The key challenge is to learn to live with the great lack of harmony that characterizes the political. According to Arendt, it demands 'virtuosity of action'.¹⁷

Via a similar line of thought, Lefort also reaches the conclusion that democracy is the preferable political regime. He agrees with Arendt that it is the only political regime that is able to respect, espouse and incorporate the political dynamics as described above. Yet, he introduces two key concepts which are at best implicitly present in the work of Arendt. According to Lefort, democracy is preferable because it is the only political regime that can properly deal with the continual *indeterminacy* of, and the inevitable *division* within society. These two concepts are in need of further elaboration.

Let us start with what Lefort regards to be the *indeterminate* state of a political society. More or less in line with Kantorowicz, Lefort shows how with the beheading of the French king and the consequent dawn of modernity, the *lieu du pouvoir* became a *lieu vide*. In *ancien régime* France, the place of power was still occupied – namely, by an eternal and transcendent substance, embodied by the King. As a consequence, when the King was beheaded on 21 January 1793, it was not only the mortal body of Louis XVI that died; but also the immortal body of the King, linked to a God-given, transcendent, absolute order.¹⁸ 'Le mort de l'immortalité' – Lefort calls it.¹⁹ The *lieu du pouvoir* thenceforth has become *vide* and is never to be occupied permanently ever again. Its occupation is only temporary. It happens via representatives; by reason of elections, the work of interest groups, and the clash of conflicting opinions. Political power is no longer tied to the body of the king. It dissipates, only to manifest itself in other places. As a consequence, *le politique* is no longer characterized by a predetermined project, plan, or end-goal. Its direction is no longer fixed. The end-point has vanished. Society can no more relate itself to or derive its substance from a transcendent order.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1956), pp. 206-7; Hannah Arendt, 'Labor, Work, Action', in: Peter Baehr ed., *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Group 2000) pp. 167-81; Jeffrey Champlin, 'Born Again: Arendt's "Nativity" as Figure and Concept', in: *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 88:2 (2013), pp. 150-64.

¹⁸ See the classic Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1957).

¹⁹ Claude Lefort, 'Mort de l'immortalité?', in: Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique. XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), pp. 301-32.

Hence, its identity, its aims, and its goals remain ever latent and indeterminate, open to the never-ceasing process of discussion and contestation.²⁰

What follows from this, is the *division* that is proper to society. Since the *lieu du pouvoir* has become a *lieu vide*, the empty place of power can never again credibly be occupied by a transcendent order – for after all, the process of modernisation cannot be reversed. Hence, from the French Revolution onward, power in society can only be exercised by different people in different ways; always temporarily, never definitive. This means that the exercise of power is always to be competed for; as well as open to criticism and questioning by all. Within *le politique*, the competition now appears before the eyes of all. The great contest of social antagonisms commences. The divided state of society – which has always been there – now becomes apparent. Since the path to the *ancien régime* has been closed off, society cannot return. What has been seen, cannot be unseen. Society is divided, and it needs to deal with it. Opinions are differing from now on. Political power is competed for and being questioned; the beacons of certainty have disappeared. ‘Virtuosity of action’ is what is asked for. The task is to allow, but also to properly channel the debates and conflicts which spring from the divided society. Democracy is the only political regime able to do so.²¹

The fact that democracy is the only political regime able to incorporate the indeterminate and divided state of society, makes it the preferable political regime for Lefort. Yet, at the same time, it is exactly these characteristics that turn democracy into one of the most vulnerable ones. It is not without reason that we have already said that totalitarianism is not so much an *undemocratic* phenomenon as it is a *postdemocratic* one. Totalitarianism is a bastard child birthed by democracy when it itself falters. As we have just seen, the *lieu du pouvoir* in a democracy is symbolically empty, yet temporarily occupied. The fatal threat that is inherent in a democracy, is as follows: that the *lieu du pouvoir* becomes not only symbolically, but also *effectively* empty. This usually happens in times of crises. The temporary power is not able to deal with such a crisis effectively and loses its legitimacy – hence losing its symbolic function in which society can find its shape, goal, and meaning. It becomes a mere factual and contingent organ of domination, which is either seen as a hub for individuals indulging their lust for power or greed; or as a talking shop completely impotent at coming to any significant solution. Society collapses into its own particularity and becomes an object of endless contempt.²²

²⁰ Lefort, ‘La question de la démocratie’, pp. 27-8; Lefort, ‘Permanence du théologico-politique?’, p. 266.

²¹ Lefort, ‘La question de la démocratie’, pp. 28-9.

²² Claude Lefort, ‘L’image du corps et le totalitarisme’, in: Claude Lefort, *L’invention démocratique* (Paris: Fayard 1981), pp. 166-186; Van de Putte, ‘Macht en maatschappij’, p. 423.

In other words, the indeterminacy and division within society are no longer sustainable. What emerges is the desire for the *Peuple-Un* – the One People, having a determined purpose; and an embodied power capable of dissolving the divisions that are present within society. Society must come together with itself. The *lieu du pouvoir* is no longer empty – not effectively, nor symbolically: with the novel substantialisation of the One People, the power is incorporated in an individual or organ who must now concentrate in himself all the forces of the One People. Power and society, formerly separated, now collide. Society turns into one giant Self. This Self must unleash itself; which demands a *total* mobilisation of society. It seeks the one Law to which everything and everyone must succumb. This Law, however, is not to be found in a transcendent order; it is to be found within society itself. The body of power no longer refers back to an eternal and immutable order guaranteed by God; it refers back to society. The absolute point to which the totalitarian society strives has become *immanent*. It stems from the giant Self and has no existence nor value outside it. There is no object outside society. The giant Self encompasses everything. There is only the subject thrusting itself forward, discovering its own Law along the way. This Law is not objective, and yet it makes an absolute claim. The Law does not emerge from reality; but reality must conform to the Law. Only if the Law can proceed unhindered, the giant Self can coincide with itself and Paradise (which is of course no longer an object to be found outside the giant Self) is within reach.²³

This is the very thing whereof the totalitarian logic consists. It transforms society into one giant Self – seeking to come together with itself. Its sole task is to pursue, discover and unleash the giant Self. This implies, however, that there is one Self that is intelligible and coherent. Hence, the totalitarian logic is completely irreconcilable with the divided state which is proper to society. It must deny this at all costs; and yet, it is confronted with opposition again and again. Since the totalitarian logic does not allow for mere internal division – society constitutes one giant Self – the division can only exist between the internal and the external. There exists only division between the Self and its enemies. Proportional to the denied internal division, the totalitarian logic demands the expression of a division between the *Peuple-Un* and *l'Autre*. The latter is the representative of the old society (the kulaks, the bourgeoisie, the imperialists, the social democrats, the jews) or of foreign interests. The logical structure of the One People constituting a giant Self, demands the perpetual fabrication of enemies. Opponents

²³ Claude Lefort, 'La logique totalitaire', in: Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique* (Paris: Fayard 1981), pp. 87-110; the epithet of the giant 'Self' is mine.

of the regime must not only be demonized into agents of the evil Other; if necessary, they must be invented.²⁴

Within the totalitarian Self, there is no untruth. After all, it itself is the sole source of truth, for it tolerates no objective standards outside itself. The Self must obey nothing or no one but itself. Within the Self the truth is to be found; outside there is only alienation. Hence the hostility towards anything external. The Self becomes the source of *le principe de la loi* and *le principe du savoir*. Law and knowledge are derived solely from the subject. It stands in flagrant opposition to the place of law in knowledge within the *ancien régime*. For sure, the King embodied the *le principe de la loi* and *le principe du savoir*; but he was still subservient to a power superior to him. In one sense, he was exempt from the laws; yet in another subject to them. He possessed wisdom, but was also subject to reason. He was *major et minor se ipso*: higher and lower than himself. Law and knowledge were to be attained – by the King – from a transcendent object. Compare this with the *Egocrat*, occupying the seat of power in the totalitarian society. He has no reality and no validity of his own. He is the One Party, and the One Party is the One People. All merge into the same, big Self. The Egocrat coincides with himself, just as society does. Law and knowledge are not to be attained from a transcendent object: the Egocrat distills it from himself. And what he distills from himself in that way, is what necessarily makes up the One People. After all, both are not even parts of the same Self: they *are* the same Self. Law and knowledge are no longer objects outside and above the power: they are one with the power.²⁵

What follows from this, is that ‘totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship’.²⁶ If ‘lawlessness is the essence of tyranny’, then ‘the realization of the law of movement’ is the essence of totalitarianism. Its chief aim is to make it possible for the law ‘to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action’.²⁷ This Law is one with the great Self. Hence, totalitarianism must become *total*. As we have already seen, the totalitarian logic cannot bear any opposition. It can only reign supreme when no one stands in its way. As a result, it must do everything in order to eliminate what is so constitutive for the freedom of the individual: his spontaneity, his capacity to begin anew. Everything that is individual must be eliminated for the sake of the whole. He must be fully absorbed into the great Self.²⁸ The boundary between

²⁴ Lefort, ‘L’image du corps et le totalitarisme’, p. 173.

²⁵ Lefort, ‘L’image du corps et le totalitarisme’, pp. 183-4.

²⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 604.

²⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 610.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 610-12.

private and public, between society and state, completely disappears. The state now must harness all forces of society in the same Self. That is the great project of the totalitarian society. A giant process of *Gleichschaltung* takes place. Private and public, society and state must come together in one and the same Self – which has enough of itself.²⁹ The individual Self must be incorporated in the transcendental Self – which is subjective yet absolute, and to which all roads lead. But here I already start playing with Fichtean ideas. More on that later. Before we turn to that, we must now first say a few things on romanticism, as well as on whom I consider to be the ‘father’ of this intellectual movement: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

²⁹ Lefort, ‘La logique totalitaire’, pp. 103-4.

3. Which ‘romanticism’?

Although he is somewhat ambiguous as regards his precise definition of romanticism, Isaiah Berlin is clear on the historical importance of it:

[...] it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world. It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it.³⁰

In saying so, he of course grossly underestimates the historical influence of the Enlightenment, with its belief in science; with its notion of progress; with its contempt for superstition; with its accounts of liberty and equality; with its advocacy for democracy; and with its discourse of the rights of men – yet, in stressing the pivotal role of romanticism he is probably right. As do many other authors, I agree with Berlin in considering romanticism to be among the most fundamental intellectual developments in human history.³¹

Berlin continues: when speaking of romanticism, we are not only speaking of a concrete moment in the history of thought; rather we are speaking of ‘consciousness, opinion, action, [...] morals, politics, aesthetics, [...] and dominant models’.³² It is a crucial observation with respect to this current investigation. When studying romanticism, I am not merely studying a defined historical phenomenon to be located in time and place. To lend a distinction made by Rüdiger Safranski: I am not merely studying *die Romantik* – which would have been a ‘German affair’ after all, to be limited to figures such as Novalis, Tieck and the brothers Schlegel somewhere between the years 1790-1820.³³ If I had done so, I would have been speaking of ‘Romanticism’ with a capital letter ‘R’ all the time. But instead, I am deliberately speaking of ‘romanticism’, with a small letter ‘r’. That is because I rather approach romanticism as *das romantische*; as a certain mindset – a *Geistesverfassung* – having roots being older than *die Romantik*; and having a lifespan far longer, moulding mindsets up until this day.

³⁰ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 1-2.

³¹ Two small Dutch books on the profound influence of romanticism to this day: Maarten Doorman, *De romantische orde* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker 2004); Hans Kennepohl, *We zijn nog nooit zo romantisch geweest* (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat 2014). Safranski, *Romantik*, also delves deeper into this issue; as does Andreas Kinning, *De onzichtbare Maat. Archeologie van goed en kwaad* (Amsterdam: Prometheus 2022).

³² Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 2.

³³ Safranski, *Romantik*, p. 12.

Although Berlin's first lecture is titled 'In Search of a Definition', the clear-cut, unambiguous definition of the romantic mindset the listener (and/or reader) may have expected is nowhere given. The gist of the whole story seems to be that it is complicated – with which of course it is hard to disagree. What Berlin does claim know with some certainty, however, is that its roots are to be located in the Germany of the second half of the eighteenth century – in its *Gegenaufklärung*. With the observation that romanticism developed as a product of counter-Enlightenment, it is once again hard to disagree. According to Berlin, the reaction against Enlightenment is a reaction against the notion 'that life, or nature, is a jigsaw puzzle'; that 'there must be some means of putting these pieces together'; and that man 'is in principle capable of fitting all the various pieces together into one coherent pattern' – in short: it is a reaction against the optimistic belief in science, progress and the reason of man.³⁴ That is all undoubtedly true, yet I think Berlin to be overlooking a more fundamental observation. I consider the counter-Enlightenment not merely to be a reaction against its rationalism; I consider it to be an attempt to fill the exact vacuum created by it. After all, the Enlightenment got rid of all belief in otherworldliness or transcendence – dismissing it as ignorance, prejudice and superstition.³⁵ 'By denying the significance, if not the existence, of universal norms, [the Enlightenment] destroyed the only solid basis of all efforts to transcend the actual.'³⁶ What man is left with, is this world; nothing else. The fully consistent *Aufklärer* may of course stubbornly adhere to the chilling notion of a disenchanted universe in which incessant swirl of molecules continues aimlessly and in which man as 'nothing but...' must find his way in an otherwise normative valueless world – but assuming that man is incurably religious, many may look for ways to fill this Enlightened vacuum. If this is not to be looked for in the transcendent domain anymore, then it must be sought for in the immanent. See here what I consider to be the core of the

³⁴ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 23.

³⁵ I am keenly aware that this is a firm claim. Intellectual history is not so easily captured within neatly defined categories, so exceptions are quickly to be found. Nevertheless, I think that this claim holds up as a general rule. In that sense, I largely concur with the way in which Jonathan Israel has at least interpreted what he calls the 'Radical Enlightenment'. See: Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006). The 'conservative' or 'moderate' Enlightenment, by contrast, tried to combine this with theological and traditional categories; but since this was an outright paradoxical undertaking, it turned out to be doomed for failure: *Enlightenment Contested*, p. 11. Kant – who is usually categorized as a prototypical Enlightenment thinker – developed a philosophy which was a reaction to precisely this Enlightened 'murder of God'. Kant's position as a *Gegenaufklärer* appears to be overlooked remarkably often. An exception to this rule: Panajotis Kondylis, *Die Aufklärung im Rahmen des Neuzeitlichen Rationalismus* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1986 (1981)), pp. 637-48. Yet, awoken from his 'dogmatic slumber', Kant too could not return to the old metaphysical notions regarding the transcendent. He left us with the *transcendental* at most. Religion, freedom and morality may all have some universal and objective claim according to Kant; they are not to be located in the 'otherworldly'.

³⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1953), p. 15.

romantic mindset: the attempt to reinvigorate the universe with meaning and to find some deeper, if not absolute truths – not by looking upward, to some transcendent order; but by looking inward, to something immanent.

It should by this time have become evident that I consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau to be the intellectual ‘father’ of this movement. More on that in a moment. I should first spend a few words on Berlin, who apparently considers himself to have ample reason to refute such a claim. Instead of Rousseau, he opts for appointing Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88) as archfather of the romantic movement. What follows is what I regard to be one of the more curious turns of his analysis. Berlin considers Hamann to be some sort of apotheosis of a line of thought already set out by Montesquieu and David Hume. Montesquieu had apparently started the first attack on the Enlightenment by introducing the notion of ‘general relativism’, which did ‘modify the [Enlightened, RS] proposition that there were eternal truths, eternal institutions, eternal values, suitable for everyone, everywhere’.³⁷ It is a rather remarkable statement, considering the fact that the Enlightenment is precisely defined by the attack on these eternal truths, eternal institutions, eternal values – dismissing its metaphysical contents as unscientific; making these suspect as subjective, uncritical ‘opinions’; and pushing these out of the domain of the scientific and the rational into the position of unquestioned axioms, which were at worst to be considered the products of the ignorance, prejudice and superstition of the past.³⁸ Relativism is one of the core aspects of Enlightenment thinking. Many Enlighteners considered it to be ‘sensible, attractive, perfectly natural’.³⁹ Considering that Hobbes already relegated ‘good’ to be

³⁷ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 31.

³⁸ See for an excellent analysis of this issue: Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1952), pp. 1-13. The terms ‘ignorance, prejudice and superstition’ come not from myself, but from the Enlightenment champion Nicolas de Condorcet, *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin 1970 (1795)). This ‘unholy trinity’ of the Enlightenment recurs multiple times throughout the work. Once again I must stress that I am aware of the fact that I am painting with a rather broad brush here. Therefore, one may align my definition of the Enlightenment more or less with what Jonathan Israel calls the Radical Enlightenment. Of course, not everyone was a Spinoza, Diderot, Condorcet, or La Mettrie. The large majority of thinkers sought to build a synthesis of ‘scientific’ Enlightened ideas and traditional faith. Among the most prominent are Leibniz, Wolff, Malebranche, Le Clerc, Boyle and Newton. The latter are called ‘moderate Enlighteners’ by Israel. They constitute rather an equivocal in-between category. Nevertheless, the (Radical) Enlightened ideas they tried to resolve with traditional faith were anti-metaphysical, monist, materialist, and nominalist. Of course, this was an almost impossible task – hence it is not surprising that most of these systems have eventually lost out. Perhaps Kant – if we can properly place him within this category – has been the only successful ‘moderate Enlightener’. The mere fact that a thinker refers to a deity here and there, I do not consider sufficient to refute my claim. Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke did so too. Yet, a close reading reveals that these deities have little to do with traditional faith. It is in any case worth pointing out that any author will hardly ever have nothing to hide. Sometimes he conceals things, or he writes in such a way that his true intentions can only be understood by the attentive reader. See also: Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press 1952).

³⁹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment. The Science of Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton 1969), p. 461. Even Gay, as a great apologist of the Enlightenment, cannot get around this fact, as will become evident many times throughout his renowned study.

‘whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire’ and ‘evil’ to be ‘the objects of his hate and aversion’;⁴⁰ that Spinoza dismissed these as ‘nothing but ways of thinking’;⁴¹ and that even earlier Montaigne, with his ‘Que sais-je?’, fulminated against the practice of calling others barbarians, observing that what is ‘good’ in one culture is not necessarily the same in another,⁴² – I cannot take the claim that Montesquieu introduced relativism as an attack on the Enlightenment seriously.

Be that as it may, David Hume continues this presumed line of thinking with his epistemic scepticism, leading him to the conclusion that ‘you know [the universe] not by intellect, but by faith’.⁴³ Now that Hume had dealt this next blow to the Enlightenment, nobody less than Johann Georg Hamann was to deliver the final *coup de grâce*. He discarded the icy reason of the Enlightenment and instead turned toward ‘that which was unique, that which was particular, that which was the specific property of this particular man, or this particular thing’, approaching it as a sort of ‘Bergsonian [...] flow of life’, concluding ‘that the attempt to cut this flow into segments killed it’.⁴⁴ This sounds fairly Rousseauian. Given the fact that by the time Hamann had started his own crusade against the Enlightenment in the 1750s Rousseau’s was already well under way, the question we are left with is on what ground Berlin thinks he can appoint not Rousseau but Hamann as father of the romantic movement. His answer: Rousseau was in actual fact an Enlightenment thinker.

His role has been exaggerated. If we consider what it is that Rousseau actually said [...] we find that it is the purest milk of the rationalist word. All that Rousseau actually said is this: We live in a corrupt society; we live in a bad, hypocritical society, where men lie to each other and murder each other and are false to each other. It is possible to discover the truth. This truth is to be discovered not by means of sophistication or Cartesian logic but by looking within the heart of the simple uncorrupt human being, the noble savage, or the child, or whoever it may be. Once, this truth is discovered, it is an eternal truth, true for all men, everywhere in all climes and seasons, and when we have discovered this truth, then it is important that we should live in accordance with it.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996 (1651), 6.7.

⁴¹ Baruch Spinoza, *Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en deszelvs Welstand*, W. Meijer, transl. (Amsterdam: S.L. Van Looy 1899 (1677)), p. 69. The translation into English is mine.

⁴² For example: Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, M.A. Screech, transl. (London: Allen Lane 1991 (1580)), p. 23.

⁴³ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 41. The term ‘faith’ Berlin uses, is a bit misleading. It does not refer to faith in the traditional sense of the word. Terms such as human nature, common sense, habit, or instinct would have been more proper here.

⁴⁴ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 52-3.

In that sense, what Rousseau said ‘is not different from what the Hebrew prophets have said’, nor is it different from what ‘every Christian preacher’ has said, nor is it different from the ‘official enlightened doctrine of the eighteenth century’ of the ‘Encyclopaedists’, whom he only ‘disliked [...] personally, because temperamentally he was a kind of dervish from the desert’.⁴⁶ This is nonsense. Berlin misses the point here. Upon hearing phrases such as ‘eternal truths’, I can easily imagine the disturbed Voltaire, D’Holbach and Condorcet reach for their pens, ready to retaliate with their ‘Écrasez l’infâme!’ and their wonted ‘ignorance, prejudice and superstition’. Moreover, the notion that these eternal truths are not to be found in a transcendental divine order but within the heart of the simple uncorrupt being is un-Christian and would qualify as heresy. Instead, Rousseau introduces a rather different approach here: a ‘third’ approach, if you like. He is not ready to take up the empirical, materialist, and common-sensical reason of the Enlightenment; nor is he ready to return to the transcendent, metaphysical and speculative reason of the Graeco-Christian tradition.⁴⁷ He wants to allow for their profound truths and values once again, and yet, the way back is blocked. He cannot look for these truths and values in the transcendent domain anymore. Hence, he turns his gaze inward, towards the immanent. It is romanticism of the purest milk. And probably without even being fully conscious of it, Berlin himself has admitted it.

Needless to say, this interpretation of the concept of romanticism is not based on thin air. It is worth noting that although the term had been used several times before (being subject to some change through time), Rousseau also started using the term ‘romantique’ himself: more or less in the sense as which I have defined it. As Mario Praz writes, Rousseau probably came

⁴⁶ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 53.

⁴⁷ Also here, I am using a broad category which the reader may consider to be in need of further explanation. With the ‘Graeco-Christian tradition’ I refer to the intellectual tradition that is primarily shaped and influenced by Plato. It is precisely this tradition that I consider to have had a huge influence on Christianity. The New Testament is steeped in Platonism – the Pauline epistles first and foremost, but the four gospels (that of John in particular), too. The early church fathers were evidently Platonic. And even the scholastic theologians were more indebted to Plato than is commonly assumed. The Thomistic notion of *participatio*, for example, is a direct descendant of the Platonic notion of μέθεξις. The key idea here is that there is a transcendent world being more ‘true’ or ‘actual’ than our spatio-temporal world, which nevertheless is subjected to and structured by the former. It provides us with an ‘invisible measure’ which is inherent to being and has an absolute, objective, eternal and immutable status. The Graeco-Christian tradition is diverse and has provided this with different names: εἶδος, λόγος, God, transcendence. Andreas Kinneging has turned the notion of the ‘invisible measure’ into the title of his book: *De Onzichtbare Maat*, in which one can find a more profound analysis of this matter. See also: Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*; Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture. Volume III: In Search of the Divine Centre*, Gilbert Highet transl. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986 (1943)); Martin Heidegger, ‘Nietzsche’s Wort “Gott ist tot”’ in: *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1950), pp. 193-247, at 200. The latter shows that Nietzsche meant precisely the Platonic tradition I have described here when he let his ‘tolle Mensch’ proclaim the death of God. Christianity is Platonism for the people after all. The murder on this God I largely ascribe to the Enlightenment.

by the word via his friend and pupil René Louis de Girardin. He first made use of the term in his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* to refer to the impression the untamed shores of Lake Bièvre made on him.⁴⁸ In it, Rousseau found the appropriate word to define that elusive and indistinct thing which hitherto he had vaguely expressed by ‘je ne sais quoi’. In that sense, it assumed a highly subjective character in the work of Rousseau. As in describing the wild shores of Lake Bièvre, Rousseau not so much used the word to describe the properties of objects; rather, he used it as a term to refer to the effects which these objects arouse in the impressionable subject.⁴⁹ To put it differently: when using the word ‘romantique’, Rousseau does not refer to the objects as they are in and of themselves; but to the way they appear to and are interpreted by the subject. In that sense, the subject becomes the ultimate measure of appreciation of the object. The ‘truth’ of an object is not primarily to be determined by the object itself, but by the subject receiving an impression from it. It is clearly a first leap towards the further immanentization of it, which I consider to be the core of *das romantische*.

Before continuing, there are still two issues which I must clarify. The first concerns the claim that Rousseau was the ‘father’ of the romantic movement. Making plausible that Rousseau was indeed a romantic is one thing – I hope this and the next chapter will suffice in doing that; showing that Rousseau was the true ‘father’ is a second. The latter implies that he must have been the ‘first’ of some sorts – at least the first to have an influence profound enough to be worthy of the title of archfather. Hence the question left open to be answered: what made Rousseau so novel? The mere turn toward the subject, indeed, was not. One of the most obvious examples of such a profound turn toward the subject is the gnostic tendency that seems to be a recurring pattern within the Graeco-Christian tradition. Notwithstanding the diversity there is within Gnosticism, the common theme is a particular emphasis on individual spiritual insight (γνώσις) over orthodox teachings. This insight is to be attained via a mystical revelation to a particular subject. This gnostic turn towards the subject, however, constitutes no complete break with the Graeco-Christian tradition and can by no means be anachronistically called (proto)romantic, since the subject does not become the measure of truth and untruth. The γνώσις that the individual receives as a particular subject is still insight into principles that stem from a transcendent order and are hence not to be determined by the subject itself.

⁴⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire (1782), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Deuxième: Suite des Confessions. – Rêveries. – Botanique. – Morceaux inédites.*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 103-164, at 130.

⁴⁹ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1951 (1933)), p. 13.

For this very same reason the Protestant turn towards the subject cannot be properly called ‘romantic’ too. It seeks to move away from orthodoxy and to place more emphasis on the particular, subjective relationship with God; but the latter is still a relationship with... God. This God remains a transcendent principle and hence the primary source of truth and value. The individual believer is only there to receive those; not to put those forth himself. A more serious applicant for the title ‘true father of the romantic movement’ would be René Descartes. His *cogito ergo sum* justly appears to place the sheer act of thinking of the particular subject above any objective world external to that subject.⁵⁰ First comes the thinking activity of the subject; then the objective world. All knowledge departs from this very principle. The subject is thus turned into the gateway to all philosophy. So far, this is all true. Nevertheless, Descartes’ thinking is a thinking without preceding impulse. It is purely reflective. What is typical of romantic philosophy, however, is that it seeks to demonstrate that this most elementary act of thinking can only occur by grace of an I preceding it. It thus adopts the cartesian scheme while at the same time seeking to carry it beyond itself. This romantic move is part of what Dieter Henrich has called ‘Fichte’s original insight’. More on that in Chapter 5. What is important to recognize for now, is that the romantic movement places an I before the act of thinking itself. The I is not the mere product of the purely reflective act; it is the source of it. In other words, the romantic movement inverts the Cartesian notion. It is not ‘I think, therefore I am’; but ‘I am, therefore I think’. As we will see in the next chapter, this was not merely ‘Fichte’s original insight’; Rousseau laid the very foundations of it.

The second and last issue to address concerns my rebuttal to those who – upon reading what I have written thus far – stand ready to charge me with the academic transgression of essentializing. I must stress that I am by no means nescient to the tremendous elusiveness, complexity and richness of the concept of ‘romanticism’. Although I refuse to go as far as authors such as Lovejoy, denying that there is something such as ‘romanticism’ and asserting instead that there are only multiple ‘romanticisms’,⁵¹ I see that it has innumerable different facets. We all know the common themes: idealisation of the past (especially the Middle Ages); the valorisation of emotion, fantasy and creativity; the cult of the genius; the fascination for unspoilt nature; the idea of romantic love; and the longing for unity in an otherwise divided and alienated world. Friedrich Schlegel calls for a ‘progressive Universalpoesie’, which Novalis in turn wants to impose on the world by romanticizing it; Woodsworth praises the authenticity of

⁵⁰ This is sufficient for Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, to proclaim Descartes to be the father of the ‘nominalist revolution’ and therefore of all modernity, romanticism included.

⁵¹ Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn Books 1948), pp. 228-253.

‘humble and rustic life’; Madame de Staël promulgates ‘mélancolie’ to be the core of romanticism, while Shelley prefers to stress ‘the expression of the imagination’.⁵² Yet, that is no reason to deny that there is something all these disparate themes have in common; something which connects them. My definition of romanticism as the subjectivation and immanentization of truth and value is a modest attempt to make at least some sense of what this common denominator could be.⁵³ Emotion, fantasy and creativity are valued as original and authentic expressions of the truth-bearing subject; the ‘genius’ is but a word for someone who has rather well understood the art of excavating immanent truths; and the elevation of *Universalpoesie* as the heir of philosophy is simply the logical outcome of the incessant search for truth and value in a Self that is thoroughly protean. Herein, the tremendous richness and complexity of the concept, is by no means denied.

⁵² All these examples are taken from: Lilian Renée Furst, *European romanticism: self-definition. An anthology* (London: Methuen Publishing 1980), respectively p. 5, 3, 12, 20, 39.

⁵³ This may still strike the reader as a rather abstract formula. Not unjustly so. Countless romantics have concretised it in numerable different manners. Rousseau and Fichte are no different. Therefore I must hereby assure the reader that this abstract formula will become more tangible throughout the next two chapters, discussing Rousseau and Fichte respectively.

4. Rousseau and the discovery of the Self

Considering the preceding chapter above, any reader has sufficient reason to wonder the fact that Maurice Cranston (who was an otherwise extremely prolific author on Rousseau) writes: ‘historians, whether sympathetic or hostile, are agreed about one thing: Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the first of the Romantics.’⁵⁴ Yes, Rousseau was the first of the romantics (with a small letter ‘r’, of course) but historians are definitely not agreed about this.⁵⁵ Subsequently adding that Rousseau ‘introduced the [romantic] movement [...] in the cultural history of Europe with the publication in 1761 of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the original romantic novel,’ does not improve it.⁵⁶ Although the *Héloïse* was presumably Rousseau’s work to cause the most furore among his contemporary readers, it was by no means the single work in which he laid the foundations for the romantic movement. Instead, I argue that its true roots should be traced a good decade before it: Rousseau’s discovery of the Self as source of truth and value is of an earlier date. It is the aim of this chapter to further trace this discovery, as well as illuminating the first ties with the totalitarian logic.

Rousseau’s great discovery is well dateable – at least, if we may believe Rousseau himself. In a letter to Malesherbes, he pathetically describes his Pauline-like moment of conversion. It was on a hot summer day in the year 1749 when he was travelling to Vincennes to visit his then-still friend Diderot, whom the royal government had imprisoned there for an apparently unclear charge. Rousseau had an issue of the *Mercure de France* in his pocket which he read along the way. While doing so, his eyes felt on a question for a philosophical contest by the *Académie* of Dijon. Then

I found my mind dazzled by a thousand lights; a flood of ideas suddenly came upon me with such a force that it made me inexpressibly disturbed; I felt my head seized by a confusion bordering to drunkenness. A violent palpitation oppressed me; it made me sick in my stomach; I could not breathe while walking. I laid myself down under a tree. There, I spent half an hour in such an agitation that when I got up I saw that my coat was soaked with tears, without having noticed that I shed them. Ah, Sir, if I could

⁵⁴ Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell 1994), p. 1.

⁵⁵ Isaiah Berlin is only one example. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, pp. 529-552 and Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012), pp. 93-109. Although both have an eye for the complexity of Rousseau, both still consider him to be primarily an Enlightenment thinker – albeit a somewhat atypical one. Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (Albany, State University of New York Press 2003) goes as far as to deem Rousseau an ‘counter-Enlightener’, but in his whole book on this very subject he does not call Rousseau a ‘romantic’ a single time.

⁵⁶ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, p. 1.

have described only a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree! How clearly could I then have exposed all the contradictions of our social system; how forcefully could I made all the abuses of our institutions seen; with what simplicity would I then have demonstrated than man is naturally good and that it is only the institutions that make him bad. All that I have retained from these great truths that came upon me under that tree and have reproduced in my most important writings [...] is but a faint reverberation of what moved me so powerfully at that time.⁵⁷

What in the world must Rousseau have seen leading him to write these things? Although he already provides us with some hints in the abovementioned fragment, he makes the precise content of this revelation more explicit in his *Confessions*. The insight that came upon him, he writes, was that there is a distinction between *l'homme de l'homme* and *l'homme de la nature*. If one really wants to penetrate into the core of human nature, one is to look at *l'homme de la nature*; only he is the true man. The *l'homme de l'homme* is but a disfigured version, corrupted by the alien forces society imposes on him – which are of course the true source of his misery.⁵⁸

This very insight forms the core of the Rousseauian philosophy, as well as the basis of the romantic way of thinking. It implies the existence of a self that is in a sense ‘truer’ and ‘more authentic’ than that other self, which is corrupted by external forces – i.e. culture. The supposition is that the authentic self stands closer to the truth than the corrupted one. More than that, the authentic or ‘deeper’ self becomes the source of the truth itself – as we will see. Man is henceforth invited to liberate himself from the shackles the outside world imposes on him and to develop his authentic self. He then chooses truth over deception. Consistently reasoned through, then, Rousseauian philosophy leads to the notion inside the self is truth, and that outside is the lie.

I am not alone in claiming that precisely this constitutes the nucleus of Rousseau’s philosophy. Ernst Cassirer stresses the fact that Rousseau’s key insight was his distinction ‘between the mask that man wears and his actual visage’. It was via this particular idea that Rousseau could have had such a profound influence on Kant; through Kant on the German Idealists; and through that very same line on Fichte. An exaggerated stress on Rousseau’s alleged ‘sentimentalism’ or ‘irrationalism’ would miss the point. What is of actual matter, is the

⁵⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Quatre lettres a M. le Président de Malesherbes’ (1762), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Deuxième: Suite Des Confessions. – Réveries.*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 181-91, at 184. In the case of Rousseau, I will often refer to the original French sources. In those cases, English translations are mine.

⁵⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Les Confessions’ (1769), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Premier: Les Confessions.*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 1-294, at 232.

contrast between nature and convention; between *l'homme de la nature* and *l'homme de l'homme*; between actual self and artificial self. This forms almost the whole of Rousseauianism – and through him of romanticism.⁵⁹

Back to the question of the *Académie* of Dijon. It read as follows: *do the sciences and the arts have contributed to the elevation of morals?* Rousseau wrote down some of the overwhelming insights he encountered on his way to Diderot, sent it to the *Académie*, and promptly won the contest. The text was published as the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (known to us as the *First Discourse*) and led to the philosophical breakthrough of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – who was hitherto only known as a mediocre composer of opera's, an undistinctive contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, and an inventor of a bizarre system of musical notation. The brief answer to the question was 'no'; the contrary is rather true. Rousseau blames the arts and the sciences to have torn man away from his secure, authentic selfhood. Social institutions, conventions, public language: all have distorted and deformed man. They breed needs, are the cause of excessive toil, and cast all minds into the same mould. The sciences and the arts are the worst enemies of the morals. All sciences have dishonourable origins: rhetoric is the result of pride, geometry and arithmetic of greed, and physics of vain curiosity. Even ethics has its origins in human pride. Man does no longer know what he himself really wants, thinks, or feels. He loses himself in his self-created culture. To use an anachronistic term: he becomes alienated from himself.⁶⁰

Thus far Rousseau's first major assault on society, civilization, the sciences, and the arts. Many more will follow. A more profound investigation into the actual causes of the fabrication of *l'homme de l'homme* as opposed to *l'homme de la nature* is given in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754) – or his *Second Discourse*: also written as an entry in a competition of the *Académie* of Dijon, which was this time not won by Rousseau. In his letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau considers it to be among his most important writings – the *First Discourse* and the *Émile* (1762) being the other two.⁶¹ As regards the heart of his philosophy (which is, beyond doubt, hard to pinpoint exactly), he is likely correct here.

⁵⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau – Kant – Goethe: Two Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1945), p. 13, 20; Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1967), p. 39. A similar point is made in the *locus classicus* on the topic: Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1919), p. 45.

⁶⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discours sur les sciences et les arts' (1750), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Sixième: Suite d'Émile. – Lettre à M. de Beaumont. – Discours sur les sciences. – Discours sur l'inégalité*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 173-89.

⁶¹ Rousseau, 'Quatre lettres à M. le Président de Malesherbes', p. ; see for a similar observation: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques' (1776), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Neuvième: Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques. – Écrits sur la musique.*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 1-214, at 166-72.

For his specific ideas about the social contract, music, romantic love – even for his alleged emotionalism and sentimentalism, one can better look somewhere else in his oeuvre; but for Rousseau's discovery of the Self, one must turn to these particular works first and foremost.

In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau develops the notion that the origins of the alienating society which he so vehemently charged in his *First Discourse* actually began with the invention of property, which in turn led to the emergence of inequality, competition and the struggle for power. From this came mutual distrust, hostility, insincerity and the whole social masquerade that Rousseau so much loathes:

The first one who fenced a piece of land and dared to say: 'This is mine', and found people foolish enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what misery and horrors humanity would not have been spared if only someone had then torn out the stakes and cried out to his fellow men: 'Beware of listening to that impostor, for you are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to everyone and that the earth belongs to no one!'⁶²

The great problem of society lays in the fact that it gives rise to *amour propre*, as opposed to *amour de soi*. The former is completely natural. It is the kind of original self-love which human beings share with the animals and which has enough of itself. It encourages creatures to act in accordance with what is good for their own self-preservation, but it is never malicious toward others. And because it is dependent on no one else, it resides entirely within itself. Compare that with the *amour propre*. This is the kind of self-love society gives rise to. It exists by grace of comparison. It is accompanied by pride, vanity, envy, competition and contempt. Society creates an artificial inequality which alienated man from himself and encourages him to an unequivocal egoism of which the only goal is to be better than others. People want to shine in one another's eyes. *Amour propre* is not self-sufficient; it is completely dependent on others.⁶³

Hence, Rousseau contrasts the peaceful *amour de soi* of *l'homme de la nature* with the egoistic *amour propre* of *l'homme de l'homme*. The latter has created a society which is full of all-round hostility, mutual lies and selfish individuals. It is a state of utter alienation. As a result, we must go back to nature. But while Voltaire could not restrain himself from expressing the urge 'to walk on all fours' upon reading the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau is under no illusion as

⁶² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes' (1754), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Sixième: Suite d'Émile. – Lettre à M. de Beaumont. – Discours sur les sciences. – Discours sur l'inégalité*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 230-94, at 257.

⁶³ For example: Rousseau, 'Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité', p. 254.

regards the direction of the social process: 'Human nature does not run backwards and we can never return to the times of innocence and equality once we have left them behind.'⁶⁴ A return to the state of nature in the strict sense of the word is impossible. Having left the state of nature for once and for all, man must find his way in this particular world. Yet, for doing so, Rousseau has offered us the image of a man who is not yet socially disfigured: a man who is somehow 'original' or 'authentic'. In this world man must still liberate himself from the false consciousness society has imposed on him: in a sense, he must discover his true, uncorrupted self. That is what Rousseau actually means with his parole 'Back to nature!' It is a theme to be developed further in his *Émile*.

The beginning of this pedagogical treatise immediately sets the (by now well-known) tone: 'Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator, everything becomes corrupt in the hands of man.'⁶⁵ So it is with man:

The natural man is all for himself; he is the unity of number, the absolute unity that relates only to himself or to his equal. The citizen is but a broken number bound to its denominator and whose value is determined by his relation to the whole, which is the social body. The best social institutions are therefore the ones that best know how to denature man; depriving him of his absolute existence and giving him a relative existence.⁶⁶

A good education facilitates the development of the original *l'homme naturel*; not the *l'homme civil*. One must return to one's natural self. With due pathos, Rousseau exclaims: 'O man! Limit your existence to yourself, and you will no longer be miserable.'⁶⁷ Yet, up until now we have seen only so much. Apparently there is a distinction between *l'homme de l'homme* and *l'homme de la nature* – the latter being in some sense more original, more authentic and truer than the former. But it is only when Émile meets the Savoyard vicar in Book IV, however, that this sought for return to the truer self is suddenly blasted into full-blown religious proportions. It is only here that Rousseau makes explicit the idea that has been lingering underneath his writings all the time: the immanentization of a hitherto transcendent Graeco-Christian order, with the Self (which we can from now on rightfully write with a capital letter 'S') as its primary source.

⁶⁴ Rousseau, 'Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques', p. 177.

⁶⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Émile ou de l'éducation' (1762), in: *Oeuvres Complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, Tome Cinquième: Émile ou de l'éducation*, Louis Barré, ed. (Paris: J. Bry Aîné 1856), pp. 1-297, at 5.

⁶⁶ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 8.

⁶⁷ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 44.

By mouth of the vicar, Rousseau readily dismisses the old philosophy of the transcendence:

General ideas and abstractions are the source of the greatest human errors; never has metaphysics with its jargon discovered one single truth, but it has suffused philosophy with absurdities which are but to be ashamed of lest they be stripped of their fantastic words. [...] Let the heavens be thanked that we are delivered from this awful device of philosophy; we can be humans without being sages; instead of spending our lives studying ethics, we have at our disposal a guide more trustworthy within this immense labyrinth of human opinions.⁶⁸

This guide is none other than the Self. Rules concerning how one should live, so the vicar tells Émile, 'I do not deduce from high philosophy, but I find them in the depths of my heart, in which nature has indelibly engraved these.'⁶⁹ One better listens to one's natural *vox interior*, rather than to reason. Through the vicar, Rousseau introduces a religion which does not need an external revelation. Man should only listen to what God tells him through his own heart. The revelation is internalized. 'The first object presenting itself as measure, is myself.'⁷⁰ One must 'listen to [one's] interior feelings'.⁷¹ And indeed, if one has really succeeded in 'returning to [oneself]', it turns out to be that 'it is certain that all is one, and reveals the presence of a unified intelligence; for I see nothing that is not ordained in this very system and that does not contribute to the same end, which is the conservation of the existent order.'⁷²

Hence, Rousseau inherits from the Christian tradition the belief in an absolute order encompassing the whole cosmos. Wholly relative it pretends not to be, for the vicar maintains that 'only if [all] had listened to what God has written into [their] hearts, there would never have been but one religion on earth.'⁷³ This absolute order as proclaimed by the Savoyard vicar, however, does no longer represent a transcendent order, revealed to mankind through Christ as the incarnation of the λόγος. Instead, this order is located in nature itself; which is the sole book 'open for everyone'. It is not the old philosophy, but only nature that can 'speak to all men in a language that is intelligible to any soul'.⁷⁴ In order to know what she says, we must listen to our

⁶⁸ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 211, 225.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 221.

⁷⁰ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 208.

⁷¹ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 212.

⁷² Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 213.

⁷³ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 228.

⁷⁴ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 239.

inner voice, this 'divine instinct, immortal and heavenly voice, trustworthy guide of an ignorant, limited, but intelligent and free being; infallible judge of right and wrong, turning man into Gods equal!'⁷⁵

This is heresy. From any Christian point of view at least. The *vox Dei* (which indisputably speaks to the heart of any human being; no Christian would deny that) does no longer serve as a means for a soul to orient itself to some divine reality beyond it; it serves to discover a reality within oneself without any reference to a transcendent order. It is no longer to be answered from beyond through a mutual *amicitia* in the relation with God; it becomes equal to God. After all, 'the first object presenting itself as measure, is myself'. There exists no absolute order outside and independent of the subject. Hence, it can no longer transcend the subject. There is only an absolute order being brought forth by the subject itself. The only means to know it, are to be located exclusively 'within oneself'. It demands that man 'is an I in its harmony and in its fullness'. In short: the traditional Christian revelation of a transcendent order is replaced by the revelation of an immanent order through the Self: the natural religion of Rousseau's Savoyard vicar is a romantic religion of the purest sort.

⁷⁵ Rousseau, 'Émile', p. 225.

5. Fichte's absolute Self

In his address 'On the Dignity of Man' (1794), Fichte writes: 'Philosophy teaches us to discover everything in the ego.' He continues: 'Only through the ego can order and harmony be instilled into the inert, formless mass.' Man, 'by virtue of his existence, is utterly independent of everything outside him and exists absolutely in and through himself; [...] he is eternal, existing by himself and by his own strength.'⁷⁶ These phrases are characteristic of what will quickly prove to be his unequivocally ego-centred philosophy. He takes Rousseau's Self, turns it into the basic principle of his whole philosophy and consequently places it on the top of the philosophical Olympus in a way that was hitherto unknown. In doing so, he made a pivotal philosophical step towards the absolutization of the subject, which, as I argue, grounds the totalitarian logic.

In order to fully comprehend the way in which Fichte develops the notion of the Self, I must first say a few things about the manner in which he develops the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, for it was Kant who further deepened and elaborated the Rousseauian turn to the subject by turning it into a grand philosophical system. It is in any case of no coincidence that the bachelor from Königsberg had a portrait of Rousseau hanging on his wall and that his renowned daily schedule (which apparently was so punctual that his fellow townsmen could set their watches to him) was once wholly disrupted because Kant had set himself to reading the *Émile*. The intellectual influence of Rousseau on Kant was arguably significant. Kant's 'Copernican' turn to the subject is most clearly reflected in the fact that Kant left us with two worlds. He pointed out to us the limits of reason by claiming that the subject can only get a grip on that which is before him – i.e. the *phenomenal* world. It reaches the subject via the organs through which he perceives them and hence is nothing but the world as it appears to the subject. But what the things are 'in themselves' independent of the perceiving subject – i.e. the *noumenal* world – will always elude him. Hence, what we are left with is the world as it is perceived and constituted by the subject. With great resignation, Kant admitted that the theoretic *Ding an sich* can never be known by us. Curiosity about what the world beyond the subjective representation actually is must initially have tormented him too, but he tried to quell it with an astute analysis of the antinomies of our reason. 'Human reason [...] is called upon to consider questions which it cannot reject, since they are put to it by the very nature of reason, but which it cannot answer either, because they transcend human reason.'⁷⁷ It is a contradiction not to be resolved – alas.

⁷⁶ Quoted in: Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 43.

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner 1919 (1781)), Vorrede.

Most of Kant's followers could not put aside the *Ding an sich* which the same resignation as the sage from Königsberg did. They could be content with the notion of a subject merely wandering eternally in a realm of phenomena without access to that which goes beyond it. The world that truly matters, they held, only begins at the border of the phenomenological realm. Hence many of Kant's followers attempted to cross this border. The 'beyond' became a *mysterium tremendum* which had to be grasped at all costs. What arose was a tumultuous curiosity that wanted to reach the supposed core of the things. Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach and Marx all tried it in their own peculiar manners, providing it with the respective names of 'nature-subject', '*Geist*', 'will', 'body', and 'proletariat'.⁷⁸ Fichte attempts to do the same. It is his great philosophical project to reach the *Ding an sich* – through nothing less than the *Ich*.

Although unfolded throughout various works, Fichte develops this philosophy most comprehensively in his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, which he first published in 1794 but kept revising up until his death. What he presents there is a *Wissenschaftslehre* in the broadest sense of the word. Fichte is concerned with knowing itself. He systematically tries to obtain the highest and purest possible insight into the (self)creative process and the unity of knowing. It is thus a science over and prior to all the other sciences.⁷⁹

A pivotal point within this work is that Fichte rejects the notion of the ominous *Ding an sich* existing wholly outside the subject and hence beyond its reach. In doing so, he appeals to the then widely heard criticism originally formulated by Ernst Schulze. The latter had observed in Kant's philosophy an erroneous derivation of the *Ding an sich*. The argument is that Kant assumed that the phenomenological world as it appears to us hides for us the noumenal world as it is in itself, but that this noumenal world is nevertheless ultimately the cause of that which we perceive to be as the phenomenological world. But in doing so, Kant applies the causality principle – namely: the noumenal world is assumed to be the *cause* of the world as we ultimately perceive it to be. But that same causality principle, Kant had demonstrated, is only applicable to the phenomenological world; not to the noumenal. Hence, Kant deduces the existence of the *Ding an sich* lying beyond the phenomena by applying a principle which is only applicable to the phenomena.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Rüdiger Safranski, *Arthur Schopenhauer: De woelige jaren van de filosofie*, Mark Wildschut transl. (Amsterdam: Olympus 2020 (1987)), pp. 162-3.

⁷⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, in: Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794-95)*, Daniel Breazeale ed./transl. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021), I, 44.

⁸⁰ Safranski, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, pp. 181-2.

Applying this criticism, Fichte holds that there cannot be a noumenal realm beyond the subject. What we are thus left with, is a *Vorstellende Ich*. Fichte thought he had to unconditionally reject the assumption that there is a *Ding an sich* externally acting upon our impressions, leading him to argue that then everything must spring from the *Ich*. As a consequence, he turns this *Ich* into the point of departure of his entire further philosophy. ‘The self’s own positing of itself is [...] it’s own pure activity. The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists*; and conversely, the self *exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing.’⁸¹ The whole world outside of us therefore has no meaning outside of the perceiving subject. It is nothing but a *nicht-Ich*, ultimately produced by the *Ich*. The world has no independent existence outside of the subject. There is only the continuous activity arising from the subject, creating and shaping this world. The world is hence no *Tatsache*; it is a *Tathandlung* arising from the striving and creative subject. Fichte turns John 1:1 and herewith the complete Graeco-Christian ontology upside down. The notion of a transcendent λόγος having an existence of its own and structuring all reality of which the subject is merely a part, is replaced by the *Tathandlung* of a subject structuring this reality by himself. In other words: in the beginning was not the λόγος; ‘Im Anfang war die Tat!’.⁸²

This is what Fichte means when he writes that ‘the I begins by absolutely positing its own existence.’⁸³ He brings Kant’s turn towards the subject to its most extreme expression. Gillespie writes: ‘The I is radically free and absolute in the most literal sense, that is, it absolved itself from all relationships other than those that it itself establishes. Fichte gives voice here to [an impulse] that thinks away all foreign determinations and establishes the I on itself alone.’⁸⁴ In this sense, Fichte takes up Rousseau’s notion of the Self as primary source of truth and value, but radically enhances it by making it creative. The Self is turned into the spring of a creative deed: the *Ich* itself actively brings forth the *nicht-Ich*. It does not merely *discover* its truths and values by listening to an authentic, original *vox interior*; it *creates* them. Gillespie again: ‘It is this fundamental act of production that is the basis of all other acts, since it grounds freedom and hence creation itself. Reality is merely a by-product of this creative will that seeks only itself.’⁸⁵

Herein lies what Dieter Henrich has called ‘Fichte’s original insight’ and hence the way in which he fundamentally differs from other philosophers thinking the external world from the

⁸¹ Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre*, I, 96.

⁸² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, 1237.

⁸³ Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre* I, 98.

⁸⁴ Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995), p. 78.

⁸⁵ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. 79.

consciousness of the particular subject, such as Descartes and Kant.⁸⁶ According to Henrich, Fichte establishes a new notion of self-consciousness radically different from as it was hitherto understood by modern philosophy. From Descartes to Kant, philosophers have understood self-consciousness as a purely *reflective* act – perceiving objects back upon itself. The Self is grounded in the act of self-reflection, which is propounded as the original source of self-consciousness. Therefore, the Self is a product of pure reflection. This is what Descartes means when he writes ‘I think, therefore I am’. But is it the typical romantic move already implicitly present in Rousseau and now explicitly forged by Fichte to invert this Cartesian notion. According to Henrich, this reflection theory could not solve the problem of knowing what the actual ‘I’ is, and was instead beset by a disastrous contradiction: ‘If the I is self-consciousness and self-consciousness is the recognition that “I am I”, what is the I that reflects upon itself in the recognition “I am I”? It cannot be self-consciousness because this only occurs as a result of reflection. Nor can it be some sort of pre-reflective I, since the I comes into being only as a result of this reflection.’⁸⁷ Hence, there must be some primordial activity that *produces* self-consciousness. There must be a primordial I preceding reflection. The cartesian subject remains a product of its own reflection; the romantic subject produces the reflection. It is wholly constitutive; fully primordial. The cartesian slogan is therefore inversed: ‘I am, therefore I think’.

It is a crucial step towards Fichte’s absolutization of the subject. He replaces the reflective I by an absolute I which is pure activity, without an underlining entity that is active. As already said, the I constitutes a *Tathandlung* by which it posits itself. This forms the basis of what will be one of Fichte’s most crucial turns and correspondingly is referred to by Berlin as his great ‘innovation’. According to Fichte, one should not conceive of the absolute I as an empirically unique *individual* I. Rather, it is a *transcendental* I. ‘The “I”, the “self” in that sense of the word, is not the same as “me”.’⁸⁸ It is best seen as an ‘I-ness’ that, as an active force of self-consciousness, pulsates beneath each individual I. This transcendental I is perfectly autonomous. It may ‘[posit] itself as an empirical I, but it is not identical with it.’⁸⁹

Rousseau, then, had discovered the Self and elevated it to the source of truth and value, which were herewith immanentized. But he still identified the Self with the empirically unique

⁸⁶ Dieter Henrich, ‘Fichte’s Original Insight’, *Contemporary German Philosophy* 1 (1982), pp. 15-52.

⁸⁷ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. 79; Stefan Schick, ‘From Being Reflexive to Absolute Reflection – Fichte’s Original Insight Reconsidered’, in: David W. Wood ed., *The Enigma of Fichte’s First Principles* (Leiden: Brill 2021), pp. 139-60.

⁸⁸ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 93-4.

⁸⁹ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. xvi.

individual. In his *Émile* he puts forth a great didactical project to produce an ‘authentic’, inner-directed individual; *amour de soi* and *amour propre* are categories that are only applicable to empirical human beings; his *Nouvelle Héloïse* tells a story of two individuals seeking to realize themselves through their authentic love; and the *Confessions* provide the reader with hundreds of pages of a tormented unique human being pouring out over the former whom he ‘really’ is. Fichte, however, ceases to identify the Self with the individual. Instead, he relates it to some ‘super-personal entity’ to which all the individual I’s are subject. According to Berlin, this super-personal entity will easily become ‘a huge intrusive forward-marching will, which imposes its particular personality both upon the outside world and upon its own constituent elements, which might be human beings, who are thereby reduced to the role simply of ingredients of, or parts in, some much bigger, much more impressive, much more historically persistent personality.’⁹⁰

This may strike the reader as a remarkably bold statement. Nevertheless, it is readily understandable, for Fichte indeed holds that every individual I must merge with this grandiose super-I. The individual I and the transcendental I are not completely separate. As long as the individual I does not become conscious of the transcendental I, it will remain unable to realize its own essence since it is still subject to the constraints placed upon it by the not-I – i.e., the phenomenal world. In other words, the I must transcend its phenomenal, empirical self in order to become one with its ‘real’ self. The ‘real’ self is a noumenal self – it is the *Ding an sich*. Fichte had rejected Kant’s notion of a *Ding an sich* outside of the perceiving subject, but now it returns – *within* the subject. Fichte’s key discovery: actually, I am the *Ding an sich* myself. It is the key task of the subject, and therefore of philosophy to stretch the individual I into the transcendental I as much as possible. There is nothing that leads beyond the absolutism of this transcendental I. It is fully sovereign. Only when the individual I merges with the transcendental I, it can ‘attain the infinite and be fully free’.⁹¹

Such philosophical spouts were sufficient for Bertrand Russell to suspect Fichte of a ‘kind of insanity’ and to dismiss his philosophy as obscure nonsense.⁹² And although my readers may now have a similar urge, I wish them to bear with me – for the implications of these ideas are vast. Kolakowski writes: ‘Fichte holds that the purpose of each human individual and that of humanity as a whole are completely identical, that the realization of each and every one of us is exhausted in the realization of the universal humanity which resides in the individual as

⁹⁰ Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 95.

⁹¹ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. xvi.

⁹² Bertrand Russell, *Geschiedenis van de Westerse Filosofie*, Rob Limburg & Vivian Franken transl. (Utrecht: Servire 2017 (1946)), p. 748.

his own nature although he is not fully aware of it.’ After all, each and every individual human being partakes in a bigger I-ness with which it must merge. ‘It is easy to interpret his programme as a system whereby everyone is to be coerced into realizing his own freedom. [...] The transcendental ego is not a product of the human experience, but is sovereign vis-à-vis human life and can make demands on it by virtue of its own freedom; it can also, like God, hasten the progress of its own freedom by coercing the empirical human being.’⁹³

The transcendental I acts ‘like God’, yet its status differs radically from any Graeco-Christian notion. The God in the latter tradition – as we have seen – refers to a transcendent λόγος structuring the world. At the same time it is not part of that particular world – after all, that is what it means to be transcendent. It stands outside and above it. The λόγος is wholly sovereign: human beings may think and do as many different things as they want, to the λόγος it will not change one jota. It is eternal and immutable. It does not care about the I. The I is subject to the λόγος, not vice versa. The Fichtean I then. He does not care about an objective reality, nor about a God transcendent to it. God is taken from His heavenly throne and not only placed into this world; He is placed into the I. Hence, God becomes completely immanentized. The only standards, the only truths, the only values then remaining are not those stemming from a λόγος transcending the subject; but from the subject itself. Since they have no ontological status outside of the latter, there is simply no reason to refer to them as ‘objective’. There is only subject, namely the I, as well as the not-I’s it brings forth. As a consequence, ‘not knowledge of values, but their creation, is what men achieve’.⁹⁴ They are a product of a *Tathandlung* of the subject. There is no structure of things. And hence, there is no pattern to which one must adapt oneself. Rather, reality must adapt itself to the subject. ‘If reality does not match my spirit, then all the more unfortunate for reality!’⁹⁵ Within this romantic framework – now consistently reasoned through by Fichte – there is no place for a notion such as ‘understanding’, because ‘it always presupposes the understander and the understood, the knower and the known, some kind of gap between the subject and the object’. But Fichte has expanded to subject in such a way, that he left no place for the object at all. Hence, what remains is ‘the subject, thrusting itself forward’. It, in turn, only exists for the sake of a ‘process of perpetual forward creation’.⁹⁶ Anything that stands in its way must be removed.

⁹³ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, pp. 47-8.

⁹⁴ Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, p. 119.

⁹⁵ This telling phrase is sometimes ascribed to Hegel, but I have not been able to trace it.

⁹⁶ Berlin, *Roots of Romanticism*, p. 120.

The Fichtean God, then, is completely immanent and fully subjective; yet its claims are absolute. There is no objective standard against which these can be measured. There is only the great subject with its own will, and since freedom consists in coming to terms with this great subject, it demands that all particular, empirical subjects become one with the great, transcendental subject. The connection with the totalitarian logic can now be easily seen. Most individual subjects are enchained by natural desire and must be ‘forced to be free’ – to use Rousseau’s notorious words. ‘The individual can never become perfectly free and infinitely powerful, but he can participate in both as a moment of the absolute I which is manifest in the feelings and emotions of the people.’⁹⁷ The absolute I becomes the giant Self referred to in Chapter 2. In order to become free, the individual human being must merge with the giant Self. The freedom of the individual to begin anew – to exercise his ‘virtuosity of action’ – must be sacrificed on the altar of the giant Self, which ultimately brings *true* freedom. Coercion should constitute no problem within this logic, since it is only employed against unfreedom, not freedom. Coercion does not constrain individual human beings; it sets them free.

The whole end of right and government for Fichte, then, is the realization of an absolute freedom in which each individual will is subordinated to the absolute will of the transcendental I.⁹⁸ The goal of politics is not providing protection or promoting prosperity; its goal is to liberate the individual human being. Since this liberation is the final end for the Fichtean as well as the totalitarian logic, and since this liberation is an immanent project, the golden age in which this freedom is attained therefore is also immanent and hence to be attained within this very world. Heaven is not something otherworldly, as in the Christian conception; heaven is something to be realized in this world. It lies in the future and what right and government must do is establish this earthly paradise as soon as possible.

Herein lies what Eric Voegelin has dubbed the ‘immanentization of the *ἔσχατον*’ – which I consider to be inextricably intertwined with the totalitarian logic. The kingdom of Christ is not of this world (John 18:36). It is a world beyond this world, and hence also a world beyond history. But by immanentizing the *ἔσχατον*, one places it in this world, and hence also in history. The *ἔσχατον* can now be localized, and therefore also realized in this world. The consequence is that history can now be transformed into one giant project to move history precisely to that one, absolute goal the future promises: the liberation of all empirical human beings by becoming one with the giant Self. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the giant Self can freely unleash itself, so that the *ἔσχατον* can be attained as soon as possible. All power must

⁹⁷ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁹⁸ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, p. 97.

now be concentrated into the hands of the One Party and the Egocrat, letting the giant Self's immanent-eschatological fever rage freely through history.

It is therefore of no particular coincidence that Fichte did not only develop the idea that the ultimate goal of history will be achieved when the transcendental I will be completely and perfectly reflected in all individual I's, but that he also laid down the necessary logical stages through which this historical project must be carried out. As McGovern writes: 'History was to be no longer the purposeless accumulation of isolated facts regarding human events at various times and places. Ordinary history is merely the study of what did happen in times past; philosophical history regards the events of the past merely as an expression of the dominant ideas which characterize the souls of mankind at different periods. Now these ideas of mankind develop logically and consistently out of man's inner consciousness. The philosopher who knows the nature of man also knows what stage in human development each of these ideas will dominate the soul of mankind.'⁹⁹ This reveals another important insight: Fichte's absolute I does not only provide us with an immanent ἔσχατον towards which history *can* move; it is something towards history *must* move, by reason of its very inner logic. 'For all his talk about freedom Fichte believed that man is bound by an inner necessity. All major historic events are merely the outward expression of the inner idea which necessarily develops at a certain stage in the evolution of the human soul.'¹⁰⁰ It is an idea which Hegel soon took up and further developed in his vast philosophical system. Be that as it may, this idea is quintessential to the totalitarian logic. As Arendt revealed, the totalitarian logic is not 'lawless', nor is it 'arbitrary'. On the contrary, it is more obedient to the law than any government could ever have been before. 'Far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History.'¹⁰¹ There is an immanent law ruling the world, necessarily leading towards the attainment of the equally immanent ἔσχατον. As a law of the Self, the law is a law of historical movement. The question is not *whether* the ἔσχατον can be attained; the question is *when*. In which particular manner the ἔσχατον is to be made concrete, is not the point here. It could be a classless society, a racially pure imperium, a technological utopia, and what have you more. Of more importance is the fact that the law of history must rage freely through society. Nothing and no one may stand in its way.

⁹⁹ William Montgomery McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (London: Harrap 1947 (1941)), p. 225.

¹⁰⁰ McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler*, p. 226.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 606.

Conclusion

God is dead! That is the conclusion of Nietzsche's madman. And with the death of God, the connection between the earthly sovereign once proudly occupying his *lieu du pouvoir* and the transcendent source of his legitimization was cut. The *lieu du pouvoir* was to become a *lieu vide*. This was affirmed on 21 January 1793, with the beheading of the French king and thus of the entire *ancien régime*.

If God is really dead, then there is no way back. We have dealt the final blow to transcendence. To paraphrase the words of Nietzsche's madman: We have emptied the sea. We have erased the horizon. We have detached this earth from its sun. We do not know to what direction she will drift; nor to what direction we will. We are floating through an infinite nothingness. Empty space flies at us. The night expands. It is colder than ever. This is his dismaying diagnosis. In despair he asks: 'How we now comfort ourselves, we murderers of all murderers?'¹⁰²

We have seen that this loveless, cold, rational conception of the universe turned out to be close to unbearable. Hence, man wanted to reinvigorate the universe with new life. He endeavoured to fill the seas again; he sought to reattach the earth to the sun; he wanted to stuff the void. Yet, he could not go back to the old philosophy of transcendence that the Graeco-Christian tradition had worked upon for more than two millennia. The invisible measures of truth and value can no longer be founded in the *Jenseits* – hence they are to be looked for in the *Diesseits*. Behold, the grand project of the romantic movement which, through a radical turn towards the subject, tried to lay the groundwork for the renewed discovery of absolute – albeit immanent – truths and values.

The romantic movement took a plethora of different forms in philosophy, literature, poetry, music, the visual arts, and what have you more. In the German lands, excited young men such as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel called for the romanticisation of the world and sought to develop an *Universalpoesie*. On the other side of the North Sea, the solitary poet John Keats was venerating Grecian urns which subsequently mounted him into the highest imaginative excitement. In France, Berlioz pulled out all musical means from infernal screeches to death bells to *Dies Irae* themata, to present to his listener a lunatic witches' sabbath into which an unrecognized artist finds himself after an unrequited love and a failed suicide attempt with opium. Be that as it may, I have tried to show that the philosophical origins of this intellectual movement are to be found in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He discovered

¹⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §125.

the authentic self. This self is the ‘actual’, ‘truer’ self – *l’homme de la nature*. This authentic self must be detached from the ‘corrupted’ and ‘false’ self that human society has produced. The latter deceives; the former is elevated into a source of truth. The Savoyard vicar reiterated this to the young Émile: the old philosophy of metaphysics and transcendence has had its day, so do not listen to the *vox Dei*, but to the *vox Sui*. The romantic must listen to what his heart tells him, not because a transcendent God speaks through that heart (as most Christians would maintain), but because it is the bearer of a true cosmos of which the I is the primary measure.

Fichte took this romantic discovery and turned the subject into the starting point of his entire philosophy. After Kant, no alternative was left, Fichte thought. He thus placed the I on the top of the philosophical Olympus, where it now stood as a Caspar David Friedrich-like figure with the world at its feet. This whole world does not constitute an ontologically independent object; but only a not-I, produced by the I itself. What remains, then, is the subject – and nothing but the subject. But that subject must not be perceived of as merely an empirical, individual I. There is also a larger, transcendental I-ness pulsating beneath it. The I must come together with itself. That does not merely mean to go ‘back to nature’, as Rousseau would have said; Fichte demands that the empirical I be brought in line with the transcendental I. In doing so, the transcendental I makes a fully absolute claim, without becoming objective at any point. Making whole the I in this particular sense means freedom. And this freedom is the ultimate goal of history. It not only can be achieved; it necessarily must. The unification of the empirical I with the transcendental I becomes the new, immanentised ἔσχατον of history. The kingdom of Christ was not of this world; the kingdom of Fichte’s I is. It is placed in this world by being placed in history. Hence, the task for man becomes to hasten this historically necessary process towards freedom as much as possible.

So, those who seek not only to effectively, but also to symbolically fill the *lieu vide* can no longer do so by tying it to a transcendent λόγος. The only route left open, is the romantic route. Reference is to be made to an absolute subject then. Society no longer finds its laws in the transcendent, so it has to look for it in the immanent – more precisely: in history itself. The law of history dictates that it moves towards freedom. The Egocrat, the One Party and the One People are mobilised to carry out this necessary law. In that sense, society itself is transformed into one giant Self that is out on completely coinciding with itself. Therefore, any kind of division is utterly untenable and must be smothered at any cost. Instead, every individual must merge into the giant Self. Only then can heaven be established on earth. Freedom in the sense of being able to start anew and ‘virtuosity of action’ are excluded by definition. That only

constitutes an obstacle to the Self's triumphal march forward and must be eliminated as soon as possible.

Wholly eradicating these divisions, however, will turn out to be an illusion. No matter how hard one tries, the division will always be and remain present in society. The totalitarian logic thus risks to become tangled into a ceaseless spiral of repression and denial. Therefore Lefort argues that it would be better to embrace and inaugurate the original division and indeterminacy. This is precisely what democracy does. It is dynamic and constantly in a flux; it is in an incessant state of debate and disagreement; and it is constantly questioning the political power. It is the *élan vital* of democracy, and yet it makes democracy vulnerable. Especially in times of crisis, people can become weary of the talk and the constant questioning, which can stand in the way of serious political action. Then, the need for a strong leader emerges. The seeds for the totalitarian logic are planted.

Resolving a crisis quickly turns into the pursuit of an immanent ἔσχατον. Even more, a crisis turns out to be readily harnessed to the pursuit of all sorts of eschatological ambitions. The current Russo-Ukrainian War is one big crisis, but it is undergirded by an eschatological messianic pursuit of either a *rússkiy mir*, or a liberal democratic nirvana. On the other side of the Atlantic all kinds of crises promise to be resolved if only America were to become great again. And the Covid-crisis concealed the everlasting human desire to master and control the whole world – life and death included. In all these cases, one is not supposed to dispute, one is told that there is no alternative, and therefore dissent must be ruled out. I hope that these examples will make clear that democracy is not as immune as Fukuyama and consorts would have hoped. It is always exposed to the totalitarian danger. It is certainly not condemned to it, but it must always be on guard. We ourselves are the guardians. Properly fulfilling our task begins by adequately understanding the totalitarian logic. This thesis hopes to have made a contribution to that.

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