

FROM PURE REASON TO HUMAN SPIRIT. FICHTE'S PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION OF A NEW SEMANTIC FIELD

LUIS FELLIPE GARCIA¹

Abstract: This paper argues that Fichte, in his early works, apprehends the task of philosophy not as much as a Critique of Reason, but rather as a self-knowledge of Spirit, thereby bringing the notion of Spirit to the center of the philosophical discussion. We explore what Fichte means by Spirit and sustain that this notion, even if it is not used in a consistent way throughout his work, covers a fundamental conceptual space of his philosophical project. The argument will be structured as an exploration of each dimension of this conceptual space, namely: (i) the Spirit as self-relation; (ii) the Spirit as productive imagination; and (iii) the Spirit as the result of learning process grounded on the human drives.

Keywords: Spirit, Self-relation, Self-knowledge, Imagination, Drives

Resumo: Este artigo argumenta que Fichte, nas primeiras formulações de seu projeto filosófico, apreende a tarefa da filosofia não tanto como uma Crítica da Razão, mas antes como um Autocônciamento do Espírito, trazendo assim a noção de Espírito para o centro da discussão filosófica. Exploramos o que Fichte entende por Espírito e argumentamos que essa noção, ainda que ela não seja usada de modo consistente ao longo de sua obra, cobre um espaço conceitual fundamental do projeto filosófico fichtiano. O argumento será estruturado

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Aufsatz argumentiert, dass Fichte, in den ersten Formulierungen seines Projekts, die Aufgabe der Philosophie nicht so sehr als eine Kritik der Vernunft, sondern als eine Selbsterkenntnis des Geistes auffasst. Dadurch wird der Begriff des Geistes zu einem der zentralen Begriffe der philosophischen Diskussion. Wir explorieren, was Fichte unter Geist versteht und schlagen vor, dass dieser Begriff – selbst wenn er im Verlauf seiner Werke nicht so konsistent benutzt wird – einen grundlegenden

¹ Post-Doc researcher of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. E-mail: luisfellipegarcia@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-2856-4428.

como uma exploração de cada uma das dimensões desse espaço, a saber: (i) o Espírito como auto-relação; (ii) o Espírito como imaginação produtiva; e (iii) o Espírito como o resultado do processo de aprendizado fundado nos impulsos humanos.

Palavras-chave: espírito, auto-relação, autoconhecimento, imaginação, impulsos

begreiflichen Raum seines philosophischen Unternehmens ausfüllt. Das Argument wird als eine Exploration der Dimensionen dieses Raums strukturiert: (i) der Geist als Selbst-Beziehung; (ii) der Geist als schaffende Einbildungskraft; (iii) der Geist als das Ergebnis eines in den menschlichen Trieben gegründeten lernenden Prozesses.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Geist, Selbst-Beziehung, Selbsterkenntnis, Einbildungskraft, Triebe

1. Introduction

The Kantian *Critique* presents itself as a work of conciliation between empiricism and rationalism thanks to the instauration of a *Tribunal* “directed to the determining and estimating of the rights of reason in general, in accordance with the principles of their first institution”². In this tribunal, Reason is simultaneously the judge, carrying out the judgment according to its laws, and the defendant, being judged upon its pretensions. Reason is thus the *protagonist* inasmuch as the *Critique* itself is a “tribunal of Reason”, instituted by Reason, to judge the rights and pretensions of Reason. Deeply influenced by the Kantian enterprise, Johann Gottlieb Fichte announces the philosophical project to which he would consecrate his entire life in a programmatic essay under the title of *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder die sogenannte Philosophie*, which he claims to be an attempt to conciliate “critical philosophy in general” and “the demands genuinely founded of the skeptics”³. If Reason is the omnipresent protagonist of the *Critique*, the guiding notion of Fichte’s programmatic essay is *the concept of philosophy itself*, which, as it is highlighted throughout the argument, is to be understood as the “presentation of the system of the human Spirit [*Geist*]”⁴.

The contrast between both approaches – a *critique of pure Reason* and a *presentation of the system of the human Spirit* – has risen a great amount of

² I. Kant, *KrV*, A751 / B779, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), 601.

³ J. G. Fichte, *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder die sogenannte Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, I 2, hrsg. Erich Fuchs, Hans Gliwitzky, Reinhard Lauth and Peter Schneider (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-2012), 109.

⁴ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 146.

attention among interpreters, to the extent that Fichte insists himself on the importance of building the system that critical philosophy, despite having opened the way to do it, has never effectively done it⁵. Nevertheless, contrary to the difference between *Critique* and *System*, the one between *Pure Reason* (*reine Vernunft*) and *Human Spirit* (*menschlicher Geist*) seems to have attracted less attention from the *Forschung*⁶. Some important factors have

⁵ This reproach appears already in Reinhold, who affirms that the Critique of pure Reason is a propaedeutic to metaphysics and not yet the system itself – cf. K. L. Reinhold, *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* (Jena: Johann Michael Mauke, 1791), 69; Fichte will say that the results of the Critique “can only acquire a signification and be harmonized” through the presupposition of a system (GA, I, 4, 230). According to Zöllner, this diagnosis would be grounded in a confusion between two notions of system in Kant: (i) an architectonic one, associated to the idea of an encyclopedic totality, towards which the Critique would be effectively a propaedeutic; and (ii) a doctrinaire one, connected to the idea of a set of principles allowing to solve vast philosophical problems – in this second sense, Kant's philosophy would be itself a system – cf. Günter Zöllner, “Sistema y vida, el legado filosófico de Fichte”, *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte* 12 (2016). Even in this second sense, it seems to us that, from Fichte's perspective, the problem is to understand how the set of principles are connected to an internal principle of articulation. For a genesis of the notion of system in Kant, see yet: Günter Zöllner, “Die Seele des Systems. Systembegriff und Begriffssystem in Kants Transzendental-philosophie”, in: *System der Vernunft. Kant und der deutsche Idealismus I. Architektur und System in der Philosophie Kants*, org. H. F. Fulda and J. Stolzenberg, (Hambourg: Meiner, 2001), 53-72. For a reconstruction of the question of the system from a Fichtean perspective, see Ives Radrizzani, “L'idée de système chez Fichte”, (Proceedings of the congress “L'idée de système”, Paris, 1998).

⁶ I have myself analyzed this transition from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Presentation of the System of the Human Spirit*, as regards its impacts on the conception of philosophy itself, in the book L. F. Garcia, *La philosophie comme Wissenschaftslehre – le projet fichtéen d'une nouvelle pratique du savoir* (Hildesheim / Zürich / New York: Georg Olms, 2018), 79-105; the aim here however is to address this point from another perspective by focusing on the particularities of the Fichtean concept of *Geist*. One of the few texts exploring this issue is the excellent article of Ives Radrizzani “Der Geist in der Philosophie Fichtes”. Radrizzani explores three dimensions of the concept – transcendental, aesthetical and historical – and shows how Fichte's philosophy can be understood as a third philosophical path irreducible both to a Critique of Reason and to a Phenomenology of Spirit in a Hegelian sense (culminating in absolute knowledge), since, as Radrizzani puts it, Fichte's philosophy is “großartig gestützt auf die dramatische Spannung zwischen der Bestimmung des in seiner tiefsten Struktur vorgegebenen Wiedertzusichkommens des Geistes und seiner Unfähigkeit, sie zu erreichen, es sei denn, er überwinde seine Endlichkeit. Die Phänomenologie des Geistes bleibt bei Fichte eine unendliche Aufgabe” – cf. Ives Radrizzani, “Der Geist in der Philosophie Fichtes”, in: *Geist und Psyche. Klassische Modelle von Platon bis Freud und Damasio*, org. Edith Düsing and Hans-Dieter Klein, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), 161-174. Our purpose here is similar in

contributed to it. Indeed, contrarily to Hegel some years later, Fichte has never given a systematic and explicit account of the notion of *Spirit*⁷. Moreover, the use Fichte makes of this notion oscillates throughout his philosophical enterprise, since it is not employed as often in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as it was in the *Grundlage* (1794-1795) and in the *Nova Methodo* (1796-1799). And finally, it is important not to overlook that Fichte presents his system as the one giving priority to practical instead of theoretical *Reason*, so that the contrast between these two modes of reason seems to be more fundamental than the one between *Reason* and *Spirit*.

However, it is undeniable that in Fichte's early works and throughout the whole period of Jena, there is a considerable multiplication of the use of the concept of Spirit, which starts to play a central role in the first formulations of his philosophical project. Indeed, in Fichte's aforementioned essay to conciliate critical philosophy with the challenges of the new skeptics, the word Reason (*Vernunft*), astonishingly as it may seem, is employed merely 3 times, whereas the word Spirit (*Geist*) appears 31 times – impressively 10 times more often than *Vernunft*. If we take into account that (i) in the *Critique* there are only 5 occurrences of the word *Geist* while *Vernunft* appears more than 1100 times, it seems that the conciliation foreseen by Fichte between critical philosophy and the skeptical challenges requires a new conceptual enterprise not entirely reducible to a *tribunal of Reason*⁸.

spirit to Radrizzani's thesis; in a slight contrast to Radrizzani's procedure however, we want to map the specificities of the semantic field covered by the notion of *Geist*, as it is first introduced by Fichte in his reflections, so as to understand the conceptual needs behind the quest for a new vocabulary.

⁷ In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hegel consecrates a whole section to the concept of *Geist*, a section following the one entitled *Vernunft*. He opens the section announcing the nuances of both concepts: "Die Vernunft ist Geist, indem die Gewißheit, alle Realität zu sein, zur Wahrheit erhoben, und sie sich ihrer selbst als ihrer Welt und der Welt als ihrer selbst bewußt ist" (G. W. F Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 23) – in other words, *Vernunft* is only *Geist* when it achieves two fundamental features proper of the latter, namely, self-consciousness and a relation the whole (*alle Realität*) – both features are also highlighted in Fichte's treatment of the concept as we will see.

⁸ We do not want in any case to downplay the fundamental importance of the contrast between practical and theoretical reason nor the fact that the concept of *Geist* will only be philosophically systematized in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. The point here is simply to identify, as a conceptual seismographer, the thickness this notion acquires in the inception of Fichte's philosophical project. Indeed, while in the three Critiques Kant employs constantly the concept of *Vernunft* – around 1100 times in the first *Critique*, 600 times in the second and 500 times in third – and relates it to the *Gemüt*, employing thus the word *Geist* considerably less than those other concepts (respectively 5, 10 and 39 times in the three Critiques); Fichte, in its turn, employs 10 times more the word *Geist*

Even if the remarkable variation in Fichte's philosophical vocabulary makes it risky to over-emphasize the use of a specific word, we would like to propose that, by following Fichte's uses of the notion of Spirit in his early works, it is possible to bring out *the conceptual requirements* forcing the philosopher to look for a new philosophical vocabulary. The hypothesis here defended is thus that: *Fichte mobilizes the notion of Geist in order to cover a new semantic field opened by his own philosophical endeavor.*

In order to sustain that thesis, our argument will be structured in three parts in the following way: (i) the first part will be an exploration of the three senses in which Fichte uses the word Geist in his programmatic essay (subject, object and self-relation), thereby operating a transition from the Kantian problem of *how Reason transforms the given into objects to the problem of how Spirit (Geist) can acquire self-knowledge*; (ii) the second part will analyze *the crucial importance of the power of creativity in this process of acquisition of self-knowledge leading Fichte even to identify Spirit and productive imagination*; and finally (iii) the third and final part argues that *the unleashing of the creative power of Spirit reveal a dimension of existence that we ignore of ourselves, a dimension we called "a new semantic field" – the field of drives.*

2. The Self Relation of the Spirit

As already mentioned, the word *Geist* is employed 31 times throughout the programmatic essay *Über den Begriff*. By following each use of it, it is possible to bring to the foreground the senses in which the word is used so as to chart out the semantic field it occupies. The method along this first part will thus be to retrace the senses in which "Geist" is used along the essay.

The first time the term appears in the text is at the end of the first section, where Fichte asks what would happen "if the human Spirit [*Geist*] could acquire knowledge only of a few objects"⁹: the Spirit being thus treated as *that that acquires knowledge*. In the sequence, after concluding the first section by the presentation of the concept of his philosophy as *science of science, science in general* and *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte remarks, at the beginning of the second section, that such a science "is not something that would exist independently from us and without our intervention, but it is something that can only be produced through the freedom of our Spirit [*Geist*] acting in

than the word *Vernunft* in the programmatic essay (31 et 3) and as many times both in the *Grundlage* (around 60 times each).

⁹ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 113.

a determined direction”¹⁰. The notion of Spirit is again articulated as the one *concerning the subject of knowledge* and presented here as *a free producer* acting in a certain direction. Now what could give this determined direction to the production of the Spirit? As Fichte clarifies in the sequence, the Spirit, in its productive action, “comes to twilight through blind steps before going out of it to a bright day” being guided in the process by an “obscure feeling [*dunkle Gefühle*]” to which Fichte attributes the name of a “sense for truth [*Wahrheits-Sinn*]”¹¹. The Spirit is thus, in a first sense of the concept, *a free producer of knowledge guided in its activity by an obscure feeling of truth*. In a nutshell: *Spirit is the subject of knowledge*.

Fichte indicates however in the immediate sequence of the text *a second meaning of Spirit, namely: something to which the knowing activities are applied*. This notion is introduced in the context of the discussion of the hypothesis according to which human knowledge would not form a unified knowledge but rather a multiple series of cognitions (such as physics, morality, art, among others) with no relation to one another (in a knowledge of knowledge). In his words:

If it originally lies in our Spirit [*Geist*] several threads which have no point of connection and which cannot be so connected, [...then] our knowledge [...] would indeed be certain, but it would not be a unified knowledge. Instead, it would constitute many sciences. In this case our dwelling would certainly be sound, but it would not be a unified, coherent structure. It would, instead, be a conglomeration of separate chambers, and we would be unable to pass from one to the other. It would be a building in which we would always be lost and would never feel at home.¹²

The Spirit is here presented as *the ground where* we build our dwelling, which, in the case of a radical heterogeneity of the constructed series, would not constitute a genuine home, to the extent that it will be fragmented in parts that would never be regarded “as a whole”¹³. This discussion introduces Fichte’s central thesis of the essay: namely, that if there is *in the Spirit (locative)* an articulated whole and not only a rhapsodic aggregate of pieces, then there should be a principle articulating the series of particular cognitions¹⁴.

¹⁰ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 119.

¹¹ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 142.

¹² Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 125.

¹³ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 125.

¹⁴ The purpose of the programmatic essay is precisely to show that the *Wissenschaftslehre*, to the extent that it is the presentation of such a system existing in the Spirit, requires a *foundation* to articulate the multiple series of knowledge. In this manner, it prepares the ground for the *Foundation of the entire Wissenschaftslehre (Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre)* published a couple of months later.

This second use of the concept of Spirit multiplies itself throughout the text; indeed, it is *in the Spirit* that we analyze the possibility of the coexistence of different totalities¹⁵; similarly, it is to the laws existent *in the Spirit* that should attach the laws of particular sciences when we examine the relation between the articulating knowledge and the particular series to be articulated¹⁶; it is equally *in the Spirit* that we find the cognitive activities with which the knowledge of knowledge is concerned¹⁷. In this second sense, thus, *Spirit* is (a) a ground *in which* knowledge is formed, being at the same time (b) the ground *with which* knowledge is concerned, since the cognitive activities to be known through the science of science are themselves activities of the Spirit. In other words, according to this second sense the Spirit is not only the subject, but also *the object of knowledge and its background scene*.

As a consequence, it is only because the Spirit cannot be turned into an aggregate of pieces with no relation to one another, that philosophy, understood as the *Presentation [Darstellung]* of the *Spirit*, must be systematic. In other words, systematicity is not an architectonic requirement of subjective thinking imposed on knowledge, but rather a requirement of the Spirit, *as that which is known*, to all subjective presentation of itself¹⁸. Therefore, those who engage in the philosophical activity are not “legislators of the Spirit”, who would impose from the outside a systematicity that would otherwise be absent, nor “journalists of the Spirit”, who would rhapsodically report the aggregate of its pieces, but rather “its historiographers, [...] pragmatic historians”¹⁹, responsible for rearticulating its internal systematicity²⁰.

The systematicity of the Spirit, however, even if it is prior to its presentation, is not there, as a fact of consciousness. Indeed, knowledge is the result of an operation of the Spirit upon itself (understood as an object), an

¹⁵ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 131.

¹⁶ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 136.

¹⁷ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 141.

¹⁸ Radrizzani formulates clearly this point, “la nature systématique de la Doctrine de la Science tient à la nature systématique de son objet, l’esprit humain”, cf. Ives Radrizzani, “L’idée de système chez Fichte” (Proceedings of the Congress “L’idée de système”, Paris, 1998).

¹⁹ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 147.

²⁰ For a reconstruction of the sources of this formula, see: Daniel Breazeale, “Fichte’s Conception of Philosophy as a “Pragmatic History of the Human Mind” and the Contributions of Kant, Platner, and Maimon”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 n. 4 (2001), 685-703; Jean-François Goubet, *Fichte et la philosophie transcendante. Étude sur la naissance de la Doctrine de la Science (1793-1796)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), 201-205; and L. F. Garcia, *La philosophie comme Wissenschaftslehre*, (Hildesheim /New York / Zürich: Georg Olms, 2018), 83-86.

operation aiming at elevating its own modes of action to consciousness. Indeed, the Spirit, to the extent that it is constituted by the whole of its actions in their mutual relations, consists in *the matter* of knowledge; however, in order to become itself knowledge, “it is yet necessary an action of the Spirit [...] consisting in elevating to consciousness its own mode of action”²¹; it is a free act through which the Spirit reflects upon itself so as to become conscious of itself. As a consequence, the relation between *Spirit*-subject and *Spirit*-object through which knowledge arises is a relation of producing *self-consciousness*.

If we resume this scheme through the uses of the term Spirit in the programmatic essay, we can see that this brochure aiming at transforming critical philosophy in order to make it resistant to the skeptical challenges leads to the introduction of a concept whose semantic plurality encompasses the notions of: (i) a free agent of knowledge (Spirit-subject); (ii) the background upon which and in which knowledge is formed (Spirit-object); and (iii) a self-relation (subject-object). In a word, the Spirit (being subject, object and background) has no exteriority and therefore knowledge is to be understood as self-knowledge. In this context, it is no surprise that, when referring to subjectivity, Fichte does not use the term *Gemüth* – whose semantic charge weighs on the side of sensibility – and gives priority to a word more capable of highlighting both the absence of exteriority and the active building of self-relation: the *Geist*²². Similarly, the notion of Reason (*Vernunft*), whose applicability was limited in the *Critique* to the matter offered by the *Gemüth*, is hardly employed in the brochure, since this relation between *Vernunft* and the matter offered by the *Gemüt* is here to be understood as a relation between *Geist* and *Geist*, a *self-relation*.

3. Creativity

We have seen that knowledge is a process through which the Spirit (as subject) acquires a higher degree of self-awareness by elevating to consciousness what was in a sense already there (the Spirit as object). But how is

²¹ Fichte, *Über den Begriff*, 142.

²² In the *Critique of pure Reason*, the word *Gemüt* is often employed in the transcendental aesthetics, since it is in the *Gemüt* that resides the forms of phenomena (*KrV*, A20 / B34), is also associated to the double source from which our knowledge proceeds, sensibility and understanding (*KrV*, A50 / B74), being thus related both to receptivity (*Empfänglichkeit*) and to activity (*Handlung*) (*KrV*, A672 / B700); the notion of *Geist*, as it is here employed by Fichte in its turn, places the accent on the side of activity as an internal principle of the articulation of the totality of our cognitive powers.

this self-relation possible? The small essay *Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*, a text in which Fichte transposes the Kantian concept of Spirit articulated in the third critique to the domain of philosophy, opens the horizon to the exploration of this point.

The essay, articulated in a close dialogue with Schiller's *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*²³, is presented in the form of three letters. The first one addresses an interlocutor and his neighbor, who is troubled by the distinction between spirit and letter, since it could "cross out the knowledge gathered with great pain, under the excuse that it would be only letters [*Buchstaben*] and not the spirit [*Geist*]"²⁴. In order to relieve his interlocutor, Fichte clarifies his own conception of Spirit. The concept is first introduced in the context of a discussion on issues surrounding the activity of understanding a book; indeed, Fichte mentions the complaints of his interlocutor concerning the difficulties of "getting into the reading", and remarks that there are certain works that leave us "cold and indifferent", whereas others attract us, inviting us "to dwell on its study and to forget ourselves"²⁵ in it. The works of this latter kind incite us to engage in "a meditation and a research in common with the writer". They enforce (*stärken*), enliven (*beleben*) and excite (*anregen*) "the very sense that we take for the object", they offer us "the spectacle and the spectator" and "just as the vital force in the universe, they communicate, in the same breath, the movement and the organization to the inert matter". This enlivening force (*belebende Kraft*), says Fichte, is the Spirit²⁶.

This conception of Spirit – not as much as a subject, object or self-knowledge, but *as an enlivening force* – strongly resonates with the one articulated by Kant in the paragraph 49 of the *Critique of Judgment*, a work

²³ The publication of this essay was the center of major polemic. Fichte, recently invited to take part in the expertise committee of the journal *Die Horen*, founded by the editor Johann Friedrich Cotta and the poet Friedrich Schiller, sends Schiller the manuscript of his essay whose form and content evoke, in a polemic fashion, a passage of Schiller's *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. Schiller, bothered both by the content and the approach (*Behandlung*) of the text, rejects the publication (see Schiller's letter to Fichte of June 24th 1795, GA III 2, 333-335). It follows an exchange of letters containing a fierce philosophical discussion culminating in the cooling of their relationship. For a reconstruction of the discussion, see Xavier Leon, *Fichte et son temps. Tome I: Établissement et prédication de la doctrine de la liberté. La vie de Fichte jusqu'au départ d'Iéna (1762-1799)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1922), 339-362. For an introduction to the debate including an excellent summary of bibliographic references on the subject, see Faustino Oncina and Manuel Ramos, *Filosofia y estética – la polémica con F. Schiller* (València: Universitat de València, 2007), 13-101.

²⁴ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*, GA I 6, 333.

²⁵ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 335.

²⁶ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 336.

towards which Fichte had never hidden his great admiration²⁷. The Spirit is there defined as *the enlivening principle (belebende Prinzip)* of the *Gemüt*²⁸; a definition that appears in the context of the analysis of the sublime. Along the Kantian argument, the Spirit appears as the “faculty of presenting the aesthetic ideas”, and therefore of presenting the:

...representation of the imagination which prompts much thought [*die viel zu denken veranlaßt*], but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no determinate concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it²⁹.

In other words, the Spirit is the power of presenting an aesthetic idea of that which is not expressible through language, thereby prompting much to think about. The products of imagination have thus a *non-expressible excess* in relation to determinate thought, an excess that constitutes the motor of the awakening of the cognitive faculties in their quest of a suitable expression of that which defies them. There is thus an internal gap originated in the disparity between the powers of imagination and the discursive understanding (the faculty of determinate concepts), a gap that the *Geist*, as the faculty of presenting the aesthetic ideas, tries to cover through the articulation of new expressions. In Kant’s words:

An aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial representations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it, making us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, the feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters [*Buchstabe*], with *Geist*.³⁰

²⁷ In the preface of his programmatic essay *Über den Begriff*, Fichte affirms to be persuaded that “no human understanding can go beyond the limit reached by Kant, particularly in his *Critique of Judgment*”; moreover, Fichte has started to write a commentary of the third critique and, even if the text remained unfinished, he reveals in a letter to his brother to be indebted to this work that has afforded him “glückliche Tage und eine sehr vorteilhafte Revolution in meinem Kopf und Herz” (GA III 1, 222) – the manuscript is available in the Bavarian Academy’s edition of Fichte’s works under the title *Versuch eines erklärenden Auszugs aus Kants Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (GA II 1, 319-373).

²⁸ I. Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, Gesammelte Schriften [Akademie-Ausgabe] V (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1900ss), 313. For the direct quotations, we used Paul Guyer’s and Eric Matthews’ translation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Kant, *KU*, 314.

³⁰ Kant, *KU*, 316.

There is thus *a gap* between what the imagination can in general present and what the concept can discursively represent, and *the aesthetic idea* introduces the possibility of building a bridge to cover this gap; i.e. a bridge between (a) the creative power of imagination, capable, in its free play of associations, of exploring the ineffable, and (b) the conceptual language without which communication would hardly be possible – thereby bridging the gap *between the ineffable and language* thanks to the possibility of connecting the spirit of creation with the letters of communication.

The semantic echo between the two texts is striking. In both cases, the enlivening principle has a strong effect upon the subject: it excites, enforces, quickens, puts the subject in movement, prompts thinking – in a word, it awakens an activity. Similarly, this activity entails a quest of new modes of expression opening the possibility of exploring expressive forces lying beyond the materiality of discursive language. There is however a specificity in Fichtean argument in relation to Kant's, namely, *in Fichte's essay, this enlivening principle is identified to the Spirit not only in an aesthetic sense, but also in a philosophical sense*, inasmuch as what is at stake is precisely to grasp what is the Spirit in philosophy³¹. In a word: *Fichte transposes the Kantian conception of Spirit from aesthetics to philosophy itself*.

Kant, in order to circumscribe his notion of Spirit to aesthetics, distinguishes two uses of imagination: (i) a use for the sake of knowledge, in which imagination is subject “to its adequacy to the concepts of understanding”; and (ii) an aesthetic use, where imagination freely provides a matter to the understanding, a matter related to knowledge “not as much objectively, but rather, subjectively, so as to enliven our cognitive powers [*zur Belebung der Erkenntnißkräfte*]”³². Based on this distinction, Kant highlights that the Spirit has a primary role in aesthetics, but not necessarily in theoretical knowledge, where imagination is under the restraint of understanding. For Fichte

³¹ Some years later in 1784 Kant will make larger use of the notion of Spirit in his essay *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, he takes the definition of Spirit as “belebendes Prinzip” and, after associating it to genius, which he calls the *eigentümlicher Geist*, applies it to other domains such as physics (Newton) and philosophy (Leibniz) (Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, AA VII, 225-227); this extended use of the notion of Spirit in the *Anthropology* is highlighted by Michel Foucault, who, in a brilliant preface added to his translation of Kant's text, remarks that the Spirit appears here as “ce qui fait naître dans la passivité du *Gemüt*, qui est celle de la détermination empirique, le mouvement fourmillant des idées” projecting it therefore in a “totalité virtuelle” (Kant *Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*, trans. M. Foucault (Paris: Vrin, 1964), 11-80 [particularly, pp. 34-41]). This relation of the Spirit to the ideas of reason and its relation to totality constitute a fundamental part of the semantic field explored by Fichte through this concept.

³² Kant, *KU*, 316-7.

however, the point is precisely to transpose this fundamental concept to the domain of the knowledge of knowledge, so as to “deconstruct a prejudice” according to which philosophy would have the tendency of neglecting the study of the Spirit³³. This extension of the domain of the Spirit and, consequently, of the role of imagination in the constitution of knowledge, will play a central role in the genetic procedure of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

By ascribing a central role to Spirit and to imagination even in the theoretical knowledge, Fichte is betting on this creative power thanks to which we can present the non-representable Idea of the whole (subject, object and background) in images (called ideals) that could help us achieving self-knowledge. Thanks to this creative capacity, the Spirit, as remarks Fichte, can also be called productive imagination (*schaffende Einbildungskraft*)³⁴, since it operates as a bridge between our feelings (in which the matter of knowledge is found) and the representations (the form of knowledge), thereby leading our feelings to a domain in which we can become aware of them – the Spirit is here understood as “the faculty of elevating feelings to consciousness”³⁵, a power of production of higher degrees of consciousness. Therefore: *the Spirit-subject and the Spirit-object can be related in self-knowledge thanks to the Spirit understood as the power of productive imagination*. If the relation *Vernunft-Gemüth* in the critique is articulated through the normative power of Reason, the self-relation *Geist-Geist* appears here as constructed through the productive power of imagination, which is, according to Fichte, another dimension of Spirit.

4. The *Drives*, a new semantic field

If the Spirit, as a creative power, can help us in the difficult process of self-knowledge, it remains the important question of how can we effectively unleash this power? Is it available for everyone? How can we grasp it? We have seen that, even if the Spirit is understood as subject, object and with no exteriority, it does not mean that it is self-transparent to itself, on the contrary, the relation between Spirit-subject and Spirit-object depends on

³³ Fichte, *Ich will untersuchen, wodurch Geist vom Buchstaben in der Philosophie überhaupt sich unterscheidet*, GA II 3, 295.

³⁴ “Sie [die Einbildungskraft] ist insofern Schöpferin, Schöpferin des eigenen Bewusstseins: Ihrer, in dieser Funktion ist man nicht bewusst, gerade darum, weil vor dieser Funktion vorher gar kein Bewusstsein ist. Die schaffende Einbildungskraft. Sie ist der Geist.” – cf. Fichte, *Ich will untersuchen*, 298.

³⁵ Fichte, *Über den Unterschied des Geistes und des Buchstabens in der Philosophie*, GA II 3, 317.

the effective work of elevating feelings to consciousness, thanks to a power of producing higher degrees of consciousness. This power however is not something naturally available, but rather something that should be unfolded and progressively developed. Fichte's reconstruction of such a path of progressive unleashing reveals the connection of the Geist with a deeper force that does not always come to the surface of consciousness. This force is the drive (*Trieb*). Let us see how Fichte constructs this point in the sequence of the essay *Über Geist und Buchstab*.

Since the beginning of the essay, the focus of Fichte's attention is his interlocutor. Indeed, it is the reader who is attracted by the product of *Geist*, invited to dwell on the reading of the book, to forget himself there, thus being transformed by a work that creates simultaneously the "spectacle and the spectator"³⁶ – a work of *Geist*. The stimulating force of the Spirit leads thus the interlocutor to a kind of self-surpassing, inasmuch as the reader is taken by a power in which he forgets himself and within which new conceptual possibilities are articulated without him having the impression that he has something to do with it. But where could such a force that goes beyond the individuality of the addressee come from? An unexpected twist at the end of the first letter of Fichte's small essay can shed some light into this point:

Strangely I discover talents and dispositions in me that I myself ignored [*die ich selbst nicht kannte*]. [...] But who has revealed him [the author of product of *Geist*] my interiority [*mein Inneres*], in which I myself was a stranger?³⁷

The essay, which started in a dialogical context and was systematically articulated in the second person (*Du*), is suddenly interrupted by the irruption of the first person (*Ich*); since the Spirit can make us all, including the narrator, discover *unsuspected dispositions and talents in ourselves*. Thanks to such a discovery, Fichte confounds himself with the reader, since the philosopher, as a spectator of this Spirit's force, can only be astonished at this power of revealing something of him that he himself ignored.

According to Fichte, such a power of self-surpassing leads us to unsuspected lands in which we become progressively aware of a "universal sense of humanity"³⁸, grounded in an active principle called *drive (Trieb)*. *Drive*, says Fichte, is the grounding principle of human activity, it is "hidden from the eyes"³⁹, beyond individualities, since it lies in humans independently

³⁶ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 336.

³⁷ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 337.

³⁸ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 275.

³⁹ The formula employed by Fichte "was, Aller Augen verborgen, in der menschlichen Seele liegt" resonates with the one employed by Kant to characterize the Schematism in

from any “exterior determination” – it is the immanent principle of the activity of the Spirit, not an activity applied to something exterior to the Spirit (which, as we have seen, has no exteriority), but an activity of the Spirit in the Spirit, a self-activity (*Selbst-Tätigkeit*).

This human power manifests itself in different dimensions of the cognitive space: (i) in the domain of theoretical knowledge, as a quest to conform our representations to the things; (ii) in a practical domain, as a quest to conform things to our representations; and (iii) in the aesthetical domain, as a power directed to the very expressive powers of representation⁴⁰. As a consequence, it is because the universal sense of humanity can be retraced to a fundamental drive, that (a) the aesthetic question “how an artist can, through a work of spirit, reveal unsuspected talents in me?” can be transformed into (b) the pedagogical question “under which conditions this human power – theoretical, practical and aesthetical – can be deployed?” In other words, *the aesthetic question concerning the artist’s talent is progressively converted into the pedagogical question of learning to deploy an inner force within different domains of manifestation of human rationality*.

The typology of *Triebe* that recapitulates the three kinds of knowledge explored by the Kantian critiques (theoretical, practical and aesthetical) allows Fichte to retrace Kant’s three masterpieces into a single human force, which is not Reason, but that plays a central role in the very genesis of rationality – the drive. Indeed, it is actually “through the drive that humans are humans, and it is on the biggest force and efficacy of the drive [...] that depends what kind of human we are”⁴¹. *Kant’s three critiques are progressively brought to the domain of an anthropology of the inner principles of self-activity, an anthropology of drives – such an anthropology brings to the center of the philosophical discussion the human forces behind the manifestation of rationality in different epistemic domains*.

The conceptual movement operated in the essay is thus on a different level than the one of Kant’s conceptual enterprise inasmuch as the aim is not to explore the conditions of possibility of theoretical, practical and aesthetical knowledge; but rather to explore the conditions under which *a reader can effectively deploy* its self-activity in those three domains. In order to achieve it, it is necessary to explore the progressive path of the deployment of the

the *Critique of Pure Reason* “eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele” (Kant, *KrV*, A141 / B180); this similarity is not casual since Fichte explores precisely these acts of consciousness hidden behind the facts, highlighting thus the central role of imagination, not only in aesthetics but also in the theoretical knowledge.

⁴⁰ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 342.

⁴¹ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 340.

human fundamental drive from its lowest degrees to the achievement of the highest level of freedom⁴².

The Spirit appears thus here as a creative power whose unleashing depends of a pedagogical process through which higher degrees of freedom and self-consciousness can be achieved. The development of this power offers us “the first solid fulcrum within our interiority”⁴³. From this steady fulcrum, available for all once the appeasement of “the voice of need inside and of war outside” allows us to turn the look towards ourselves, the Spirit can finally unfold itself and thus “develop an interiority in men”⁴⁴. This interior development corresponds to the development of the drive that elevates us beyond the sensible world and its particularities – that elevates us to the formulation of *supersensible concepts*.

The Spirit is henceforth the bridge between our limited interiority and the unlimited supersensible, it is that through which we can rejoin the movement of the drive whose finality, “infinite and unlimited”, pushes us towards what surpasses us; it unveils in this manner the possibility of a link between the finite and the infinite thanks to its work, whose fundamental fruit is the development of our interiority leading to the opening of a trans-individual dimension. It is through this bridge that we can penetrate a profound region of ourselves, where it can be found, in the most secret sanctuary [*geheimsten Heiligtume*] of our interiority, the feelings relating to what goes beyond the sensible world. The development of the Spirit allows therefore not only a progressive awareness of our feelings, but also the self-surpassing of individual consciousness thanks to the awareness of the feeling of the self-activity directed at an idea whose infinity surpasses all possible particularity – so that the Spirit can also be understood as a “faculty of elevating Ideas to consciousness”⁴⁵.

However, since the ideas relating to these *secret regions of the human spirit* cannot be transmitted through objective representations, this semantic field connected to the ideas cannot be immediately communicated. Since the ideas, in order to attain the interlocutor, should be imprinted in a form

⁴² This nuance regarding the Kantian motives can also explain the reservations manifested by Fichte concerning Schiller's *Briefe*, even if Fichte's project constitutes as well a pedagogical enterprise aiming at the awakening of freedom. Indeed, even if aesthetics could help a person in its route towards freedom, it is still necessary that “the voice of need inside and of war outside” be appeased and that humans “come to a degree of external well-being” before they could “consecrate time to its mediations and let himself go with his aesthetic impressions” – cf. Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 348. Therefore, according to Fichte, “the idea of [...] an aesthetic education [...] constitutes a circle, if we do not find a way first of arousing in the individuals of the masses the courage of not being masters nor slaves” – Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 349.

⁴³ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 353-354.

⁴⁴ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 354.

⁴⁵ Fichte, *Über den Unterschied*, 318.

capable of passing them through, they must be mediated through *letters* (*Buchstaben*). To be sure, this distinction concerns not only works of art, but also philosophy itself. Indeed, as Fichte remarks:

I find myself before you in the same circumstances. I bring before you a product in which I think I have instilled some ideas: but I do not give you the ideas themselves, these I cannot give you. I give you only bodies: my words, that you listen, are these bodies⁴⁶.

We see thus that the philosophical ideas require a material envelope embodying their spirit so as to render it shareable. This necessary envelopment of the Spirit for the sake of its communicability is a requirement not only of aesthetics, but also of philosophy itself. The imprinted forms constitute, on one hand, a limitation, since “the various mazes and vibrations of [the Spirit’s] inner life and of its self-active form are not describable and no language can find a word to it”⁴⁷, but, on the other hand, a fundamental asset since, in absence of these contingent forms in which the Spirit is printed, it would be simply ineffable. These forms constitute “the bodies or the letters [*Buchstaben*]” in which the Spirit becomes shareable. However, since the letters constitute only limited expressions of the Spirit, the reconstruction of it requires from the philosopher and from the reader that they make the Spirit of philosophy their own, and thus that we become, in a certain sense, part of the philosophical Spirit – part of philosophy itself in its exploration of the most profound semantic fields of the Human Spirit.

5. Conclusion

This paper has followed, in a seismographic way, Fichte’s uses of the notion of *Geist* in two small essays composed in the early period of his reflections in Jena – *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder die sogenannte Philosophie* and *Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie*. This method allowed us to produce a semantic chart of the landscape covered by the multiple uses of this concept, which encompasses three large dimensions: (i) self-relation; (ii) creativity; and (iii) drives. The first dimension (i’) *indicates that the Spirit is understood subject and object of knowledge, and brings to the foreground of philosophy the problem of self-reflexion*; the second dimension (ii’) *highlights a new sense of Spirit as the creative power through which the construction of a self-relation is possible, what leads Fichte*

⁴⁶ Fichte, *Über den Unterschied*, 320.

⁴⁷ Fichte, *Über Geist und Buchstab*, 356.

to identify Spirit and productive imagination – we have thus Spirit-subject and Spirit-Object that can only be connected through Spirit-imagination; and finally the third dimension (iii') *shows that this triadic articulation (subject-imagination-object) can only effectively obtain through a learning process that reveals a dimension of our own selves that we ignore, a dimension we called "a new semantic field"*.

As regards Fichte's relation to Kant, the argument here developed – by bringing together the programmatic essay, closely connected to the problems of the first Critique, and the small essay *Über Geist und Buchstab*, where Fichte dialogues with the third Critique – allows us to see how important this latter work becomes in Fichte's enterprise and how he will use some key concepts of the third Critique, such as productive imagination, for the sake of solving problems formulated in the first Critique, thereby inaugurating an original conceptual project in which imagination will progressively assume the position of a protagonist.

As regards German Idealism, we see already how the notion of Spirit opens a field to be explored in different directions by the two other great philosophers of the period, Schelling, in the direction of natural history and religion Hegel, in the direction of society and culture. Finally, as regards Fichte himself, even if his uses of the notion of Spirit will oscillate in the deployment of his project, this semantic field covered by the concept – self-relation, creativity and drives – will remain the horizon of Fichte's philosophical endeavor leading him to explore the potentialities of imagination and pedagogy for the sake of a progressive self-awareness of humankind.

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