



The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte

Frederick C. Beiser

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The Fate of Reason is the first general history devoted to the period between Kant and Fichte, one of the most revolutionary and fertile in modern philosophy. The philosophers of this time broke with the two central tenets of the modern Cartesian tradition: the authority of reason and the primacy of epistemology. They also witnessed the decline of the Aufklärung, the completion of Kant's philosophy, and the beginnings of post-Kantian idealism.

Thanks to Beiser we can newly appreciate the influence of Kant's critics on the development of his philosophy. Beiser brings the controversies, and the personalities who engaged in them, to life and tells a story that has uncanny parallels with the debates of the present.

The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte Details

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Ed says

This is a remarkably lucid book about ideas that I have always found difficult. I was particularly interested in the chapter on Herder's philosophy of mind and Kant's reaction to Herder's vitalism. By putting Kant in historical context he becomes much more interesting than simply reading about his ideas out of context. Much that he was writing against and much that his critics said are not things that matter much to someone like me. To suggest an analogy: Since we agree that the world is round, reading arguments to that effect are not of much interest unless one can see them in the context of arguments for the world being flat. This is a very thorough book and I must confess I didn't make it through all the chapters on Kant's critics. I will read more of Beiser's work. He is a great guide to difficult ideas.

Andrew says

Excellent in showing how German philosophers came to doubt the Enlightenment's guiding principle - the autonomous authority of reason - and how their attempts to salvage it served as a starting point for nineteenth-century German idealism.

Chad says

The philosophers at the turn of the 18th century were at a turning point. The Enlightenment had enshrined reason as the as the fundamental article of faith. "Reason could criticize all our beliefs; it could justify morality, religion, and the state; it was universal and impartial; and it could, in theory, explain everything in nature."

Today, we deal with a lot of consequences of the Enlightenment. Science has a say in absolutely everything. We use it to justify the food we eat (diets, the food pyramid), government policy (global warming being the most noted), and even things that were considered at one point beyond science's reach. There are some major differences now though. For instance, we no longer take a scientific justification of God quite as seriously as they did back then. Most people don't even know what the term metaphysics even means.

But the turn of the century was also a turn of thought. The authority of reason was questioned: "Why should I listen to reason? What reason do I have to obey it? We demand that a person's beliefs and actions be rational; to say that they are irrational is to condemn them. But why do we make such a demand? What is the justification for it? Or, in short, whence is the authority of reason?"

These are big questions, and this book is an excellent introduction. Many of these issues are still issues fought over and discussed today.

One of my favorite questions discussed was between the rationalists and the fideists. The rationalists believed that reason could justify morality, religion, and the state. Fideists believed that if you took reason seriously and followed it to its logical conclusion, it would undermine all three; hence, a reliance on something outside of reason to justify belief in God and all that follows.

I was also introduced to dogmatism (introducing a priori concepts and principles without justifying them. It isn't just religions guilty of this. Scientists have their own dogmas today), skepticism (the idea that you can't really know anything), criticism, and empiricism.

This book did a great job of mixing biography with philosophy, so you got the ideas and some of the background of the people who had them. I do wish it had explained a little more of the concepts for the reader new to philosophy. I left not knowing exactly what regulative versus constitutive meant. I was able to look up some things like the law of contradiction, but it looks like I'll need to find a starter book in philosophy if I really want to get serious.

Big names that are used as background are Locke, Leibniz, and Spinoza. Some of the main philosophers discussed are lesser known, but are indeed important: Jacobi, Kant, Herder, Hamann, Schulze, Reinhold, and Maimon.

Rich says

A classic guide to German philosophy in the late eighteenth century.

Renxiang Liu says

This book fills a lacuna in the history of philosophy at the end of the 18th Century. Kant's influence was predominant in German philosophy during that period, obscuring other figures who motivated him through criticism, made explicit internal contradiction of the critical philosophy, or foreshadowed the development of idealism after Kant. Significant among them were Hamann, Mendelssohn, Jacobi, Herder, Eberhard, Reinhold and Maimon. This book gives a careful examination on each of them, pointing out their historical significance as well as summarizing the ways they contributed to the disputes.

There are two clues that lead throughout the book. The first is the crisis of the authority of reason at the decline of the German *Aufklärung*. The harmony between reason and morality/religion, the autonomy, impartiality and universality of reason, were all under serious doubt. The second and more concrete clue is the pantheism controversy initiated by Jacobi and Mendelssohn and participated by almost all the figures at the time. Through a disclosure of Lessing's Spinozism, Jacobi argued that reason, when followed consistently, necessarily leads to fatalism and atheism. There is no way to be loyal to reason while retaining values of morality, religion and the state. A dichotomy was posited between rational nihilism and irrational fidelism.

The role Kant played in the story was interesting. Though his critical philosophy deserves a significant place in the pantheon of philosophy, Kant's fame was largely due to Reinhold's popularizing interpretation of him as providing a solution to the aporia created by the pantheism controversy. Kant's critical notion of reason (distanced from Leibniz-Wolffian rationalism) and especially his prioritization of practical over theoretical reason seemed to provide a third path apart from Jacobi's dilemma. Because obligations of practical reason necessitate the regulative ideas of freedom, God and immortality of the soul, Kant proves their validity without relying on metaphysical arguments, which were losing their credit under Hamann, Jacobi and Herder's attack.

But the solution Kant gave soon appeared problematic as well. Attacks came from Lockeans and Wolffians,

but more fatally from Reinhold, Schulze and Maimon, who maintained that Kant's critical philosophy failed to fulfill its own aims. Criticism thus turned into meta-criticism, and philosophy was profoundly transformed from a first-order inquiry of epistemological processes into a second-order examination of transcendental concepts of reason, which was crucial to the transition from Kant to Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

The merits of this book are various. First, Frederick Beiser knows how to extract from intricate materials a clear account of a certain philosopher's ideas, with an emphasis on his agreements and disagreements with others. This is a gift for a book that deals with some 30 figures within 300 pages. The reader never finds herself lost in details of those disputes, but is always guided with a synoptic view on the main issue.

Second, the book impressively contextualizes Kant's philosophy and its development. Most of Kant's ideas are revealed to have been responses to others, though the pivotal conception of a transcendental philosophy was undoubtedly revolutionary - something more revolutionary than Kant the man. Beiser neither trivializes Kant's thought as a melange of his contemporaries', nor detaches him from them, rendering Kant's breakthroughs rootless. Rather, Beiser knows well that the best way to depict a great philosopher is to place him back in his time and then to show the timelessness of his thoughts.

Third, the book also serves as a valuable documentation of those supposedly "minor" figures at the period. Though they seemed to be largely trapped in their *Zeitgeist*, lots of their ideas, given proper interpretation, are astonishingly close to what we find in 19th and 20th Century philosophy. For example, Hamann and Herder's philosophy of language already suggests a conceptual analysis; Reinhold's theory of representation is structurally reminiscent of Husserl's discussion of intentionality, and Maimon's idea of an infinite struggle of understanding foreshadows Lacan's conception of the dynamics of the Real. This does not mean, of course, that 19th and 20th Century philosophies have nothing new. However, once we recognize those purportedly "novel" ideas in the history of philosophy, we become less blind to their connection to other ideas as well as the difficulties intrinsic to them. Indeed, most philosophers today are much more ignorant of such difficulties than their 18th Century precedents.

Having gone through the extremely productive years from 1781 to 1793, the book curiously stops before introducing Fichte. The rest of the story, which is largely a revival of metaphysics in the face of meta-criticism, constitutes the theme of Beiser's another book, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* .

Michael says

Beiser gives an excellent history of Early German Romanticism and its response to Kant's critical project in this text. He develops a compelling story, particularly with the genius of the Sturm und Drang movement within Germany led by Jacobi and the early Kantian response led by Schiller and picked up by Fichte. An accessible and interesting read.
