



## Fichte on Trial. The Atheist, the Nihilist, the Democrat

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### Resumen

En este artículo, me propongo dilucidar el significado de las acusaciones por parte del Electorado de Sajonia —y otras no oficiales—, que J. G. Fichte recibió en el marco de la Disputa del Ateísmo (*Atheismusstreit*), según las cuales su pensamiento idealista era considerado ateo. A su vez, en este contexto, el filósofo fue acusado de nihilismo y, según su propia interpretación de las acusaciones, fue tildado de jacobino-demócrata.

El objetivo es identificar en sus obras —*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-1795), la primera versión de su sistema filosófico, así como en las *Revolutionsschriften* (1793-1794) y en los textos que escribió en el contexto de la Disputa (1798-1799)— aquellos nodos en los que se basan las etiquetas antes mencionadas. En este ámbito, también se hace referencia a su relación filosófica con F. H. Jacobi, quien desempeñó un papel significativo en la esfera de la Polémica. Jacobi lo criticó y demarcó una dicotomía entre su pensamiento religioso y el idealismo moral *à la Fichte*.

El propósito de este análisis es arrojar luz sobre las propias ideas de Fichte, y al mismo tiempo argumentar que las etiquetas que se le asignaron tanto a su persona como a su filosofía sí tienen cierta base —incluso cuando, a veces, Fichte intentó desvincularse de ellas—. Este análisis delimita la distinción metafísica entre una filosofía idealista y una dogmática, así como las diferencias en sus implicaciones prácticas que conllevan la reivindicación del idealismo como filosofía de la libertad y la igualdad.

**Palabras clave:** Moralidad; Ateísmo; Nihilismo; Democratismo

### Abstract

In this article I intend to elucidate the meaning of the accusations by the Electorate of Saxony —and others unofficial—, which J. G. Fichte received in the framework of the Atheism Dispute (*Atheismusstreit*), according to which his idealistic thought was seen as atheistic. In turn, in this context, the philosopher was accused of nihilism and, according to his own reading of the accusations, was branded as a Jacobin-democrat. The aim is to identify in his works —*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-1795), the first version of his philosophical system, as well as in the *Revolutionsschriften* (1793-1794) and in the texts he wrote in the context of the Dispute (1798-

1799)— those nodes on which the above-mentioned labels are based. In this sphere, reference is also made to his philosophical relationship with F. H. Jacobi, who played a significant role in the sphere of the Dispute. He criticized him and demarcated a dichotomy between his religious thinking and moral-idealism *à la Fichte*. The purpose of this analysis is to shed light on Fichte's own ideas, and at the same time to argue that the labels that were given to his person as well as to his philosophy do indeed have a certain basis—even when, at times, Fichte tried to disassociate himself from them. This analysis delineates the metaphysical distinction between an idealistic and a dogmatic philosophy as well as the differences in their practical implications that entail the vindication of idealism as a philosophy of freedom and equality.

**Key words:** Fichte; Morality; Atheism; Nihilism; Democratism

## Introduction

The aim of the article is to determine the meaning of the accusations suffered by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in the context of the Atheism Dispute (*Atheismusstreit*) (1798-1799), according to which his philosophy was accused of being atheistic, nihilistic and the philosopher a democrat-Jacobin-anarchist, in order to be able to determine whether they are deduced from his thought as shown in the first version of his system—the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre (GWL)* (1794-1795)—as well as in his revolutionary texts (*Revolutionsschriften*): *Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europas, die sie bisher unterdrückten* (1793) (ZD) and *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution (BB)* (1793-1794). Although in the context of the Dispute Fichte denied the accusations, as I am not able to determine whether this was only a judicial strategy or a philosophical conclusion of the author, I aim to inquire into those works—as well as the texts that make up the Dispute, i.e. *Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung (üGuG)* (1798); *Apellation an das Publikum (AP)* (1799) and *Verantwortungsschriften gegen die Anklage des Atheismus (VS)* (1799)—with a view to identifying the aforementioned features and their systematic consistency. In other words, my aim is to connect some of the fundamental metaphysical concepts of his philosophy—in particular the notions of tendency (*Streben*); drive (*Trieb*); and longing (*Sehnen*)—with their practical consequences—i.e. religious, moral and political, in particular, around the concept of duty (*Pflicht*)—with respect to the properly human way according to which man can and, more importantly according to Fichte, ought to develop his existence. In this way my intention is to show how the moral character of his idealism entails—even at times against Fichte's own claims in the context of the Dispute—the blurring of religion and politics as modes of conceiving subjective and intersubjective life.

Fichte wrote in *VS*: “«[t]o them, I am a democrat, a Jacobin [...]». It is not my atheism that they are persecuting by judicial means; it is my democratism” (GA I/6, 72-73/195-196).<sup>1</sup> He also stated: “I am quite far from preaching anarchy” (GA I/6, 74/196). According to what was said in the preceding paragraph, we will see that these items that constitute the accusations form a *totum*, and that his philosophy —as Doctrine of Science—, his atheism, his democratism and his anarchism —and also his nihilism—, are mutually intertwined.

Now, even if it is impossible to fully differentiate the meaning of the Fichtean defense in its intellectual or strategic-biographical sense —that is, with respect to Fichte's own life—, it's useful to provide a historiographical overview in order to contextualize the philosophical issues the Dispute discusses. In 1798, the philosopher published in the *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft teutscher Gelehrten* —which he edited together with Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer— the aforementioned article *üGuG*. The text —that featured a transcendental perspective from Fichte's moral-idealism— appeared as an attachment to an article by Friedrich Karl Forberg, entitled *Entwicklung des Begriffs der Religion*. When Forberg sent the text for its publication, Fichte wanted to put some footnotes of his own in it but Forberg refused. Fichte decided to publish the text as it was —he was a great defender of freedom of thought and of the press and did not want to exercise any kind of censorship power—<sup>2</sup> and published the notes as a text in its own right —the aforementioned *üGuG*.

A few months later, due to the publication of an anonymous accusatory pamphlet —known as *Schreiben eines Vaters an seinen studierenden Sohn über den Fichteschen und Forbergschen Atheismus*— that reached the highest ranks of government in the Electorate of Saxony, Fichte had his publication and his *Journal* confiscated on the basis of his statements in that text, which were

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<sup>1</sup> Fichte's works are referred to according to the critical edition of the *Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* [GA]. The pages of an English translation are separated with a slash. The complete bibliographical references appear at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. de Almeida Carvalho, (2009: 104). Fichte dedicated a particular text to the vindication of freedom in these senses, the aforementioned *ZD*. In turn, these items are imbricated with the moral vision of existence as he conceived it in *BB*. In both works, he explains that freedom of thought and expression are inherent to the process of formation-education (*Bildung*) of man in an individual as well as generic sense, in pursuit of his moral self-improvement, as he seeks to identify with himself in an absolute way, by overcoming the obstacles that the world imposes on him. In other words, by forming the world, forming other men and forming himself. Without this formation and free self-formation, man cannot develop in his most proper sense —according to the systematic foundation of Fichtean thought that understands the I as a striving launched to overcome finitude with a view to the infinite (cf. GA I/2, 418 and 421/348 and 350). For its part, in *BB*, he points out that political relations —under the institution of the State—, make attempts, due to their coercive and unfree character, against this formative process and emphasizes that what is proper to the existence of the individual and to inter-individual existence is morality. Hand in hand with this, he refers to the accessory and even counterproductive role of political-state life for an independent life of man (cf. GA I/1, 286-287/97). Hence, his thought is not only qualified as democratic but can also be thought of as anarchist.

allegedly atheistic.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, on January 19, 1799, he published *Apellation an das Publikum* (*AP*) for his personal and public defense. In addition, on March 18, he sent the *VS* to the Pro-Rector of the Jena Academy as a university justification for its publication. Ultimately, none of Fichte's attempts to escape the accusation succeeded and he ended up leaving the University of Jena—in which he had been Head of the Chair of Transcendental Philosophy since 1794, when Reinhold, another post-Kantian, had left it empty.<sup>4</sup>

As for Fichte's academic status at the time, he had become a success as soon as he published *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (*VKO*) (1792), another text on the philosophy of religion, which the public thought was Kant's long-awaited book on that question.<sup>5</sup> The text had been published anonymously. Kant immediately let it be known that the text was Fichte's. In fact, Fichte had written it to show it to Kant when he visited him in Königsberg, and from then on, he became a recognized figure in the philosophical sphere and earned that position as Professor in Jena. But precisely because of the Dispute, in 1799 he left Jena to settle in Berlin—where, a few years before his death, he ended up being appointed the first Rector (1811) of the University (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) founded a year earlier by Wilhelm von Humboldt. The question of the relationship between Fichte's texts and thought from the Jena period (1793-1800) and the Berlin period is a matter of debate among scholars and is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that there are two main currents of thought, those who think there is a break<sup>6</sup> and those who maintain that there is continuity<sup>7</sup>—both in terms of the different versions of his metaphysical system and in terms of the applied meaning of his

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<sup>3</sup> Fichte had already received accusations and had suffered some problems in Jena. Some of these occurred, for example, when he decided to teach his classes on Sunday mornings—traditionally designated for Mass. With respect to this question, López Domínguez writes: “Fichte had defied the official laws by not respecting Sunday as dedicated to the praise of the Lord. Rather, he had attempted to replace these sacred activities with a secular preaching that was nothing but a cult of reason and, consequently, pure atheism” (López Domínguez, 2023: 231). (Translation of my own).

<sup>4</sup> Fichte had started reading Kant in 1790 and he fell in love with transcendental philosophy—and in particular with the second of Kant's *Critiques*. Up until that point, he had been a dogmatist. That is, he believed in deterministic philosophy and the idea of necessity in the development of subjective existence and worldly events. But he wrote in a letter dated in August-September 1790: “*Ich lebe in einer neuen Welt, seitdem ich die ‚Kritik der praktischen Vernunft‘ gelesen habe. Sätze, von denen ich glaubte, sie seien unumstößlich, sind mir umgestoßen; Dinge, von denen ich glaubte, sie könnten mir nie bewiesen werden, z. B. der Begriff einer absoluten Freiheit, der Pflicht usw., sind mir bewiesen [...]. Es ist unbegreiflich, welche Achtung für die Menschheit, welche Kraft uns dieses System gibt*” (GA III/1, 167). The philosophical and personal division between idealism and dogmatism is a topic that pervades Fichte's entire *oeuvre*. The philosopher shapes his own system in opposition to the dogmatic systems that preceded him in the history of philosophy—in particular, with respect to Spinoza's system, which appears as Fichte's philosophical counterpart both as described in the *GWL* (cf. GA I/2, 262-264 and 279-280/205-207 and 222-223) and also in the introductory texts to it, *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (*EE*) (1797) and *Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (*ZE*) (1797-1798) (cf. GA I/4, 264).

<sup>5</sup> Only a few years later Kant would publish *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793-1794) as his statement on the philosophical-religious issue.

<sup>6</sup> For example, cf. Rivera de Rosales, (2014: 211; 215 and 220).

<sup>7</sup> For example, cf. Santoro (2016); cf. Martins da Cunha (2020: 53-54); and in particular regarding the religious issue in Jena and in Berlin, cf. Estes (2008).

philosophy. There are also those who try to identify points of agreement and disagreement between the works. It's a question of determining whether Fichte abandons the transcendental-moral position of his Jena idealism and adopts an onto-theological way of thinking that goes beyond the limits of critical philosophy. It is also a question of deciding between a revolutionary Fichte or a more reformist one —and based on the various lectures of his works, even a reactionary-conservative one. This not being the space for a digression on this comparative question of Fichte's philosophical perspectives in the various periods of his philosophical work, we will restrict ourselves to the Jena years, with the aim of unraveling the question posed at the beginning of the article.

Based on the aforementioned sources we will then present the connection between three points of Fichte's thought: 1) his metaphysical thinking considering the concepts of striving (*Streben*); drive (*Trieb*); longing-yearning (*Sehnen*); and duty (*Pflicht*); 2) the atheism and nihilism of his theory based on the preeminence of its transcendental-moral sense. To enlighten this question we will also refer here to his biographical and philosophical relationship with Jacobi —who played a central role in the *Atheismusstreit*—;<sup>8</sup> and finally 3) the democratism-jacobinism-anarchism in its moral sense, which is opposed to a political view of human existence.

## 1. Fichtean Moral Idealism from its Fundamental Concepts

Fichte qualifies his philosophical thought with different labels. In the *GWL* he calls it “practical idealism” (cf. GA I/2, 311/249) and “critical idealism” (cf. GA I/2, 326 and 412/265 and 343). In *EE*, “transcendental-integral idealism” (*vollständiger transscendentaler Idealismus*) (cf. GA I/4, 204 and 227). What is of value for our purposes in this article is to highlight morality as the central axis around which the Fichtean system unfolds and its consequences in relation to his conception of man's practical existence —which will lead to his characterization as atheist, nihilist and democrat. To delineate this —as well as to connect both in spirit and in letter the *GWL* with the revolutionary texts and the texts of the Dispute—, it is worth beginning by highlighting the connection between two passages in his works in which two of the main concepts of his philosophy —longing and duty— come into relation. He says in *AP*: “this weariness with the transitory, this yearning for something higher [...] lies indelibly in the mind of mankind (*Gemüthe des Menschen*). Just as indelibly a voice in it says that something is a duty (*Pflicht*)” (GA I/5, 424/100). And in *GWL*, he writes: “a longing, a drive toward something with which one is utterly unacquainted, a drive that reveals itself purely [...] through a void: a drive that seeks satisfaction without indicating where such satisfaction is to be

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<sup>8</sup> Fichte appeals in *AP* not only to the public in general but to Jacobi in particular for his defense (cf. GA I/5, 447-448/120-121).

found” (GA I/2, 431/358). This highlights the metaphysical foundation of his system, from which it derives its practical meaning —moral, religious and political. Fichte links longing and duty. The discovery of these terms implies an understanding of the transcendental meaning of his idealism. In fact, their realization implies the self-discovery of the subject as a free activity that launches itself —that ought (*soll*) to launch itself— into the infinite, in search of something higher that fills the boredom and emptiness of finite existence. Thus, in Fichtean thought, morality and the transcendental —that is, transcendental subjectivity— are linked, as, on the other hand, are religion and the transcendent —God and, as we will see on the third point of this paper, the State. In other words, it's a choice between an idealistic or dogmatic understanding of existence.<sup>9</sup>

Even when the space of this article doesn't allow a full disclosure of the dynamics of Fichtean metaphysical thought as they appeared in *GWL*, it is worthwhile to comment on the pages that he dedicates to the “Foundation of the Science of the Practical” in this text (§5-§11) in order to understand why he could be accused of atheism and nihilism. The metaphysics of longing is developed from §10 onwards. However, in order to understand its role within the system, it is necessary to refer to §5 and §7 of the *GWL* in which the notions of striving (*Streben*) and drive (*Trieb*) appear. In fact, according to the quotation from §10, Fichte describes longing as an activity driven towards an ideal object, that is to say, impossible to attain in the finite (cf. GA I/2, 432/239). In §5, he had described the I —as the principle of the system—<sup>10</sup> as an infinite striving that seeks to overcome the world-reality in which it always encounters a check (*Anstoß*) (cf. GA I/2, 386-387 and 405; 187-188 and 209).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the I strives, in its character as a foundation that posits itself as such (*sich setzen*), towards absolute identification with itself, overcoming all checks imposed by the world (cf. GA I/2, 400/202). However, Fichte stresses that this is precisely what the I cannot achieve. In fact, if it were to achieve this, the striving would be exhausted, and the self would implode. In his words: “[t]he I can extend the object of its striving to infinity; but were it at any determinant

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<sup>9</sup> The aforementioned opposition between idealism and dogmatism as systems of philosophy and ways of developing man's own life is summed up in the sentence in *EE*, according to which: “[t]he kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon on the kind of person one is” (GA I/4, 195/20).

<sup>10</sup> Fichte explains the three fundamental principles of his system —I; Not-I; and the reciprocal interaction (*Wechselwirkung*)/reciprocal determination (*Wechselbestimmung*) between them— in the first three paragraphs of the work (GA I/2, 255-282/200-224). Although we cannot give a full account of the deduction of these principles here, it is worth noting that the I as First, Purely and Simply Unconditioned Foundational Principle is the ground upon which the Not-I —unconditioned in its form but conditioned in its content— stands. It is also important to highlight that this grounding refers to the significance —content— of the Not-I, of the world, but not of its factual existence, which is given to the subject precisely as a fact that he encounters and with which he checks. Otherwise Fichtean idealism would be a naive one —one which projects the factual existence of reality from the subject's own mind— proper to what Fichte calls dogmatic idealism (cf. GA I/2, 304/242).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the relation between striving and the world or the object, cf. López Domínguez, (1982: 25). It is also interesting to pay attention to the reference of Janke (1970: 163) with respect to the role of striving in Fichte's thought when considering the relation between the practical and the theoretical aspects of reason as he establishes them.

moment to be extended to infinity, then [...] the idea of infinity would be realized — which, however, is itself a contradiction” (GA I/2, 403/335).

On the other hand, in §7 he describes the drive as a determined striving (cf. GA I/2, 418/222).<sup>12</sup> He thus demarcates a distinction between the terms. From the drive, the I determines itself to produce an effective reality outside of itself (cf. GA I/2, 430/236). But this does not imply the realization of the ideal infinitude of the I in the world of the finite. What the longing drive puts into action is not an absolute product of the I. As a conclusion to this reasoning, he states:

the drive that manifests itself in the I is by no means directed at matter as such, but instead, at a certain «determination of matter» [...]. Longing by no means aims at the production of matter as such; instead, what it aims at is the modification of matter (GA I/2, 434/362).

Now, the question that Fichte reflects on here is that of where the conciliation between ideal activity and the drive towards reality takes place. But, according to his argument, he has already indicated where this place is: in longing. The I oscillates (*schwebt*) between the projection of an ideal object and the reality that is different from that object. However, insofar as the object longed for is something other than reality, both —ideality and reality, the object of longing and the real object— are conciliated in their reciprocal determination (*Wechselbestimmung*) through longing. He writes:

[i]deality and the drive toward reality are inwardly united in longing. Longing is directed «toward something else», which is possible only on the presupposition of a preceding determination by means of ideal activity. Also present in longing is the drive toward reality (as limited), since this drive is «felt» [...]. What is longed for is now determined, but only by the predicate that it should be «something other» for feeling (GA I/2, 444-445/372-373).

On the basis of this metaphysics of longing, two questions can be presented which are fundamental in both *GWL* and *AP* and which make it possible to understand the accusations of atheism and nihilism aimed towards Fichte. These questions also make it possible to delineate the moral sense of his idealism based on the concept of duty. On the one hand, it's about the impossibility of absolute contentment and harmony for the subject —the impossibility of a total consummation of longing and duty. On the other hand, it is a matter of emphasizing that longing and moral duty have their origin in the subject and their direction towards the subject. In other words, Fichte presents a field of absolute immanence, with no room for religious transcendence.

Regarding the first of these questions, Fichte says that longing aims towards what he calls a “feeling of «satisfaction»” (*Befriedigung*). If longing didn't try to satisfy itself, it wouldn't rise up as such. The drive as an action towards reality, once satisfied, gives rise to a feeling of approval (*Beifall*). But this

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cruz Cruz, (1975: 141. Footnote).

implies a disapproval (*Misfallen*) of the object of a previous longing. As Fichte explained, in longing, ideality and reality are conciliated, but ultimate identification and the experience of total harmony are not possible: “[h]armony is present, and from this there arises a feeling of approval [...] of total completion (which, however, lasts but a moment, on account of the necessary return of longing)” (GA I/2, 450-451/378).

With this conclusion, Fichte links the metaphysics of his system to its practical sense, which is particularly moral and not religious. Although there is never an endpoint to the drive that longs, in every action by which the subject gives form or modifies—which is to say moralizes—the world, there is a gain in respect for the infinite order of subjectivity. He writes in *AP*:

the goal of our entire existence and all of our acting—a goal that is indeed never to be reached but is to be unceasingly promoted [...].<sup>13</sup> [T]his vocation of ours proclaims itself to us precisely through that yearning (*Sehnen*) that is not to be satisfied with any finite good [...]. The unshakeable confidence of the person who does the right thing [duty] for the sake of [moral] conscience (*Gewissen*), the unshakeable confidence that he approaches the fulfillment of his goal, is hereby explained as well. He irresistibly feels, even if he has not developed it into a distinct thought, that that disposition is precisely the presupposition of and the means to his satisfaction and liberation and that he enters thereby into the order that his inextinguishable yearning requires (GA I/5, 426/102).

As for the second question above, it's a matter of underlining the immanent significance of longing and duty, which are involved in Fichte's conception of the structure of subjectivity. In other words, he conceives of a longing and a duty that is transcendental and not transcendent; moral and not religious. Subjective existence is only founded and directed towards self-improvement from and within itself. He states in *AP*:

this [moral] character, which is to be attributed to every human being, can be developed [...] only by at first guiding a person not to outward propriety but rather to «inner» righteousness [...]. [W]ithout such righteousness [...] religion is a pernicious superstition leading mankind to complete ruin (GA I/5, 431/106).

As explained in *GWL*, Fichte also argues in *AP* that the position of the I is a self-position. In other words, the foundation and *telos* of subjective existence is its own—moral—existence. Now, the problem that arises from this is that which involves thinking about the relationship between morality and religiosity. If the foundation and goal of existence is the moral duty that the subject only discovers in himself, what place does the god of religion have in the Fichtean idealistic system? Throughout the *AP*, he refers to an imperative voice (*gebietende Stimme*) as the point of discovery of oneself, of the suprasensible and infinite moral character of subjectivity (cf. GA I/5, 426/101-102). For Fichte, longing and moral duty are one and the same immanent principle—neither transcendent nor

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<sup>13</sup> This question also appears in *GWL* under the idea of an infinite approach (GA I/2, 277/220).

theological. In this way, the possibility of a God as an entity that summons the subject to a higher life is undermined. This calls into question not only theism, but also transcendent religiosity as a whole. In fact, both in *üGuG* and in *AP*, it is not only the God of positive religion that loses ground, but also Spinoza's substance, as a Principle of which the subject is a mere mode. A subject that does not have the foundation of its existence in itself implies transcendence and, on a philosophical level, dogmatism (cf. GA I/5, 356 and 434-435. And cf. GA I/6, 46). Fichte refers to this when he criticizes Spinoza's system—as referred to in note 4—in disagreement with Jacobi's system. In this point the question of Fichte's atheism is linked with the nihilism of which he stands accused.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Atheist and the Nihilist

In order to delve deeper into the atheism and the nihilism of Fichte's idealistic thought as shaped in the Jena period within the context of the Dispute, it is useful to refer—because of its philosophical and biographical value—to some passages from the letter that Jacobi wrote to him between March 3 and 21, 1799. This choice is not arbitrary. Jacobi was a main actor in the Dispute. In fact, in *AP*, Fichte asked directly for his intervention in that context (cf. GA I/5, 447). However, Jacobi did not contribute philosophically to safeguarding the Fichtean system. On the contrary, in the letter he expresses his opposition to the theses on the relationship between morality and religion, as well as to the consequences for the practical existence of the subject from Fichte's point of view. In particular, Jacobi criticizes the atheistic drift and the subjective and objective nihilization—or to use Jacobi's words, “phantasmagorization”—that stem from the foundations of Fichtean idealism.<sup>15</sup> For Jacobi, the alternative is clear: “[m]an has this choice [...] and this alone: Nothingness or a God” (GA III/3, 251/524). For his part, Fichte wrote in *üGuG*—rejecting the theistic religion as well as any other dogmatic philosophy as we anticipated at the end of the previous paragraph—: “the faith (*Glauben*) that has just been derived, however, is faith entirely and completely. That living and active moral order is itself God; we require no other God” (GA I/5, 354/26). With this last sentence we can once again underscore Fichte's emphasis on morality as the proper way for developing human existence. This is particularly opposed to a religious way of development. But this is precisely the question to analyze here: what relationship does he establish between morality and religiosity and what is the meaning of duty and faith (*Glauben*) in his view? Now, in order to uncover this matter it is necessary

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<sup>14</sup> For a lecture that does not associate atheism and nihilism in Fichte's thought, see Cruz Cruz, (1975: XXX). This author states that Fichte is not an atheist but a cosmological nihilist.

<sup>15</sup> For a particular study on the philosophical relationship between Fichte and Jacobi with regard to the concept of nihilism, see Rivera de Rosales (2020).

to discuss some elements of Fichte's systematic development of the foundation of his practical thinking as stated in *GWL*. These elements serve to highlight its moral character and also strengthen the philosophical concepts presented in the aforementioned paragraph.

Let's start by quoting in its larger context the citation of Jacobi that was previously referred to only partially. He states:

[m]an [...] can find himself only «in» God; and he is to himself unfathomable because God's being is necessarily unfathomable to him. "Necessarily", for otherwise there would reside in man a supra-divine power (*übergottliches Vermögen*), and God would have to be capable of being invented (*erfunden*) by man. God would[n't] be then the Highest Being (*höchstes Wesen*) who «subsists in Himself alone». [M]an loses himself as soon as he resists finding himself in God as his creator, in a way inconceivable to his reason; as soon as he wants to ground himself «in himself alone». Then everything gradually dissolves for him into his own nothingness. Man has this choice, however, and this alone: Nothingness or a God. If he chooses nothingness, he makes himself unto a God, that is, he makes a «phantom» (*Gespens*) into God [...] and all that surrounds him should be anything but a «phantom» (GA III/3, 250-251/523-524).

At the end of the first paragraph of *GWL*, Fichte resumes a history of Modern Philosophy, showing the ways in which previous philosophers<sup>16</sup> thought about the first principle of their systems —as far as reaching this principle is the main object of the text—<sup>17</sup> and he underlines two things that go hand in hand with each other: i) the fact that they have conceived it in a theoretical and not a practical manner and ii) the fact that this principle is transcendent regarding subjectivity. That is to say, the first principle is a foundation that stands and directs not from and to subjectivity but from and to something —being a fact, a thing, a god or a substance— that, effectively, transcends the subject. Jacobi does not appear in this list of philosophers. We will show from our explanation of the grounds of the *GWL* how Jacobi falls in this characterization of other modern philosophers and by this opposition we will clarify certain elements of Fichte's own philosophy —in particular the atheist and nihilist traces that Jacobi himself points out.

According to Fichte, the fact of considering the first principle of subjective experience as a fact (*Tat-Tatsache*) or as a thing-substance implies a problem since, in a logical sense, both presuppose an antecedent cause and thus a regression to infinity and the impossibility of the principle being established (cf. GA I/2, 263-264 and 280-281/19-20 and 32-33). For Fichte, the principle has to escape the factual. It has to escape being as something closed. So the first principle cannot be a

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<sup>16</sup> The names that appear there are Descartes, Reinhold, Maimon and Spinoza. According to Fichte, the last of these provides the fullest example of a transcendent philosophy, that is to say, a dogmatic one, which is fully opposed to idealistic philosophy (GA I/2, 262-264 and 280-281). On the other hand, he also makes a reference to Kant but does so in order to safeguard his thinking as a prelude to his own. In fact, Fichte will characterize his philosophy as a well-understood Kantianism (*wohlverstandene Kantische*) (cf. GA I/4, 221/52).

<sup>17</sup> The first lines of the text are: "[w]e have to seek out the absolutely first, purely and simply unconditioned foundational principle of all human knowledge" (GA I/2, 255/200).

being, but an activity (*Handlung*). For Fichte, the principle is the absolute I as *Tathandlung* —where the factual (*Tat*) coincides with activity (*Handlung*). Now, the question arises: why is the I this activity as the systematic principle and does Fichte not refer here to another notion? In his search for such a principle, he starts from the logical proposition of identity “a=a” as a certain basis that every rational subject accepts.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he points out that the necessary connection between the terms that are identified is only formal (=X). That is to say, up to this point it is not possible to establish anything in relation to its content. But he continues as follows:

[n]othing is yet posited thereby regarding «whether» A itself exists or does not exist. This raises the question: under what condition does A exist? X is at least contained in the I and is posited by the I, since the I is that which judges in the case of the above proposition [...]. X is possible only in relation to some A; but X is actually posited in the I, and thus A must also be posited in the I, insofar as X is related to A [...]. «A exists purely and simply for the judging I, and it exists at all only because it is posited in the I as such». In other words [...] there is something [= X] in the I that is constantly self-identical [...] and this X that is posited purely and simply can also be expressed as follows: “I = I” or “I am I” (GA I/2, 257/202).

So there is no being that can precede the I as a principle. In Fichte's words: “«the I originally posits its own being purely and simply»” (GA I/2, 261/205). However, it is a being that should not be thought of in ontological terms —i.e. substantial and constitutive terms— as something closed, but only in practical-philosophical terms —i.e. regulative terms. Otherwise, the logic of the infinite regression of transcendent —that is, dogmatic— thought would be presented once again. But what is the status of the concept of the I? At this point, it can be said that the I, which is not a being, is, according to the development of *GWL* —and taking Jacobi's classification into account— a phantom or, in accordance with the terminology in that text, an idea (cf. GA I/2: 409/134).

According to Fichte, the subject must necessarily, in the knowledge of its impossible grasp, outline the idea of itself as absolute, as total unity. He says: “this [unity] [...] is the object of an Idea, something that «ought» to be present and ought to be brought about by us” (GA I/2, 281/223). That is to say, it is a phantom, which exists and does not exist at the same time. It does exist in its projection through the duty to be, and does not exist in its lack of total concreteness. It does exist through the constant activity of self-positing, and it does not exist insofar as it is not caused by anything that transcends it and gives it a closed formation. Thus, the fantasmatic-ideal self is a regulating focus of a practical nature. Hence the primacy of morality as a component of Fichtean idealism in terms of its principle and the rejection of the religiosity characteristic of a way of thinking that maintains the

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<sup>18</sup> That being said, it is worth noting that it is not the case that the logic grounds the metaphysics. The departure point from logic is only an expositional resource that Fichte takes (cf. GA I/2, 256 and 261/201 and 205).

existence of a being —Jacobi's God or Spinoza's substance—<sup>19</sup> that rises above subjectivity as its cause or of which the subject is only a mode.

On the other hand, to take up Jacobi's quote: “[m]an has this choice [...] and this alone: Nothingness or a God”. In fact, if it is conceived that only a foundation outside of subjectivity (*höchstes Wesen* - God) (cf. GA III/3, 243/517) can give him and the world meaning, then its negation implies a nihilization. The foundation as an ideal I implies the loss of the subject from itself; it implies the dissolution of any closed meaning. However, it is through this “idealization-phantasmagorization” —that it is also a moralization. This means that it is tracing out a regulative idea— that the subject creates (*erfunden*) —or in Fichtean terms, posits (*sich setzen*)— itself and produces a worldly meaning, as a dynamic of loss and gain at the same time. This is the dynamic proper to longing and duty that was described in the previous section of the paper. In fact, it is possible to put into connection with this thought what Fichte says in *AP* in relation to the action for duty. Even though it never reaches a total consummation, it is the very act that posits a meaning there where —effectively in nihilistic terms— there is none. Fichte says regarding the idealistic philosopher —that one who assumes the I as principle of his existence according to what is explained in *GWL*—:

“I will do my duty” [...]. Through this outlook alone is he again able to bear the human hustle and bustle that has become disgusting to him. “Duty now demands”, he says to himself, “that i go on with this life and deal vigorously and cheerfully with whatever now happens to me; and even though life for its own sake has very little value for me, it is holy to me on account of duty” (GA I/5, 424/100).

Against this lack of a God to grant meaning, to ground subjective existence and world existence, and against the absence of total completion or satisfaction, Jacobi says:

if there is no God [...], [j]ust as this world of appearances [and this subject] if [they] had all [their] truth in the appearances and no deeper meaning, if [they] had nothing to reveal apart from them, [they] would become a ghastly phantom before which I would curse the [moral] consciousness where this horror has its genesis [...]. The moral principle of reason, the «accord of a man with himself, a fixed unity» [...] is not itself the «true». Its self, in itself alone, is barren, desolate and empty [...]. I feel a terrible horror before the «nothing», the absolutely indeterminate, the utterly void» (GA III/3, 241-245/515-519).

And he adds in opposition to this horrifying moral conception of oneself by man who believes that he himself is of particular importance:

if you meet a man that thinks high of himself, that is so full of himself, then stay away from him and have pity on him. We are not great, and our happiness lies in the possibility to believe in something greater and better... Those who do not think so and believe they are better than they are, put lies in their sack which cannot be filled with them (GA III/3, 264; JWA 3, 55/XLVIII).

Now, for Fichte, to conceive of a fullness of oneself is a false dogmatic consolation. He writes in *AP*:

the actual intention of this system, I will state it in a few words: with respect to the doctrine of religion, its overarching goal is to snatch away from mankind all the props supporting its laziness and all the reasons for glossing over its depravity, to stop up all the sources of its false consolation, and to leave neither its understanding nor its heart any standpoint other than that of pure duty and belief in the supersensible [moral] world [...]. Contrary to the dogmatist, whose mind attributes self-subsisting reality to the latter because his heart is contented with that very thing. Our philosophy does not deny all reality; it denies only the reality of the temporal and the transitory in order to establish that of the eternal and the everlasting in its full dignity. It is strange to accuse this philosophy of denying divinity, since it instead denies the existence of the world in the sense in which it is asserted by dogmatism (GA I/5, 440/114-115). And he adds: what is

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding the rejection of the religious concept of God as substance in Spinozian terms, cf. (GA I/5, 434-435/109-110).

solely the true and absolute «for me» does not exist at all for them and is a chimera (*Chimäre*) and phantasm (*Hirngespinnst*) «for them» (GA I/5, 444/118).<sup>20</sup>

We can now go a bit further in Fichte's atheism and nihilism by connecting its metaphysical development in *GWL* with its practical implications as they appear in *AP*. In this work Fichte homologates morality and religion. Already this could be considered problematic if we take into account the argumentative propositions that we have established in the paper. The problem arises when he establishes an internal distinction in that homologation. He writes: “[m]orality and religion are absolutely the same. Both are an apprehension of the supersensible, the first through action, the second through belief” (GA I/5, 428/104). Fichte doesn't go much further than this sentence in his explanation. Despite this, we can conclude, taking into account the preceding and following passages, not only his rejection of the theistic God but also his rejection *tout court* of religiosity as a component of subjective existence. Once again, in this way his philosophy can be characterized as atheistic and nihilistic. A few lines before that passage, we read:

[i]t is absolutely necessary and is the essential element in religion that the man who affirms the dignity of his reason relies on the belief in this moral world order (this supersensible, divine realm [...]), takes each of his duties, considered as a decree of that order, and every result thereof, as good, i.e. as beatifying; and happily submits himself to that order [...]. But anyone who demands a concept of God's essence that is in the least conceived without relation to our moral nature and is independent of it in the smallest part has never known God (GA I/5, 428/103).

And he adds: that he summarizes (and focuses on) the various relations of that order to himself and to his acting (when he has to speak thereof with others) by means of the concept of an existing being (which he perhaps calls God) is the consequence of the finitude of his understanding (GA I/5, 428/103. And cf. GA I/5, 433/107).

With what has been said, we see once again that Fichte not only does not admit the anthropomorphization of divinity but he also argues that divinity is nothing outside of subjectivity itself in a transcendental-moral sense. For the philosopher, the suprasensible world is the world of the I, not of a being that transcends it. Religious thought vanishes in Fichte's moral philosophy. Thus, the atheism of his system is based on his denial of the concept of something above subjectivity—the denial of transcendence. In the same way, his nihilism is based on the denial that reality has a meaning in itself, beyond that which the subject attributes to it as an activity—a longing drive—that develops in the world and constantly idealizes it and moralizes it—action for duty— (cf. GA I/5, 438/112).

Finally, we will see how the terms democratism and anarchism also emerge hand in hand with the Fichtean terms of atheism and nihilism.

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<sup>20</sup> We can see here once again in an explicit way Jacobi's characterization of Fichte's idealism as a “phantasmagorization” and nihilization of subjective and objective existence.

### 3. The Democrat-Jacobin-Anarchist

The question to examine at this point is that of which politics can be derived from Fichte's thought which turns around morality as its fundamental axis. My aim is to understand the classification of Fichte as a democrat, a jacobin and an anarchist.<sup>21</sup> Fichte assigns a central place to the political question within the framework of the *Atheismusstreit*. In *VS*, he argues that his supposed atheism is a mere pretext, and that the real reasons why he is being targeted are his democratism and jacobinism—which were equivalent terms at that time. He also reveals in that text that he is not seeking for any revolution and that he is far from wishing for anarchy. There are two interconnected issues to elucidate in this regard. On the one hand, there is the democratic-anarchist sense of his thought in the *BB*—insofar as he states in *VS* that it is on the basis of this work that he is criticized. But more broadly, on a philosophical level, there is the exploration of anarchism or moral democratism—moral democratism according to a qualification that can be attributed to his philosophical perspectives, although it is not in line with the author's own terminology—<sup>22</sup> which challenges the very idea of a political configuration of human life. It is worth clarifying here that in the context of this article, democracy does not imply a specific form of government, but absolute equality between men on the philosophical grounds of his moral idealism and the disappearance of government itself understood in political terms. In fact, Fichte discredits the idea of a truth established by a majority of votes in a political election on the grounds of positive laws that have nothing to do with truth according to the moral law (cf. *GAI*/1, 211/14).<sup>23</sup> Thus it is in a metaphysical-moral sense that we shall consider democracy—and also revolution—as these concepts are deduced in *BB*.<sup>24</sup>

In *VS* he states: “«[t]o them, I am a democrat, a Jacobin [...]». It is not my atheism that they are persecuting by judicial means; it is my democratism” (*GA I*/6, 72-73/195-196). And adds: “I am quite far from preaching anarchy” (*GA I*/6, 74/196). And against the idea of a revolution, he states:

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<sup>21</sup> In what follows, I will focus my attention on the issues of Fichtean democratism and anarchism, rather than on his Jacobinism. For a study of the latter topic in particular, see La Vopa, (1989: 131-133); Oncina Coves, (1995); James, (2008); James (2011: 58); and Beiser, (2016: 40-44).

<sup>22</sup> For a broader account of the concept of democracy in Fichte's philosophy in political and not moral terms, which is rooted more in *GNR* than in the *Revolutionsschriften*—considering the differences between those works—, see Alessiato (2019: 184-189).

<sup>23</sup> In fact, the concept of the people (*Volk*)—which is linked to the concept of democracy in a philological but also philosophical sense—that appears as central in the first chapter of the book and even in its title, loses this major role later on in the other chapters.

<sup>24</sup> This deduction does not imply a philosophical procedure as we find it in *GWL*—or any other of the versions of the *WL*. The *BB* is written as a pamphlet and it lacks a systematic approach to the issues that it discusses—although that does not diminish the philosophical value of his statements there. Apart from that, it is worth noting that already since the beginning of the text, Fichte explains that the Revolution must be read in moral and educational terms and not in political terms (cf. *GA I*/1, 203/5).

I cannot wish for a revolution, for my wishes are satisfied. I cannot intend to cause or support any revolution, for I have no time for that. my time is dedicated to entirely different things that require tranquility [...]. [A] single hour would [not] be left over for revolutionary activities [for me] (GA I/6, 78-79/200).

In the following pages of this text, Fichte is concerned with rejecting his position on *BB*, which, according to him, could give rise to the relevant accusations (cf. GA I/6, 75). However, just as the course of his polemical writings—if we take them to their extreme consequences—leads one to think that he rejected religion as an aspect that should be part of humanity—even though he denies his atheism in a certain sense—so too, when studying the meaning of the political detachment of his idealism, the idea of an exaltation of moral democracy or anarchy<sup>25</sup> that equalizes all individuals and calls into question the role of politics—and in particular of the State as its primordial institution—gains strength. But before analyzing his words in *BB*, we can once again take up *AP* to see how Fichte also speaks out there—in idealistic terms, *i.e.* against empiric-dogmatic views based on the sensible aspect of subject existence—in favor of the idea of equality between individuals—and hand in hand with this, in opposition to egoism as a proper way of developing an individual's life.<sup>26</sup> There he writes:

that yearning [longing] (*Sehnen*) demands liberation from the bonds of sensibility [...], from which the performance of duty, as a consequence of our acting, really liberates us [...]. An entirely new world opens itself to us by means of that predisposition in our nature. Without it, all of the thoughts and endeavors of the human heart are aimed solely at sensible gratification, or at best at the dominance of our unconditioned willfulness (*unbedingte Eigenwille*) (GA I/5, 425/101). (And in *üGuG*, cf. I/5, 353/24-25).

Fichte links the sensible life—that is, the life of the dogmatic-eudamonist who is oriented towards the world as if it had a value in itself (cf. GA I/5, 435/109)—to a subjective disposition that seeks nothing more than the satisfaction of its own unconditioned will, which seeks a pleasure that is consumed in that same sensibility. On the other hand, the existence of an idealist-moral character, which is based on duty, implies an orientation towards a new—suprasensible—world in which the character of subjectivity is the same in each individual. Thus, morality implies absolute democratism as absolute equality. Also in *AP* he maintains:

I necessarily will my beatitude, not as a pleasurable state, but [...] because a rational being (*vernünftiges Wesen*) deserves it [...]. My [moral] conscience (*Gwissen*) shows me that the single yet infallible means to beatitude is the fulfillment of duty [...]. It forces on me the unshakeable belief that there is a rule and a fixed order [...] in accordance with which the purely moral mode of thought necessarily

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<sup>25</sup> For his part, Druet claims that, even in spite of himself, Fichte—particularly in *BB*—arrives at anarchism. In his own words: “[c]’est donc malgré lui que Fichte aboutit à une sorte d’anarchisme” (Druet, 1974: 697).

<sup>26</sup> Although we are not going to analyze this subject in *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten (BG)* (1794)—which Fichte presents only months after the publication of *BB*—, it is relevant to say that also there he makes pronouncements with similar terms. He affirms that the State—as every human institution that is a mere medium towards a moral existence—ought to disappear (cf. GA I/3, 37).

makes for beatitude [...], an order in which all sensible beings work collectively toward the morality of all and thereby toward the «beatitude of all» (GA I/5, 426-427/102). (Underlined text is my own).

From this background, the question arises as to whether, for Fichte, the political consideration of the subject's life should not be left aside. If morality guides the subject towards the beatitude not only of oneself but of everyone, what role would politics and the State as its primary institution play with regard to intersubjective relations? This is a theme that also appears in the aforementioned *BB*.

In general terms, in this work he vindicates the French Revolution at a time when most German intellectuals had adopted conservative positions towards it.<sup>27</sup> Fichte wants to highlight the moral meaning of the revolutionary process and emphasize the importance of thinking of a libertarian and egalitarian society, based on individualism —and therefore anti-statist in any of its forms of government, whether it be a monarchy or a democracy in its political sense— but not for this reason egoistic. Historiography on the text has generally adopted an interpretative line according to which it is a work in which a radicalization —opposed or as a continuity— of Lockean liberalism is exposed (Schottky, 1973: XXVIII; Church & Schön, 2021: XVI) and hence considers that the individual thought of Fichte implies, in fact, an egoistic subject. But it is possible to think that the Fichtean proposal leads to the conception of a society, effectively individualistic, but egalitarian in a moral and therefore absolute sense —contrary to any possible egoism. It is precisely this radicality of the idea of a democratic human life —where democracy should be thought about horizontality between individual lives— that is pointed out and criticized by Fichte's conservative philosophical detractors of the time.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In particular Fichte wrote against A. W. Rehberg and his *Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution* (1793). Rehberg bases his ideas on a work by the English conservative, E. Burke, entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Fichte would also be the target of a few critical reviews of *BB* by F. von Gentz and —although not from a conservative but a republican Kantian perspective—, J. B. Erhard. The latter wrote the essay *Apologie des Teufels* (1795) in which he criticized Fichte's philosophy in *BB*, considering that its presentation of the figure of the individual implies an egoistic way of thinking about the subject's life and even has diabolical consequences.

<sup>28</sup> Even when it is not the subject of this paper, it is important to note that in *BB* he is also thinking of a certain equality regarding the material issue of property. Although he advocates for private property, he explains that its only foundation is individual work (*Arbeit*), understood as formation (*Bildung*) of the material world through one's own physical and mental power and not in a speculative-capitalist sense (cf. GA I/1, 267/77) —as we could consider nowadays the foundation of property in liberal and neo-liberal philosophical-economical-political theories. In particular, this is what prevents us from thinking of Fichtean individualist anarchism as it appears in *BB* in an “anarcho-capitalist” sense as a radicalization of liberal theories. We read in the text: “he who works more also possess more and he who does not work legally possesses nothing at all” (GA I/1, 269/79). And in a more radical passage, he recovers a quotation from Schlözer's *Reports on the States*: “he who does not work, ought not to eat either” (GA I/1, 267/77). That being said, there is no room in a Fichtean moral individual perspective to justify the idea that something beyond one's own hands and mind can work —as for example, the idea that “money works of itself”, which is proper of financial capitalism. From Fichte's point of view, no one “provides work”. Either you work or you don't. This argumentation also separates him from theories of “possessive individualism” (cf. Oncina Coves, 2024: 305) of Lockean root. In particular, the idea of a more equal social distribution of property (*Güter*) that appears in the text (cf. GA I/1, 318/126), contradicts any possible liberal-capitalist reading of the text.

The moral aspect of his philosophical thinking here is linked with the systematic foundation of his thought in *GWL* —which, as I would like to emphasize once again, appeared only months after the publication of *BB*.<sup>29</sup> In *GWL* we find the duty of subjective unity as an existential foundation in moral terms. In *BB*, Fichte refers to the command (*Gebot*) of agreement with oneself (*mit Sich selbst einstimmig zu Machen*) which, when thought of from rationality in a transcendental sense —i. e. a priori; universal—<sup>30</sup> implies the assumption of the moral law (*Sittengesetz*) as the sole foundation of men's free actions —that is, actions according to duty, actions by command (cf. GA I/1, 219-220/23-24)—, with a view to achieving that agreement. This is important because it leads us to particularize the role of this law as a factor of equality between individuals —i.e. morality, in its rationality, implies equality as universality; it is what is common between them. In *BB*, Fichte states:

[t]his primordial form of our self now desires to bring its «changeable» forms [...] into agreement with itself [...]. It [the primordial form of our self] desires this continuously for all reasonable spirits, for it is the primordial form of «reason per se» (GA I/1, 219/24).

Based on this —that is, insofar as morality leads to harmony between individuals— it is possible to ask what the meaning of the state and civic-political laws is in relation to the organization of inter-individual relations according to the development of Fichte's argument in *BB*. Here he affirms:

the moral law of reason is not the business of civil legislation (*bürgerliche Gesetzgebung*). The former is absolutely complete without the latter, and the latter does something superfluous and harmful if it attempts to give the former a new sanction (GA I/1, 238/46).

And in turn, he directly criticizes the State as an institution that pretends to determine human life insofar as it is not based on morality. He characterizes the State as something that does not really aim at freedom, justice and human concord —understood as equality between men—, but rather, through dogmatic procedures, aims to make machines out of them. Hence the Fichtean exhortation to leave political life. We read in *BB*:

the State has always tried to habituate us in every way possible to be a machine, rather than an independent being (*selbständiges Wesen*) [...]. [N]o injustices ought to be committed. Since no civil association

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<sup>29</sup> In fact, Fichte wrote in a letter to his friend J. Baggesen in April or May of 1795: “while I was writing a work on the [French] Revolution, the first insights of my system appeared in me as a reward” (GA III/2, 298. Translation of my own).

<sup>30</sup> With respect to the connection between the transcendental sense of Fichte's idealism according to *GWL* and his thinking in philosophical practical terms in *BB*, is of interest to consider the qualification that Baggesen ascribed to his political —or, more accurately, shall we say moral— thinking as an *a priori sans-culottism* (FG I, 94). We can also refer to Beiser (2016: 38-40) who remarks on the close link between Fichte's *GWL* and *BB*.

(*bürgerliche Verfassung*) is possible without injustices, no civil association must exist (GA I/1, 286-287 and 308/97 and 116).<sup>31</sup>

Now, returning to the *AP*, another issue worth mentioning when thinking about Fichte's moral democratism-anarchism is that of gradualism with regard to the realization of duty and, at the same time, with regard to the implementation of this democracy. Fichte writes in *AP*: “[t]o that consciousness of having done our duty for its own sake is immediately connected a new one: [...] that once one has done only what depended on us, what is not in our power will gradually reveal itself on its own” (GA I/5, 425/101). Now, together with the idea of a gradualism in the effectiveness of action out of duty, Fichte states that a leap is needed in search of the transformation of subjective existence that abandons sensibility and reaches this new world. Still in *AP*, he says: “there is no steady transition from sensibility to morality [...]. [T]he transformation [...] must take place by means of a leap. It must be a rebirth” (GA I/5, 446/119). What is worth emphasizing in these passages is that there is no contradiction in his thinking. In other words, while gradualism with regard to the development of moral existence is known as an activity that is never completely satisfied, the subject can also assume—unless he denies himself his transcendental-moral foundation and treats himself like a machine—that it is not through particular external actions, but through a leap that involves reflection as transcendental subjectivity and autonomous activity, that one reaches such a suprasensible world—in its perpetual self-realization.

Hand in hand with his thoughts on duty, the development of the metaphysics of longing of the *GWL* is also useful as a ground for thinking about whether politics and the State are not lost in his moral democracy. In other words, if longing—as a drive that is not directed towards the world of sensibility—is the engine of subjective existence, then what role does the State play? The State is an institution that regulates the politics of human relations to guarantee a coexistence in which the sensible property of subjects is not threatened by others—property being the touchstone from which Fichte deduces the need for the state in *GNR* (cf. GA I/3, 416-418). However, this is in opposition to Fichte’s moral position in *BB* and as we can conclude, in *AP*. This is also why, according to Fichte, another revolution is more important than any political revolution when it comes to conceiving a change in the existence of man. For Fichte, when he aims for a life of concord in the relationships

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<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Alessiato (2019: 199-205) reads the *BB* in such a way as to consider that the State still has a central place in the organization of the life of individuals and their social relations, which leads to the formulation of a series of questions (2019: 204) about how such an organization should develop, which, according to the author, Fichte does not answer. Indeed, we believe that Fichte does not do so, because—if we draw the ultimate consequences of his ideas—those are not really inconveniences that arise within his theory in this text, in which the State as a political institution that has to regulate the existence of man ends up being abolished in its identification with mere society (*Gesellschaft*). De Pascale (2012: 325-326) also underlines this connotation of the text.

between individuals, the dynamic to be developed is not, in the first place, a change in the political forms of government but in the philosophical way of thinking about one's existence and its moral-practical development. The former change is to be deduced from the latter. This change would lead to the absence of any kind of coercive government and, in its place, to the presence of the constant production of moral coexistence.<sup>32</sup>

From the above it can be deduced that duty and longing, as fundamental concepts of Fichtean idealism, imply the configuration of a framework for subjective coexistence in a democracy that is not a form of political government, but is—in anarchist terms—the absence of it in an existential context of a moral nature.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have tried to solve a concrete and technical problem within the scope of Fichte's philosophy. We have attempted to understand and determine the accuracy and the significance of the accusations of atheism, nihilism and democratism-anarchism that were ascribed to his system. We have departed from his grounding systematic concepts of striving, drive, longing, and duty in order to favor a global understanding of his ideas as an idealist author in opposition to any dogmatic kind of thinking—in particular, opposed to the features of all positive religious thinking and also to the system of Spinoza and the ideas of Jacobi. There is no doubt that the key question to answer would be: is Fichte an atheist? Or, more strictly, is Fichtean transcendental-moral idealism, as a philosophical system, atheist—as well as nihilist and democratic-anarchist—? Do religion and politics still have a place in the framework of his idealism as shown in the texts we have discussed in this paper?

In some of the works edited in the months of the Dispute, Fichte explicitly states that his thought does not imply atheism and, at the same time, declares himself to be against democracy-anarchy. But what do these statements imply? Is this just a legal strategy against his accusers or is this the core of his philosophy? In any case, if we take into account the classic division he establishes between the spirit and the letter in philosophy (GA II/3, 315-342), what are relevant when studying the *Atheismusstreit* are the possibilities that emerge from his metaphysical system and from its

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<sup>32</sup> Fichte writes at the very beginning of the Preface in *BB* in this way: “[a]s long as human beings do not become wiser and more just, all their attempts to become happy are in vain. Escaping from the despot's dungeon, they will murder themselves among each other with the ruins of their broken shackles” (GA I/1, 203/5). On the subject of the philosophical revolution, which, after all, is an educational revolution with a view to the moral development of man and its superiority to any political revolution, cf. López Domínguez, (2024: 92). This author also highlights anarchy as the final end of Fichte's moral-revolutionary thought (cf. López Domínguez, 1993: 140).

practical implications when viewed from the standpoint of a deductive hermeneutics of the texts. In this way —while considering *GWL* as the foundation of his systematic philosophy and the revolutionary texts from the same period—, it is important to emphasize that, according to him, any kind of transcendence —and dogmatic transcendence in particular— implies the annulment of activity and freedom as the principle of subjectivity in the transcendental sense. Or, more precisely, it implies the attempt to sink man into a state of inertia (*Trägheit*) by transposing his existential foundation in an exercise of self-contradiction.<sup>33</sup> Thus, if positive religion or a so-called philosophical thought involves the idea of a metaphysical principle that creates or causes, or a metaphysical principle of which the subject is simply a part or a mode —since this principle is a God or a substance—, then Fichte is an atheist. The absolutely transcendental and immanent character of his doctrine implies such a conclusion.

In turn, he emphasizes the morality of duty as the driving force of subjective life, which is oriented towards the suprasensible world —not as a realm external to subjectivity itself but as a postulate that favors the constant overcoming of worldly obstacles, as well as moral self-improvement. This duty, in conjunction with longing as the drive to absolute concordance with oneself and absolute agreement with other rational beings, leads to the depoliticization of intersubjective relations or, in any case, to the establishment of a framework of democratic-moral coexistence —which we could also call anarchy.

These are the key points that can be deduced from Fichte's idealism in the context of the Dispute that, even through intricate and confusing passages, provide a truly rational consideration of how man can —and ought to— live with himself and with others in a free and equal manner.

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, Fichte stresses that every dogmatist is a fatalist (GA I/4, 192/16) and that this contradicts the fundamental basis of subjectivity itself.

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