

*The
Cambridge Companion
to*

FICHTE



EDITED BY
DAVID JAMES AND
GÜNTER ZÖLLER

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO FICHTE

Each volume of this series of companions to major philosophers contains specially commissioned essays by an international team of scholars, together with a substantial bibliography, and will serve as a reference work for students and non-specialists. One aim of the series is to dispel the intimidation such readers often feel when faced with the work of a difficult and challenging thinker.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) was the founding figure of the philosophical movement known as German idealism, a branch of thought which grew out of Kant's critical philosophy. Fichte's work formed the crucial link between eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought and philosophical, as well as literary, Romanticism. Some of his ideas also foreshadow later nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in philosophy and in political thought, including existentialism, nationalism and socialism. This volume offers essays on all the major aspects of Fichte's philosophy, ranging from the successive versions of his foundational philosophical science or *Wissenschaftslehre*, through his ethical and political thought, to his philosophies of history and religion. All the main stages of Fichte's philosophical career and development are charted, and his ideas are placed in their historical and intellectual context.

New readers will find this the most convenient and accessible guide to Fichte currently available. Advanced students and specialists will find a conspectus of recent developments in the interpretation of Fichte.

DAVID JAMES is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. His previous publications include *Fichte's Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge 2015), *Rousseau and German Idealism: Freedom, Dependence and Necessity* (Cambridge 2013) and *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy: Property and Virtue* (Cambridge 2011).

GÜNTER ZÖLLER is Professor of Philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich and is the author of numerous works on Fichte, including *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy* (Cambridge 1998), *Fichte lesen* (2013) and *Res Publica: Plato's Republic in Classical German Philosophy* (2015). He is also the co-editor and co-translator of *Fichte: The System of Ethics* (Cambridge 2005).

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO FICHTE

Edited by

David James

University of Warwick

and

Günter Zöller

Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich



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Contributors

ALEXANDER AICHELE is Privatdozent of Philosophy at the University of Halle, Germany. His books include *Philosophie als Spiel. Platon – Kant – Nietzsche* (2000), *Ontologie des Nichtseienden. Aristoteles' Metaphysik der Bewegung* (2009), *Einführung in die Logik und ihren Gebrauch* (2015), *Wahrscheinliche Weltweisheit. A. G. Baumgartens Metaphysik des Erkennens und Handelns* (2016) and *Recht: Die Geschichte einer Idee* (2016). He is the editor of Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (2008), A. G. Baumgarten's *Acroasis Logica* (2016) and *Initia Philosophicae Practicae Primae* (2016), as well as co-editor of *Rechtsphilosophie. Zeitschrift für die Grundlagen des Rechts*.

FREDERICK C. BEISER is Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University. He is the author of *Schiller as Philosopher* (2005), *Diotima's Children* (2009), *The German Historicist Tradition* (2011) and *Late German Idealism* (2013).

DANIEL BREAZEALE has taught for many years at the University of Kentucky. He is a translator of several volumes of Fichte's writings, and has also co-edited a dozen volumes of essays on Fichte. His most recent book is *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (2013).

PAUL FRANKS is Professor of Philosophy, Judaic Studies, Religious Studies and German Studies at Yale. In addition to publishing numerous articles, he is the co-editor and co-translator of *Franz Rosenzweig: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (2000) and the author of *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (2005).

SEBASTIAN GARDNER is Professor of Philosophy at University College London. He has published books and papers on figures and themes in philosophy from Kant, including an introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1999), and a collection, co-edited with Matthew Grist, *The Transcendental Turn* (2015).

DAVID JAMES is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. His publications include *Fichte's Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), *Rousseau and German Idealism: Freedom, Dependence and Necessity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); and *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy: Property and Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). He is the editor of *Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

CHRISTIAN KLOTZ is Professor of Philosophy at the Federal University of Goiás, Brazil. He is the author of *Kants Widerlegung des problematischen Idealismus* (1993) and *Selbstbewusstsein und praktische Identität. Eine Untersuchung über Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (2002). He has also published various articles on Kant, Fichte and Hegel.

WAYNE MARTIN is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Essex. He is the author of *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project* (1996), and *Theories of Judgment: Psychology, Logic, Phenomenology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). His recent work on German Idealism includes one paper on Fichte's theory of private property, and a second which applies lessons from German Idealism in analysing legal antinomies in Mental Health legislation.

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE MERLE is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vechta and Honorary Professor of Philosophy at the University of Saarland at Saarbrücken. He is the author of *German Idealism and the Concept of Punishment* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *Justice et Progrès* (1997), the editor of *Fichte. Grundlage des Naturrechts* (2001, 2nd edn forthcoming), and the co-editor of *Kant's Theory of Law* (Beiheft 143 of *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie*), *Fichtes System der Sittenlehre* (2015), *Spheres of Global Justice* (2013), and *Leviathan between the Wars* (vol. XI of *Rechtsphilosophische Hefte*, 2005)

ELIZABETH MILLÁN is Professor of Philosophy at DePaul University. She is author of *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (2007). She translated and edited Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early*

German Romanticism (2004). With Bärbel Frischmann, she edited *Das neue Licht der Frühromantik* (2008). She also co-edited (with John Smith) a special volume of the *Goethe Yearbook* on Goethe and German Idealism (2011).

IVES RADRIZZANI is Professor of Philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. He is also an associate editor of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences editions of Fichte's and Schelling's writings. Besides his extensive editorial work (he is also the editor of writings by Maine de Biran, Reinhold, Jacobi and Maimon), he is the author and translator of many works relating to German idealism (Kant, Reinhold, Jacobi, Fichte, Schulze, Maimon, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling), including monographs and about sixty articles.

HANSJÜRGEN VERWEYEN is Professor Emeritus of Fundamental Theology at the University of Freiburg. He is the author of *Recht und Sittlichkeit in J. G. Fichtes Gesellschaftslehre* (1975), *Gottes letztes Wort: Grundriß der Fundamentaltheologie* (1991, 3rd edn 2000), *Philosophie und Theologie: Vom Mythos zum Logos zum Mythos* (2005), and *Mensch sein neu buchstabieren: Vom Nutzen der philosophischen und historischen Kritik für den Glauben* (2016). He has undertaken German editions of Fichte's *The System of Ethics* (1995), *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1998), *The Vocation of Man* (2000) and *Instructions for a Blessed Life* (2001).

ALLEN WOOD is Ruth Norman Halls Professor at Indiana University and Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Professor emeritus at Stanford University. He is author of numerous articles and author or editor of over twenty books, including *Karl Marx* (1981, 2nd edn 2004), *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (1990), *Kant's Ethical Thought* (1999) and *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (2014). His most recent book is *Fichte's Ethical Thought* (2016).

GÜNTER ZÖLLER is Professor of Philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. A former member of the Fichte Commission of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and a main editor of the critical edition of Fichte's Complete Works, his publications on Fichte include *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy* (1998), *Fichte*

lesen (2013) and *Res Publica: Plato's Republic in Classical German Philosophy* (2015) as well as edited and co-edited books on Fichte and the Enlightenment (2005), Fichte's practical philosophy (2006) and Fichte's political philosophy (2011).

Abbreviations

Writings of Fichte

ACR

Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation, ed. Allen Wood, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

AD

J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800), ed. Yolanda Estes and Curtis Bowman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

AGN

Addresses to the German Nation, trans. Gregory Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

CCS

The Closed Commercial State, trans. Anthony Curtis Adler (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

CPA

The Characteristics of the Present Age, in *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, trans. William Smith, vol. 2 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999).

CR

‘J. G. Fichte: Review of Leonhard Creuzer, *Skeptical Reflections on the Freedom of the Will* (1793)’, trans. Daniel Breazeale, *The Philosophical Forum* 32(4) (2001).

EPW

Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

FG

J. G. Fichte im Gespräch. Berichte der Zeitgenossen, ed. Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth and Walter Schieche, 7 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978–2012). Cited by volume and page number.

FNR

Foundations of Natural Right, ed. Frederick Neuhouser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

FTP

Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo (1796/99), trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

GA

J. G. Fichte: Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962–2012). Cited by part, volume and page number.

IWL

Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797–1800), trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994).

SE

The System of Ethics, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

SK

The Science of Knowledge, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

SW

Sämmtliche Werke, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965). Cited by volume and page number.

VM₁

The Vocation of Man, in *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, trans. William Smith, vol. 1 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999).

VM₂

The Vocation of Man, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987).

Writings of Kant**AA**

Kant's gesammelte Schriften, ed. Königliche Preußische (later Deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Reimer/de Gruyter, 1900–). Cited by volume and page number.

CJ

Critique of the Power of Judgment, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

CPR

Critique of Pure Reason, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

CPrR

Critique of Practical Reason, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

IUH

‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’, in *Kant's Political Writings*, 2nd edn, ed. H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

MM

The Metaphysics of Morals, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

P

Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

R

Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

TP

Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770, ed. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Chronology

1762

Born 19 May in Rammenau, in the Upper Lusatia area of Saxony, the first of eight (surviving) children of the ribbon weaver Christian Fichte and his wife, Johanna Maria Dorothea

1774–80

Attends Princely Secondary School at Pforta, near Naumburg (*Schulpforta*)

1780–84

Studies at the universities of Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg, no degree taken

1785–93

Private tutor in households in Saxony, Zurich and Eastern Prussia

1790

August/September: reads Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

1791

Visits Kant in Königsberg

1792

Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation (in part anonymously published)

1793

June: returns to Zurich; October: marries Johanne Rahn of Zurich

1793–94

Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution (published anonymously)

1794

February: *Zurich Lectures on the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*. As of May: Professor at the University of Jena; *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*; *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Parts One and Two); *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*

1795

Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre (Part Three)

1796

Foundation of Natural Right (Part One)

1796–99

Three yearly lecture courses on the *New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*)

1797

Foundation of Natural Right (Part Two)

1797–98

New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre (fragmentary)

1798

The System of Ethics

1798

November: beginning of the atheism dispute

1799

April: loses his professorship

1800

July: moves to Berlin; *The Vocation of Man*; *The Closed Commercial State*

1804–5

Five consecutive lecture courses on the *Wissenschaftslehre*

1805

May to September: Professor in Erlangen

1806

The Characteristics of the Present Age; The Way towards the Blessed Life; On the Essence of the Scholar

1807

October: flees with the Prussian court to Königsberg; travels on to Copenhagen; returns to Berlin; *Wissenschaftslehre Königsberg*

1807

December to March 1808: *Addresses to the German Nation*

1809

As of December: Professor at the University of Berlin

1810–14

Five yearly lecture courses on the *Wissenschaftslehre*

1810

August: elected Dean of the Philosophical Faculty (re-elected June 1811); *The Wissenschaftslehre in Its General Outline*

1811

August: first elected Rector of the University of Berlin (resigns April 1812); *Five Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar*

1812

Doctrine of Right; Doctrine of Ethics

1813

The Doctrine of the State (published 1820)

1813–14

Three-part philosophical diary (*Diarium I, II and III*)

1814

Dies on 29 January in Berlin

Introduction



Günter Zöller

The purpose of the fourteen essays gathered in the present volume is to introduce the English-speaking reader to the philosophical thought of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Together with Schelling and Hegel, Fichte forms the core of the philosophical movement known as ‘German idealism’, which grew out of Kant’s critical philosophy in a rapid succession of ambitiously projected and variously executed systems of thought. As the founding figure of the movement, Fichte forms the crucial link between eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought and philosophical as well as literary Romanticism, while also foreshadowing later nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in philosophical thought, from existentialism and liberalism to nationalism and socialism.

The outward stations of Fichte’s life are easily summarized: impoverished beginnings in a ribbon weaver family in the Eastern part of Germany, excellent secondary schooling in Schulpforta (the boys’ school later also attended by Nietzsche), university studies of theology and philosophy at Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg (without taking a degree), private tutor in various households in Saxony, Zurich and Eastern Prussia, professorships in Jena (1794–99), Erlangen (1805) and Berlin (1809–1814), along with private lecturing activity between those academic appointments.

Fichte’s past and recent reputation mainly rests on the works he produced during his tenure as professor of philosophy at the University of Jena and on a series of popular works published during his later years in Berlin. The full extent of Fichte’s philosophical work became apparent only posthumously: first through the select publication of his literary remains (*Nachlaß*) in the middle of the nineteenth century and more recently through the complete edition of Fichte’s published and unpublished works, along with his correspondence and transcripts of his lecture courses, undertaken by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (1962–2012). To a large degree, then, Fichte’s is a philosophy yet to be discovered, especially in the English-speaking world, where his reception and reputation have been confined mostly to his influential early work.

The Fichte that emerges from the comprehensive body of his work, stretching over more than two decades (1792–1814), is not so much a forerunner and inaugurator of the later accomplishments of his successor-critics but a coequal participant in a joint and roughly contemporaneous movement beyond Kant that found specifically different manifestations in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. In such a coeval perspective on German idealism's tremendous trio, the three protagonists offer alternative and complementary contributions to their shared project of grasping reality – nature as well as culture – at the level of fundamental philosophical principles and in a comprehensive manner.

In particular, Schelling's philosophical focus lies primarily on an encompassing conception of nature (*Naturphilosophie*) that even includes nature's irrational, 'dark' underground. In contrast, Hegel's core concern lies with the form and function of spirit (*Geist*), as governing reality through the dynamics of its self-alienating as much as self-reaffirming stadial development. Differently yet, Fichte's thinking is centred around a comprehensive conception of freedom as the common and comprehensive principle of self and world, of knowing and doing and of theory and practice ('the first system of freedom').

Fichte's system, while conceived in its entire outline early on, was slow to materialize and never attained a final shape or form. After a meteoric rise to fame, owing to a first publication mistaken for a work of Kant's (*Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, 1792) and his influential lecturing and publishing activity while teaching at Jena, Fichte's academic career and publication record came to an abrupt end over charges of atheism ('atheism dispute', 1798–99) that led to the termination of his academic appointment and made him desist from the further publication of his continuing basic work in philosophy, effectively limiting his public activity over the next decade to lecturing and to popular print publications in the philosophy of history (*The Characteristics of the Present Age*, 1806), political philosophy (*Addresses to the German Nation*, 1808) and the philosophy of religion (*The Way towards the Blessed Life*, 1806).

In addition to responding to recent philosophical developments and decisively shaping their future course, Fichte's philosophical thinking is deeply informed by and directed towards contemporary political events – from the French Revolution, to which he devoted an early work (*Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgment of*

the French Revolution, 1793–94), through Napoleon’s rule over Europe, to which he responded with a call for German cultural re-education and political unification (*Addresses to the German Nation*), to politico-philosophical interventions in the context of the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon.

Fichte’s philosophical system, as it first took shape in his Jena lectures and associated publications, comprises a foundational philosophical discipline, inspired by Kant’s critical philosophy and termed ‘*Wissenschaftslehre*’ or ‘Science of Knowledge’ (*Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794–95), a philosophy of right (*Foundation of Natural Right*, 1796–97) and an ethics (*The System of Ethics*, 1798), the latter two built on the premises of his foundational philosophy. Additional publications from that phase lie in the philosophy of education (*Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*, 1794) and the philosophy of religion (‘On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World’, 1798). In the wake of the atheism dispute and as part of his defence against the charges of denying God as well as any genuine material and spiritual reality (‘nihilism’), Fichte wrote his most widely known work, a set of meditations tracing the passage from doubt through knowledge to faith (*The Vocation of Man*, 1800).

On the basis of his conviction that philosophy did not reside in some fixed product but instead consisted in a continuing and evolving activity requiring ever-changing modes of presentation, Fichte reworked the *Wissenschaftslehre* again and again over the entire course of his life, developing and publicly presenting some seventeen versions altogether, but never publishing any of them other than the very first one. The earlier presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are centred around a basic non-empirical (‘transcendental’) account of human subjectivity (‘I’) in its dual but unitary manifestation as the subject of knowing and the subject of willing (‘theoretical I’, ‘practical I’), along with the associated worlds to be known and to be acted upon (‘world of sense’, ‘world of the understanding’). Fichte’s focus here is on the role of immediate self-consciousness as the enabling condition of all other consciousness and its objects.

The later presentations focus on knowledge as such (‘absolute knowledge’) along with its inscrutable ground (‘being’, ‘the absolute’, ‘God’) as the ultimate condition of all things known. On Fichte’s understanding, the various and varying presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* all reflect his basic insight into the self-sufficiency of knowledge as

such and into the independence of knowledge in general as well as any particular kind of knowledge from the contingent mental and physical conditions of its actual occurrence. For Fichte, who here follows Kant, knowledge has its own laws, independent of nature and actually founding nature's lawful order through the basic functions of cognitive and conative subjectivity (transcendental idealism).

A further defining feature of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* across its multiple instantiations is the constitutive role of willing and acting for all forms of knowledge ('primacy of the practical'). For Fichte thinking is a form of doing (inner activity), just as willing is a form of thinking (practical thinking). Fichte's pervasive recourse to the I notwithstanding, the activity of thinking and willing in Fichte is not solitary and monological. In a pioneering move, Fichte introduces the You and the We (intersubjectivity, interpersonality) and the material presence of each individual I ('body') as essential conditions of a functionally complete consciousness. Fichte the notorious philosopher of the I is also the philosopher of the other I and the joint I.

Next to the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper, the chief output of Fichte's philosophical work lies in the areas of law (or right) and ethics. Fichte's early philosophy of law defends a conception of the state as a state of right based on the freedom and equality of its citizens. According to Fichte, the legal relations between citizens are to be marked by their reciprocal regard of each other as equally free ('recognition'). In his early ethics Fichte combines the derivation of the principle of morality ('moral law') as condition of practical self-consciousness with a sustained consideration of the functional conditions for the empirical efficacy of moral willing. In particular, he introduces a natural basis for moral action under the guise of a propulsion ('drive') that orients and motivates moral willing, thus preparing it for reason's freely given assent to the action.

During his final phase, as a professor of philosophy at Berlin's newly founded university, Fichte returned to his earlier practice of having the lecture presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* prepared by propaedeutic lecture courses (*The Facts of Consciousness*, 1810–11, 1813; *Transcendental Logic*, 1812) and followed by specific applications to the domains of law and ethics (*Doctrine of Right*, *Doctrine of Ethics*, both 1812). The late Fichte also returned to his long-standing interest in political philosophy with a lecture series on the relationship of stadial approximation between the state in history and the state in the idea (*The Doctrine of the State*, 1813; published

posthumously in 1820). Further material of a philosophical and political nature is contained in a set of extensive noetic diaries from Fichte's final years, only recently published for the time, which offer a fascinating glimpse into the exceedingly open and explicitly self-critical form under which Fichte's thinking took place (*Diarium I, II and III*, 1813–14).

The fourteen essays to follow address the emergence, the unfolding and the reception of Fichte's philosophy. Wayne Martin traces the path that leads from Kant to Fichte, with a focus on the further philosophical figures mediating the transition between Kant and Fichte. Frederick Beiser presents Fichte's engagement with the French Revolution as an international political event.

Turning to the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper, Christian Klotz's contribution features the first and only published version of 1794–95, focusing on the structure of consciousness and self-consciousness in the influential text. Daniel Breazeale examines the *New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*) from 1796–99, especially regarding questions of method. Günter Zöller's contribution includes the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in a comprehensive perspective on Fichte's overall philosophical project.

The next group of essays pursues the systematic application of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to specific object domains. Allen Wood deals with Fichte's philosophy of right and his ethics, including both their early (Jena) and their later (Berlin) versions. Jean-Christophe Merle presents Fichte's philosophy of economics, with a special focus on his theory of property. Ives Radrizzani's contribution presents Fichte's philosophy of history, with special regard to the active shaping of history. Hansjürgen Verweyen deals with Fichte's philosophy of religion in its development over time and in tandem with the overall trajectory of his thinking. Alexander Aichele reads Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* with an eye to the submergence of individuality in nationality.

The final group of essays is devoted to the reception of Fichte's philosophy. Elizabeth Millán portrays Fichte's role in the development of early German Romantic philosophy, with a particular focus on the poet-philosophers Hardenberg (Novalis) and

Friedrich Schlegel. Sebastian Gardner investigates the philosophical relationship between Fichte and Schelling, focusing on their increasing disagreement with each other's philosophical projects. David James looks at Hegel's critique of Fichte, with special consideration given to Hegel's retake on Fichte's account of mutual recognition between human beings. Finally, Paul Franks surveys the recent reception of Fichte's philosophy, chiefly in the context of current work in the philosophy of mind.

The volume also includes a chronology of Fichte's life and works and a bibliography listing the main editions of Fichte's complete works, English translations of his writings, bibliographies of primary and secondary literature on Fichte along with journals and book series specifically devoted to Fichte's philosophy, and a selection of international scholarly work on Fichte's philosophy, focusing on classical studies and recent international work.

1

From Kant to Fichte



Wayne M. Martin

Introduction

Few periods in the history of philosophy manifest the degree of dynamism and historical complexity that characterizes early post-Kantian philosophy. The reasons for this special character of so-called ‘classical German philosophy’ are no doubt themselves quite complex. Institutional and political circumstances certainly played an important role. The end of the eighteenth century marks a point at which philosophy was seen as being deeply implicated in the political developments of the day (in particular: the upheavals in France). What’s more, this intense political context for philosophy coincided with the re-emergence of ‘academic’ philosophy: the first point in the modern period when the leading figures on the philosophical scene were members of a common (and flourishing) academic community.¹ But more narrowly philosophical factors are also important. Kant’s philosophical accomplishment was widely seen as marking a watershed in philosophy’s development, but it was an accomplishment whose lessons and viability were highly contested. Moreover, part of the legacy of Kant’s project was an intertwining of particular philosophical investigations and theories with accounts of the development of recent philosophical enquiry. The idea that philosophy must be self-conscious about its own history is one that has since come to be associated particularly with Hegelian thought, but its origins are already to be found in Kant’s idea of a ‘critical philosophy’. The critical project – the investigation of the self-undermining tendencies of reason – is motivated, after all, by an account of the trajectory of the history of philosophical theorizing. When combined with a widespread (and now quite alien) optimism about the prospects for a final, thoroughly ‘scientific’ resolution of philosophy’s questions, it gave rise to a period in which philosophical undertakings were often informed and justified by appeal to an account of their place in philosophy’s unfolding endgame.

Given all this there is clearly good reason to approach any philosophy from this period via an understanding of its original philosophical context and to locate it in this dynamic philosophical development. In the case of Fichte’s thought, however, there are further circumstances which make such a contextual approach at once indispensable and all but irresistible. The indispensability derives mainly from the state of Fichte’s early corpus – in particular the writings from his short tenure at Jena and the time in Zurich

just preceding it. It was during this period (roughly, the last seven years of the eighteenth century) that Fichte developed his most original ideas and exercised his greatest influence on his contemporaries. Yet despite the importance of this period, and despite the fact that he published extensively during it, Fichte's foundational texts from the Jena period remain fragmentary and incomplete. The student of the Jena corpus is left to work with various documents pertaining to Fichte's lectures from this period: most notably the 'handbook' Fichte prepared for his students and student-transcripts of the lectures themselves. We also have a number of what Fichte called 'critical'² discussions and summaries of his views from various essays and reviews, as well as extensive private notes from his *Nachlaß*.³ If we are to make an intelligent attempt to interpret these puzzling and often context-bound works, we must begin by trying to situate them in the rich and dynamic philosophical conversation to which they were a contribution.

The irresistibility of this approach stems from a tantalizing puzzle about the history of classical German philosophy. One of the central aims of Kant's critical project was strictly to limit the domain of rational enquiry. His positive theory – the transcendental account of the cognitive faculties – was meant to be in the service of this negative project of confining those faculties to their legitimate applications. To this end Kant laboriously documents and diagnoses the dangers of speculative excess: in particular the logical tangles which he held to be the product of the traditional philosophical project of extending a metaphysical theory beyond the limits of possible experience. Yet to all appearances, this spirit of restraint – along with the specific strictures Kant sought to establish – was the first casualty of the rage for 'critical philosophy' that followed. Hence the puzzle: how did Kant's critical project so quickly inspire a tradition which at once claimed its name and legacy and yet seemed so palpably to depart from both its letter and its spirit?⁴ Any attempt to resolve this paradox must in the first instance come to terms with the philosophical context in which Fichtean philosophy could – at least for a time – claim the Kantian mantle.

This question about the puzzling transformation of critical philosophy has long admitted of a quick and simple answer – an answer which, however, has frequently yielded a distorted (and dismissive) account of Fichte's thought. This reading begins with the claim that Fichte's philosophy is an attempt to carry out a 'consistent Kantianism' – in particular a Kantianism that would renounce any appeal to the problematic notion of a

‘thing in itself’. Like most neat formulae in the history of philosophy, there is a kernel of truth here. One of the main contentious issues in the early discussions of Kant’s *Critiques* concerned the notion of things in themselves. The most notorious formulation of the criticism of this part of Kantian doctrine came from F. H. Jacobi, who complained, in an oft-quoted remark from the appendix to his dialogues on David Hume,⁵ that

I was held up not a little by this difficulty in my study of the Kantian philosophy, so much so that for several years running I had to start from the beginning over and over again with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, because I was incessantly going astray on this point, viz. that *without* that presupposition I could not enter into the system, but *with* it I could not stay within it.⁶

According to Jacobi’s influential criticism, Kant is committed to the claim that things in themselves causally interact with (or ‘affect’) the senses to produce representations. Yet, as Jacobi sees it, such a thesis contradicts at least three central claims of Kantian theory. First, it is incompatible with what Jacobi took to be Kant’s quasi-phenomenalistic idealism. If Kant’s claim that objects are ‘mere appearances’ amounts, as Jacobi holds, to the claim that they are ‘merely subjective beings, with no existence outside us’,⁷ then they cannot also be mind-independent realities that affect the senses. Secondly, the thesis violates the limits imposed by Kant’s account of causality: the doctrine of affection constitutes an illegitimate application of the categories of cause and effect to things as they are in themselves. Finally, the affection thesis contradicts Kant’s most general and important critical claim: that things in themselves are unknowable. If we are to remain true to this Kantian result then it seems we must renounce any claims about the role of things in themselves in experience. The conclusion Jacobi draws is that the moderated form of idealism advocated by Kant – an idealism which, as he sees it, retains realist commitments by invoking things in themselves – must inevitably collapse from its own internal tensions. If one is to pursue the idealist strategy consistently, Jacobi claims, the idealism must be of a much more radical form. Accordingly Jacobi’s appendix closes with a challenge to would-be idealists – a challenge that, in some sense, Fichte took up:

The transcendental idealist must have the courage, therefore, to assert the strongest idealism that was ever professed, and not be afraid of the objection of speculative

egoism, for it is impossible for him to pretend to stay within his system if he tries to repel from himself even this last objection.⁸

But, although Jacobi's challenge certainly informs Fichte's appropriation of Kantian philosophy, it has often proved to be a misleading point of reference from which to construct an interpretation of his positive philosophical doctrine. In particular, this account of Fichte's antipathy towards things in themselves has suggested all-too-ready an answer to the puzzle about the transformation of classical German philosophy. For what would be involved in meeting Jacobi's challenge? How would Kant's 'critical' philosophy emerge from the systematic excision of all invocation of things in themselves? An important part of what would be lost is the dualistic theory of cognition that lies at the heart of Kant's epistemological doctrine. Kant claims that human knowledge requires the contributions of distinct and mutually irreducible cognitive faculties – in particular a faculty of intuitions (sensibility) and a faculty of concepts (understanding). This thesis – sometimes called the 'distinctness of the faculties thesis' or 'the discursivity thesis' – provides the key both to Kant's positive epistemological views and to his critique of his empiricist and rationalist predecessors. The attempt to meet Jacobi's challenge, however, would seem to involve renouncing this central Kantian doctrine. For the rejection of the doctrine of affection by things in themselves would seem to require the rejection of its correlate: the claim that there is an essentially passive, receptive dimension of human cognition. This cost seems quickly to generate others. If there is no passive dimension to human cognition then the spontaneous activity of the subject can no longer be seen as one moment (the formal, synthesizing, organizing element) of the cognitive process. We are led, it seems, to the idea of an active knowing subject which is somehow wholly productive of its experienced world. It is the emergence of this idea of a 'world-productive' (or 'absolute') subject that has seemed to many commentators to mark the transformation of post-Kantian philosophy. For it would seem here that we have left behind Kant's epistemological framework and embarked on the seas of speculative metaphysics against which he had warned. Indeed, since it seems clear that we finite human subjects are not wholly productive of our world, one might be led to think that the discourses of transcendental philosophy have here been replaced by a metaphysical discourse that borders on the theological. Evidence for this shift has seemed to some

commentators to be readily visible in the talk of the ‘Absolute I’ and ‘Absolute Spirit’ that soon became the characteristic idiom of the post-Kantian tradition.⁹

Although there may be a certain logic to this sequence of interpretative moves, and although it makes contact with Fichte’s arguments and doctrines at various points, the outcome must be deemed a fundamental distortion of Fichte’s aims and views. In what follows I provide an account of Fichte’s early philosophical project by drawing on a richer account of the context of his initial forays into transcendental philosophy. Naturally the scope of this contextual approach must remain very limited here.¹⁰ But even a basic familiarity with this context will provide us with a historically more accurate and philosophically more interesting account of the aims and methods of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as well as a more complex answer to the puzzle about the Kantian legacy in German Idealism.

Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*

The first step in contextualizing the *Wissenschaftslehre* is to attend to the crucial role played by one mediating figure in particular – Fichte's predecessor at Jena: Karl Leonhard Reinhold.¹¹ In the late 1780s and early 1790s, Reinhold was (after Kant himself) the most widely known and influential of the growing group of proponents of the new 'critical philosophy'. His writings during this period were devoted to two separate purposes. As he explained in a 1790 preface:

The plan of my future endeavours now has two main parts, one of which I take up in my letters on the Kantian philosophy [i.e., the *Briefe*], the other in these contributions [i.e., the *Beyträge*]. In the former I seek to develop the consequences, the applicability and the influence of the critical philosophy; in the latter its grounds, elements and particular principles.¹²

Reinhold's influence was felt on both these fronts. Of the two projects mentioned here, the first provided the medium through which Kantian philosophy first attracted a broad public audience. It was the second project, however – the attempt to investigate the foundations of Kant's system – that was to have a decisive influence on the subsequent development of German Idealism. In a number of related writings, Reinhold sought to forge a 'philosophy of the elements' or 'elementary philosophy' (an *Elementarphilosophie*)¹³ which would spell out the basic principles and arguments upon which Kant's critical edifice is erected.

Reinhold's guiding conviction regarding Kant's critical writings was that they held out – without actually fulfilling it – the promise of raising philosophy to the ranks of 'strict science'. On Reinhold's repeatedly professed view, Kant had provided the necessary materials to take such a step; what was needed was a more perspicuous presentation of them. Three leading ideas animate Reinhold's attempt to provide, in his *Elementarphilosophie*, such a reconstructed Kantianism. The first is the idea of a philosophical *system*. In part we can see Reinhold's project here as a reaction against the all-but-impenetrable architectonics of Kant's critiques. The obscure structure of the critiques – a structure tailored in part to their polemical, particularly anti-rationalist function – stood in the way of their attaining what Reinhold took to be one of the

hallmarks of a mature science: consensus among its practitioners. If a philosophy is to defend a claim to general validity (if it is to be, in Reinhold's terms, *allgemeingültig*) then it must seek general acceptance (it must aim to be *allgemeingeltend*) as well.¹⁴ One could only hope for general acceptance of the Kantian system, Reinhold held, if its strength were made more apparent in its exposition. This demand for systematicity, however, goes beyond merely expository considerations. The deeper complaint is that there are crucial premises in the critiques whose status is left obscure in Kant's own account. One important example of such a premise is the distinctness of the faculties thesis (discussed above). As we have seen, this is a central pillar of the Kantian system, yet Kant nowhere provides a direct argument in its support. For Reinhold it was only by recasting Kant's views in systematic form that such shortcomings could be identified and corrected. As regards the form that would satisfy this demand for system, Reinhold's views betray a clear rationalist lineage: philosophy must be a deductive system of propositions based on a single self-evident first principle or *Grundsatz*.

Of course, it is one thing to hope for a fully and transparently systematic philosophy; it is something else to imagine that it might actually be carried out. Reinhold's confidence on the latter point arises out of a second guiding idea of his *Elementarphilosophie*: a claim about the central insight at stake in Kant's philosophical revolution. The 1791 *Fundament* is an attempt to capture this insight (and its philosophical importance) by situating the Kantian project in the context of the development of modern philosophy. According to the sketch Reinhold provides there, the central philosophical project of the modern period has been to develop a theory of the foundations of knowledge – in particular to establish those foundations through what Reinhold broadly calls 'theories of the origin of representations'. It is this project that is at work both in the empiricists' account of 'simple representations drawn from experience' and in the rationalist theories of 'innate representations'.¹⁵ Reinhold sees the roots of Kant's accomplishments in his contribution to this modern epistemological undertaking. For Reinhold, Kant has fundamentally advanced the project by directing his attention to certain basic structural features of consciousness – features that his predecessors had failed to investigate systematically. One way in which Reinhold formulates this point is to attribute to Kant an insight into 'the essential distinction ... between a mere impression and a representation', or 'between experience, understood as

the connection of perceived objects, and ... sensations, which only contain the material of perception'.¹⁶ In a word, Kant's contribution was to explore the presuppositions of the *representational* character of our conscious life – to realize that a theory of knowledge must not simply account for the presence of certain sensations or impressions in consciousness, but must explain the capacity of those conscious contents to relate to or express objective states of affairs. It is this interpretation of the roots of Kant's philosophical accomplishment that determines the strategy for Reinhold's systematizing project: critical philosophy must be systematized by tracing its main philosophical doctrines back to this concern with the fundamental 'faculty of representation' (*Vorstellungsvermögen*).

The third idea that gives shape to Reinhold's Kantianism is his introduction of what can now best be thought of as a version of phenomenological methodology. Reinhold insists that the only way in which a philosophical system can be securely founded is if its first principles are drawn from the 'facts of consciousness' themselves. This aspect of Reinhold's programme has at least two motivations. In part it arises out of his requirement that a scientific philosophy must be generally accepted (*allgemeingeltend*). According to Reinhold's rather narrow conception of how such consensus might be attained, it is only by starting from something that must be admitted by all parties at the outset that philosophy can hope to rise above its perennial factionalism. Hence philosophy must avoid any starting point which begs the question against the sceptic, for instance; and it cannot begin, as for instance Spinoza had, with abstract and contestable definitions. The only way of assuring universal acceptance, Reinhold concludes, is to start from indisputable facts of consciousness. Additionally, however, this methodological injunction reflects an important point about the *object* of philosophical investigation in the wake of Kant's attack on traditional metaphysics. The facts of consciousness must provide the *starting point* for philosophy because the conscious subject is now the primary *domain* of philosophical investigation. Philosophy must no longer be in the business of constructing *a priori* arguments about being as such; its aim is to provide an adequate account of human subjectivity.

These three ideas flow together in what is Reinhold's most important single contribution to the early Kant-reception: his claim that critical philosophy must begin from what he dubs 'the principle of consciousness' (*der Satz des Bewußtseins*):

In consciousness the representation is distinguished by the subject from the subject and the object and is related to both.¹⁷

The principle of consciousness is meant to articulate a self-evident, phenomenologically accessible fact which can ground a rigorous philosophical science. The fact it articulates concerns the complex representational structure characteristic of conscious states. Consider, for example, my belief that Socrates died in Athens: it is related to and distinguished from me (it is my belief but not me) and it is related to and distinguished from Socrates (it is about Socrates but not Socrates). According to Reinhold, it is the analysis of this fourfold structure which must occupy the place of *philosophia prima* in a new, rigorously systematic transcendental philosophy.¹⁸ The most fundamental notion in this new first philosophy will be not the notion of substance or subject or even knowledge, but representation – i.e., that which stands in this complex structure of relation and distinction.

Reinhold's attempt to develop this *Elementarphilosophie* shaped the early reception of Kant's philosophy in a number of important ways. His demand for systematicity (and his particular conception of what would count as meeting that demand) set in motion a lively debate about the starting point and methodology of philosophical investigation. That debate – which would soon count, for instance, Fichte's 'Introductions' and Hegel's *Phenomenology* as prominent chapters – would become one of the most important philosophical legacies of German Idealism. Secondly, although Reinhold's particular claims about the principle of consciousness were challenged, his introduction of this principle provided a focus to many early discussions of Kant's theoretical philosophy. From the Reinholdian perspective which briefly dominated the scene, the central doctrines of the first critique – e.g., its account of the structure of reason, its doctrine of the ideality of space and time, even its deduction of the categories – are subordinated to (and sometimes neglected in favour of) what seemed to be the more general and fundamental issue raised by the principle of consciousness: how are we to account for the complex relation and distinction of a representation to its subject and object? Finally, as we shall now see, Reinhold's undertaking shaped the Kant-reception

not only through its positive project but also through its failure – in particular its vulnerability to sceptical criticism.

Schulze's Sceptical Critique of Reinhold

Reinhold's 'systematized Kantianism' very quickly came under attack from a number of quarters. For the purposes of understanding the emergence of Fichte's project, the most important of the attacks came from a number of self-proclaimed sceptics who sought to vindicate a broadly Humean position against the purported refutation Hume had suffered at the hands of 'critical' philosophy. One of the most prominent of these sceptics was Fichte's onetime schoolmate, G. E. Schulze. Schulze wrote under the penname Aenesidemus, and in 1792 published his influential attack on critical philosophy, particularly (though not exclusively) as manifest in its Reinholdian version.¹⁹

Schulze attacked Reinhold's system on many particular points. Indeed, the philosophical core of his work consists of a long section in which he reproduces substantial portions of the *Neue Darstellung*, providing a running critical commentary on Reinhold's claims and arguments. Two clusters of objections in particular seem to have attracted Fichte's attention and ultimately played a key role in his rejection – or revision – of Reinhold's variety of Kantianism. The first cluster directly relates to the principle of consciousness and to what we might call 'Reinholdian representationalism': the view that *all* our conscious states are representations, exhibiting the fourfold structure articulated in Reinhold's first principle.²⁰ This form of representationalism, Schulze argues, is untenable: the principle of consciousness can at best be considered a claim about a subset of our mental states; it is not the case that every mental act or content (*Äußerungen des Bewußtseyns*) exhibits Reinhold's complex fourfold structure.²¹ At one level this objection is cast simply as a phenomenological report: if we reflect on our conscious lives we will discover some conscious events to which the principle of consciousness does not apply. But in his commentary on §§ II–V of Reinhold's *Neue Darstellung* Schulze goes on to make a stronger claim: it is not a contingent matter that the principle of consciousness fails of universal applicability; it *could not* be the case that all our mental states are representations. He argues that the very possibility of representation requires a set of mental acts – acts he refers to as 'intuitions' or 'perceptions' – to which the principle of consciousness does not apply:

[T]he act of distinguishing and relating can only take place if something exists [*wenn etwas da ist*] that can be related to and distinguished from something else. It is quite impossible to conceive of an act of distinguishing where there is nothing at hand that can be distinguished.²²

Moreover, since Reinhold's representations have as constituent moments a relation to the object and a relation to the subject, we must, Schulze argues, assume the existence of some non-representational relation to subject and object:

The perception of the object to which the representation is related and from which it is distinguished does not consist *once again* in something's being related and distinguished by the subject to the subject and the object.²³

Otherwise we would seem to be left with a regress: representations would themselves always require further representations as their constituents. Schulze's view thus seems to be that the complex act of representation, with its fourfold relations among mental content, subject and object, depends on the prior availability to consciousness of the items which enter into those relations. I can only represent, that is, once I have some (accordingly non-representational) acquaintance with mental content, subject and object.

The principle of consciousness also suffers, Schulze argues, from ambiguity and indeterminacy. Schulze develops this line of criticism by documenting Reinhold's inconsistent use of key terms from the principle and by charging that he fails to specify, for instance, what type of 'relation' is supposed to hold between representation and subject and between representation and object (part to whole? cause to effect? substance to accident? sign to signified?).²⁴

The second cluster of objections centres around the issue of causality. It is here in particular that Schulze seeks to defend a sceptical Humean position against its alleged Kantian refutation. Hume, at least as Schulze understands him, had cast doubt on the validity of causal judgements, denying the legitimacy of an inference from effect to cause (or vice versa). Citing Kant's famous claim about his dogmatic slumbers, Schulze takes one of the chief aims of the *Critique* to be the refutation of Hume's scepticism on this point: the *Critique* sets out to vindicate the rational credentials of the notion of causality, to show that it is a 'pure concept of the understanding' and a condition on the possibility

of any experience. Schulze complains, however, that this purported refutation of Hume, particularly as it appears in Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, begs the crucial question at issue. For Reinhold's first substantive move is to argue from the principle of consciousness to a 'faculty of representation'. This inference from the fact of representation to a faculty of representation, Schulze charges, is tantamount to an inference from effect to cause; Reinhold has simply assumed the validity of just the sort of claim which Hume had cast in doubt.

It is therefore simply incomprehensible whence the *Elementarphilosophie* obtains the right, in laying down its foundations, to apply the categories of cause and actuality to a supersensible object, viz., to a particular faculty of representation which cannot be intuited and which is not given in any experience.²⁵

If we construe Schulze's point narrowly as a critique of Reinhold's inference from the fact of representation to the faculty of representation then the objection is less than conclusive. For it is certainly possible (and, in this context, charitable) to construe this as an inference from an actuality to its possibility rather than from effect to cause.²⁶ But when we consider the overall strategy of the *Elementarphilosophie*, Schulze's objection – that it helps itself to a causal model of the faculty of representation – begins to seem more telling. This is perhaps most striking in Reinhold's notoriously problematic argument from the principle of consciousness to the Kantian 'distinctness of the faculties' thesis. In its barest form Reinhold's argumentative strategy is as follows: from the principle of consciousness we know that representations are related to both subject and object. In order for this to be the case, however, the representation must have at least two constituents: one in virtue of which it is related to the subject, and a second through which it is related to the object. Reinhold goes on to dub these two constituents the 'form' and 'matter' of the representation, and concludes that it is the form which relates to the representing subject and the matter which relates to the object.²⁷

This argument is vulnerable to criticism on several grounds. Schulze, for instance, rightly objects to the major premise, which would seem to admit of obvious counterexamples; Reinhold simply assumes that a simple entity cannot stand in the same relationship to two different things.²⁸ What's more, Reinhold's introduction of the

form–matter distinction seems (particularly given its importance in that which follows) curiously unmotivated and arbitrary. But the more fundamental problem with Reinhold's argument is the slide it exhibits in his use of the notion of 'relation' (*Beziehung*). When, in the principle of consciousness, Reinhold asserts a relation between representation and object, the relation in question must clearly be an intentional relation. In this context, that is, to say that the representation 'relates' to an object is to say that it is *about* an object, that it is a representation *of* something. It is, after all, only in this intentional sense that the relation between representation and object can possibly have the status of a 'fact of consciousness'. But when Reinhold concludes, in the context of the distinctness argument, that the *matter* of representation relates to the object, this cannot, on his own theory, be interpreted as an intentional relationship. For in abstraction from the form of representation, the matter of representation is not about *anything*.²⁹ Reinhold's account of the distinctness of the faculties thus must be construed as a departure from the intentional vocabulary of his starting point. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, as Schulze charges, Reinhold here seeks to draw a causal conclusion directly from the principle of consciousness.

Fichte's Review of Schulze

It was Fichte's confrontation with Schulze's attack on the *Elementarphilosophie* – a confrontation occasioned by Fichte's assignment to review Schulze's work for the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* – that led to the first formulations of the programme of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte's surviving correspondence from 1793 clearly indicates that the task of coming to terms with Schulze's critique prompted him to a fundamental reassessment of his own basic philosophical commitments.³⁰ The review itself is composed in three distinct voices. At each stage, Fichte provides a statement of a Reinholdian claim, a summary of Schulze's objection and then a commentary on the exchange in his own (anonymous) voice. Although the rhetoric of the review suggests that Fichte is providing a defence of Reinhold against Schulze, a closer examination quickly reveals that he in fact grants many of Schulze's central objections. At the same time, however, Fichte points towards a reconstrual of *Elementarphilosophie* – towards a system of critical idealism which would stand up to Schulze's assault. Although the discussion ranges over a wide variety of issues – from the philosophical significance of scepticism to the possibility and structure of so-called 'moral theology'³¹ – the most important points for our purposes concern the two clusters of objections discussed above.

A first general lesson to be drawn from Schulze's objections to the principle of consciousness, Fichte holds, concerns the relation of transcendental philosophy to the 'facts of consciousness'. As we have seen, Reinhold proposes that the first principle of the *Elementarphilosophie* be drawn directly from phenomenological reflection on these facts. In raising the issue of the universality of the principle of consciousness, however, Schulze alerts us, in Fichte's view, to a fundamental difficulty with Reinhold's phenomenological procedure. In short, there seems to be a mismatch between the empirical, inductive generalizations that might be warranted by Reinhold's 'empirical self-observation' (as Fichte dubs it)³² and the *a priori* science it purportedly grounds. If, to take a key example, the transcendental philosopher seeks to establish with strict necessity that knowledge of things in themselves is impossible (and not merely, for instance, that no such knowledge has been gained to date), then the principle which provides the ultimate foundation for that claim must surely be more than an empirical generalization

across observed cases. Yet on Reinhold's conception of phenomenological grounding, the latter is the best that can be claimed for the principle of consciousness. Fichte's conclusion – which in effect marks the first of several 'speculative turns' in the history of post-Kantian Idealism – is to insist that, while transcendental philosophy must concern itself with the empirical facts of consciousness, those facts cannot themselves provide the foundation for the transcendental project.

Secondly, Fichte effectively agrees with Schulze (in a key case of taking Aenesidemus' side against Reinhold) in rejecting the thesis of 'Reinholdian Representationalism'. 'Representation', Fichte writes, 'is not the highest concept for every act of our mind' (GA I/2: 48; EPW, 65; translation modified). In part, Fichte's reasoning here follows Schulze's. The possibility of my engaging in a particular, complex act of representation – of my relating a mental content to a subject and an object and distinguishing it from both – depends on my having at my disposal some notion of subject and object, some conception of the world as distinct from me (and of me as distinct from it). Since the availability of the subject–object schema is a condition of the possibility of any representation (in Reinhold's sense), it cannot itself be understood as a product of a further set of representational acts. Accordingly, we must attribute to any representing subject a set of cognitive capacities or 'acts' that are not themselves representational. But Fichte declines to follow Schulze's empiricist construal of these pre-representational acts as 'perception' or (empirical) 'intuition':

The absolute subject, the I, is not given by empirical intuition; it is, instead, posited by intellectual intuition. And the absolute object, the not-I, is that which is opposed to it. Neither of these occurs in empirical consciousness except when a representation is related to them. In empirical consciousness they are both present only indirectly, as the representing subject and as what is represented.

(GA I/2: 48; EPW, 65; translation modified)

What Fichte provides here is a first glimpse of the technical vocabulary that becomes the vehicle for his own philosophical project. The notions of 'absolute subject' and 'absolute object' (or alternatively, in the language Fichte would soon come to prefer, 'I' and 'not-I') are here introduced to characterize the bipolar transcendental substructure

presupposed by Reinholdian representations. The construal of conscious experience in terms of this bipolarity is then itself described as the product of two acts: the positing (or intellectual intuition)³³ of the I, and the opposing of the not-I to the I. Since these acts serve as general conditions of any Reinholdian representations, they cannot themselves be understood as representational acts or contents.

Although at this stage Fichte's deployment of this language is very sketchy, the general shape of his account is already beginning to come into view: the capacities that make conscious representation possible must include not only the familiar sensory abilities but also certain very basic capacities whereby I generate for myself the fundamental schema of subject–object opposition. Part of the point of describing these as acts of 'positing' (the German is '*setzen*', cognate of the English verb 'to set') is to emphasize that this schema is in no way drawn from experience, serving rather as a general condition thereof. (In this sense we can call these acts '*a priori*'). But the term '*setzen*' should also be seen as a placeholder of sorts, a very general term to mark the point where a more fine-grained account is required. If we are to carry out the transcendental task of providing a theory of experience then we must investigate the (possibly very complex) structure of *setzen* – the structure of our capacity to posit an objective realm which exists for a representing subject.

What is already clear in the review of *Aenesidemus* is that, in Fichte's view, the prospects for a successful Reinholdian *Elementarphilosophie* depend on its beginning from an investigation of these non-representational acts of positing and opposing. In a passage which points the way from *Elementarphilosophie* to *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte writes the following:

[This] reviewer, at least, has convinced himself that it [the principle of consciousness] is a theorem that is based on another principle, but that it can be strictly deduced from that principle, *a priori* and independently of all experience.

(GA I/2: 48; EPW, 64; translation modified)

This 'other principle', which is here left unspecified, will be a principle expressing the subject's pre-representational positing of itself in opposition to an objective realm. It is important to emphasize, however, that Schulze's critique does not, in Fichte's estimation,

impugn the principle of consciousness per se. Reinhold's mistake does not lie in his formulation of the principle of consciousness, or in recognizing its crucial importance to transcendental philosophy. His mistake was to think that the principle of consciousness could itself be the first principle of philosophy.³⁴

What about Fichte's response to the second cluster of Schulzean objections, the charges that critical philosophy begs the question against Hume by presupposing a causal model of the faculty of representation? Fichte makes his general position on this point abundantly clear: transcendental philosophy should not be construed as a causal investigation; and accordingly the faculty of representation should not be seen as some sort of cognitive mechanism whose effects are manifested to us in consciousness. In Fichte's uncharitable technical vocabulary, any such reading reduces the critical project to 'dogmatism'.³⁵ Fichte denies that Reinhold himself advanced such a causal theory, blaming Schulze for 'reproaching the *Elementarphilosophie* for making claims that he has first read into it' (GA I/2: 51; EPW, 67). As I argued above, it is not clear that Reinhold can be so easily acquitted of Schulze's charge. But the important question raised by this exchange concerns not the proper interpretation of Reinhold's theory but the viability of transcendental philosophy. What Schulze's objections bring out is the extent to which that viability depends on the availability of an alternative to the tempting but ultimately untenable causal construal. Schulze sees no such alternative and concludes that the transcendental project is indefensible. Fichte clearly does not share this pessimism, but at this stage has little to offer by way of an alternative. In the context of the review he is content loudly to denounce any conception of the *Vorstellungsvermögen* as something that exists independently of representations as a cause exists independently of its effects:

The faculty of representation exists *for* the faculty of representation and *through* the faculty of representation: this is the circle within which every finite understanding, that is, every understanding that we can conceive, is necessarily confined. Anyone who wants to escape from this circle does not understand himself and does not know what he wants.

(GA I/2: 51; EPW, 67)³⁶

Each of these two major points of dispute among Reinhold, Schulze and Fichte provides an insight into the character of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. What we see, first of all, is that the project of providing a theory of the ‘self-positing’ or ‘absolute’ I is motivated – at least in its general outlines – quite independently of Jacobi’s attack on the doctrine of things in themselves. Far from marking some radical departure from the epistemological discourses of Kant’s transcendental project, the attempt to give a theory of the ‘positing’ of I and not-I can be seen to lie at the very heart of that project – the project of giving a theory of the possibility and *a priori* structure of experience. Indeed, it is only a slight distortion to describe the ‘Transcendental Analytic’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as Kant’s theory of the positing of I and not-I.³⁷ After all, the account of the pure categories of the understanding is Kant’s answer to the question of how the respective unities of self and world, subject and object, are constituted.

Jacobi’s challenge *is* relevant, on the other hand, to the issues about causal inference in transcendental philosophy. In the wake of the failure of the *Elementarphilosophie*, however, Jacobi’s objections to things in themselves take on a new significance. For Jacobi’s critique now appears alongside Schulze’s as a different manifestation of a single underlying objection: where Schulze complains about Reinhold’s causal analysis of the faculty of representation, Jacobi complains of Kant’s causal claims about things in themselves. So construed, the problem of things in themselves becomes more an issue in the methodology than in the ontology of transcendental philosophy.³⁸ As we have seen, part of the challenge Fichte faces in trying to improve on the failed *Elementarphilosophie* is the challenge of freeing the transcendental project from the difficulties raised by reliance on the principle of causal inference.

Rethinking Freedom after Kant

Paradoxically, one of Fichte's most striking contributions to the critical reception of Reinhold's Kantianism is one that appears only obliquely in his review of *Aenesidemus*. The issue in this case concerns freedom, in particular the proper place (and interpretation) of the notion of freedom in transcendental philosophy. One key source in this regard is a letter Fichte wrote from Zurich to his friend Heinrich Stephani.³⁹ Much of this important letter – for instance his claim that Aenesidemus 'has overthrown Reinhold in my eyes' and that a new system must be built 'from the ground up' – we are now in a position to understand. But Fichte also makes an important remark to Stephani that as yet remains obscure. Fichte writes of 'the lamentable state of contemporary philosophy', citing as evidence 'the recent controversies concerning freedom' and 'the misunderstandings among the critical philosophers themselves' on this topic. Fichte then continues:

From the point of view of the new standpoint that I have reached, these controversies concerning freedom appear ridiculous. It is amusing when Reinhold tries to make everything that happens in the human soul into a representation. Anyone who does this can know nothing of freedom and the practical imperative. If he is consistent, he must become an empirical fatalist.

(GA III/2: 28; EPW, 371)

What does Fichte mean by these remarks? What does Reinhold's theory – and in particular the thesis that I have been calling 'Reinholdian representationalism' – have to do with the issue of freedom? In order to answer these questions (and to understand this distinctively Fichtean juxtaposition of issues) we must look further into the contemporary context out of which the *Wissenschaftslehre* was born, and in particular into Fichte's analysis of those 'ridiculous recent controversies concerning freedom'. In seeking to unravel these matters, our best point of entry can be found in Fichte's very first contribution to the *ALZ*, his review of L. Creuzer's *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freyheit des Willens*.⁴⁰ Creuzer's book concerns the traditional problem of freedom and determinism. The position Creuzer defends is sceptical, but not in the sense of doubting

or denying that freedom is real. His claim, rather, is that all purported solutions to the problem of free will have been failures. The defence of this claim is in part piecemeal: Creuzer surveys and rebuts a range of purported solutions, stretching from the ancients through to his own contemporaries. But his piecemeal refutations are informed by an overarching conviction, which itself functions as the master argument of the whole book:

In every case, antinomy was unavoidable. If it wanted to be consistent, theoretical reason had necessarily to lead to fatalism, while practical reason always postulated moral freedom ... No one was able to construct an exit from this labyrinth. Many believed themselves to have discovered the thread of Ariadne. But in following it, they discovered that instead of leading out of the labyrinth, it instead led them deeper within.⁴¹

The Kantian lineage of this master argument is clear. Creuzer's claim is that our reasoned convictions regarding free will form an inconsistent set, beset by antinomial contradictions. And the locus of the collision is an inevitable clash between the respective demands of theoretical and practical reason. So his scepticism is not so much scepticism *about free will*; rather, it is scepticism *about the ability of reason* to resolve the problems associated with free will. It is a scepticism about reason itself.

But while Creuzer may have been persuaded by the Kantian diagnosis of the *source* of the problems about free will, he was by no means satisfied by the Kantian *resolution* of those problems. Indeed, from the outset, one of the principal targets of Creuzer's sceptical attack is the so-called 'critical philosophy'. Tellingly, he engages the Kantian position in the first instance in its specifically Reinholdian variant. (See, in particular, *Skeptische Betrachtungen*, 124ff.) The most important Reinholdian source on this topic comes from the second series of *Briefe*, specifically from its eighth letter, '*Erörterung des Begriffes von der Freiheit des Willens*' (*Elucidation of the Concept of Freedom of the Will*), although Creuzer engages mainly with the more schematic statement of the position in the sixth letter and in the earlier *Versuch*.⁴² In the development of Kant's moral philosophy, Reinhold's letter is of considerable importance for its insistence on a sharp distinction between two discrete elements of freedom, a distinction that would play an increasingly important role in Kant's own later elaborations of his position.⁴³

The celebrated core of Kant's positive theory of freedom lay in his account of the autonomy of practical reason. According to Kant, pure reason legislates the moral law autonomously; its validity accordingly depends on no extra-rational authority, and its demand is categorical rather than conditional. Reinhold embraces the Kantian account of the autonomy of practical reason and the moral law, but insists that this cannot be the whole story about freedom. In addition to the *legislative autonomy of reason*, Reinhold insists, we must also recognize a form of *executive freedom of the person*. On Reinhold's model, we human beings are subject to a variety of demands (*Förderungen*), which may have their source in inclination or in pure practical reason itself. But it is then up to us, by an exercise of our own executive will (*Willkür*), freely to decide whether to conform to these demands or not. Reinhold offers a battery of arguments for this conclusion. He famously claims that we must appeal to this capacity for executive choice in order to explain the possibility of free-but-immoral actions. He argues that it is necessary as a condition of 'imputability' (*Zurechnung*) – the ability to attribute actions to persons. And he argues that appeal to such a capacity is necessary in order to distinguish between the ways in which rational principles are authoritative in a mathematical or logical proof (where the person is necessitated by the authority of reason) and in ethical deliberation (where she is not).

In his discussion of Reinhold's Kantian theory of freedom, Creuzer is happy to concede many of Reinhold's arguments. He agrees that practical reason makes demands upon us in the form of the moral law, and he expounds Reinhold's central contention about the presupposition of a capacity for executive choice (*Willkür*) in the face of such a demand. But, applying his master argument, he insists that the postulation of such a capacity is an affront to the demands of theoretical (or 'speculative') reason.

A freedom that contains within itself the sufficient ground for adopting maxims that stand in contradictory opposition stands in conflict ... with the laws of speculative reason.⁴⁴

Creuzer's objection takes the form of a dilemma. Suppose that, in the face of a demand (whether of inclination or of morality), I choose to satisfy the demand. My choice either has a sufficient reason or it does not. If it does have a sufficient reason then, *ex*

hypothesi, the opposite course of action was not actually available and there was therefore no genuine executive opting for one course of action over the other. But if it does *not* have a sufficient reason then the demands of theoretical reason are flouted.

It was Kant's position on freedom that reportedly first attracted Fichte to the critical philosophy, convincing him to abandon his youthful commitment to deterministic fatalism.⁴⁵ So what did he make of Creuzer's critique? In his review, Fichte's attitude towards Creuzer was scornful. Fichte writes with acid sarcasm that 'The reviewer believes that philosophy can expect many good things from Mr. Creuzer, just as soon as his extensive and varied book learning acquires a better order and he has acquired more maturity in his spiritual activity' (GA I/2: 14; CR, 296). As regards Creuzer's central objection to Reinhold's Kantian position, Fichte insists that he has simply missed the mark. Creuzer's master argument rests on Kant's Third Antinomy; Fichte accordingly recounts Kant's solution. The demands of theoretical (or 'speculative') reason are to be curtailed; the principle of sufficient reason applies only to appearances. There is therefore scope for the possibility of freedom as an intelligible or noumenal reality; practical reason in turn requires us to postulate it as a reality.⁴⁶

Significantly, however, Fichte does not rest content with this defensive reply. Kant's solution to the Third Antinomy depends on drawing a sharp distinction, as Fichte puts it, between a 'determinate being' and an 'act of determining'. An intentional action undertaken in response to a demand would be a determinate being; it is a feature of sensible reality and an object of knowledge. The act of choosing to respond to the demand, by contrast, is an act of determining, understood as 'the free action of the intelligible I'. It is not a sensible but a 'supersensible' reality – something postulated, an object of rationally motivated belief (*Glaube*) but never of knowledge.

But, having distinguished these two features of action, Fichte claims, we face the task of saying something about their relationship. If our intelligible, supersensible freedom is to make any difference to the sensible world, then the two must somehow be related. Fichte is critical of Reinhold for offering what he considers a muddled account of this relation. He objects in particular to a passage in Reinhold's eighth Letter that suggests that the relationship is causal – that the supersensible act of executive will is the cause of the sensible actions. Such an account commits the fatal error, according to Fichte, of 'drawing something supersensible down into the series of natural causes'.

But if the causal story will not suffice, then what alternative is available? In his review, Fichte offers what might seem to be a retrograde proposal.

However, insofar as the determinate being produced through the causality of nature is supposed to be in harmony with the act of free determination (a harmony that, for the sake of a moral world order, also must be assumed), the ground of such harmony can be assumed to lie neither in nature, which exercises no causality over freedom, nor in freedom, which has no causality within nature, but only in a higher law, which subsumes and unifies both freedom and nature – in, as it were, a pre-determined harmony of determinations through freedom with determinations through the laws of nature.

(GA I/2, 11; CR, 294)

Fichte's proposal here adumbrates the concept of a 'moral world order', which would later occupy the central place in the controversy over his purported atheism.⁴⁷ But the key move regarding the Kantian theory of freedom lies in his appeal to a form of harmony between freedom and nature. Kant's solution to the Third Antinomy required a sharp dualism of supersensible freedom and sensible nature; Fichte proposes to rejoin what Kant had put asunder by appeal to a 'pre-determined harmony' between the two.

Both in its specific language and in its general tenor, this solution might well sound like a throw-back to the grand metaphysical positions characteristic of pre-critical rationalism. But when we look more closely, a series of subtle but significant differences come into focus. It is worth noting, first, that Fichte writes here of a *pre-determined* harmony, rather than a *pre-established* harmony – the latter being the terminology associated with Leibnizian rationalist metaphysics.⁴⁸ The difference may seem subtle, but it serves to leave open a possibility that Fichte would seek to exploit, namely that the requisite harmony is *not in fact pre-established*, indeed that it is *not yet established* at all, even if its transcendental shape is pre-delineated, and that it therefore falls to us to produce it.

Secondly, Fichte shows his allegiance to the Kantian project of curbing the pretensions of rationalism by insisting that the 'higher law' or 'higher assistance' which ensures this harmony is beyond the reach of knowledge. We must postulate such a

harmony in order to sustain the possibility of real freedom, and we are justified in such a postulate as a precondition on ‘the moral world order’. But he nonetheless insists that ‘we have no insight into the law that joins together freedom and nature’. Echoing language that Kant had only recently used in his book on religion, Fichte writes of ‘an *unfathomable* higher assistance’, the function of which is to ‘make our appearing, empirical character harmonize with our intelligible character’ (GA I/2: 12; CR, 295).⁴⁹

But where does all this leave us as regards the prospects for a viable Kantian theory of freedom? Reading the review of his book, Creuzer might justifiably have taken Fichte’s positive proposals as further vindication of his overarching thesis that rational inquiry cannot lead us out of this particular labyrinth. Fichtean freedom may be a postulate of practical reason, but its possibility depends on an incomprehensible harmony between our empirical and intelligible characters, itself guaranteed by an unfathomable higher power. Is this really the path towards a solution to the problem of free will? Or is it rather an instance of taking refuge in a blind alley of obscurantism?

It falls beyond the scope of this essay to offer a reconstruction and assessment of Fichte’s approach to the theory of freedom – a topic which, despite the scale of the recent revival in Fichte scholarship, remains woefully under-developed. But, before leaving this topic, it is worth taking note of one important component of Fichte’s subsequent development of the themes from his review of Creuzer. Fifteen months after the appearance of his anonymous review in the *ALZ*, Fichte found himself in his first regular academic post, giving his first public lecture as Reinhold’s successor at the university in Jena. Near the end of that first, far-reaching lecture, Fichte returned to the theme he had identified in the Creuzer review as the key for completing the Kantian theory of freedom. By this point, however, two further features of Fichte’s position have come into view. First, he repeats his insistence on the importance of a harmony between what he now calls ‘the pure I’ and ‘things’. And he insists that this requires a harmony between ‘our rational and our sensible natures’. But this harmony is now explicitly projected as an ethical *task to be accomplished*, indeed as the fundamental demand of the moral law as such. Secondly, he gives a name to this higher power responsible for the harmony between freedom and nature. Where the rationalist precedent and Kantian system of postulates attributed this harmony-producing power to God, under Fichte’s radical modification the source of this harmony is *culture (Kultur)*.⁵⁰

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this proposal, both for the post-Kantian theory of freedom and as an emblem of the subsequent development both of Fichte's own thought and of the idealist tradition. The solution to the problem of free will does not, according to Fichte, lie in identifying the right kind of cause of free actions; it lies in identifying the right kind of configuration of the human world. Freedom is not a special kind of metaphysical fact that can be identified from the philosopher's armchair, but a task to be accomplished by reconfiguring human culture through active endeavour. In his opening lecture in Jena Fichte even offers a brief sketch of the features that freedom-constituting culture must exhibit. It consists, he proposes, in the combination of two 'skills' (*Geschicklichkeiten*) – one subjective and one objective. Subjectively, the harmony between our intelligible will and our sensible nature requires that we develop a form of self-discipline or self-control that allows us to 'suppress or eradicate erroneous inclinations that arise in us prior to the awakening of reason'. Objectively, it requires work: 'the skill to modify and alter external things in accordance with our concepts' (GA I/3: 31; EPW, 150).⁵¹

Conclusion

The various developments that we have tracked ‘between Kant and Fichte’ can be seen as pointing the way towards the conception of an ‘Absolute I’ that would become the notorious lightning rod atop Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. Rather than functioning as some quasi-divine reality that produces the human and natural world, the Absolute I is better understood as a distinctive configuration of human reality – including both its psychological and its social dimensions, as well as the built environment in which human reality unfolds. Psychologically, Fichte’s Absolute I is associated with the act/fact (*Thathandlung*) of self-positing, which itself establishes the transcendental substructure presupposed by Reinholdian representation. But, for Fichte, the task of thinking through this transcendental substructure becomes, above all else, the challenge of working through the presuppositions upon positing oneself *as an I*. To posit oneself as an I, for Fichte, is to stake a claim to freedom. The working out both of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and, according to Fichte, of human culture itself, is to be understood as a working through of the conditions under which such a claim can be fulfilled.

So, far from marking some radical repudiation of the critical-transcendental programme, Fichte’s philosophical project can legitimately lay claim to a place firmly within that Kantian tradition, while at the same time pointing beyond the limits of that tradition, marking an important transformation of classical German philosophy. In response to the early disputes and crises of Kantian philosophy, Fichte transforms the transcendental investigation – the investigation he describes as ‘tracking the constituents of our cognitive faculty’ – into the project of tracking the transcendental, spiritual and cultural prerequisites of a radical form of self-positing freedom.

Notes

1 Of particular importance in this connection was the emergence, under Goethe's administration, of the university at Jena as a leading intellectual centre. Between the mid-1780s, when Kant was still in the midst of publishing his major works, and 1806, the year of both Napoleon's victory at Jena and Hegel's completion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, many of the leading figures of the early Kant-reception were associated for some period with this university. The result was what Dieter Henrich has described as a 'constellation' of the leading thinkers of the era, sometimes in daily contact, actively cooperating and competing with each other in a common institutional context. Dieter Henrich, 'The Path of Speculative Idealism: Retrospect and Prospect', in Dieter Henrich, *The Course of Remembrance and other Essays on Hölderlin*, trans. T. Carman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

2 In the second edition preface to *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (*Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*) Fichte defines 'critique' as the investigation 'into the possibility, real meaning and rules' of philosophical enquiry (GA I/2: 159; EPW, 97). Accordingly, Fichte's 'critical' essays are second-order discussions about the nature of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

3 Once we go beyond the 'foundations' of Fichte's system, the Jena corpus provides a much less disjointed and fragmentary record. Two of Fichte's major accomplishments of the Jena period were extended studies in moral and political philosophy: book-length works that were edited and prepared for general publication. Despite several attempts, however, Fichte never produced a comparable statement of his epistemological and metaphysical views. (For a discussion of Fichte's works in 'practical philosophy' see the contribution to this volume by Allen Wood.)

4 For a particularly damning account of this departure, see Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a reply to Ameriks see Daniel Breazeale, 'Two Cheers for Post-Kantianism: A Reply to Karl Ameriks', *Inquiry* 46(2) (2003): 239–259.

5 F. H. Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben; oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch* [*David Hume on Belief; or Idealism and Realism: A Dialogue*] (Breslau:

Loewe, 1787). Citations to Jacobi's work are to *Werke*, ed. F. Roth and F. Köppen (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812ff; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968). An English translation of many of Jacobi's works can be found in F. H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. G. di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1994).

[6](#) Jacobi, *Werke* II, 304.

[7](#) Jacobi, *Werke* II, 305.

[8](#) Jacobi, *Werke* II, 310.

[9](#) For a classic statement of this line of interpretation – which is very common in general histories of philosophy – see Volume VII ('Fichte to Nietzsche') of Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963). Other accounts in English along these lines can be found in John Lachs, 'Fichte's Idealism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **9** (1972): 311–318; and in Patrick Gardiner, 'Fichte and German Idealism', in G. Vesey (ed.), *Idealism Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 111–126.

[10](#) Two important limitations of the present discussion deserve mention here. The first is the omission of any account of Fichte's earliest philosophical publications, which dealt with the theme of religious revelation and also with philosophical issues pertaining to the revolution in France. For a discussion of these aspects of Fichte's early thought see the contributions to this volume by Frederick Beiser and Hansjürgen Verweyen. The second is the omission of a discussion of Fichte's complex relationship to Salomon Maimon. A broader and much more systematic analysis of this period has been undertaken in a series of major studies by Frederick Beiser. See in particular *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) and *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [2002](#)). On Maimon's role in the development of post-Kantian idealism see also Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). For an account of Fichte's engagement with themes from Maimon, see Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2013](#)), especially [Chapter 3](#).

[11](#) For our purposes here, the most important of Reinhold's texts are the following: *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* [*Letters Concerning the Kantian Philosophy*; hereafter *Briefe*] (Weimar: Der Teutscher Merkur, 1786–87; enlarged second edition Mannheim: Bender, 1790); *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens* [*Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation*; hereafter *Versuch*] (Prague and Jena: Widtmann und Mauke, 1789; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); Volume I of *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Mißverständniße der Philosophen* [*Contributions to the Correction of the Previous Misunderstandings of the Philosophers*; hereafter *Beyträge*] (Jena: Mauke, 1790); *Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* [*Foundations of Philosophical Knowledge*; hereafter *Fundament*] (Jena: Mauke, 1791; reprint Hamburg: Meiner, 1978). Part of *Fundament* is translated by di Giovanni and Harris in *Between Kant and Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985); an English edition of the first series of *Briefe* can be found in Ameriks and Hebbeler (eds.), *Karl Leonhard Reinhold: Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005). An English translation of *Versuch* can be found in Mehigan and Empson (eds. and trans.) *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

[12](#) *Beyträge* I, iv.

[13](#) I shall hereafter leave this term untranslated. Reinhold's most detailed presentations of the *Elementarphilosophie* are given in the *Versuch* and in *Beyträge* Volume I, Chapter III: '*Neue Darstellung der Hauptmomente der Elementarphilosophie*' ('New Presentation of the Main Elements of the *Elementarphilosophie*'; hereafter *Neue Darstellung*).

[14](#) *Versuch*, § II, 120ff.

[15](#) *Fundament*, 43–44.

[16](#) *Fundament*, 58–59.

[17](#) *Neue Darstellung* § 1; *Beyträge* I, 167.

[18](#) See for instance Reinhold's essay 'Über den Begriff der Philosophie' ('Concerning the Concept of Philosophy'); Chapter I of *Beyträge*; in particular 72–78.

[19](#) Anonymous [G. E. Schulze], *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie: Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaaßungen der Vernunftkritik* [*Aenesidemus, or Concerning the Foundation of the Elementary Philosophy Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold, Including a Defence of Scepticism against the Pretensions of the Critique of Reason*; hereafter *Aenesidemus*] (published without details of publication 1792; reprint Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1969). An excerpt is translated by di Giovanni and Harris in *Between Kant and Hegel*.

[20](#) Reinhold's commitment to representationalism of this sort is not immediately apparent; after all, the principle of consciousness is not explicitly universal in form. The overall strategy of the *Elementarphilosophie*, however, exhibits his commitment to the universal applicability of the principle. This commitment is particularly evident in his argument for the unknowability of things in themselves (see the *Neue Darstellung*, §§ XII–XIII; *Beyträge*, 184–186). In short, Reinhold's strategy is to argue that nothing which fulfils the conditions derivable from the principle of consciousness could count as a representation of a thing as it is in itself. The generality of this argument would be sacrificed if one conceded the possibility of conscious states to which the principle of consciousness did not apply. The commitment to representationalism is also implicit in Reinhold's claim that his notion of representation provides the genus for which Kantian intuitions, concepts and ideas are the species.

[21](#) See, *inter alia*, *Aenesidemus*, 72.

[22](#) *Aenesidemus*, 85.

[23](#) *Aenesidemus*, 87–88, emphasis added.

[24](#) See *Aenesidemus*, 67.

[25](#) *Aenesidemus*, 103.

[26](#) The word standardly translated as 'faculty' is '*Vermögen*', a nominalized form of the verb 'to be able'. The inference from representations to a faculty of

representations can thus be interpreted as an inference from the claim that I actually have representations to the claim that I am able to. So interpreted the inference would not involve a causal claim.

[27](#) *Neue Darstellung*, §§ IX–XI; *Beyträge*, 180–184.

[28](#) For Schulze’s statement of this objection – and a geometrical counterexample to Reinhold’s claim – see *Aenesidemus*, 188.

[29](#) According to Reinhold’s account (see, in particular, *Versuch*, § XVI, 235ff.), the form of representation is that through which the matter becomes a representation. Hence, in abstraction from that form, the matter is not a representation at all, and so cannot be said to relate to an object in the sense specified in the principle of consciousness.

[30](#) See in particular the letters to Flatt (November or December 1793; GA III/2: 17–18) and to Stephani (mid-December 1793; GA III/2: 27–29). We should note here that all of Fichte’s published works – and indeed virtually everything of philosophical interest in his *Nachlaß* – date from after his ‘conversion’ to Kantian philosophy. For some hints about this conversion, however, see the letters to Weißhuhn (August–September 1790; GA III/1: 167–168) and to Achelis (November 1790; GA III/1:190–195). All of these letters are translated in EPW, 357ff.

[31](#) For a more systematic discussion of the review, see Daniel Breazeale, ‘Fichte’s Aenesidemus Review and the Transformation of German Idealism’, *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981): 545–568. For an account of the issues in Kantian moral theology discussed in the review, see my ‘Without a Striving, No Object is Possible: Fichte’s Striving Doctrine and the Primacy of Practice’ in Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds.), *New Perspectives on Fichte* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995).

[32](#) GA I/2: 46; EPW, 63.

[33](#) Fichte’s use of the term ‘intellectual intuition’ is, of course, intentionally provocative, since Kant had denied that humans possess such a capacity. But Fichte makes it clear elsewhere (in particular in the ‘Second Introduction’) that he does not intend to assert what Kant denied (GA I/4: 216ff.; IWL, 46ff.). He does not, that is,

mean to suggest that we might somehow directly know things as they are in themselves. The use of the term intuition is meant to emphasize the pre-representational character of the act in question.

[34](#) GA I/2: 48–49; EPW, 65; see also Fichte’s letter to Reinhold of 1 March 1794 (GA III/2: 75; EPW, 376).

[35](#) I have discussed Fichte’s use of this notion in ‘Fichte’s Anti-Dogmatism’, *Ratio* 5 (1992): 129–146.

[36](#) See also GA I/2: 49; EPW, 66

[37](#) It is *something* of a distortion, however, if only because Kant’s doctrine of the ideals of reason must be counted as part of his theory of ‘world-positing’. Kant would also presumably decline to follow Fichte in describing the positing of the unity of the self as something ‘immediate’ or ‘intuitive’, since, on his view, the unity of apperception is achieved only through the synthesis of the manifold of experience in accordance with the categories. The latter point, however, may ultimately not mark such an important difference from Fichte, since Fichte’s own claims about the ‘immediacy’ of self-positing are fundamentally qualified in the course of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

[38](#) In this connection see Fichte’s letter to Niethammer of 6 December 1793:

Kant demonstrates that the causal principle is applicable merely to appearances, and nevertheless he assumes that there is a substrate underlying all appearances – an assumption undoubtedly based upon the law of causality (at least this is the way Kant’s followers argue). Whoever shows us how Kant arrived at this substrate without extending the causal law beyond its limits will have understood Kant.

(GA III/2: 21; EPW, 369)

This passage – dating from the period when Fichte was most intensely engaged with his review of Schulze’s argument – indicates the extent to which Fichte’s concerns about things in themselves were indexed to the problem of finding a suitable methodology for transcendental inquiry.

[39](#) Fichte to Stephani, mid-December 1793; GA III/2: 27–29; EPW, 370–371.

[40](#) *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freyheit des Willens mit Hinsicht auf die neuesten Theorien über dieselbe* [*Sceptical Observations Concerning Freedom of the Will, with Attention to the Most Recent Theories Thereof*; hereafter *Skeptische Betrachtungen*] (Giessen: Heyer, 1793). Fichte’s review appeared in the *ALZ* at the end of October, 1793 (GA I/2: 7–14; CR, 289–296).

[41](#) *Skeptische Betrachtungen*, 24–25.

[42](#) Reinhold’s eighth letter had been published by the time Creuzer published his book, and Creuzer implicitly makes reference to it in a note appended at the very end of his introduction. However, it appeared too late for Creuzer to treat it in detail.

Unfortunately, this important letter is not included in the Cambridge University Press translation of the *Briefe*, which includes only the first series of Reinhold’s letters. Citations here refer to the pagination of the 1923 edition of the *Briefe*, which includes both the first and the second series, Raymund Schmidt (ed.), *Reinholds Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1923).

[43](#) For a discussion of Kant’s own development of the distinction, developed in part out of an extended exchange with Reinhold, see Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 129–136.

[44](#) *Skeptische Betrachtungen*, 151. Creuzer advances an independent argument intended to show that such a freedom contradicts the laws of practical reason as well, since it presupposes what he calls ‘transcendental indifferentism’ – that there is a fundamental faculty of our moral psychology which is indifferent in the choice between good and evil.

[45](#) On Fichte’s ‘conversion’ to the Kantian position, see Draft of a Letter to Weißhuhn (August–September 1790); GA III/2: no. 63; EPW, 357ff.

[46](#) Fichte: ‘The source of this misunderstanding can be eliminated only by returning to what seems to this reviewer to be the true spirit of the Critical philosophy, which teaches that the principle of sufficient reason can by no means be applied to the *act of determining* absolute self-activity through itself (i.e., to the *act of willing*)’ (GA I/2: 10; CR, 294).

[47](#) For a discussion, see my ‘Transcendental Philosophy and Atheism’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 16(1) (2008): 109–130.

[48](#) The German term in this passage is ‘*vorherbestimmten*’; notice also the qualification ‘as it were’ (*gleichsam*). Elsewhere, in referring to the rationalist doctrine, Fichte uses the term ‘*präformiert*’. See for example the Review of Aenesidemus, GA I/2: 48; EPW, 56.

[49](#) The German expression is ‘*unerforschlichen höhern Beystand*’. For Kant’s use of the expression see AA 6: 45; R, 66.

[50](#) See GA I/3: 31; EPW, 150.

[51](#) On Fichte’s notion of work, see my ‘Fichte’s Transcendental Deduction of Private Property’, in Gabe Gottlieb (ed.) *Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2016](#)).

2

Fichte and the French Revolution



Frederick Beiser

The Problem of Interpretation

It has always been recognized that there is an intimate connection between Fichte's politics and his early philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794. The inspiration for the *Wissenschaftslehre* came from the Revolution in France, and its purpose was, in some sense, to justify the events across the Rhine. The source of this interpretation is impeccable: Fichte himself. In the Spring of 1795, he wrote a famous revealing letter about the origins of his *Wissenschaftslehre*:

I believe that my system belongs to this [the French] nation. It is the first system of freedom. Just as that nation has torn away the external chains of man, my system tears away the chains of the thing-in-itself, or external causes, that still shackle him more or less in other systems, even the Kantian. My first principle establishes man as an independent being. My system arose through an inner struggle with myself and against rooted prejudices in those years that the French struggled with outer force for their political freedom. It was their *valeur* that spurred me to conceive it. When I wrote on the Revolution there came the first hints and inklings of my system.

(GA III/2: 298)¹

This letter makes it plain that there is a close link between Fichte's philosophy and his politics.² The problem is, however, how to explain it. All kinds of questions arise. Exactly how was Fichte's philosophy inspired by the Revolution? What were these first hints of his later system? How does his first principle relate to the ideal of liberty of the Revolution? What relevance does the critique of the thing-in-itself have for political freedom? Or, to sum up all these questions in one: how could such an abstract and abstruse philosophy as the *Wissenschaftslehre* ever serve the political cause in France?

Seeing a wide gap between the sophisticated and technical reasoning of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Fichte's politics, some scholars simply deny that there can be a close connection at all.³ They see Fichte's primary concern as first philosophy, the development of a presuppositionless epistemology in the Cartesian tradition.⁴ Since they distinguish sharply between the philosophical and the political, the theoretical and the practical, they think that any attempt to explain how the *Wissenschaftslehre* arose from

the French Revolution must fail. In their view, to try to establish a connection between the abstract reasoning of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Fichte's politics is like trying to derive Newton's differential calculus from his early alchemical studies.

But this view denies the problem rather than resolving it. The sharp distinction between the theoretical and the practical is completely contrary to Fichte's intentions. It was never his aim to develop a first philosophy that is pure speculation, having no direct connection with life and action. In many of his early writings, he emphasized tirelessly that the aim of his philosophy is to guide conduct, and that its very soul is the realm of life and experience.⁵

The most common explanation emphasizes a metaphor, an analogy between metaphysical and political freedom.⁶ What the French do for *political* liberty, the *Wissenschaftslehre* does for *metaphysical* freedom. While the French liberate humanity from feudalism and despotism in practice, the *Wissenschaftslehre* frees it from the spectre of the thing-in-itself in theory. Thus the absolute ego of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, whose self-positing activity constitutes all of reality, represents the ambition of French radicals to recreate the whole of society according to the principles of reason.

This interpretation presupposes, however, that Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* is a kind of metaphysics. It assumes, for example, that Fichte postulates the *existence* of the absolute ego, which somehow creates itself and all reality *ex nihilo*.⁷ But such a reading runs counter to the whole spirit of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*: to provide a purely immanent philosophy entirely within the bounds of experience, a system completely rid of every trace of hypostasis. Furthermore, such a metaphysical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes complete nonsense of Fichte's attempt to justify the Revolution. For if the absolute ego is the infinite activity of reason, and if *ex hypothesi* it now exists within all of reality, then the present social and political *status quo* receives the sanction of reason. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is then the philosophy of the *ancien régime*!⁸

If, then, we are to explain the connection between Fichte's philosophy and politics, we must get beyond metaphor. My task here will be to explore and examine this connection in more literal terms. I wish to put forward the case for the complete *interdependence* of Fichte's early philosophy and politics: that his political aims could not be achieved without his epistemology, and that his epistemological ends could not be accomplished without his politics.⁹ The fourth section of this essay, 'First Hints and

Inklings', will discuss how the first hints of the *Wissenschaftslehre* came from the political writings. The fifth section, 'Knowing and Doing in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*', will try to clarify how Fichte's epistemology required his politics: Fichte believed that the problem of scepticism could be solved only through action directed by political ends. Finally, the sixth section, 'Critique and Liberation', will attempt to show how Fichte's politics required his epistemology: only criticism could remove the fundamental obstacles to the self-awareness of freedom.

An understanding of the unity of philosophy and politics in Fichte demands that we first have some acquaintance with his early political thought. The task of the next two sections will be to provide a brief sketch of Fichte's political views regarding the Revolution in France prior to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794.

The Politics of Revolution

What precisely, was Fichte's attitude towards the Revolution in France? In what respects did he approve of it, and how did he defend it? These questions are not easy to answer, partly because Fichte did not have a fully explicit and consistent position, and partly because the evidence about it is insufficient and vague. For these reasons, there has been some controversy over the issue of Fichte's Jacobinism.¹⁰

Was Fichte a Jacobin? That was the opinion of many of his contemporaries, both friends and enemies.¹¹ Obviously, much here depends on the meaning of the term. In the 1790s in Germany to call someone a Jacobin could mean many things.¹² The police used the word for anyone who approved of the ideals of the Revolution, and who therefore seemed a threat to public order. Hence they turned it into a term of abuse, a *Schimpfwort*. But it also had a more precise meaning: it designated those who supported popular sovereignty, defended the right of revolution, and sympathized with Jacobin policies in France. In this more precise sense it *seems* that Fichte was indeed a Jacobin. He affirmed popular sovereignty and the right of revolution, and he certainly sympathized with the ideals, and to some extent even the policies, of the Jacobins. Moreover, he even had contacts with Jacobin agents and the Mainz republic.

Yet Fichte protested vigorously against any imputation of Jacobinism. Given the negative connotations of the term, he could hardly have done otherwise. Against the implication that he was a conspirator ready to incite rebellion, he insisted that his main goal was to lead a quiet life of contemplation,¹³ and that it was one of his chief maxims to always respect the laws of the land.¹⁴ His enemies, however, made some more specific charges. They accused him of having associations with French Jacobins, of trying to inaugurate a religion of reason in Jena, of preaching revolutionary doctrine in his lectures, and of creating a revolutionary club.¹⁵ But Fichte emphatically denied all these claims too.

But should we take Fichte at his word? Although he did not attempt to preach a religion of reason or to impart revolutionary doctrine in his lectures, he did have contacts with Jacobin agents, and he even started something like a republican club. As soon as he arrived in Jena he created a society – *Die Gesellschaft der freien Männer* – devoted to the ideals of the Revolution.¹⁶ One of its most prominent members was the Jacobin spy

Johann Franz Brechtel, who reported to Theobald Bacher, Secretary to the French Ambassador in Basel and leader of French espionage in southern Germany.¹⁷ Fichte also had contacts with, and performed services for, Giuseppe Gorani, the secret agent for the French government in Geneva.¹⁸ Finally, in the late 1790s, Fichte corresponded with Franz Wilhelm Jung, who was the Bureauchef of the French government in Mainz.

It is also important to see that, on several occasions, Fichte expressed a desire to join the new republic and to work for its cause. He had long considered France as a possible refuge from his many political enemies.¹⁹ In early 1795 he told Baggesen about his hopes for a stipend from the French government to complete the *Wissenschaftslehre*.²⁰ In September 1798 he considered leaving Jena to teach in the new school system designed for the French republic in Mainz. He wrote to Jung that he would like nothing more than to devote himself to the education of the republic's future citizens.²¹ The formation of the Second Coalition in the Spring of 1799 made Fichte fear the defeat of France and the loss of all political liberty in Europe. He admitted that atrocities had been committed by both sides, and that sometimes the French were even worse than their enemies; but this was a war of principles and it was now time to choose. He had no hesitation in deciding on whose side he stood: 'I now place everything that I can do in the hands of the republic', he wrote to Jung on 10 May 1799 (GA III/3: 349).

Still, all these facts do not make Fichte a Jacobin agent, or even a member of a Jacobin club or cadre. The aims of the *Gesellschaft der freien Männer* were more moral and literary than political. The contacts with the Jacobins were also of negligible political significance. Fichte's meeting with Gorani was friendly rather than official: he did nothing more than deliver parts of a manuscript to a publisher.²² And all that Brechtel imparted to Bacher was a copy of one of Fichte's books.²³ It is indeed noteworthy that Fichte told Jung that he had no other official contacts with the French republic.²⁴

The question still remains, however, whether Fichte's *political philosophy* was Jacobin, even if he was not personally and officially a Jacobin himself.²⁵ There are indeed some striking similarities between Jacobin ideology and the arguments of Fichte's main revolutionary writing, his 1793 *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution* (*Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution*). First, Fichte defends the right to revolution, and indeed even the duty to defend the revolution with force if it is in danger

from counterrevolutionary elements;²⁶ secondly, Fichte speaks for the economic interests of the people at large, and especially for the right to existence and a reward for work.²⁷ It is indeed striking that Fichte advanced these doctrines when the Jacobins were struggling for power in France and advocating the use of force against the enemies of the Revolution.²⁸

It has been argued, however, that the *Contribution* has no close connection with the doctrines, policies and events in France. The main evidence for this point is that Fichte's defence of the right of the revolution was very different from that of the Jacobins in France.²⁹ While Fichte gave this right to every individual, the Jacobins granted it only to the people as a whole, demanding that the individual subordinate himself to the nation. But it is noteworthy that Fichte's later revision of his teaching regarding the right of revolution in his 1796 *Foundation of Natural Right (Grundlage des Naturrechts)* was more along Jacobin lines.³⁰ Here Fichte denied that the individual alone had a right to rebel against the government and attributed such a right only to the people as a whole.³¹

For all these similarities, there are still some very important differences. First, unlike most of the Jacobins, Fichte advocates reform from above rather than revolution from below.³² Although he defended the right of revolution, he seems to have regarded this as a right to be claimed only *in extremis*, when the prince refused all reform and continued to trample underfoot all the liberties of the people. Secondly, Fichte distanced himself from the radical democracy of the Jacobins by arguing that it leads to the worst form of tyranny, mob rule. While he defended popular sovereignty, he still insisted upon the need for representation, a separation between the people and the executors of their will.³³ Thirdly, Fichte also disapproved of the violent methods of the Jacobins. Thus he declined invitations to join the revolutionary government in Mainz because he could not abide 'the wild excesses of the Jacobins'.³⁴

So was, then, Fichte a Jacobin? After considering all these factors, we have to conclude that neither his political affiliations nor his philosophy make him one. Indeed, Fichte seems to have explicitly distanced himself from Jacobin doctrine and policy later in the 1790s. It is only in the contemporary meaning of the term – anyone who espouses democracy and a right of revolution – that Fichte can be regarded as a Jacobin; but such usage is misleading because it suggests a much closer doctrinal and political affiliation. If

we compare Fichte with other German radicals of the 1790s who played a more active role in the Revolution – Georg Forster, Georg Friedrich Rebmann and Johann Benjamin Erhard – then his reputation as a Jacobin seems completely undeserved. Nevertheless, there is no denying that Fichte had more sympathies with Jacobinism than most of the moderate *Aufklärer*, who never embraced democratic principles. We must place him firmly in the left-wing, if not the radical left-wing, of German politics in the 1790s.

Defending the Revolution

Fichte's main defence of the principles and actions of the Revolution is his *Contribution*, which was written before the publication of Kant's political writings.³⁵ This work is a polemic against the growing reaction to the Revolution in Germany, and in particular against A. W. Rehberg's *Investigations Concerning the French Revolution* (*Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution*).³⁶ As Fichte presents his case in the introduction, his debate with Rehberg concerns the classical conflict between rationalism and empiricism in politics. Should we judge history and tradition according to principles, which we derive from reason, or should we derive our principles from history and tradition? In this debate Fichte takes a firm stand in favour of rationalism.³⁷ We must judge history according to the standards of morality, he argues, rather than deriving these standards from history. We must not pretend that we cannot do in politics what we ought to do in morality: 'Man can do what he should do; and if he says "I cannot" he really means "I do not want to"' (GA I/1: 230).

Although Fichte sometimes presents his quarrel with Rehberg as if it were simply a dispute between rationalism and empiricism, the issue was more complicated. For Rehberg never asserted a complete empiricism in politics. Like Fichte, he too believed that reason could determine the fundamental principles of morality and natural law, and that these were binding on the statesman.³⁸ The problem is that these principles are *insufficient* for political practice. The real issue between Rehberg and Fichte, then, concerns the limits of our liberty within the sphere left open by moral principle. Rehberg contends that we *must be* guided by historical practice, which alone determines how to apply the moral law to specific circumstances.³⁹ Fichte replies that we are free to enter new contracts, regardless of past institutions and traditions.⁴⁰

Fichte's defence of the Revolution consists in two central contentions: (1) that a nation has the right to change its constitution, and (2) that it has the right to defend its new constitution through force. The framework for the first contention is the social contract theory of Rousseau. Civil society must be founded upon a contract, Fichte contends, because that alone agrees with the principle of autonomy, which binds us only to those laws to which we give our consent.⁴¹ Fichte explains, however, that we have no *moral* obligation to enter into, or even to keep, the social contract. The moral law

permits, but does not oblige, us to enter into it.⁴² My obligation to make and keep a contract is therefore based upon nothing more than my sovereign will, my decision to limit my choice and to enter into a specific agreement with others. Now it follows from this, Fichte argues, that a person can dissolve contracts as easily as he can create them.⁴³ Because it is only our sovereign will that binds us to a contract, its bonds are broken whenever we change our will. The promise never to break a contract is invalid because it violates one of the inalienable rights of man: the right to change his will if it is necessary to achieve greater moral perfection.⁴⁴

Fichte's second contention appears in the course of a long chapter about state–church relations.⁴⁵ The occasion for this discussion was the debate surrounding the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in France. After confiscating church property, the National Convention demanded an oath of allegiance from the clergy, which it feared would be loyal to the Pope rather than the new state. Since less than half of the clergy took the oath, most were regarded as traitors, a suspicion that ultimately led to the September massacres. In this debate Fichte took a clear stand on behalf of the new government. He argued that the state has the right to exclude anyone who does not renounce religious doctrines dangerous to it. Although the state does not have the positive right to determine which religion is true, it does have a negative right to exclude those which undermine public safety. If it finds someone guilty of holding dangerous opinions, then it has no authority to violate their natural rights; but it can bar them from citizenship. Yet the crucial question is this: what should we do if refractory priests declare war against the state, whether openly or secretly? In this case, Fichte explains, the state has a right to defend itself with force.⁴⁶ This right follows not from the social contract but from natural law itself, which maintains that I have a right to protect myself against anyone who does violence against my rights.⁴⁷ The context of Fichte's argument makes it plain, then, that he was defending the right of the new government to defend itself against counter-revolutionary force.

The *Contribution* proved to be a successful book. It aroused much public interest, received favourable reviews, and went through a second edition. But it also encountered severe criticism. In a perceptive review J. B. Erhard pointed out one serious *non sequitur* in Fichte's argument: that it is one thing to argue that an individual has the right to revolt

on his own behalf, but quite another to maintain that he has the right to do so *on behalf of everyone else*.⁴⁸ Fichte had at best established the first point; but he had completely ignored the second. But this was not the only question Fichte had failed to answer, according to some other contemporaries. Friedrich Gentz and Jens Baggesen contended that Fichte's rationalism made him overlook such crucial practical issues as *who* is to make the revolution, and *when* or under what circumstances it is justified.⁴⁹ In their view, Fichte had still not overcome the yawning gulf between theory and practice. But the most controversial part of the book by far was Fichte's contention that the individual can one-sidedly break his contract with the state. Both liberal and conservative reviewers pointed out that this seemed to dissolve the very possibility of all contracts, and so to undermine all the bonds of the state.⁵⁰ For why enter into contracts at all if there is the danger that the other party can break them at will? Here Fichte's radical individualism seemed to border upon anarchism. The reviews of the *Contribution* were later to have an important effect on Fichte, who revised his political theory in the *Foundation* to meet them.⁵¹ They helped to ensure that the *Contribution* would remain only an early – and quickly surpassed – stage in the development of Fichte's political thought.

First Hints and Inklings

What were the first hints of his later system that Fichte got from writing on the Revolution? In what respects did his early writings on the Revolution anticipate the later *Wissenschaftslehre*? Since Fichte does not explain himself, it is difficult to say. We can only speculate, basing our conjectures on several passages from the early political writings.

It has been maintained, however, that all such speculation is a waste of time, because Fichte could not have had any glimmerings of his later doctrine from the early political writings.⁵² That Fichte said this was only due to his retrospective imagination, which exaggerated his connections with France. Fichte discovered the first principle of his system only in November 1793 by reading G. E. Schulze's *Aenesidemus*, several months *after* the composition of the revolutionary writings. Furthermore, the dialectical method of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the 'discovery' of the 'I am', also go back to the Autumn of 1793, again too late for them to have been aroused by the Revolution.

This argument assumes that Fichte *explicitly formulated* and *became certain about* the foundation and method of his system when writing about the Revolution. But no such assumption is suggested by Fichte, who writes only of the first 'inklings' and 'hints' (*die erste Winke und Ahndungen*). To have these it was surely not necessary to be certain of the final form and method of his system. Fichte began writing about the Revolution in the Spring of 1793. It was also then that he became deeply worried about the foundation of his system, and that he first suggested the idea of basing it upon the pure ego.⁵³ So could it not be, just as Fichte implies, that his ideas came to him in the course of writing his political tracts?

Some passages from the early writings give us reason to think that this was indeed the case. It is possible that some hints came from Fichte's early tract *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe* (*Zurückforderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europas*), which was published in Easter 1793. Although it deals more with Prussian politics than the Revolution, this tract makes unmistakable references to events in France as a warning to the German princes. It is essentially a defence of freedom of thought and of the press, and more specifically a vigorous critique of the Wöllner Edicts of 1788, which strengthened the censorship in Prussia. The basis of Fichte's argument is

the Kantian concept of autonomy. The right to think freely, he maintains, is the precondition for our development as autonomous beings. It is only by exercising this right that I become conscious of myself as a rational being, and hence as a moral agent ready to take responsibility for his own actions. In the course of making this argument Fichte hits upon a striking formulation for his point: ‘The expression of freedom of thought, just like the expression of our will ... is a necessary condition under which we can say “I am”, I am an independent being’ (GA I/1: 175). The ‘I am’ here is, of course, an anticipation of the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Already, it seems, Fichte had conceived, though not become certain of, the first principle of his philosophy.

Another foreshadowing of the *Wissenschaftslehre* comes towards the close of this tract when Fichte raised the question of whether there could be a social contract where people agree to forfeit their right of freedom of thought.⁵⁴ Fichte argues that such a contract is impossible. To alienate such a right, he contends, violates the moral law, which does not permit us to do anything that could jeopardize our development as rational beings. It is the essential characteristic of a rational being that it constantly goes beyond any limits in the search for truth. We cannot impose any legal barriers upon freedom of thought, then, without placing constraints upon our rationality. Here Fichte adumbrates a *leitmotif* of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*: that rationality is characterized by an infinite striving.

It is more likely, however, that the first hints of the later system came while writing the *Contribution* in the Spring of 1793. In his introduction Fichte raised the question of the source and basis of the first principle of morality, which was his criterion to judge the rights and wrongs of the Revolution. We cannot find its origin in our empirical self, he argued, but only in our inner self, and indeed only in ‘the pure and original form of the self’ (GA I/1: 219). We come to know this inner self, he went on to explain, only by abstracting from experience and by reflecting upon ourselves. This derivation of the moral law from the inner self anticipates both the first principle and the method of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the pure self, and its method of knowing the pure self is through abstraction and reflection.⁵⁵ It is indeed striking that Fichte came to both of these conclusions in considering the proper criterion to judge the Revolution. This suggests that he wanted the first principle of the

Wissenschaftslehre to serve as a philosophical foundation for the events across the Rhine.

Knowing and Doing in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*

How did the aims of Fichte's epistemology depend upon his politics? We can answer this question only if we first have some idea about one central theme of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

If we abstract from all the technicality, nuance and complexity of Fichte's early epistemology, then one central thesis, one guiding theme, demands our attention: that the possibility of all knowledge depends upon 'subject-object identity'. Fichte himself stressed this thesis on several occasions,⁵⁶ though it often disappears in the welter of his argument. Put simply, the principle of subject-object identity states that all knowledge requires nothing less than the *identity* of the knowing subject and the known object. This means that self-knowledge is the paradigm of all knowledge, because it is only in self-knowledge that the subject and object are one and the same. In demanding identity, this principle lays down some very strict and severe conditions for the possibility of knowledge; but Fichte insisted that nothing less would do. Only subject-object identity can provide a foundation for knowledge, he argued, because *any* kind of dualism between the subject and object inevitably leads to scepticism.⁵⁷ If the object is distinct from the subject – whether as a thing-in-itself or as a given empirical manifold – then there is no guarantee that the subject knows it. For the subject cannot jump outside its own knowing activity to see whether its representations correspond to the thing-in-itself or the empirical manifold prior to synthesis. To avoid scepticism, then, all knowledge must involve subject-object identity or self-knowledge.

Such a paradigm of knowledge had, of course, its historical precedents. In emphasizing the necessity of subject-object identity, Fichte was only following in the footsteps of Kant. His starting point was the principle behind Kant's 'new method of thought': 'that we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them' (CPR, Bxviii).⁵⁸ In the prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had stressed that reason knows best those objects that it creates itself, since its own activity is transparent to itself.⁵⁹ Fichte would soon make this idea into the central principle of his system. But it is important to see that Fichte takes it a step further than Kant. He generalizes Kant's principle so that it is the paradigm of *all* knowledge, not only *a priori*

knowledge. All knowledge must conform to the conditions of *a priori* knowledge, so that we know anything only to the extent that we create it or make it conform to the laws of our own intellectual activity. This principle then holds not only for the *form* of experience – the general laws of the understanding – but also for its *matter* – given sensations of sensibility. Fichte argued that it is necessary to generalize Kant's principle because only then is it possible to surmount the troublesome dualisms of his system, which leave open another foothold for scepticism.⁶⁰

However plausible, Fichte's principle of subject–object identity suffers from some serious problems of its own. The main difficulty is that the principle appears simply false by our ordinary experience. We human beings cannot claim that we create the things that we know. The objects of everyday life are simply given to us, and our sensations come and go independently of our will and imagination. It was indeed for just this reason that Kant limited his principle to the divine understanding, the *intellectus archetypus*, which alone had the capacity to create its objects.⁶¹ The principle of subject–object identity therefore comes to grief in the face of the subject–object dualism of experience. This opens the door again for the sceptic, who simply denies the existence of the subject–object identity that is the condition for all knowledge.

Of course, Fichte himself was aware of this problem. He insisted that any satisfactory idealism would have to explain the existence of the external world, and that it would have to account for the subject–object dualism of our ordinary experience.⁶² But this only aggravates the fundamental problem facing transcendental philosophy: how to explain the possibility of knowledge, which requires subject–object identity, when experience shows nothing more than a subject–object dualism? Somehow, transcendental philosophy had to establish *both* subject–object identity and non-identity, *both* the possibility of knowledge and the existence of the external world.

Such was the problem Fichte faced in one of the central sections of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, the third part entitled 'Foundation of the Science of the Practical' (*Grundlage der Wissenschaft des Praktischen*).⁶³ Fichte's solution to this problem was perfectly Faustian: his concept of striving (*Streben*).⁶⁴ It was this concept that was to play the pivotal role of deducing both subject–object identity and non-identity, both the possibility of knowledge and that of experience. According to this concept, we finite human beings should strive towards the ideal of subject–object identity, the status of the

divine understanding. We all have a mission here on earth: to struggle to make more of nature submit to the ends and laws of our reason. The more control we acquire over nature, the more its given content will decrease and its created content will increase, and so the more knowledge we will have. Of course, we cannot ever attain the status of the divine intellect, for as long as we are finite we cannot ever create all of nature. Nevertheless, this is an ideal which we can constantly approach.

Fichte argues that this concept provides the required synthesis of subject–object identity and non-identity.⁶⁵ Both are necessary conditions of the possibility of striving, of acting in the world. There is subject–object identity because the ego acquires control over nature, making it submit to the demands of its own activity. But there is also subject–object non-identity since there cannot be any striving without some obstacle or resistance to it. The concept of striving therefore accomplishes the apparently insurmountable task of transcendental philosophy: by ensuring subject–object identity, it explains the possibility of knowledge; and by deriving subject–object non-identity, it accounts for the finitude of our ordinary experience.

This concept of striving was also Fichte’s response to the sceptic. The false premise behind scepticism is that the subject–object dualism of experience is completely insurmountable. We cannot acquire any knowledge, the sceptic thinks, because the subject–object dualism of experience is eternal and unalterable, a *fait accompli*. But in assuming this, the sceptic ignores our power to act upon and to change the world, our capacity to make the object submit to our ends. Of course, we cannot have *complete* knowledge because we cannot attain subject–object identity; but we can have at least *some* knowledge because we can approach this ideal. Indeed, we can acquire *more and more* knowledge the more we gain control over nature. In sum, then, the problem with scepticism is that it has a contemplative model of knowledge: it is as if we know things simply by *thinking* about them. But the truth of the matter is that we know them only by *acting* upon them.

The central role of the concept of striving in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* clearly reveals the primacy of the practical in Fichte’s thinking. We must understand striving not only as the *theoretical* activity of investigating nature, but as the *practical* activity of making it conform to our ends. Fichte’s solution to the problem of scepticism is indeed profoundly pragmatic. We know only what we make, and what we make must conform

to our ends. We cannot know the object through pure contemplation or speculation because that does not change the object according to our requirements but simply leaves it as it stands, so that the subject–object dualism persists.

We are now in a position to see how Fichte thinks that the solution to the problem of knowledge involves moral and political action. For he insists that the practical activity of striving is both moral and political; in other words, it must be guided by moral and political ends. The attempt to gain control over nature is not an end in itself, but simply a means towards moral independence and the just society. Our knowledge of nature is only the means and the result of achieving these ends.

Striving is a *moral* activity, Fichte maintains, because it is commanded by the moral law. On Fichte's interpretation, the moral law demands that we attain absolute independence, a condition where we are completely self-determining, so that we are subject to no laws but those of our reason.⁶⁶ This means that we ought to strive to bring the desires and emotions of our sensibility under control, for these often tempt us to act contrary to our reason. But the condition under which this is possible, Fichte argues, is that we have control over nature, which acts upon and influences our sensibility.⁶⁷ Hence Fichte regards control over nature not simply as a means of attaining knowledge, but as the means of achieving moral perfection, absolute independence.

It is now only necessary to add that Fichte regards striving as a *political* activity. The purpose of our striving is not only moral – insofar as our goal is complete independence – but also political – insofar as our end is a perfect society upon earth. In his 1794 text *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar* (*Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*) Fichte advocates that each individual strive to attain absolute independence, so that everyone working together will create 'the highest good' (GA I/3: 31–32, 40), a society in which everyone receives their happiness in direct proportion to their merits, and in which everyone gives according to their abilities and gets according to their needs. Here he is clear that the absolute ego is achieved only when a perfect society is created, when all individuals have become entirely rational and so identical with one another.

If, then, we place Fichte's concept of striving in its moral and political context, the conclusion is inevitable: Fichte sees the solution to the problem of scepticism as political activity. Anticipating Marx, he believes that all the mysteries of transcendental philosophy

will be resolved only through political practice. Empirical knowledge is not the purpose but the reward of he who strives to achieve the highest good: a society founded on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Critique and Liberation

One of the most striking analogies in Fichte's Spring 1795 letter is that between the thing-in-itself and the external chains of man. *Prima facie* this confirms the metaphorical interpretation, for it seems to involve nothing more than an analogy between metaphysical and political freedom. For what is the political significance of the critique of the thing-in-itself? We can rest assured that no sansculotte ever worried about this monster laying siege to Paris. True to the caricature of the German professor, Fichte seems to be giving too much importance to philosophy, too little importance to politics.

Was Fichte's critique of the thing-in-itself really so politically harmless? If we care to probe beneath the surface, we find that it was not just epistemology but daring – and even dangerous – political criticism. To see its political significance, it is necessary to consider two aspects of his transcendental philosophy: first, his view of the task of criticism; and, second, the meaning of the thing-in-itself.

Like Kant, Fichte held that the task of criticism is to make humanity self-conscious of its freedom. The distinguishing feature of criticism in contrast to dogmatism, he argued in the *First Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*,⁶⁸ is that criticism is a system of freedom. By making us self-conscious of our freedom, the critical philosopher helps us *to realize* it, for we can become free only if we first know that we are so.

How, though, does criticism make us self-conscious of our freedom? First and foremost, through the exposure and elimination of hypostasis, the reification or objectification of the laws of reason. This was essential to the achievement of freedom, Fichte believed, because of one paradoxical but pervasive fact: that we enslave ourselves to entities of our own creation. What we should consciously and intentionally create as autonomous beings we subconsciously and unintentionally reify and then submit to as heteronomous beings. This was the fallacy of the Spinozist, for example, who reified the principles of reason into laws of nature, which seemed to rule over him with iron necessity.⁶⁹ But the same problem was apparent in religion in general. Thus, in his first published work, the *Critique of All Revelation (Kritik aller Offenbarung)*, Fichte contended that the idea of God is the hypostasis of the moral law within us, the alienation of our natures as rational beings. In some lines suggestive of Feuerbach or Marx, he wrote that 'The idea of God, the legislator of the moral law within us, is based upon the

alienation of what is within us, upon the transference of something subjective into a being outside us; and this objectification is the characteristic principle of religion' (GA I/1: 33).⁷⁰

For the young Fichte, then, hypostasis was the key to that famous paradox stated by Rousseau in the opening lines of the *Contrat social*: that man is born free but everywhere is in chains. It was the great contribution of the critical philosophy, he believed, to show us *how* man had enslaved himself: through the objectification of the laws of his own reason. Hence the task of criticism was to liberate man from this self-imposed bondage by making him self-conscious of hypostasis.

How would criticism eradicate hypostasis? The basic techniques had already been laid down by Kant in the 'Transcendental Dialectic' of the first *Critique*.⁷¹ The critical philosopher would de-hypostasize reason by reformulating a 'constitutive principle', which seemed to describe some entity, into a 'regulative principle', which prescribed some goal or ideal of enquiry. For example, a constitutive principle states that 'if the conditioned is given, then the entire series of conditions is also given'; its regulative reformulation states that 'if the conditioned is given, then seek the entire series of conditions as a task'. Although many of the ideas of classical metaphysics had no validity as constitutive claims, they were still useful as regulative principles, Kant argued, because they helped reason to systematize its knowledge and bring it to completion.

But, for all his services to criticism, Fichte believed that Kant had still not gone far enough. Although he had ruthlessly exposed the hypostases of traditional rationalist metaphysics – the ideas of the soul, of substance and of the unconditioned – Kant had indulged in some hypostases of his own. This inconsistency was plain from the problem of the thing-in-itself, the unknowable cause of our experience. Kant had insisted that the categories of cause and existence are applicable only within experience; yet he postulated the existence of a thing-in-itself beyond experience to serve as the cause of all its sensations. The need to remove this inconsistency became an imperative for the Kantians in the 1790s.

Fichte's mission as a transcendental philosopher was therefore clear: to remove the last vestiges of hypostasis from the critical philosophy itself. Only then could it claim to be the system of freedom. Hence one of Fichte's first tasks was to remove the spectre of the thing-in-itself. Somehow, he would have to explain the origin of experience without

any inference to a transcendent entity. But it is important to see that, for Fichte, this was only one aspect of a wider problem. He was convinced that hypostasis was endemic throughout the critical philosophy. The thing-in-itself had a very broad meaning for him: it was not only the cause of experience, but any hypostasis or objectification of reason. Another striking hypostasis, for example, was Kant's idea of a noumenal self, which exists as a thing-in-itself prior to our self-consciousness. It was one of the central tasks of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to develop a theory of self-consciousness which would avoid any such reification.⁷²

Yet the most striking and important hypostasis of them all came with the idea of 'the highest good', Kant's concept of a moral world order where good is rewarded and evil punished so that virtue and happiness are in perfect proportion. For Fichte, this idea epitomized all the fundamental concepts of classical metaphysics, since it presupposes the ideas of God, providence and immortality.⁷³ As a concession to traditional and orthodox religious belief, Kant argued in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that we have a right, indeed a duty, to believe in *the existence* of the highest good, and so the *reality* of God, providence and immortality.⁷⁴ Even though we cannot prove the existence of the highest good according to our *theoretical* reason, we still have a right, indeed a duty, to believe in it according to *practical* reason, because only such a belief gives us the incentive to act according to the moral law. As weak and sensible beings, who are often tempted to act contrary to the rigorous demands of morality, we need to believe that there is a God in heaven who will reward our better efforts with eternal happiness.

But the inconsistency here is palpable, as many critics quickly saw. In postulating the existence of the highest good, Kant had granted it a constitutive status. According to the first *Critique*, however, we should see all the ideas of pure reason not as *objects of belief* but as *goals of enquiry*. If, then, Fichte were to de-hypostasize the critical philosophy, he would have to transform the idea of the highest good from a constitutive into a regulative principle. Rather than being an object of belief, it would have to be a goal for action. This transformation is already complete in the text *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*, where the highest good becomes the ideal of moral and political perfection.⁷⁵

We are now in a position to see why the criticism of the thing-in-itself was filled with such political significance for Fichte. The thing-in-itself was not merely the

unknowable cause of experience, but much more fundamentally the hypostasis of the highest good. In attempting to de-hypostasize this concept, Fichte was saying that there is no kingdom of God, no providence, no divine justice, except that which we create here on earth. Read as a regulative principle, then, the highest good prescribes the task of establishing a just society. In his *Foundation of Natural Right* Fichte sketches in detail just what such a society would be like. It will be one where only he who works will eat, one where people receive according to their needs and give according to their ability, one where the rich do not prosper and the poor suffer, and one where everyone will be rewarded according to their efforts and merits.⁷⁶ Such a society, if it can only be created, will be the realization of the dreams of the old Christian prophets: the kingdom of God on earth.

Fichte's critique of the thing-in-itself – if it were fully understood – could be viewed only with alarm by the defenders of the *ancien régime*. There was much at stake, for Fichte was attacking one of the fundamental props of their ideology. The traditional idea of the highest good was the belief in providence, the moral world-order created by God and existing now within all of nature and society. Of course, this belief provided supernatural sanctions for civil laws, since good is rewarded and evil punished in heaven; but, more importantly, it served as a rationalization for the static social and political hierarchy of late eighteenth-century society. All the differences of wealth, power and prestige within society, it seemed, were the product of providence, decreed eternally by God in his heaven. If it seemed unjust that the wicked and lazy aristocracy prospered and the virtuous and hardworking people suffered, then it was only necessary to be reminded that the ways of God are a mystery, which we should not attempt to fathom and to which we should humbly submit. In general, the *ancien régime* never regarded social structure as the product of human activity but simply as part of the eternal ordinance of God himself.

But Fichte's message was understood all too well. His political enemies jumped upon his 1798 essay 'On the Grounds of Our Belief in a Moral World Order' (*Ueber den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*), where Fichte stated that the true belief in God is that of the moral world order, and that we create this order through our actions.⁷⁷ They argued that such a belief is tantamount to atheism. But this charge was, for most, simply an excuse. What disturbed them was not so much Fichte's

religious belief but the politics that lay behind it. In their suspicious eyes, Fichte's moral religion was simply another instance of his 'Jacobinism and democratism'. Fichte himself saw their attack upon him in just these terms: 'I am for them a Jacobin, a democrat; this is it' (GA I/6: 72).

So was the critique of the thing-in-itself simply philosophy for its own sake? The aims of Fichte's epistemology, the meaning he gives to the concept of the thing-in-itself, and his social and political context, all belie this interpretation. To understand Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, we must interpret it as Fichte would have: as a system of freedom of the greatest political significance for his age.

Notes

1 The addressee of this letter is unknown; it is assumed that it was Fichte's friend Jens Baggesen.

2 In his introduction to Fichte's *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1973), xlii–xlv, lxi, Richard Schottky argues that Fichte's Spring 1795 letter represents a 'perspectival shift' that exaggerates the relationship between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the Revolution. This is explicable from the context of the letter: Fichte was hoping for a pension from the French government. Yet Schottky's argument is a *non sequitur*: the mere fact that Fichte had grounds to stress the relationship does not mean that he distorted or even exaggerated it. Schottky's attempt to loosen the connection presupposes his own sharp *a priori* separation between systematic philosophy and politics. It is precisely this separation, however, that needs to be questioned if we are to do full justice to Fichte's letter.

3 This is the view of Richard Schottky. See Schottky, *ibid.*, xlii–xlv, lxi.

4 See, for example, Reinhard Lauth, 'Die Bedeutung der Fichteschen Philosophie für die Gegenwart', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* **70** (1962–63): 252–270. Schottky has applied Lauth's views to the question of Fichte's relationship to the Revolution. Lauth's position represents a much older tradition that has concentrated upon the epistemology of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, relegating Fichte's political views to specialist scholarship. Some of the chief writers in this tradition: Fritz Medicus, *J. G. Fichte: Dreizehn Vorlesungen* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1905); Heinz Heimsoeth, *Fichte: Leben und Lehre* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1923); and Max Wundt, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1927).

5 Fichte's views on the relationship between philosophy and life underwent some important changes even during his Jena years. For an account of these changes, see Daniel Breazeale, 'The Standpoint of Life and the Standpoint of Philosophy in the Context of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–1801)', in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System*, ed. Albert Mues (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989), 80–104. In this essay I will concentrate upon Fichte's views in the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

⁶ See, for example, Reinhold Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Cass, 1965), 109, 116; George Kelly, *Idealism, Politics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 191–192, 205; Manfred Hinz, *Fichtes System der Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1981), 9–10; Bernard Willms, *Die totale Freiheit: Fichtes politische Philosophie* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1967), 63–64; and Manfred Buhr, *Die Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und die Französische Revolution in Fichte – die Französische Revolution und das Ideal vom ewigen Frieden*, ed. Manfred Buhr and Domenico Losurdo (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1991), 62–70.

⁷ For a thorough criticism of this interpretation, see Ernst Cassirer's *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Dritter Band: Die Nachkantische Systeme* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 126–216.

⁸ Thus Hinz, *Fichtes System*, 10–11, notes the inconsistency but attributes it to Fichte. The source of the inconsistency, however, is only Hinz's metaphysical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

⁹ I have developed some of this argument in more detail in my *Enlightenment, Revolution, & Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1992](#)), 57–74.

¹⁰ The early Fichte has sometimes been labelled 'a Jacobin'. See, for example, Reinhold Aris, *A History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Cass, 1936), 111, 123, and G. A. Walz, *Die Staatsidee des Rationalismus und der Romantik und die Staatsphilosophie Fichtes* (Berlin: Rothschild, 1928), 414. This interpretation has been critized by Wolfgang Schweitzer, *Der entmythologisierte Staat* (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1968), 211–230. The debate has been carried on by Richard Schottky, who has sharply criticized the Marxist interpretation of Manfred Buhr. See below, notes 24 and 28. For a thorough analysis of some of the issues, see Hajo Schmidt, *Politische Theorie und Realgeschichte: Zu Johann Gottlieb Fichtes praktischer Philosophie (1793–1800)* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1983), 297–334.

¹¹ Among his friends see, for example, Baggesen's diary, April 1797, and K. L. Reinhold to Niethammer, 10 September 1798, in FG, I, 420, II, 2. These views were

countered by J. F. Mehlis, a colleague of Fichte's, who insisted that 'Whoever knows Fichte will not find anything Jacobin in him' (see FG, VI/2, 529).

[12](#) On the varied use of the term, and the problems of defining it, see Helmut Reinalter, 'Der Jakobinismusbegriff in der neueren Forschung', in *Die Französische Revolution und Mitteleuropa* (Frankfurt, 1988), 39–57.

[13](#) See J. G. Fichtes als Verfassers des ersten angeklagten Aufsatzes und Mitherausgebers des phil. Journals Verantwortungsschrift (GA I/6: 77–78).

[14](#) See Fichte's reply to the charge that he was attempting to undermine public worship on Sunday, his 1797 *Des Prof. Fichte Verantwortung, welche dem Bericht des Senats Academia ad Serenissimum Reg. Beygelegt worden ist* (GA I/4: 391–405).

[15](#) These charges were made on many occasions by Fichte's enemies in Jena and Weimar. The first three were made most explicitly, publicly and notoriously by an anonymous article in the reactionary journal *Eudämonia*, 'Verunglückter Versuch, im christlichen Deutschlande eine Art von öffentlicher Vernunft-Religions-Übung anzustellen', Band II (1796), 28–56. Fichte wrote a bitter riposte: *Erklärung gegen den Aufsatz: Verunglückter Versuch ...* (GA I/3: 279–288). The final charge was made by one of the student orders, *Die Unitisten*. See J. K. von der Becke to Ernst II Ludwig von Sachsen-Gotha-Altenburg (FG, VI/1, 130–131).

[16](#) See Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps* (Paris: Colin, 1954), Vol. I, 318–319.

[17](#) See Brechtel to Bacher, 22 June 1794 (FG, VI/1, 54). Bacher sent a copy of Fichte's *Beitrag* to Philibert Buchot, the commissar for international affairs in Paris, who wanted a report on pro-revolutionary literature in Germany. Buchot wanted to mention Fichte's book to the National Convention. See Bacher to Buchot, July 9, 1794 (FG, VI/1, 64).

[18](#) See Jens Baggesen to Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg, 26/28 April 1794 (FG, I, 88).

[19](#) See Marie Fichte to Fichte, 7–12 July 1794 (GA III/2: 172).

[20](#) GA III/2: 300.

[21](#) GA III/3: 138.

[22](#) At least that was Fichte's explanation. See his reply to the *Eudämonia* review, *Erklärung gegen den Aufsatz: Verunglückter Versuch ...* (GA I/3: 279–288, especially 279).

[23](#) It is indeed significant that Brechtel writes of Fichte as if he were unknown to Bacher. See FG, VI/1, 54.

[24](#) See Fichte to Jung, 10 May 1799 (GA III/3: 349).

[25](#) This is the thesis of Manfred Buhr in his still stimulating *Die Philosophie Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und die Französische Revolution*, 14. (This book was originally published in 1965.) Buhr has restated his position in 'Die Philosophie Fichtes und die französische Revolution', *Republik der Menschheit: Französische Revolution und deutsche Philosophie*, ed. Manfred Buhr, Peter Burg and Jacques D'Hondt (Cologne: Paul Rügenstein Verlag, 1989), 104–117.

[26](#) See GA I/1: 253, 254.

[27](#) See GA I/1: 269, 322, 323. Fichte developed this theory in much greater detail in his *Foundation of Natural Right* (GA I/4: 20–41).

[28](#) The first half of the *Contribution* was probably written in Danzig, in the Winter of 1792–93. The second half was composed in the Summer of 1793. See the editorial note in GA I/1: 196–197.

[29](#) See Schottky, 'Einleitung', viii–xi.

[30](#) This was Buhr's original argument. See *Revolution*, 38, 50. Schottky's argument holds only for the earlier work, so his critique of Buhr misses its target.

[31](#) See *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (GA I/3: 458–459).

[32](#) In his first political publication, his 1793 *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe*, Fichte warned against revolutions as a means of social and political change. See GA I/1: 169, 189–192. The preface to the *Contribution* only

reaffirms this moderate standpoint. Fichte advises his readers not to apply the principles of right to the present states in Germany. Although most German states are unjust, nothing should be done against them by means of force. All that we can do is to spread knowledge of the principles of justice among our own circle and within our own community. If worthiness for freedom must come from below, liberation can come only from above. See GA I/1: 207–208.

[33](#) See Fichte's *Foundation of Natural Right*, GA I/3: 438–440. In his later *Verantwortungsschrift* (GA I/6: 73), Fichte appealed to these passages from the *Foundation* to defend himself against the charge of being a democrat. It is important to note, however, that in the *Foundation* Fichte does not disapprove of democracy as such, only of a direct one. He approves of democracy provided that it has a representative government. See GA I/3: 441–442.

[34](#) See the manuscript of Marie Johanne Fichte (FG, II, 200). Her testimony is corroborated by Fichte's 10 May 1799 letter to Franz Wilhelm Jung, where Fichte complains about the revolutionary practices of the French. See GA III/3: 348.

[35](#) It is customary to stress the early Fichte's dependence upon Kant. It is important to note, however, that, although Fichte's argument borrows much from Kant, it does not merely apply a fully developed Kantian position. When Fichte wrote the *Contribution* Kant still had not fully formulated his own political philosophy. The famous theory–practice essay, 'On the Common Saying: That Is Right in Theory but Useless in Practice', did not appear until September 1793; and *Towards Eternal Peace* was not published until late 1795. Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, his most systematic work on political philosophy, appeared only in 1797. In his introduction to his *Foundation of Natural Right* Fichte drew attention to the similarities and differences between his view and Kant's. See GA I/3: 323–328. On the context behind the development of Fichte's natural law doctrine, see Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. I, 472–89.

[36](#) See A. W. Rehberg, *Untersuchungen über die französische Revolution* (Hannover and Osnabrück: Ritscher, 1793). On Rehberg, see Ursula Vogel, *Konservative Kritik an der bürgerlichen Revolution* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1972); Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 1966), 547–594; and my *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, 302–309.

[37](#) GA I/1: 211–221.

[38](#) See Rehberg's article 'Über das Verhältnis der Theorie zur Praxis', in *Über Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Dieter Henrich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 116. This article was originally published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 23 (1794), 114–143. See Rehberg's review of the *Critique of Practical Reason* in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* 188 (6 August 1788): 345–352.

[39](#) See Rehberg, *Untersuchungen*, 15–17.

[40](#) This becomes clearer only later in the course of Fichte's polemic in the *Contribution*. See I/1: 238.

[41](#) GA I/1: 236.

[42](#) GA I/1: 238.

[43](#) GA I/1: 264, 290, 300.

[44](#) GA I/1: 254–255, 301.

[45](#) GA I/1: 370–404, especially 393–403.

[46](#) GA I/1: 393–394.

[47](#) The premise behind Fichte's argument here is made more explicit in the *Foundation of Natural Right* (GA I/3: 392).

[48](#) This review was first published in *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten* II (1795), 47–88. It has been reprinted in *Johann Benjamin Erhard: Über das Recht des Volks zu einer Revolution und andere Schriften*, ed. H. Haasis (Munich: Hanser, 1970), 135–164. See especially 136–137.

[49](#) See Baggesen's *Tagebuch*, May/June 1794 in FG, I, 93. See Friedrich Gentz's review in *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, 153–154 (7 May 1794), 345–360. This review has been reprinted in Schottky, 323–343. See [note 2](#).

[50](#) This point was made most vigorously and clearly by Gentz, 351–352. See Reinhold to Baggesen, 31 January 1794, in FG, I, 83; and Baggesen, *Tagebuch*, May/June

1794, in FG, I, 94. The same point was made by Friedrich Schleiermacher, FG, VI/1, 18.

[51](#) This is most clear from Fichte's later theory of revolution, which is much more specific about who has the right to make a revolution and when. See his *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, Drittes Capitel (GA I/3: 432–460).

[52](#) See Schottky, xliv–xlv.

[53](#) On 20 February 1793, Fichte wrote to his friend Franz Reinhard that he had come to have grave doubts about the foundation of the critical philosophy. See GA III/1: 373–374. Fichte says in the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* that he explained his idea of basing philosophy upon the pure ego to J. F. Schultz, who lived in Königsberg. See GA I/4: 225. This conversation must have taken place in early 1793 when Fichte was still in that city.

[54](#) GA I/1: 182–183.

[55](#) See Fichte's conversation with Baggesen, 7 December 1793, in FG, I, 68. Here Fichte discovers the first principle of philosophy, the existence of the self or 'I am', through abstraction and reflection. It is necessary to place this discovery in the context of Fichte's earlier development: he had already had the idea of basing philosophy upon the pure ego in the Spring of 1793. See [note 43](#) above. The 'discovery' consisted more in Fichte becoming certain of a principle whose possibility had dawned upon him much earlier.

[56](#) See, for example, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 275–276) and the introduction to Fichte's *System der Sittenlehre* (GA I/5: 21). The importance of this paradigm of knowledge is made clear by the young Schelling in his *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre*, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. F. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart, 1856–61), I/1, 366.

[57](#) This argument is most apparent in Fichte's early review of G. E. Schulze's *Aenesidemus* (GA I/2: 41–67, especially 49–60). On the significance of this review for the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Daniel Breazeale, 'Fichte's *Aenesidemus* Review and the Transformation of German Idealism', *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981), 544–568. In his *Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des*

Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre, Schelling attacked the dualisms of the Kantian philosophy. See *Werke*, I/1. 345–362. Fichte endorsed Schelling’s critique in the second introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 234–242).

[58](#) Kant, CPR, Bxviii.

[59](#) See CPR, Axx, Bxii, xviii.

[60](#) This was indeed just the argument of Solomon Maimon, one of Kant’s most powerful critics, and an important influence on Fichte. See Maimon, *Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie*, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. V. Verra (Hildesheim, 1965), II, 62–65, 182–183, 362–364. On Maimon’s influence on Fichte, see Fichte’s March–April 1795 letter to Reinhold (GA III/2: 282). See also the fragmente ‘Wer Hume, Aenesidemus wo er Recht hat u. Maimon noch nicht verstanden ...’ (GA II/3: 389–390).

[61](#) The *locus classicus* for Kant’s views on the divine understanding is in the *Critique of Judgment*, §§ 76–77 (AA 5: 401–410; CJ, 271–279).

[62](#) See, for example, the *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 186–187). Fichte rejected an idealism that could not explain the facts of experience as a ‘transcendent’ or ‘dogmatic’ idealism. See GA I/4: 200, 243. See *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 411–412).

[63](#) See *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 385–486).

[64](#) See especially GA I/2: 401–404.

[65](#) GA I/2: 402–403.

[66](#) See *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (GA I/3: 29–30) and *System der Sittenlehre* (GA I/5: 69–70).

[67](#) See *Einige Vorlesungen* (GA I/3: 29).

[68](#) See *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 191–195).

[69](#) GA I/2: 263 and GA I/4: 194–195.

[70](#) Admittedly, Fichte does not develop the full implications of this idea in the *Kritik*. Rather, he continues to affirm some central tenets of the Kantian doctrine of moral faith. In his *Reclamation of Freedom of Thought*, however, Fichte notes the political use of religious doctrine in the *ancien régime*: that the idea of heaven is a compensation for social and political ills on earth. See GA I/1: 187.

[71](#) CPR, B536–543, 642–648.

[72](#) This is especially apparent in Fichte's *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*. See GA I/4: 277. The 'most famous philosopher of our century' here is certainly Kant. See Fichte's unpublished 1798 *Wissenschaftslehre*, where he mentions Kant by name and openly attacks his theory of self-knowledge. See Fichte, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. Hans Schulz (Berlin: Jünker und Dunnhaupt, 1937), 356, 377.

[73](#) Hence in his *Critique of All Revelation* Fichte used it as a basis for the deduction of God, providence and immortality, which were legitimate only as necessary conditions for the highest good. See GA I/1: 19–22.

[74](#) AA 5: 125; CPrR, 240–241.

[75](#) GA I/3: 31–32.

[76](#) See *Foundation*, §18 (GA I/4: 20–58).

[77](#) See GA I/5: 354. The question of Fichte's atheism cannot, of course, be explored here. According to the regulative reading of the ideas of God and the highest good, however, Fichte was indeed an atheist if 'atheism' means belief in the *existence* of God and the highest good. This was the implication of Fichte's doctrine, which he never developed for political reasons. Fichte's later philosophy, after the atheism controversy, involves reading his originally regulative principles in constitutive terms.

Fichte's Explanation of the Dynamic Structure of Consciousness in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*



Christian Klotz

A few months before he is offered a chair at the University of Jena, Fichte notes an idea which had struck him like a ‘flash of light’: that the central problems concerning the foundation of philosophy as a system can be resolved through an investigation of the ‘unconditionedness of the I’ (GA II/3: 48).¹ One may say that it is from this moment on that Fichte has a philosophical project of his own. And when, in 1794–95, the first year of his teaching activity in Jena, he presents his conception of the principles of philosophy to his students, he pursues precisely this insight. Indeed, the concept of the ‘absolute I’ which Fichte introduces right at the beginning of his private lectures corresponds to the idea of the unconditioned nature of the I formulated some months before. However, in his lectures, he has to extract a systematic account from the ‘flash of light’ that had struck him some months earlier. He has to show that ‘the I’ (or, as we may say today, subjectivity) really is an ultimate, unconditioned dimension that is fundamental for the adequate understanding of philosophical problems and of the systematic connections between them.

Before he began to lecture in Jena, Fichte published in 1794 the *Aenesidemus Review* and *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, a programmatic text addressed to his future students. These writings show that Fichte already had a certain conception of the principle as well as of the overall structure and method of his theory.² However, when he is about to begin his lectures in Jena, Fichte is not at all certain how to carry out his programme. He asks to start his teaching activity at a later date, but this request is denied. And because he believes that students should not waste their time and concentration in taking notes during the lectures, he decides to hand out the printed text

in fascicles during the two semesters in which he presents his account of the principles of philosophy (the summer of 1794 and the winter of 1794–95). What his students receive here is nothing more than a ‘work in progress’ – a text which shows step by step how there arises a (and maybe the first) theory that focuses on the structure of subjectivity as an ultimate and unifying condition of our understanding of ourselves and our relation to the world. While writing the handbook for his students, it was not Fichte’s intention that the text should be distributed widely.³ And yet, the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge*) – this is the title with which the lecture text was finally published as a book – was to become one of the most influential works of post-Kantian philosophy. This text would shape German Idealism and at the same time become one of the principal sources of inspiration for Romanticism. And, since the book remained the only detailed account of the foundations of his philosophy published during his lifetime, Fichte would be identified with it for the rest of his life, in spite of the considerable changes his thinking underwent in its later development.

To be sure, in Fichte’s 1794–95 account we find the characteristics of a work in progress: some unresolved ambiguity in its central terms, gaps in the argumentation and a continuous rethinking of the systematic conception that is being developed; but, on the other hand, we find a profound and highly original investigation concerning the nature of subjectivity which was able to transform post-Kantian philosophy and contribute decisively to the formation of German Idealism. At the heart of this investigation is the idea that the unconditioned nature of the I gives rise to a dynamics of consciousness from which its fundamental theoretical and practical characteristics can be explained as elements of a unified structure. It is through this conception of a dynamic structure of subjectivity which is both theoretical and practical that Fichte wanted to solve a problem he considered to be central to philosophy and still unresolved in Kant’s critical philosophy and the discussion which arose from it, namely: how can the unity of our cognitive–perceptual and of our practical, reality-transforming relation to objects be adequately described and explained? To understand Fichte’s answer to this question, we will follow the three-part division of his text: first, we will discuss the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole, and then we will turn in separate sections to the two

following parts of Fichte's account: the 'Foundation of Theoretical Knowledge' and the 'Foundation of the Knowledge of the Practical'.⁴

The Fundamental Synthetic Structure of Representational Consciousness in the Section on Principles of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*

The section on principles of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* (§§ 1–3) presupposes a general conception of what philosophical explanation is about. This conception emerged as a result of Fichte’s critical assessment of positions that were of decisive importance in discussions of Kant’s critical philosophy in the late 1780s and early 1790s. The theoretical and practical aspects of consciousness are for Fichte to be understood as aspects of ‘representation’, that is, of the way in which consciousness relates itself to objects by representing them. Thus, consciousness is ‘theoretical’ insofar as it represents objects as an independent and given reality, and ‘practical’ insofar as it represents them as something to be transformed through action. Consequently, Fichte holds that it is within a theory of representation that both the theoretical and practical aspects of consciousness and their unity must be accounted for.

The focus on representation which characterizes Fichte’s philosophical project is to some extent due to the influence of Karl Leonhard Reinhold, whose successor in Jena Fichte was. According to Reinhold, Kant’s critical philosophy had to be reconstructed on the basis of a general theory about our representational faculty. For when Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* speaks of intuitions, categories and ideas, he refers to kinds of representations, but without explaining what the general structure of representation is. In his ‘Elementary Philosophy’, Reinhold wanted to provide exactly this missing fundamental element of Kant’s theory – a general theory of the representational structure of consciousness. And he did so by basing this theory as a whole on one fundamental principle, which, as Reinhold supposes, describes the factual structure of representation as it presents itself in consciousness. However, Reinhold’s formulation of the principle and the theory of the faculty of representation upon which he built it soon became a target of sceptical critics such as G. E. Schulze, whose ‘Aenesidemus’ is a brilliant attack on Reinhold’s Elementary Philosophy.⁵

When Fichte, who had been convinced by Reinhold’s position, elaborated his review of Schulze’s book, he finally came to the conclusion that the sceptical arguments formulated by Schulze really undermined Reinhold’s claim to have given a valid

formulation of the principle of philosophy. However, this does not mean that there can be no philosophical theory of representation which is based on a first principle. Rather, it means that the principle of such a theory cannot be a description of the structure of representation as a given fact. Even if it is in a certain sense a fact that we represent objects, Fichte holds that it is not a contingent fact – there is some necessity to our doing so, even if it is not the necessity of a logical or analytic truth. How could we be conscious without relating ourselves to objects by representing them? Fichte concludes from this that the principle of the theory of representation must express the ‘ground’ from which we can understand why the fact that we represent objects is somehow a necessary fact about our consciousness.⁶

Fichte’s 1794 account of the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is clearly guided by the idea that philosophy as a theory of representation has to be based on comprehending the ground that underlies the necessary or essential facts about representational consciousness. It is Fichte’s fundamental thesis in this section that these facts result from acts of the I that are (under some aspect, at least) unconditioned and therefore ultimate grounds of the representational structure of our consciousness. In this sense, ‘facts result from acts’ is a central claim of Fichte’s in the section on the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Thus, within the Fichtean project subjectivity is not to be taken as an empirical phenomenon. Rather, the I and its acts are what ground the facts of representational consciousness and explain their necessary and general characteristics. Therefore, investigating the factual aspects of representation is relevant to the comprehension of subjectivity only insofar as they reveal the acts of the ‘I’ which underlie it. This idea is behind Fichte’s ascending arguments in the section on principles by means of which he searches for each principle: starting from some ‘essential’ fact about representational consciousness (which here is always the fact that some logical law is considered to be necessary) we can discover the fundamental activity of the I from which this fact results.

Fichte’s search for the first principle starts from the fact that the logical principle of identity (‘ $A = A$ ’, that is, ‘everything is identical with itself’) is generally, even by sceptics, regarded as valid without being in need of any further justification (GA I/2: 256; SK, 94). However, as Fichte argues, a closer look at this principle shows that its supposed necessity is not self-evident. In Fichte’s reading, what the principle of identity

says is this: whatever is ‘posited’, that is, whatever is introduced into discourse as a possible object of judgements, has an ‘essence’ through which it is what it is, or, as Fichte also puts it, possesses ‘reality’ in the sense of some qualitative character which is constitutive of what it is.⁷ One could say that, for Fichte, the principle of identity implies an ‘essentialist’ conception of whatever is posited in consciousness as an existing or possible object. If we accept this reading, the principle of identity no longer seems trivial or self-evident. Now we have to ask what is the ground of the supposedly necessary passage from the being ‘posited’ of something in consciousness to its ‘being’ in the sense of essence or reality (GA I/2: 257, 261; SK, 95, 99–100). And Fichte argues that the ground of the fact that the activity that introduces an object into discourse is necessarily an essence- or reality-positing activity lies in the nature of the positing and judging subject itself. For in the case of the subject, the positing activity simply coincides with essence or reality – to posit itself precisely *is* the essence of the ‘I’ or of subjectivity: *‘That whose being (essence) consists simply in the fact that it posits itself as existing, is the I as absolute subject’* (GA I/2: 259; SK, 98).

However, more important than the argument from identity through which Fichte reaches the first principle in his 1794–95 account (which he did not repeat in any of his later versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*) is the insight into the nature of subjectivity yielded by Fichte’s definition of the absolute subject. It is Fichte’s fundamental claim that a subject is not just what it is, like a ‘thing’, but is essentially engaged in some self-referential activity through which it is ‘for itself’ what it is. This being ‘for itself’ is constitutive of the subject both under the aspect of its existence and under that of its determinations: if we want to understand in what mode a subject exists and what its determinations *qua* subject are, we must consider its own perspective and understand how its existence and its determinations are ‘for’ the subject itself. And as this self-relatedness cannot be passively received by the subject, but owes itself to an activity of the subject itself, we must say that a subject is characterized by some self-constitutive activity. Any attribution of some determination A to a subject implies that there is some self-referential activity through which the subject is A ‘for itself’ – this is the fundamental rule for the discourse about subjectivity and subjects which is established by Fichte’s definition of the absolute subject.

Fichte refers to the self-constitutive activity of the I by coining the compound

neologism ‘*Tathandlung*’ (translated as ‘Act’ in SK, but ‘deed-action’ would be a more literal translation) (GA I/2: 259; SK, 97). There are two important aspects that Fichte wants to emphasize with this peculiar terminological move. First, the term expresses the difference between the self-constitutive activity of the I and whatever is a fact (*Tatsache*) of consciousness and thus is grounded by the I’s activity. Secondly, the term ‘*Tathandlung*’ also expresses the intrinsic character of this activity: the action in the sense of the acting (*Handlung*) immediately brings about its result (*Tat*), that is, the mode of being of the I is essentially performative – it consists in nothing else than in its relating itself actively to itself and, in this sense, being ‘for’ itself. Fichte also states that in this activity the agent and the product of the action are the same, thus stressing the idea of self-constitution. All this makes sufficiently clear that ‘*Tathandlung*’ differs in its structure from the representation of objects, even from self-representation: the subject is originally ‘for itself’ not in the sense of being an object for itself, but in the sense of constituting itself in the first place through its self-referential activity. And if we want to understand the representational structure of consciousness, we must never lose sight of this pre-representational ground of representation. The I is a representing subject only insofar as it ‘posits’ itself as representing something. Thus, representation must be explained ‘from inside’, as a result of the self-structuring activity of the subject.

However, it is clear that, even if the conception of the self-positing nature of the I is fundamental for the explanation of the representational structure of consciousness, it is not sufficient for it. Representation involves reference to some object which is distinguished from the representing subject as such.⁸ But the nature of the I, as it is characterized in the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, does not involve any such reference. Fichte says that the I in this sense is according to its essence ‘undetermined’ and ‘infinite’ – it is a purely self-constitutive activity which does not involve any act of distinguishing itself from something else, or of relating itself to something else. Moreover, the conception of ‘*Tathandlung*’ as the I’s essence is not sufficient when it comes to understanding the self-consciousness of the representing subject. For our consciousness of ourselves can hardly be understood without considering the fact that we understand ourselves as ‘finite’ subjects who are engaged in various relations to objects.⁹ Thus, Fichte must introduce further principles in order to be able to explain both the representational structure of consciousness and the nature of self-consciousness.

To search for the second principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte starts again from the fact that a logical principle is generally considered valid. Fichte calls the logical principle now under consideration the ‘principle of opposition’, which seems to be his version of the principle of non-contradiction: ‘What is not-A is not equal to A’ (GA I/2: 264; SK, 102). What is important here is that this principle involves an operation which is not yet contained in the principle of identity: negation or, as Fichte puts it, the act of ‘opposing’ (*Gegensetzen*). Fichte holds that without this act there could be no differences for us – it is only because, by applying negation, we consider something as *not* being what a given object or content A is that differences exist for us. Thus, the fact that there are differences for us is due to acts which we perform (again: ‘facts result from acts’) (GA I/2: 265–266; SK, 103). However, Fichte holds that distinguishing between objects is not the fundamental exercise of ‘opposing’. For insofar as the original act of positing is that of the self-positing of the I, the original exercise of opposing must be the act in which the I distinguishes something from itself. Therefore, the second principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* tells us that the I opposes a not-I to itself (GA I/2: 266; SK, 104). This principle involves the important claim that the subject’s conception of something as being different from it is due to a non-empirical, unconditioned act of the I and not to any kind of experience. For, as Fichte argues, in order to be able to understand an experience as being the experience of some object which differs from me, I must already be in possession of a ‘criterion’ through which I recognize something as different from me, which presupposes that I have already the conception of something as being different from me (GA I/2: 267; SK, 104–105).

Obviously, the second principle presupposes the first: only insofar as the I is posited can a ‘not-I’ be opposed to it. However, the second principle is also opposed to the first, by postulating an act which is irreducibly different from the purely self-positing activity which, according to the first principle, is constitutive of the I as such. How can the I consistently posit itself and, at the same time, posit something which is irreducibly different from it? There must be a third act of the I that makes this possible, by making the two opposed acts of positing compatible. Fichte holds that the proposition that characterizes this act is a third ‘principle’ and not just a theorem, because even if it follows from the first two principles that there must be such an act, it does not follow from them how this act is to be specified (see GA I/2: 268; SK, 106). Fichte describes

this act as a positing of the relation of mutual limitation between the I and the not-I, but also – in a second formulation that he considers to be more precise – as a positing of reality as ‘divisible’. The basic idea here is that, in order for both the I and the not-I to be posited, both I and not-I must be understood as being what they are through their negative, excluding relation to each other – each one is what the other is not. And this implies that they can be characterized by means of contrasting predicates, reality thus being ‘quantifiable’ in the logical sense of being divisible into different predicates. The upshot of this is that I and not-I must be posited as being ‘something’, that is, as being determined through mutual negation, and therefore as being intrinsically related to each other (GA I/2: 271; SK, 109).

Fichte considers the act through which I and not-I are related to each other as bearers of mutually exclusive, contrasting predicates to be the fundamental ‘synthesis’ from which both the theoretical and the practical nature of representational consciousness can be explained. Thus, the third principle of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* involves Fichte’s transformation of the Kantian theory of synthesis: the fundamental synthetic act of the subject is not the unification of the manifold of a given intuition, but its relating itself to something that it distinguishes from itself. And Fichte’s conception of synthesis involves another claim which goes beyond Kant: like any synthesis, the fundamental synthesis involves other acts - a ‘thesis’ (the absolute self-positing activity of the subject) and an ‘antithesis’ (the positing of the not-I) without which no differentiated elements which are to be synthesized would be available. With this, Fichte has established the famous triad ‘thesis–antithesis–synthesis’, which in his conception refers, in the first place, to the acts of the I which ground the representational structure of consciousness. Fichte considers the triadic conception of the I’s fundamental synthetic act to be of considerable systematic importance. On its basis, he not only introduces the Kantian categories of quality (reality, negation and limitation), but also distinguishes the fundamental forms of judgements (thetic, antithetic and synthetic judgement) and logical laws (the principles of identity, of non-contradiction and of sufficient reason) (see GA I/2: 272–282; SK, 110–119).

However, what is decisive for the following steps of Fichte’s 1794–95 account is that the conception of the fundamental synthesis of the I and the not-I creates a new problem, even if it may serve as a basis for introducing some systematically important

distinctions. For, on the one hand, the I is now understood as a determinate ‘something’ that is intrinsically related to something else; but, on the other hand, according to the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in its intrinsic essence the I is nothing but pure, self-positing activity. This activity is the ‘ground’ of consciousness in that it is constitutive of the intrinsic nature of the positing subject without which there could not be any determination, any ‘fact’ of consciousness at all. Thus, the I now seems to be characterized in two incompatible ways: as an absolute, self-sufficient activity, and as a determinate *relatum* within consciousness. It is ‘something’ and, at the same time, it is beyond any determinateness. The I, Fichte says, is ‘finite’ and ‘infinite’ at the same time. But how can the I possess these apparently incompatible characteristics? We will see that this question – we may call it ‘the problem of the internal consistency of the I’ – is the central problem both of the ‘theoretical’ and of the ‘practical’ parts of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that succeed the section on principles.

The Foundation of Theoretical Knowledge: Critical Idealism as a Mediation of Idealism and Realism

By virtue of the synthetic act introduced in the third principle, the I and the not-I are ‘something’, limiting each other through negation, that is, by being describable through mutually exclusive predicates. However, it is decisive for the further argument of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* that Fichte passes from this purely logical conception of the mutual limitation of the I and the not-I to a *dynamical* one. According to the latter, the original synthesis of the I and the not-I involves the idea that they mutually reduce the activity of the other, causing, in a wide sense, ‘passivity’ (*Leiden*) in the other (GA I/2: 287; SK, 124). This idea becomes explicit at the beginning of the fourth paragraph when Fichte formulates the principle of the ‘mutual determination’ (*Wechselbestimmung*) of the I and the not-I and explains this principle by referring to Kant’s dynamical categories of relation (GA I/2: 290; SK, 126–127).¹⁰

It is through the opposed directions involved in the mutual determination of the I and the not-I in the dynamical sense that Fichte can introduce – albeit in an initial and rudimentary sense – the distinction between the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘practical’ aspects of consciousness: insofar as the I conceives of itself as determined by the not-I (and this means now: as affected by the not-I), it ascribes to itself a perceptual relation to the not-I, understanding itself as a ‘theoretical’ subject which has to take into account the independent characteristics of the object affecting it. But when the I conceives of itself as ‘determining’ the object, it regards itself as an agent which is able to transform the not-I through its actions. Fichte does not justify by any argument the passage from the logical, negation-based conception of the mutual limitation of the I and the not-I to the dynamical conception of their mutual determination. But the passage to the dynamical conception of determination brings into play an important idea: that the representational structure of consciousness essentially involves the subject’s self-ascription of dynamical, real relations to the represented objects, and not only the subject’s distinguishing itself from the object by means of contrasting, negation-involving predicates.

In order to be able to relate ourselves to objects as actors who can transform them, we must already attribute some given reality to the objects. Therefore Fichte first turns to the theoretical aspect of the synthesis of the I and the not-I. The fact of our perceptual relation to objects is grounded in some act, which Fichte now specifies in the formulation of the principle of the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: ‘*The I posits itself as limited by the not-I*’ (GA I/2: 285; SK, 122). At first sight, the act described in this principle has a paradoxical character: the I performs an act in which it understands itself as passive, as being affected by something else. And the leading question of the fourth paragraph of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* – of the ‘Foundation of Theoretical Knowledge’ – is how this act is possible, that is, how the I can understand itself as being in a perceptual relation to independently real objects. In a first step, Fichte accords to the Kantian categories of relation (causality and substantiality) a decisive role in this act: the I attributes to the not-I an independent reality, if it regards its own activity as being limited or reduced in such a way that the ground of this limitation must be seen to reside in the object. Thus, the attribution of reality to the object involves the idea of some causal relation between the object and one’s own mental state (GA I/2: 290–295; SK, 127–131). But how can the I originally become aware of its own activity as being limited or reduced, in such a way that this very awareness is the ground for attributing causality and therefore reality to the not-I?

Fichte holds that the concept of substantiality is necessarily involved in the awareness of one’s own passivity: the subject conceives of itself as a substance in the sense that there is a totality of determinations which can be predicated of it (to have determinate thoughts or intentions, to imagine something etc.). Each of these determinate activities is ‘accidental’ insofar as its determinate character (thinking, willing, imagining etc.) and its content are not implied by the self-positing activity which alone is essential to the I. Thus, when the I attributes an accidental activity to itself, it will understand the exercise of that activity as being grounded not only in itself, but also in its being ‘affected’ by the not-I (GA I/2: 295–301; SK, 131–138). Fichte claims to have identified therewith the original function of the categories of causality and substantiality. It is only in a second moment that these concepts are used to characterize objects. Their fundamental function is to make it possible for the I to attribute to itself a determination

whose cause it sees in some object and thus to relate itself as a perceiving subject to objects which it considers to be as real as itself.¹¹

However, the explication of the attribution of reality to the not-I through the categories of substantiality and causality is far from being sufficient. For it presupposes that the I exercises some determinate activity which cannot be explained from its self-positing nature. But what is the ground of the accidental determinacy of the activity of the I which, according to this explanation, is the starting point of the I's attribution of reality to the not-I? Fichte holds that any explanation of the determinateness of the activity of the I has to focus on one of the two categories involved in the attribution of reality to the not-I: either the determinateness is considered to be autonomously produced by the I as an active 'substance', or it is explained from the not-I as its 'cause'. It is important to notice that the activities that are introduced in these explanations are understood as being antecedent to the I's relating itself to the not-I in conformity with the principle of mutual determination, for they are to explain how this can happen in the first place. Therefore, Fichte characterizes these activities as 'independent' (GA I/2: 305; SK, 141).

Fichte calls the philosophical positions which explain the determinateness of the activity of the I from the I itself 'idealist', and those which explain it from some condition which is external to the I or to its activity 'realist'. Thus, according to Fichte, idealism and realism are opposed attempts to solve the same theoretical problem, namely, to respond to the question of 'which road is to be taken in explaining representation' (GA I/2: 310; SK, 147). With this, Fichte has gained his own theoretical perspective for reconstructing the debate between idealism and realism which had become central to German philosophy since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Jacobi's *David Hume*.¹² In its strongest form, idealism claims that the I determines itself through an arbitrary, absolute act, producing thereby the determinateness within itself without which it could not represent any object. On the other hand, the strongest version of realism consists in the explanation of the determinateness of the I as the effect of the affecting activity of the not-I which is now conceived as a 'thing in itself'. Fichte characterizes these strong versions of idealism and realism as 'dogmatic' (GA I/2: 310; SK, 146–147). However, there are more modest versions of idealism and realism: idealism can content itself with the claim that, as a matter of fact, it is the original nature of the I to engage in some

determinate, object-related activity. And realism may adopt the more cautious thesis that representation arises by virtue of some determinateness of the I which can neither be explained from its arbitrary activity nor from its nature, but whose ground we cannot know (GA I/2: 333–335; SK, 169–171).

Fichte argues that neither the strong nor the more modest versions of idealism and realism can be maintained. With regard to realism, Fichte argues that in all of its forms it involves the same error: realism explains representation from a condition which is supposed to exist independently of the subject's consciousness or knowledge, and thus adopts a point of view external to that of the subject whose act of representation it intends to explain. How the subject can know that it is affected by a thing in itself or that it is in some real, determined state remains unexplained. But without being determined 'for itself' (and not only for some external observer) the I will not attribute any reality to the not-I. Thus, the realist explanation fails by tacitly passing from a condition which is real or 'in itself' to an 'ideal' condition which exists 'for the I', without being able to explain how this passage is possible (GA I/2: 336; SK, 171). But also idealism, whose subjectivist explanation seems to have more affinity with Fichte's position, is rejected by Fichte both in its strong and in its weaker version. The absolute, self-determining act of the I from which the dogmatic idealist explains the determinateness of the I's activity, as Fichte objects, is 'quite unknown and inaccessible to us' (GA I/2: 333; SK, 169). And the modest version of idealism, which claims that it is by virtue of its own original nature that the I relates itself to some object to which it attributes reality, is also unacceptable according to Fichte, because it considers the I to be essentially finite and object-related, thus contradicting the central idea of the first paragraph of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, namely that the I in its essence is nothing but self-positing activity and therefore 'infinite' (GA I/2: 333–334; SK, 169). Fichte holds that the explanation of representation must take into account the original indeterminateness of the I. As we shall see, this claim has important consequences for Fichte's explanation of both the theoretical and the practical aspects of consciousness.

What is, in the end, the result of Fichte's subtle discussion of idealism and realism? All the strong and weak versions of idealism and realism which have been considered turn out to be unsustainable. However, Fichte holds that the result of his critical examination of idealism and realism is not purely negative. Both the idealist and the

realist explanations contain some truth, even if neither of them is adequate taken by itself. Therefore, Fichte develops an explanation of the theoretical–perceptual aspect of representation which is conceived as a synthesis of idealism and realism. Adopting Kantian terminology, Fichte calls it ‘critical idealism’, even if both its content and its justification are quite different from that of the idealism which Kant calls transcendental or critical.

Given the previous discussion, it is not difficult to understand why Fichte holds that the explanation of representation must involve an idealist element: whatever the ground of the determinateness of the I’s activity is, it must essentially be ‘for’ the I. External conditions (things or determinations of the I that exist ‘in themselves’) cannot explain why the I understands its activity as being determined. However, it is also true that the object-related determinateness of the I’s activities cannot be explained from the activity of the I alone, which in its essence is nothing else than self-positing activity. Therefore, there must be some condition which is for the I such that it occasions the I to delimit its self-positing activity, that is, to attribute to itself determinate acts that are related to an external reality. Fichte calls such a condition a ‘check’ or ‘trigger’ (*Anstoß*) (GA I/2: 355; SK, 189). Here we have the realist element of Fichte’s explanation of representation, in the sense that a condition which cannot be explained from any activity of the I is supposed to explain its determinateness. However, the realism adopted by Fichte is a weak form of realism. It does not involve the claim that the I is affected by some external instance, a ‘thing in itself’ – the Fichtean I has no sensibility in the Kantian sense of a mere receptivity. Instead, the condition that cannot be explained from any activity of the I is nothing else than the ‘requirement’ (*Aufgabe*) to delimit its activity which exists ‘for the I’, that is, to which the I itself (and not some external observer) sees its activity subjected (GA I/2: 355; SK, 189–190).¹³

Fichte holds that the synthesis of idealism and realism that characterizes his ‘critical’ idealism explains the fundamental structure of the I’s theoretical–perceptual relation to objects, which is expressed by the principle ‘*The self posits itself as limited by the not-Self*’. If, by virtue of the ‘check’, the I delimits its own activity, this act must involve the production of some determinate content which is such that, on the one hand, it pertains to the I (as a content of its activity), but, on the other hand, it presents itself as related to some not-I or object. In this sense, the content of the finite activity must be ‘the

boundary' between I and not-I; a boundary that pertains to both at the same time or, as Fichte also says, that is the point at which they 'clash' (GA I/2: 357; SK, 191). Adopting a central term of Kant's critical epistemology, Fichte attributes the production of such content to 'the wonderful power of productive imagination' (GA I/2: 353; SK, 188).

But the function of productive imagination in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* is not yet adequately characterized if it is described only as what synthesizes I and not-I through the production of an intuition that is the 'boundary' between them. We must not forget that the self-delimitation of the I involves the problem of the internal consistency of the I: originally, the I is infinite or indeterminate, insofar as in its essence it is nothing else than pure self-positing activity. But how can it be indeterminate and, at the same time, perform determinate and object-related acts? By synthesizing the I and the not-I, productive imagination must also synthesize 'the finite and the infinite', that is, the I's indeterminacy and the determinate, finite character of its object-related acts (GA I/2: 358; SK, 192). And this means that the product of imagination must be 'determinable', that is, it must be a content which is such that, by virtue of being conscious of it, the I never finds itself in a merely fixed determination, but always possesses at the same time a distance from the determination and moves beyond it. The character of the perceptual content must be such that the I is determinate and indeterminate at the same time.

According to Fichte, it is precisely from this requirement that we can understand the structure of time and space, which in his view are not (as in Kant) forms of sensibility as a mere receptivity, but products of imagination. Time is not a mere sequence of static 'points' in which the I is in some determinate, fixed state. Instead, time consists of extended 'moments' each of which already involves a passage from one state to some other state. It is a continuous stream in which the I permanently 'wavers' or 'oscillates' (*schwebt*) – to cite Fichte's famous metaphor – in a dynamical way between determinate states (see, for instance, GA I/2: 360; SK, 194–195). And in space as a continuous infinite totality every determinate figure is, so to speak, open for a dynamical continuation, both in the sense of its infinite internal divisibility and in the sense of the possibility of going beyond it within space. Thus, by pertaining to the infinite stream of time and the continuous structure of space, the perceptual content is such that the I, by being aware of it, is never just determined; rather it is always about to transcend the determinate content, thereby manifesting its indeterminacy, that is, the fact that it does

not coincide with any determination. Because of the intrinsic connection that holds between the character of perceptual content and the nature of subjectivity, Fichte can say that the activity of productive imagination ‘forms the basis for the possibility of our consciousness, our life, our existence for ourselves, that is, our existence as selves’ (GA I/2: 369; SK, 202).

The conception of the ‘check’ and of ‘productive imagination’ signifies a decisive turning-point in the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. While hitherto the discussion had concerned ‘possibilities of thought’ or ‘mere hypotheses’ (the idealist and realist attempts to explain representation), now we have reached a ‘fact’ of the human mind: the existence of intuition (GA I/2: 362–369; SK, 196–202). From now on, it is possible to investigate how the human mind really works and how it develops its empirical knowledge, using ‘perception ... given to experiment’ as a methodical tool. Fichte famously characterizes the philosophical investigation that now begins as a ‘pragmatic history of the human mind’ (GA I/2: 365; SK, 198–199). It is ‘pragmatic’ in the sense that it deals with observable facts of the human mind. However, the ‘history’ of the human mind is not written here in the sense of some diachronic account of its evolution, but in the functional sense that the various faculties of the mind are presented in a systematic order, showing how they build on one another in such a way that the characteristics of our perceptual relation to objects and of the self-consciousness involved in it become comprehensible as a result of the cooperation of these faculties. Therefore, Fichte gives the section that presents the results of such an investigation the title ‘Deduction of Representation’ (*Deduction der Vorstellung*) (GA I/2: 369–384; SK, 203–217).¹⁴

Fichte introduces here cognitive faculties that are already central to Kant’s critical epistemology: understanding, judgement and reason. However, he conceives these faculties in a very different manner. The function he attributes to them presupposes the synthesis of imagination which in its ‘waving’ between indeterminacy and determination produces intuition as a determinable and flowing content. In order for it to be possible to represent objects, there must be some ‘determining’ activity which gives rise to fixed determinacy in the first place – and exactly this is the function of judgement and understanding. It is striking that Fichte here characterizes understanding as a passive ‘receptacle of what imagination brings forth’ (GA I/2: 374; SK, 207). The function of

understanding is only, as it were, to ‘save’ the fixed determinations which are yielded by judgement’s reflection on the stream of intuitions. Thus, understanding is necessary for the perception of objects, insofar as these are understood ‘as’ something and therewith characterized through stable concepts. But it is no longer (as in Kant) conceived as the spontaneous lawgiver of synthesis, which, as Fichte holds, in its most fundamental form is purely imaginative and prior to any discursive structure.

Fichte concludes the ‘Deduction of Representation’ by finally introducing the self-consciousness of the representing subject in his systematic ‘history’ of the human mind (GA I/2: 382–384; SK, 215–217). The fact that it appears only as the final stage of this history clearly implies the claim that self-consciousness *qua* fact of the human mind presupposes the perceptual relation to objects. According to Fichte’s account, what makes self-consciousness possible is our capacity to ‘abstract from’ or to detach ourselves to some degree from object-related contents. Consequently, self-consciousness is intrinsically related to our perceptual relation to objects, for it emerges when consciousness abstracts from them. Depending on how far such abstraction goes, the individual approaches more or less ‘pure’ self-consciousness where its capacity to abstract from object-related contents would reach its maximum.¹⁵ The fact that in self-consciousness we can detach ourselves from the totality of objective contents gives rise to a ‘conflict’ which, according to Fichte, characterizes our self-conscious relation to the world: we can conceive of ourselves as infinite and somehow ‘outside’ the world as a sphere of mere finitude, or we can understand ourselves to be finite beings existing within the world as an infinite totality. When Fichte finally observes that here ‘lies the ground of the *antinomies* expounded by Kant’, he once more gives expression to his project to reconstruct (or to transform) Kant’s critical philosophy on the basis of his new theory of subjectivity (GA I/2: 384; SK, 217).¹⁶

The ‘Foundation of Knowledge of the Practical’: Reflection and Striving in Fichte’s Practical Idealism

According to Fichte, the conditions that make possible the theoretical–perceptual aspect of consciousness introduced in the foundation of the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are by no means sufficient to explain the representational structure of consciousness. Instead, he defends the claim that such an explanation requires conceiving of critical idealism as a ‘practical idealism’, that is, as including as a constitutive element the *active* relation of the I with the not-I in the conception of what makes possible our representational relation to objects (GA I/2: 311; SK, 147). Thus, concepts such as *striving*, *drive*, *feeling* and *longing*, through which Fichte characterizes the practical aspect of subjectivity, are introduced in the third part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as indispensable elements of the philosophical explanation of representation. Moreover, Fichte seems to defend the claim that the practical aspect of subjectivity is in some sense the most fundamental, grounding even the theoretical–perceptual aspect of the representation of objects. ‘The possibility of representation’, Fichte says, ‘is founded’ on the practical capacity of man (GA I/2: 399; SK, 233). However, as we shall see, Fichte’s explicit intention to establish the ‘primacy of practical reason’ in the philosophical explanation of representation is not without problems. Fichte presents these basic claims of the third part of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* in the fifth paragraph of the text (GA I/2: 385–416; SK, 218–251).

Here, too, the problem of the internal consistency of the I is central to Fichte’s argument. The keystone of the theoretical part, the ‘wavering’ of imagination between indeterminacy and determinacy (or infinity and finiteness), was already to resolve the contradiction between the two facets of the I: to be in its essence purely self-positing and – insofar as it is a representing subject – finite and object-related. However, as Fichte now argues, an important aspect of the problem of the internal consistency of the I is not resolved through the synthesis of imagination. When he says that the ‘major antithesis’ to be resolved in the third part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that between the ‘unrestricted’ and the ‘restricted’ character of the I, the focus is on the contradiction between the

‘dependence’ and the ‘independence’ of the I, and, hence, on an aspect of the problem of the internal consistency of the I that was not considered in the foundation of theoretical knowledge (GA I/2: 386–387; SK, 219, 220–221). In its essence, the I is nothing but self-constitutive activity and therefore independent in a radical sense; however, as a representing subject, it depends on the ‘check’, that is, on some condition which cannot be explained in terms of its activity. But how can this dependence of the representing I be made compatible with its essential independence? Fichte’s solution brings into play the fundamental concept of his practical philosophy: in order not to lose its self-positing, independent nature when representing objects, the I must ‘strive’ to be fully self-determined in its act of relating itself to objects. Thus, we want to maximize our self-determination, even if perfect self-determination for us can only be an ideal which is never fully realized. By identifying this striving with the ‘categorical imperative’, Fichte gives expression to the idea that the fundamental concepts of Kant’s practical philosophy can be reconstructed on the basis of his new theory of subjectivity. There is an ‘unconditioned’ imperative for us, because our factual, object-related being does not correspond to our essential, purely self-positing being – because our internal consistency is not a given fact, but a task (GA I/2: 396n; SK, 230n).¹⁷

As Fichte argues, the striving through which the I opposes itself to any limitation of its self-constitutive activity is a condition without which we could not speak of ‘objects’ in the proper sense. For it is by virtue of this striving that whatever does not allow for the full realization of the idea of self-determined activity presents itself as an external obstacle which can only be understood as a real non-I. And to oppose our activity, to be an ‘obstacle’, is a characteristic of objects as such. Therefore, Fichte concludes, the representation of real objects presupposes our practical capacity in the sense of our ‘striving’: ‘Without a practical capacity in the self, an intelligence, too, is impossible’ (GA I/2: 410; SK, 244–245). We may illustrate Fichte’s idea by thinking of the familiar fact that objects in space resist being penetrated by us, which is essential for our considering them to be real in contrast to merely imagined objects. However, Fichte would say that the conception of real objects involves the idea of resistance for the deeper reason that we strive towards an ideal of unrestricted self-determination that cannot be realized as long as we are interacting with some reality which seems irreducibly different from us. It is worth noting that this does not necessarily amount to the explanatory primacy of the

practical in the sense of an asymmetrical founding of the theoretical on the practical. For it may plausibly be argued that there is a mutual interdependence between the awareness of one's striving and that of resisting objects, such that consciousness is inseparably and at every moment both theoretical and practical (we will return to this soon).

Up to this point, the argument given by Fichte in the fifth paragraph of the *Wissenschaftslehre* amounts to saying that, without a practical capacity of the I in the sense of its striving, neither the peculiar status of our internal unity as a task nor the possibility of our relation to real objects can be understood. However, Fichte digs even deeper by raising the question of whether our practical and object-related condition can be derived from the very concept or essence of the I. Fichte calls such a positive deduction of the practical capacity from the fundamental principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* a 'genetic' demonstration. And he holds that only such an argument makes intelligible in the first place how the unconditional requirement to maximize one's autonomy arises in the human spirit (GA I/2: 404–405; SK, 239). This is a highly important step, because now Fichte begins to rethink the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and, in particular, the relation between the first and the second principle, between the inner nature of the I and the positing of the not-I.¹⁸ Given the first principle, that is, the characterization of the I as in its essence being nothing else than pure self-positing activity, the practical relation to a real not-I seems to be entirely extrinsic to the I – in fact, we can hardly understand how the I can possibly be engaged in such a relation or be 'open' to the check. Fichte now clearly observes this defect of the first principle (see GA I/2: 405; SK, 239–240). And he introduces a new key concept in the explication of what the I is: the I is not only self-positing activity, but it must also be *reflectively* aware of such an activity as its own essence. It must comprehend itself as being self-constituting. However, to understand oneself as A, one must distinguish oneself from what is not A. Without relating itself to what it understands as being a not-I, the I could not reflectively understand what it is. Thus, the I is intrinsically disposed to face the check – it is, as Fichte says, 'open' to it and to becoming engaged in some determinate, object-related activity in which, however, it will always remain in a state of striving, because it aims to understand itself as being purely self-determined (GA I/2: 408–409; SK, 243).

In his 'genetic' demonstration, Fichte introduces the tendency towards reflection as

the fundamental characteristic of the I. This move makes it possible to understand both the theoretical and the practical relation to objects as rooted in the I's intrinsic nature. Can we now still speak of an absolute I as characterized in the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*? It seems we cannot. It seems that in the fifth paragraph Fichte substitutes the conception of the I as a 'closed' self-positing with that of the I as a tendency towards a reflection which is guided by the idea of self-positing as its own essence. And there is a second important implication of the 'genetic' argument: Fichte characterizes the I's reflective self-consciousness as involving an inseparably theoretical and practical relation to objects. It is in the sense of such a 'holistic' conception of consciousness that Fichte now speaks of 'the circuit of the self's functions, and the inwardly linked reciprocity of the latter with itself' (GA I/2: 423; SK, 258). Thus, the picture we find at the end of Fichte's § 5 argument is rather that of a reciprocal relation of dependence between the theoretical and the practical aspects of consciousness than that of a one-sided relation of dependence of the theoretical on the practical, in spite of the programmatic idea of an explanatory primacy of the practical, which no doubt is present in Fichte's account.¹⁹

In paragraphs 6 to 11 which now follow, the final portion of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte addresses the question of how the subject can become conscious of its own striving nature as opposing any limitation to its self-positing activity (see GA I/2: 416–451; SK, 251–286). Thus, Fichte concretizes here the abstract conception of the theoretical–practical character of subjectivity which was presented in the fifth paragraph. What he thereby develops is 'practical philosophy' in an entirely new sense. It is neither a theory of action, nor ethics in any usual sense of the word. For Fichte holds that the consciousness of one's own practical, striving nature originally arises in a pre-deliberative way, which is to be described in terms of the experience of drive, feeling and longing. Thus, Fichte now investigates subjective phenomena, albeit not as merely factual psychological data, but rather as possessing a determinate function in the formation of practical self-consciousness and at the same time as informing our relation to objects as such.

When the striving is reflectively determined as a continuous tendency towards a self-determined activity that is grounded in the I itself without, however, being effective, Fichte speaks of a 'drive' (GA I/2: 418; SK, 253). As Fichte argues, the reflective

awareness of one's drive involves the consciousness of being restricted to a determinate state or a determinate conscious content which does not allow the drive to be satisfied – and this, the 'inability, as manifested in the self', is what Fichte calls 'feeling' (GA I/2: 419; SK, 254–255), or 'sensation' when it involves the reflective awareness of oneself as the feeling subject and therewith self-attribution (GA I/2: 447; SK, 282). Feeling or sensation in this sense is necessary for the awareness of the drive and for the I's relating itself to real objects as such, which are nothing else than the supposed counter-striving causes of one's own limitation. However, feeling as the consciousness of one's own being fixed or restricted would not be possible if there was no awareness of one's own wanting to go beyond the given determination, and insofar as this wanting involves the idea of one's perfect self-determination, its aim is something completely unknown to us – indeed, we can neither conceive nor imagine what it would be like to be a feeling and therefore object-related subject, and at the same time fully self-determined. Fichte introduces the conception of our intentionally undetermined, fundamental wanting to be fully self-determining by coining the notion of longing (*Sehnen*), a peculiar and central element of his 1794–95 practical philosophy: 'But such a determination of the self is called a *longing*; a drive towards something totally unknown, which reveals itself only through a *need*, a *discomfort*, a *void*, which seeks satisfaction, but does not say from whence' (GA I/2: 431; SK, 265).

Longing requires a change of the state of feeling (and therewith at the same time some objective change). The question of how it is possible to be aware of such a change is at the centre of the last paragraph of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 446–451; SK, 281–286). Thus, Fichte concludes his account by investigating the conditions of the dynamics of consciousness in the sense of a potentially infinite change of feelings demanded by the I's striving, whose objective correlate is the continuous transformation of objects through acting. According to Fichte, we can achieve contentment in this process only for 'a moment', because our acting, even when it arises from moral self-determination, can only realize the transitory and limited self-determination that is allowed by the conditions of representational consciousness (GA I/2: 450–451; SK, 286). Thus, never to feel fully at home in the world in which we locate ourselves as agents is the price we pay for the unconditioned nature which characterizes our being subjects.²⁰

Notes

1 The manuscript cited here, published with the title ‘Eigne Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie’ (*My Own Meditations on Elementary Philosophy*), shows how Fichte’s philosophical project originated as a result of critical reflection on Reinhold’s reformulation of Kant’s theory (see GA II/3: 21–177). The importance of Reinhold for Fichte in the period during which the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* emerged will be discussed below.

2 See GA I/2: 41–67; EPW, 59–79 and GA I/2: 107–172; EPW, 94–136. It is worth noting that, before leaving for Jena, Fichte presented his account of the foundations of philosophy in the house of the Swiss theologian, pastor and physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater in Zurich. Some important aspects of the principles and the general structure of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* seem to have been present already in this earlier lecture (see GA IV/3: 1–48).

3 See Fichte’s letters from 15 January 1794 to Voigt (GA III/2: 42–44), from 4 February 1794 to Böttiger (GA III/2: 54–56), from 1 March 1794 to Böttiger (GA III/2: 70–73) and from April 1794 to Niethammer (GA III/2: 94–96). For a more detailed account of the process of production of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*, see the editors’ presentation in GA I/2: 176–186.

4 For a helpful overview of Fichte’s 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1990](#)), 41–53; Peter Baumanns, *J. G. Fichte. Kritische Gesamtdarstellung seiner Philosophie* (Freiburg and Munich: Alber, [1990](#)), 56–115; Günter Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1998](#)), 43–54; and Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 179–220. For a more detailed commentary, see Wolfgang Class and Alois K. Soller, *Kommentar zu Fichtes Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004); Rainer Schäfer, *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre von 1794* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

5 Schulze's book was published anonymously with the title *Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie. Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skeptizismus gegen die Anmaassungen der Vernunftkritik* (Helmstedt: Fleckeisen, 1792).

6 For a more extended discussion of the importance of Reinhold and Schulze for the emergence of Fichte's philosophical project, see Jürgen Stolzenberg, *Fichtes Begriff der intellektuellen Anschauung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 13–117; Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 68–74 and 102–107; Wayne M. Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1997](#)), 82–99; Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 124–201; Günter Zöller, *Fichte lesen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2013), 17–21; and Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2013](#)), 23–41.

7 Already in his explanation of the principle of identity, Fichte begins to use the term 'setzen' (*posit*), which is one of the fundamental terms of the 1794–95 account of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. However, Fichte neither justifies the introduction of the term nor explains its meaning. Its origin is the Latin '*ponere*' as used in rationalist logic, which refers to the act in which some thought is considered or claimed to be true. Fichte's initial use of the term in § 1 still bears some continuity with this meaning by being related to the act of judging and to one of its logical principles. However, it is important to note that Fichte soon proceeds to use '*setzen*' to signify the pre-representational acts by which the structure of consciousness is grounded. For more discussion of this, see Baumanns, *J. G. Fichte*, 67; Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*, 43–47; Claudio Cesa, '... Ein Doppelsinn in der Bedeutung des Wortes *Setzen*', in: Erich Fuchs and Ives Radrizzani (eds.), *Der Grundsatz der ersten Wissenschaftslehre Fichtes* (Neuried: Ars Una, 1996), 134–144; and Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity*, 93.

8 The idea that representational consciousness involves a distinguishing and relating of subject and object is clearly present in the phenomenological characterization of representation which Reinhold had presented as the principle of his Elementary Philosophy: 'In consciousness the representation is distinguished by the subject from the subject and the object, and related to both' (*Beiträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger*

Mißverständnisse der Philosophen, Vol. I (Jena, 1790), 167; see Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*, 46).

9 Thus, the fact that in § 1 of his 1794–95 account Fichte defends the claim that the I ‘exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself’ (GA I/2: 260; SK, 98) does not mean that we should identify the ‘*Tathandlung*’ with some type of actual self-consciousness, or even with some ‘pre-reflective’ or ‘pure’ form of self-awareness. What Fichte wants to capture in the formulation of the first principle is the intrinsic essence of subjectivity, whereas any actual self-consciousness is an instantiation of this essence which involves or presupposes something more, namely a determination of the I which is not yet involved in its self-positing nature. How this determination of its essence is possible, that is, how the ‘synthesis’ of the I’s intrinsic nature with relation-involving determinations can be comprehended, is the central question of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole, as will become clearer in what follows. For interpretations which suggest a straightforward reading of Fichte’s first principle as a contribution to the theory of self-consciousness, see Dieter Henrich’s influential ‘Fichte’s Original Insight’, trans. David R. Lachterman, *Contemporary German Philosophy I* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, [1982](#)), 15–53 and Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, especially 46 and 110–111.

10 The passage to the dynamical reading of the mutual determination of I and not-I is also found in Fichte’s characterization of the not-I as ‘negative magnitude’ (GA I/2: 271, 292; SK, 109, 128). Fichte here adopts the central concept of Kant’s important pre-critical writing *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (1763), in which Kant argues that opposition exists not only in the logical sense of contradiction, but also in the sense of ‘real’ opposition which involves conflicting forces (AA 2: 167–204; TP, 203–241).

11 For an extended presentation of Fichte’s conception of the categories in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Wilhelm Metz, *Kategorienduktion und produktive Einbildungskraft in der theoretischen Philosophie Kants und Fichtes* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991), especially 199–386.

12 See Kant’s ‘Refutation of Idealism’ in CPR, B274–B279; and Jacobi’s ‘David Hume on Faith or Idealism and Realism: A Dialogue’, in George di Giovanni (ed.), *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*

(Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1994). Both in Kant and Jacobi, the debate about idealism and realism is understood to be epistemological rather than ontological. For a comprehensive presentation of the idealism–realism debate from Kant to Hegel and of Fichte’s place within it, see Valentin Pluder, *Die Vermittlung von Idealismus und Realismus in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie. Eine Studie zu Jacobi, Kant, Fichte, Schelling und Hegel* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 2013).

13 The conception of the ‘check’ remains highly abstract in Fichte’s formulation of his critical idealism in § 5. We may understand the conception of ‘feeling’ introduced in § 7 as a concretization of the abstract notion of a check. Alternatively, Fichte’s later conception of a ‘summons’ from another individual introduced in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–97) might be understood as concretizing this conception. In the latter case, the notion of a check would point towards Fichte’s theory of intersubjectivity, which is not explicitly formulated in his 1794–95 account. For more discussion of this, see R. Lauth, ‘L’interpersonnalité chez Fichte’, *Archives de Philosophie*, **XXV** (1962): 325–344; Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, 210–211; and Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, 167–186.

14 For more detailed discussion of the Fichtean project of a pragmatic history of the human mind and its relation to previous conceptions of a ‘pragmatic history’ of man (Kant) or of cognitive faculties (Platner, Reinhold, Maimon and Tennemann), see Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, 70–95.

15 For a more extended presentation of Fichte’s explanation of self-consciousness in the Deduction of Representation, see Ulrich Claesges, *Geschichte des Selbstbewusstseins. Der Ursprung des spekulativen Problems in Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1794–95* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), especially 135–152.

16 It is plausible to suppose that Fichte here refers principally to Kant’s Third Antinomy as applied to the human will (CPR, A444–A451): when we consider our will to be free, we locate ourselves ‘outside’ the (phenomenal) world as a totality of causally determined things or events; but when we consider our will as causally determined, we locate ourselves within the world as an all-embracing totality governed by the principle of causality. Fichte suggests that the origin of the antinomy thus

construed is not to be found in the explanatory activity of reason (as is suggested by Kant), but in the nature of our self-consciousness.

17 The conception of the I's self-positing as an unattainable practical ideal of self-determination may seem surprising in view of Fichte's claim in § 1 that the I *is* self-positing activity and that this activity underlies all representational consciousness. Does Fichte here adopt a practical conception of the I's self-positing activity which is at odds with the 'theoretical' and consciousness-grounding character of this activity defended in the formulation of the first principle? Frederick Neuhouser has criticized Fichte's argument in § 5 as involving such a shift in the interpretation of the term 'self-positing' and as therefore incompatible with the meaning of the first principle (see *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 50–53). However, against this criticism it can be argued that we should understand Fichte's argument as involving less a shift in meaning than a shift of standpoint. In § 1, the self-positing activity of the I is conceived in philosophical reflection as the intrinsic essence of the representing I whose positing activity underlies all representational consciousness. In contrast, the argument in § 5 characterizes the very same essence of subjectivity as it presents itself from the point of view of the I as finite and object-related, that is, from the point of view of reflective self-awareness. And, from this standpoint, its own self-positing nature can only be understood by the subject as an ideal or task. See Wolfgang H. Schrader, 'Philosophie als System – Reinhold und Fichte', in Klaus Hammacher und Albrecht Mues (eds.), *Erneuerung der Transzendentalphilosophie im Anschluß an Kant und Fichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1979), 331–344 (especially 343–344); and Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, 219–220.

18 For more discussion of Fichte's rethinking of the conception of the I in § 5, see Violetta Waibel, *Hölderlin und Fichte. 1794–1800* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 59–70; and Jürgen Stolzenberg, 'Geschichte des Selbstbewußtseins. Reinhold – Fichte – Schelling', in *International Yearbook of German Idealism* 1 (2003): 93–113, especially 98–101.

19 Fichte's claim concerning the explanatory primacy of the practical faculty certainly remains a controversial issue. In favour of Fichte's claim, Wayne Martin has argued that striving can be understood as not yet involving the consciousness of objects in the proper sense and thus as 'prior' to the theoretical aspects of consciousness (see *Idealism and Objectivity*, 137–141). Daniel Breazeale, in contrast, defends the view

that Fichte's account implies the 'equiprimordiality' of the theoretical and the practical (*Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, 410). It should be noted that the fact that – at least in some passages of the 1794–95 account – Fichte adopts the conception of a circular, holistic unity of the theoretical and the practical aspects of consciousness does not mean that he abandons the 'foundationalist' orientation of his philosophical project, as is convincingly argued in Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, 272–300. We may say that Fichte defends a holistic view of the factual structure of consciousness, but that he also, and decisively for his philosophical project, defends the view that there must be some ground from which this structure can be philosophically explained – and here we have his foundationalism.

[20](#) I would like to thank the Brazilian Research Council (CNPq) for a research grant which helped me to finish this text, and Katia Hay for her careful revision of the manuscript.

The *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1796–99 (*nova methodo*)



Daniel Breazeale

Though the term *Wissenschaftslehre* is widely taken to designate a specific text (usually the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794–95), Fichte never actually published a work with this title. Instead, he employed the term as the general name for his own philosophical standpoint or system, just as he customarily referred to Kant as the author of ‘the Critical philosophy’. Even if it is understood as the general name for Fichte’s overall philosophical project or system, however, the term *Wissenschaftslehre* still remains ambiguous. To begin with, the system in question consists of several different branches or subdivisions, one of which – namely the first or ‘foundational’ division, which Fichte later described as his *philosophia prima*¹ – is often, even by Fichte himself, designated by the same name as the larger system to which it is merely the propaedeutic. Moreover, this system itself did not remain static and unchanged. On the contrary, both the system and Fichte’s presentation of it continued to undergo almost constant development and evolution right up to the moment of his death in 1814, by which time he had produced more than a dozen different full-scale presentations of at least the rudiments or foundations of his system, most of which differ strikingly – in both systematic form and technical vocabulary – from all of the others. (How much difference there is between the actual *content* of these various versions and how *significant* these differences are remains a hotly disputed question among scholars.²) It is, therefore, always advisable, when speaking of ‘Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*’, to specify the specific (published or unpublished) text or presentation to which one is referring.

The first sketch of what eventually became the *Wissenschaftslehre* was drafted in Zurich during the winter of 1793–94, while Fichte was engaged in a systematic reconsideration of Kant’s Critical philosophy and Reinhold’s Elementary Philosophy and

preparing to defend both against the sceptical attack of G. E. Schulze/Aenesidemus.³ The new philosophical strategy and new standpoint that emerged from this reconsideration were first made public in Fichte's review of *Aenesidemus*, published in February of 1794, and in the following months he delivered, before a circle of local intellectual leaders, his first lectures on his new system of philosophy, for which he had by then coined the name '*Wissenschaftslehre*' or 'Doctrine of Science'.⁴

By the time of his arrival in Jena for the summer semester of 1794, Fichte was prepared not only to lecture upon the *Wissenschaftslehre* but also to have printed 'as a manuscript for his students' a detailed presentation of the first part of his new system, in which he attempted to expound its principles and foundations. This text, the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, was originally intended to be distributed only in fascicles to Fichte's immediate students, but copies soon began to circulate among a larger public and Fichte quickly authorized an official, public edition. Parts One and Two of the *Foundation* were published in 1794 and Part Three, along with the closely associated *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre with Respect to the Theoretical Faculty*, appeared the following year. These texts constitute the only detailed presentation of 'the *Wissenschaftslehre*' (or, more accurately, of the first principles and foundations of the larger system with that name) published during Fichte's lifetime. Yet the author himself immediately began to express grave reservations concerning the adequacy and intelligibility of this first presentation and devoted his remaining years at Jena to the twin tasks of (1) developing and systematically articulating the various branches or sub-disciplines of that system whose foundations had been provisionally laid in the lectures of 1794–95, and (2) thoroughly revising his exposition of these very foundations and presenting them according to an entirely 'new method'.

In pursuit of the first of these goals, Fichte revised his lectures on political philosophy or 'philosophy of right' and published them in 1796–97 under the title *Foundation of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*. His *System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, the revised text of his lectures on moral theory, appeared in 1798. However, his original plans to lecture on a third systematic subdivision of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, namely philosophy of

religion, had to be abandoned – ironically enough – because of the eruption of the ‘Atheism Controversy’ and Fichte’s subsequent dismissal from his post at Jena in 1799.⁵

All of these works belong to the broader systematic exposition of what is sometimes called ‘the second Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*’, the essential systematic foundation of which was the subject of a lecture course entitled ‘Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*)’, which Fichte first offered in the winter semester of 1796–97 and then repeated during the two following winter semesters. These new lectures on the foundations of transcendental philosophy (usually referred to simply as *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*), which were intended to replace the earlier *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, conclude with what is unquestionably Fichte’s clearest and most detailed sketch of the overall organization and structure of his Jena system. According to this ‘Deduction of the Subdivisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ (GA IV/3: 520–523; FTP, 467–474),⁶ this systematic structure is as follows.

The first portion of the system is devoted to *philosophia prima*, that is, to a rigorous and complete presentation of the first principles or foundations of the system as a whole.⁷ In the case of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, this ‘first philosophy’ consists entirely of a transcendental analysis of self-consciousness and a systematic deduction of the necessary conditions for and essential structure of the same. The first part of Fichte’s system thus contains an *a priori* inventory of everything that we must necessarily encounter within consciousness if we are to ‘think the I’ at all. Upon this first or foundational portion is then erected the rest of the system, which consists of four ‘special philosophical sciences’ or systematic subdivisions of the ‘entire *Wissenschaftslehre*’: (1) a specifically ‘theoretical’ portion devoted to philosophy of nature or ‘theory of the world’, which would presumably resemble Kant’s *Metaphysical First Principles of Natural Science*, though supplemented by a consideration of organic laws;⁸ (2) a specifically ‘practical’ portion devoted to ethics; (3) a complex and important ‘philosophy of the postulates’, which is, in turn, further subdivided into (3a) ‘theory of right’ or ‘doctrine of law’ (*Naturrecht*), which considers the demands that theoretical reason addresses to practical reason, and (3b) ‘philosophy of religion’, which considers the postulates that practical reason addresses to theory; and (4) aesthetics.⁹

The task of ‘theoretical philosophy’ is to develop and to analyse the concept of objectivity deduced in the first part of the system, until one has finally established – in as

much concrete detail as is obtainable from the *a priori* standpoint of transcendental philosophy – *what experience, and hence ‘nature’, necessarily is and must be*. The task of ‘practical philosophy’ or ‘ethics’ is to explain *how the world ought to be constructed by a rational being as such*, without regard to the individual circumstances of such a being. Whereas theoretical philosophy deals with ‘nature as such’ or ‘experience in general’ and practical philosophy deals with the demands issued by ‘reason as such’, philosophy of right or political philosophy is concerned with *how the freedom of rational individuals must be limited if they are to co-exist with one another* and describes, in as much detail as is obtainable from the standpoint of transcendental speculation, those juridical/political institutions through which alone such mutual freedom is realizable. If political philosophy views the practical demands of morality from the standpoint of the actual world, then philosophy of religion adopts the opposite perspective and describes *how nature itself must be thought of as a ‘moral world order’*.

Though aesthetics is listed by Fichte as the final systematic subdivision of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, its relationship to the system as a whole is very different from, and more ambiguous than, those of any of the previously mentioned disciplines. On the one hand, the aesthetic *standpoint*, from which one contemplates the given world of natural necessity ‘just as if we had produced it’, is described as an essential *intermediary* between the ordinary standpoint, which it is the task of philosophy to ‘deduce’, and the transcendental standpoint occupied by the philosopher. So understood, aesthetics is less a part of the *Wissenschaftslehre per se* than a *propaedeutic* to it. Yet Fichte also characterizes aesthetics in more conventional terms as a special philosophical science in its own right, which ‘describes the aesthetic way of looking at things and establishes the rules of aesthetics’.¹⁰

As was the case with his lectures on natural right and ethics, Fichte firmly intended to revise his lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* for publication. Indeed, he began doing so under the title *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, the first four instalments of which – consisting of two Introductions and Part One – appeared in his own *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten* in 1797 and 1798.¹¹ Unfortunately, Fichte discontinued this project in the wake of the Atheism Controversy, though he tried, unsuccessfully, to revive it after arriving in Berlin in 1800,¹² before making a completely fresh start with the unpublished

‘*Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801–2’. Not only did the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* remain unpublished during Fichte’s lifetime, but his own manuscript of these lectures vanished as well. Fortunately, however, detailed student transcriptions have survived, and it is to these lecture transcripts or *Kollegnachschriften*, supplemented, of course, by the published portions of the ‘Attempt at a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’, that one now refers when speaking of the ‘*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*’.^{[13](#)}

The Task, Starting Point and Method of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*

A striking feature of the new presentation of 1796–99 is the author’s careful attempt to separate the strictly ‘scientific’ exposition of his system from various preliminary reflections of a more metaphilosophical nature concerning the overall character and method of the transcendental project, its relationship to other philosophical projects, and the prerequisites for and limitations of the project. To employ the terminology introduced in the preface to the second, 1798 edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, issues of this sort do not pertain to philosophy (or ‘metaphysics’) proper, but instead belong to the domain of what Fichte now calls ‘critique’.¹⁴

Such a preliminary critique will obviously be of special interest and value to anyone seeking entrance into a system as difficult and as technically forbidding as Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, which is presumably why Fichte began his lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* in precisely this manner and prefaced his published (but unfinished) *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* with not one but two ‘critical’ introductions – the first addressed to the philosophically naive or ‘unprejudiced’ reader and the second to ‘readers who already have a philosophical system of their own’.

The primary *task* of philosophy, according to Fichte, is to answer the question ‘Why do we assume that actual things exist, beyond and in addition to our representations?’ (GA IV/3: 324; FTP, 78). Since, however, it is only through those very representations that we distinguish between ‘representations’ and ‘things’, the latter distinction must be grounded in a distinction between two sorts of representations: (1) freely produced, merely ‘subjective’ representations and (2) ‘objective’ representations, the distinguishing feature of which is that they appear to be independent of our will – and in this sense ‘necessarily present’ within or to consciousness. The question philosophy has to answer can therefore be rephrased as ‘What is the foundation of those representations of mine that are accompanied by a feeling of necessity?’ (GA IV/3: 331; FTP, 88).

The distinction between freely produced and ‘necessary’ representations is simply assumed by transcendental philosophy and is an integral feature of what Fichte characterizes variously as ‘the ordinary standpoint’, ‘the standpoint of the individual’,

‘the standpoint of life’, ‘the standpoint of (natural) science’, ‘the standpoint of experience’, or ‘the practical standpoint’. Philosophy’s task is by no means to prove that there is an objective or external world, but rather to *explain* why we must assume that there is. In other words, it is the task of philosophy to discover, within the *a priori* structure or character of consciousness itself, the transcendental *ground* or *foundation* of the ordinary standpoint and to establish this claim by actually ‘deriving’ the former from the latter.

In order to accomplish this task, however, one has to be capable of turning the ordinary standpoint into an object of philosophical reflection. Another way to put this is to say that the would-be philosopher must be able to elevate himself – however temporarily and artificially – to a standpoint ‘higher than’ the practical standpoint he is trying to ‘explain’. This new standpoint – which is referred to by Fichte as the ‘speculative’, the ‘theoretical’, the ‘transcendental’ or the ‘philosophical’ standpoint – is, in contrast to the ordinary standpoint, never forced upon anyone, but can be attained only by virtue of a *freely initiated* act of reflection, through which one, so to speak, sets aside one’s everyday, unexamined assumptions about the relationship between necessary representations and external objects and treats this assumption as something *to be explained*.¹⁵ Thus any philosophy – whether the ‘popular philosophy’ of Fichte’s era or any other variety of common-sense philosophy or philosophical naturalism – that appeals directly to the *philosophical authority* of ordinary experience has simply confused *explanans* and *explanandum* and has therefore, far from achieving its aim, failed even to recognize philosophy’s distinctive task.

A philosopher who cannot or will not attempt to ‘abstract from’ ordinary experience is, in Fichte’s eyes, simply no philosopher at all. But if one does abstract from ordinary experience, then what does one have left as a potential *explanans* of the same? Fichte’s reply is that either one is left with the concept of a ‘pure I’, posited in abstraction from that connection with external objects which is a constant feature of everyday ‘subjective’ experience, or else one is left instead with the concept of a ‘pure not-I’ or ‘thing in itself’, in abstraction from that reference to consciousness which is also a constant feature of everyday ‘objective’ experience.

‘Dogmatism’ is Fichte’s name for all philosophies that attempt to ‘explain’ ordinary experience by postulating a realm of independently existing ‘things in themselves’, which

somehow ‘affect’ the mind and produce within consciousness those involuntary representations that lead us to posit the existence of external things in space and time. The only other strategy open to philosophy is to start not with postulated things in themselves, but rather with the experiencing subject – or rather, with the pure concept of the I – and then to attempt to derive therefrom both empirical (individual) self-consciousness and consciousness of material objects in space and time. This is the strategy of philosophical ‘idealism’.

Idealism and dogmatism both obtain their starting point simply by *reflecting upon* ordinary consciousness, within which one normally encounters both an experiencing subject and an experienced object, and then *abstracting therefrom* either the concept of the pure subject or that of the thing in itself. Since experience itself must furnish the material from which the philosopher then abstracts, these two reflective options would seem to exhaust the possibilities for discovering an explanatory principle or foundation of experience. Since, moreover, the dogmatist and the idealist adopt diametrically opposed first principles, with each affirming precisely what the other denies, it is difficult to imagine how either might go about refuting the other. Such reflections led the young Schelling to conclude that dogmatism and idealism represent two opposed, equally irrefutable – and equally tenable – philosophical positions.¹⁶ Indeed, this might sometimes appear to be Fichte’s view as well, inasmuch as he freely concedes that ‘these two systems appear to have the same speculative value’ (GA I/4: 431; IWL, 17).

No sooner, however, does Fichte seem to admit the speculative equivalence of idealism and dogmatism, than he immediately embarks upon a detailed critique of the latter, a critique that purports to demonstrate the utter incapacity of dogmatism to accomplish the task it is supposed to accomplish and hence its inevitable philosophical *failure*. This failure is twofold. First, dogmatism posits but cannot explain the mysterious ‘leap’ from the realm of causally interacting ‘things’ to the utterly heterogeneous realm of intentional ‘representations’, and is thus never able to account for the distinction between consciousness and its objects. Secondly, dogmatism must either *ignore* our (subjective) consciousness of freedom, or else must *reject* it as illusory. There is simply no place for genuine human freedom in a philosophy that takes bare thinghood as its ultimate explanatory principle. Every consistent dogmatist, according to Fichte, must also be a materialist and fatalist.

In contrast to dogmatism, idealism at least possesses the *potential* both to explain the ‘leap’ from consciousness to things and to provide an account of objective experience which does not entail the denial of human freedom; for, unlike the dogmatist, who recognizes only the ‘single series’ of mechanically interacting things, the idealist recognizes, within consciousness itself, a *dual* series of ‘things’ and ‘representations’. It is, after all, within consciousness itself that the distinction between consciousness of objects (things) and consciousness of one’s awareness of objects (mere representations) is first posited. This ‘dual series of being and observing, of what is real and what is ideal’ (GA I/4: 436; IWL, 21) is already present within the intellect itself, which thus already involves a *synthesis of ideality and reality*. From the mere fact that the idealist has access to both the ideal and the real series, however, it by no means follows that he will necessarily *succeed* in his attempt to explain the connection between these two series or that he will in fact be able to ‘derive’ the latter from the former. That transcendental idealism can indeed account for our consciousness of representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity is a claim that can finally be established only by actually providing the detailed account in question.

Though idealism may possess a certain *prima facie* theoretical or speculative advantage over dogmatism, its true superiority lies elsewhere and rests upon strictly *practical* or *moral* considerations. As noted above, dogmatism must treat human freedom – and hence moral responsibility – as purely *illusory*, and must thus also deny the original distinction between ‘freely produced’ and ‘necessary’ representations.

The possibility that our inner conviction concerning our own freedom is simply an illusion cannot, Fichte admits, be rejected on purely *theoretical* or *speculative* grounds; nevertheless, such a possibility will be *intolerable*, he maintains, to anyone with a firm sense of his own moral obligations and a lively awareness of his own freedom. This is the gravamen of Fichte’s essentially *practical* case against dogmatism. The deepest reason why the idealist begins his philosophizing with the I rather than with things in themselves is not because of his superior theoretical insight into the obstacles facing every attempt to account for experience on the basis of dogmatic principles, but because idealism alone possesses the potential to accord with his previously existing moral commitments and practical self-conception. Since the idealist cannot deny that he has a *moral* obligation to affirm his own freedom, he also possesses a practical *interest* in

favour of a theoretical conception of the self that at least holds out the promise of explaining objective experience without denying human freedom. The celebrated ‘choice’ between idealism and dogmatism thus proves to involve no choice at all on the part of the idealist; instead it is an expression of an essentially *practical* necessity. As Fichte puts it in the ‘First Introduction’ of 1797:

I *cannot* go beyond this [idealistic] standpoint, because I am not *permitted* to go beyond it. With this, transcendental idealism simultaneously reveals itself to be the only type of philosophical thinking that accords with duty. It is the mode of thinking in which speculation and the ethical law are most intimately united. I *ought* to begin my thinking with the thought of the pure I, and I ought to think of this pure I as absolutely self-active – not as determined by things, but rather as determining them.

(GA I/4: 467; IWL, 50)

Similarly, the dogmatist’s evident willingness to take seriously the theoretical possibility that freedom is actually an illusion also reflects *his* very different self-conception and self-interest, since only a person with a weak or defective sense of his own moral responsibility and autonomy could seriously consider such a possibility. Though it is always possible to characterize the difference between *idealism* and *dogmatism* in neutral and purely theoretical terms (that is, as a simple disagreement concerning the most promising starting point for a philosophical explanation of the ordinary standpoint), the difference between the *idealist* and the *dogmatist* can be properly appreciated only in frankly *ad hominem* terms, as a theoretical difference that reflects a deeper practical difference between two different *characters* or levels of moral development. This is the meaning of the well-known Fichtean admonition that ‘the kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon the kind of person one is’ (GA I/4: 434; IWL, 20) – an admonition that was never meant to imply that there are several, equally tenable philosophical positions between which one is free to pick and choose, but simply to acknowledge that certain *extra-philosophical* conditions must be satisfied *before* one is ready to enter into that chain of philosophical reflections that *alone* has any chance of successfully displaying the *a priori* conditions for the possibility of experience: transcendental idealism or *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹⁷

No mere philosophy, however, including the *Wissenschaftslehre*, can actually liberate human beings or improve their moral character. Nor can any philosophy *prove* the reality of freedom. All that even the best philosophy can do is to demonstrate that there is no necessary *conflict* between a belief in moral freedom and a belief in the reality of causally interacting material objects. The latter belief, while inseparable from the natural attitude, is not assumed but rather *explained* by the *Wissenschaftslehre*; whereas the former belief – the practical conviction that one is free to act morally – which is also part of the ordinary standpoint, at least for the morally self-aware individual, is indeed presupposed by the *Wissenschaftslehre*, for which it serves as the ultimate explanatory ground of experience as a whole. A lively awareness of one's own freedom is thus a prime *prerequisite* for understanding Fichte's new presentation of the foundations of his system.

Once one appreciates Fichte's conception of the specific task and starting point of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, the next question concerns his general *strategy* and *method* for actually accomplishing this task and moving beyond this starting point. Unlike 'uncritical' or 'transcendent' idealism, which is content simply to *affirm* the morally privileged status of freedom and merely *asserts* that all being must be 'being for consciousness', without offering any detailed explanation of *how* and *why* consciousness of representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity *must* be present within a free, self-positing subject, the *Wissenschaftslehre* purports to be a 'Critical' or transcendental idealism. What is distinctive about Critical idealism, according to Fichte, is that it presents the intellect as acting in accordance with certain specific *rules* or *laws* and tries to demonstrate that the I *must* act in certain specific ways if freely self-positing self-consciousness (which is the specifically postulated starting point of the new presentation) is to be possible at all. It is precisely by displaying the (transcendental) *necessity* of certain determinate 'modes of acting' on the part of the I that the *Wissenschaftslehre* proposes to account for the (psychological) 'necessity' of certain representations.¹⁸ Following the example of Kant (at least as the latter was understood by Fichte), the *Wissenschaftslehre* thus accounts for the 'objectivity' of experience not in terms of the allegedly external *sources* of certain representations but rather in terms of the *necessary and universal* rules followed by the mind itself in arriving at consciousness of – that is, in the language of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, in 'positing' – certain representations. What

the *Wissenschaftslehre* purports to demonstrate is that these are the rules of thinking that must be followed by the I if it is to be conscious of anything whatsoever – including *itself*.

The deductive strategy of the 1796–99 presentation of the foundations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is therefore as follows. It begins with a ‘postulate’.¹⁹ That is to say, it calls upon the listener or reader to *perform a particular act*: namely, that act through which and through which alone one becomes conscious of (or ‘posits’) oneself. Thus the reader is instructed – or rather, challenged – to ‘construct the concept of the I and observe how you accomplish this’ (GA II/3: 349; FTP, 119).

But how *does* one manage to ‘think the I’? According to Fichte’s description, which every reader must confirm for himself by actually performing what Fichte describes as the ‘experiment’ in question, the very concept of the I is that of a *subject* that is *always already* an *object* for itself and is such only through its own act of self-positing. In his earlier presentation of 1794–95 Fichte had attempted to designate this central and unique feature of subjectivity (or ‘I-hood’) by describing the I as a *Tathandlung* or ‘f/act’.²⁰ In the new presentation he attempts to convey the same idea by describing the I as a ‘subject/object’. The concept of the I is thus the concept of a ‘self-reverting act’ that is both ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ in character, inasmuch as it involves both cognition and production, both knowing and willing. This *unity of the theoretical and practical*, which is first encountered within the very concept of ‘I-hood’ (*Ichheit*), is encountered over and over again on virtually every page of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* and is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Fichte’s new presentation of his philosophy.²¹

In observing how one constructs for oneself the concept of the I, however, one also becomes aware that this self-identical subject/object *never* occurs as such within actual consciousness; instead, the pure concept of I-hood is something the philosopher posits only through a wilful act of free *abstraction* from actual consciousness, within which the subject and object are *always* distinct from and opposed to each other. The ‘original I’ is posited by the philosopher only in order to explain *actual* self-consciousness without having to invoke the absurd notion of an endless series of reflective acts in which a new reflecting subject needs to be posited every time the I is made anew into an object of reflection. It was thus not Hegel, but Fichte, who first presented a clear critique of the so-called ‘reflective model of consciousness’.²² What the philosopher realizes and posits

is that, *if* consciousness of anything whatsoever is to be possible, then an awareness of oneself *as* conscious of this object is already implicitly presupposed in such object consciousness, even though the pure identity of the self as a subject/object (i.e., ‘pure self-consciousness’) is never actually *experienced* as such – not even within empirical *self*-consciousness²³ – but is simply posited by means of philosophical abstraction and reflection as a necessary condition for the possibility of all empirical consciousness.

After the philosopher has posited the concept of the I, as well as the self-reverting act through which this concept is constructed, the next step is to continue reflecting upon this act in order to discover the conditions, if any, which made it possible to posit this same self-reverting activity. Fichte therefore invites his reader to pay explicit attention to any other mental acts one has to perform in order to ‘construct for oneself the concept of the I’. What one will thereby discover, Fichte assures us (though this assurance can be confirmed only through one’s own ‘experiment’ in ‘thinking the I’ for oneself), is that in order to engage in such self-reverting activity one first had to *freely direct* one’s intention and awareness back upon oneself, which required one freely to ‘tear oneself away’, as Fichte puts it, from one’s preceding awareness of all other particular objects (and thus, from the entire realm of the not-I), in the contemplation of which the I was, so to speak, ‘lost’. Indeed, in order to engage in any activity at all, one must ‘tear oneself away’ from a state of (relative) non-activity or ‘repose’ and perform a ‘movement of transition’ from the latter to the former. It is therefore only with reference to such a ‘state of repose’ or passivity that one can determine and identify an act of the I *as* an act of the same. In this manner the would-be transcendental philosopher discovers that in order to ‘construct the concept of the I’ he also requires a concept of the not-I, and that in order to become conscious of his own act of self-positing he also requires an awareness of his own non-action or passivity (which is, for Fichte, ultimately only a way of reflectively positing his awareness of the original *limitations* to his own original activity). Thus, claims Fichte, in order to become conscious of anything at all, we must oppose it to something else, ‘for it is only through opposition that it is possible to obtain a specific and clear consciousness of anything whatsoever’ (GA IV/3: 348; FTP, 116).

In order to *determine* or to specify (*bestimmen*) ourselves – or anything else – in any particular manner we thus have to presuppose (that is, ‘to posit’) something *indeterminate* but *determinable*, which is to say, a sphere of *determinability* or that

which is simply *determinable* in a certain manner, but not yet *determined*. This movement from ‘determinacy’ to ‘indeterminacy’ (from what is determinate to what is determinable), and vice versa, is required for the possibility of any cognition whatsoever. Following the lead of Salomon Maimon, Fichte calls the principle governing the movement just described the ‘principle of determinability’ or ‘law of reflective opposition’. This principle, moreover, is not simply one of many ‘laws of reflection’. On the contrary, it is described in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* as the ‘fundamental law’ of *all* reflection, a general law of which all the intellect’s specific modes of acting (thinking) are simply determinate applications. This fundamental law of reflective opposition thus governs all thinking and reflection – including that of the transcendental philosopher himself, as well as that of the I he professes to be ‘observing’ as it ‘thinks itself’.

The *method* of the new presentation is *to reflect* upon the originally postulated free act through which one constructs for oneself the concept of the I and *to observe* the products of such reflection. Philosophical reflection always involves more than passive awareness or attentiveness; like all thinking, it is genuinely *productive*, in the sense that by reflecting in accordance with the previously indicated ‘law of reflective opposition’ the philosopher posits in opposition to each new object of reflection yet another – determinable or determinate – object of reflection. Fichte characterizes such thinking as ‘synthetic’, by which he means not simply that synthetic thinking joins together two terms or objects or connects two terms or objects of thought that are already present to consciousness, but rather that reflective thinking *goes beyond* its immediately posited object and connects the latter with *a second* object of reflection – one which was not previously posited. Nor is it merely the abstract thinking of the philosopher that can be described as productive or ‘synthetic’ in this manner. On the contrary, the task of the philosopher is not simply to engage in synthetic thinking in his own name, but also to *observe* and to *describe* the synthetic acts of the self-reverting I, the activity of which he has already postulated – which is, of course, that of his own ‘I’ as well, in the sense that the philosopher must in this case play both the role of agent and the role of observer.

Fichte sometimes describes the ‘attentiveness’ and ‘self-observation’ that is required of the transcendental philosopher as an act of ‘inner’ or ‘intellectual’ intuition. In this context, ‘intellectual intuition’ designates nothing more than the reflective self-awareness

that is a condition for the transcendental project itself. What distinguishes such awareness from ordinary empirical self-observation ('inner sense' in Kantian terminology) and from ordinary psychological introspection is that it is supposed to be *preceded* by a free act of *abstracting from* all the determinate contents of empirical consciousness and to be *directed at* only what remains and continues to remain present for reflection within the context of this 'self-reverting act' and whatever can be reflectively established as a condition for the same. What guarantees the *universality* of claims based upon this type of reflectively purified 'inner intuition' is, according to Fichte, the *replicability* of the same by anyone who follows his instructions and tries to 'think the *Wissenschaftslehre* for himself'.

Though not without its problems, there is nothing particularly mysterious about Fichte's reference to 'intellectual intuition' in such contexts, and certainly nothing to suggest the later use of this term by Schelling and the early romantics to designate a special philosophical capacity similar to aesthetic 'genius'. What complicates matters is that Fichte *also* uses the term 'intellectual intuition' to designate not the philosopher's awareness of his own reflections and attentiveness to the products of the same, but rather the immediate relationship to itself of the pure I, the pure subject/object itself. In *this* sense, which was first introduced in the *Aenesidemus* review, 'intellectual intuition' is virtually a synonym for the pure I, qua *Tathandlung* or absolutely self-positing subject-object or 'pure willing'; i.e., it is what is *thought* – but, observes Fichte, *not intuited*²⁴ – by the transcendental philosopher. A tremendous amount of confusion has been generated by Fichte's failure to distinguish carefully between these two different senses of the same term.²⁵

As we have now seen, the method of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* involves a combination of (productive) reflection and (passive) observation. Thanks to the aforementioned law of reflective opposition, one thing really does 'lead to another'. And thanks to the constant 'attentiveness' of the philosopher, all of these various elements are kept constantly in mind and not allowed to drop from view as the presentation proceeds, which means, among other things, that the presentation becomes ever more complex. By proceeding in this manner, from one reflectively discovered act of the I to the next (and thus, from what is conditioned to the condition of the same)²⁶ the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* aims to assemble a *complete* inventory of *all* the transcendental conditions

for the possibility of the originally postulated act of empirical consciousness with which it began.

Overview and Summary of the New Presentation

Let us now turn to an all too brief summary of the actual *contents* and *structure* of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. The new presentation is divided into two distinct parts. Part One (§§ 1–13) follows what Fichte describes as an ‘ascending path’ from active self-awareness (the concept of self-consciousness) to the concept of the ‘pure will’, which is revealed to be the *ultimate condition* for the possibility of the concept of the I with which the presentation begins. The method employed in the first half of the work is that of *synthetic reflection* in accordance with the principle of determinability (law of reflective opposition), and the goal of Part One is to achieve a complete inventory of the conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness by means of a *regressive analysis* of the same.

As noted above, Part One actually begins with the *postulate* or *summons* to the reader to ‘think the I and pay attention to how you do this’. When one does this, one will discover that ‘immediate self-consciousness’ (that is, the I as a ‘subject–object’) simply has to be *presupposed* to explain empirical consciousness and self-consciousness (within which the reflecting subject is *never* identical to the reflected object). The concept of I-hood is that of an ‘activity that reverts back into itself’. Such an activity, however, presupposes a prior state of passivity or rest, i.e., a *determinable* state of the I from which the transition to *determinate* self-consciousness can be made. Further reflection reveals that, in order for the postulated free act of self-consciousness to occur at all, the I must possess both (1) the *real* (or ‘*practical*’) *power* to engage in the *real activity* of freely determining itself in a certain way (e.g., to think of itself) and (2) the *ideal* (or ‘*theoretical*’) *power* to engage in the *ideal activity* of ‘copying’ or positing for itself – as the object of its cognition – the aforementioned real activity.

At the very beginning of the new presentation we thus encounter what is unquestionably one of the more original and distinctive features of Fichte’s overall account of subjectivity: viz., his emphasis upon the necessarily *dyadic* structure of I-hood. This ‘original duplicity’ of the I will then be further analysed and examined in dozens of contexts and from a variety of perspectives over the course of the new presentation, but it will never be overcome. The posited ‘unity of the self’ will always

remain a *synthetic unity*, and hence a unity that always presupposes a genuine *difference* at the very heart of the I.

That the I makes itself into an object for itself in the manner required by the concept of the I is not something that can be demonstrated. All that philosophy can do is explain *how* it manages to accomplish this remarkable feat and show *why* it must do so if there is to be any consciousness whatsoever. The actual *occurrence* of such an act has no ground beyond itself, or rather, beyond the freedom of the individual who undertakes such an act. ‘Freedom, therefore, is the ultimate ground and the first condition of all being and of all consciousness’ (GA IV/3: 363; FTP, 146). It is for this reason that Fichte believed that the *Wissenschaftslehre* could be accurately described as ‘the first system of freedom’.²⁷ It is, however, vital to note that freedom, by itself, is *not* a sufficient condition for the possibility of consciousness. Instead, as the ongoing analysis will make clear, an *original determinacy* or limitation of the I (indeed, a dual determinacy, which is both ‘sensible’ and ‘intelligible’) is also required for the possibility of self-consciousness.

In order to become self-conscious, the I must *act* in a certain manner; but in order to act at all, a concept of the *goal* of one’s action is also required. Every exercise of the practical power of the I thus presupposes an exercise of its theoretical power, for it is the latter that must posit any *concept*, including that of the *end* or *goal* of an action. Conversely, the theoretical power of the I (intellect) is always related to its practical power, since only insofar as the latter is *actually limited* in some fashion can there be any determinacy for the I to posit and become aware of. ‘Practical power and intelligence are inseparable. Neither can be thought of apart from the other. The true character of the I lies in this identity’ (GA IV/3: 366; FTP, 153).

From this point on, we will strive in vain along our ascending path to resolve this apparently paradoxical (or viciously circular) relationship between theory and practice, knowing and doing, limitation and freedom. In the end, the only way to resolve this difficulty will be to postulate, as the supreme condition of all empirical self-consciousness, an intelligible (i.e., non-sensible or non-empirical) act of ‘pure willing’, an act that is not only freely determinable, but also possesses a certain original determinacy of its own (in the sense that what it wills is freedom itself, i.e., the domination of reason over sensibility). Moreover, this act of original willing must always be accompanied by a spontaneous act of ‘original reflection’, through which the pure I makes itself into an

object for itself. This ‘supreme condition of consciousness’ is finally deduced in §§ 12 and 13.

Before reaching this goal, however, there are many important stations along the ascending path of Part One, and many more conditions to be revealed by the synthetic method of regressive analysis, and at least a few of these deserve special mention. For example, one discovers that one of the conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness is that the self-positing I must be ‘originally *limited*’, in the sense that it must contain within itself a determinate and ever-changing manifold of sensible ‘feelings’. And conversely, in order for an I to be capable of being limited in this manner, it must possess an original practical ‘drive’ to assert itself in such a manner that it can actually encounter and act in response to the ‘limits’ in question. This leads to an important conclusion:

The feeling of limitation is, accordingly, conditioned by the feeling of striving, and, in turn, the feeling of striving is nothing without limitation. Only together do they constitute a complete feeling. Here we discover a bond between different things within the I, a bond grounded in the very nature of the I itself. The theoretical sphere can easily be derived from the feeling of limitation and the practical sphere from the feeling of striving. Since they are both originally connected with each other, they cannot subsequently be separated, and this is the ultimate reason why there can be no theory apart from practice.

(GA IV/3: 391; FTP, 198)

Unfortunately, space does not allow further discussion of the many interesting details in Fichte’s account of how bare ‘feelings’ are converted into conscious ‘intuitions’ and intuitions, in turn, into ‘concepts’ (of both the I and the not-I, of the determinate subject of experience and of determinate objects of the same) or of his new account of the distinction between ‘representations’ and ‘objects’. Instead, let us concentrate on two of the most original features of the first part of the new presentation, features that distinguish it sharply from the Kantian presentation of transcendental idealism. These two features are (1) the complete absence of the distinction (so important to Kant) between ‘transcendental aesthetic’ and ‘transcendental analytic’; and (2) Fichte’s direct appeal to purely *practical* aspects of I-hood in his deduction of space, time and the categories, all

of which are deduced by showing that they must be posited by the I in order to bring objects of experience into a relationship with the I's essential freedom of action – a relationship that is mediated by the *human body*. The basic strategy of Fichte's deduction is to show that the I could not act freely if it did not possess both inner and outer intuition and if these intuitions did not possess the particular forms (time and space) that they do.

Not only must the I posit its *objects* as matter in space; it must also posit *itself* in this manner as well, that is, as a materially embodied subject, or *body*, albeit a practically striving one. The human body too is a condition for the possibility of consciousness, a point that will become more and more important as the argument proceeds. (This emphasis upon the need for *embodiment* is one of the most significant differences between the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.)

A crucial condition for the possibility of I-hood, and hence for the possibility of self-consciousness, is that the I must posit for itself not only its own original limitation (feelings) but also its own power of *free willing*. That the I actually possesses such a power of free self-determination is, of course, a *premise* of transcendental idealism, as Fichte made clear in his 1797 Introductions. In this sense, philosophy cannot *explain* freedom, but instead treats it as the ultimate explanatory ground of everything else.²⁸ Yet the I we philosophers are observing and analysing must certainly 'explain to itself' its own freedom, in the sense that it must explicitly posit its own power of willing. It is for this reason, according to Fichte, that the experience of a practically striving being must be *temporal* in character. Like space, time is first and foremost a schema of free action. And this is also why any world that can be posited by such a subject must be posited as possessing a *causal* structure. The relationship of causal dependence between objects in the world is merely a reflection of the originally posited dependence of something objective (the body) upon the efficacy of the will.

It is thus only by virtue of time and causality that the I is able to *intuit its own willing* – which, of course, it must be able to do if it is to be an I at all. Moreover, in order for willing (which is something purely intelligible) to be made sensibly intuitable, it must be posited as a *series* of acts *through which* the I's original limitations (whether understood as 'feelings of the I' or as 'objects in the world') are altered in accordance

with the *efficacy of the will*. This ‘inner efficacy’ that is inseparable from every act of genuine willing is thereby *transferred* from the inner to the outer realm, where it is posited as a sensibly efficacious ‘force’. Moreover, a continual series can be intuited as such (that is, as a *single* series) only if its members are connected to one another in a relationship of *dependence*. Therefore, the temporal series must be intuited as a *causal* series (the ultimate cause of which is always the efficacy of the will).²⁹ Fichte thus neatly reverses the order of Kant’s deduction: instead of proceeding from time to causal dependence, he instead moves from willing to causality and then from the causal or ‘dependent’ series to time, understood as the ‘schema’ of a manifold of dependence – and hence, ultimately, as a schema of free action.

The unity of the manifold of feeling has thus been secured ‘by deriving this manifold from and referring it to a determination of the will’ (GA IV/3: 433; FTP, 277), and it is only by virtue of the *relationship of dependence* that such a ‘derivation’ can be accomplished. As a consequence of this ‘temporalization’ of the manifold of feeling, says Fichte (in a problematic passage to which we shall return), we first ‘think ourselves into’ time (GA IV/3: 475; FTP, 366) and the ‘pure’ or ‘intelligible’ *force* of the will is transformed, for the I, into a sensible or physical force. The practical freedom of the I (the efficacy of willing), which is inwardly intuited as an ‘inner’ or ‘pure force’, is thus, when ‘extended by sensible intuition’, transformed into an externally intuited *temporal series* of acts. This is the origin of time, and *real action can occur only in time*. Real action, however, is the first condition for the possibility of consciousness; therefore, time too is a condition for the possibility of consciousness; therefore, the I is not only in space, but must also be in time.

Despite all that has been discovered and deduced along the ascending path of Part One, we have still not succeeded in resolving the central problem that helped to propel us onwards and upwards. The flagrantly circular relationship between practical willing (real efficacy) and theoretical reason (ideal cognition of a goal), each of which seems to presuppose the other, still needs to be addressed and explained. Fichte’s solution to this puzzle is to posit, as the final and supreme condition for the possibility of consciousness,³⁰ something that is simultaneously real and ideal, limited and free. The ‘something’ in question turns out to be *pure willing*, which, in order to be efficacious at all, must possess within itself a certain directionality and goal – i.e., a certain determinacy

of its own. Such ‘pure willing’ is, of course, purely *intelligible* and can be recognized solely through the *feeling of ‘ought’* with which its cognition is invariably accompanied: ‘the pure will is the categorical imperative’ (GA IV/3: 442; FTP, 293). The will, therefore, is not simply free and practically efficacious; it is also determinate and cognizable. *Limitation* (determinacy) and *freedom* (the power to initiate a new temporal series of causally dependent acts) are here *combined in a single moment*. Mere philosophy, of course, can no more produce a categorical awareness of pure willing than it can produce a sensible awareness of our original limitations (the manifold of feelings). In both cases, transcendental philosophy can do no more than identify each to be a *necessary condition* for the possibility of consciousness. At most, philosophy can merely explain why these ultimate conditions are susceptible to no further explanation.

Here again, Fichte’s departure from orthodox Kantianism is striking. By placing pure willing at the summit of his transcendental deduction of the conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness, he intimately connects the ‘practical’ reason of the second *Critique* with the ‘theoretical’ reason of the first and demonstrates that ‘the “ought” or the categorical imperative is also a theoretical principle’ (GA IV/2: 241; FTP, 437), which is one of the most characteristic theses of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*.

It has now been established, claims Fichte, that there can be no cognizing without freedom and that freedom itself must possess an ‘original determinacy’ of its own, ‘an inner limitation’, without which the entire mutual interaction of freedom and limitation would not be possible.³¹ With the deduction of the concept of pure willing we have reached the end of our ascending path and are now ready to embark upon the second or ‘descending’ one, which begins precisely where the first path ends. The task now is to descend from the concept of pure willing – or of what has been called ‘the transindividual I’³² – to the standpoint of empirical consciousness and self-consciousness. Hitherto, explains Fichte, our path has led steadily ‘upward’, from what is sensible to what is intelligible, but our new, ‘descending’ path leads ‘in the opposite direction’, from what is intelligible to what is sensible, namely to ‘feeling’ (GA IV/2: 157 and IV/3: 161; FTP, 323).³³

Whereas Part One employed a *synthetic method of argument* in order to *analyse consciousness*, Part Two will do just the reverse: here we will employ an *analytic mode of argumentation* in order to understand the *synthetic structure* of the I. The task is no

longer to *discover* the conditions for the possibility of consciousness, but rather ‘to assemble the conditions of consciousness and, as it were, to construct consciousness before our very eyes’ (GA IV/2: 178; FTP, 354). It is in this sense that Fichte sometimes describes Part Two of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* as a ‘genetic demonstration that – and how – the sort of consciousness with which we are familiar flows from our consciousness of ourselves’ (GA IV/2: 197; FTP, 381).

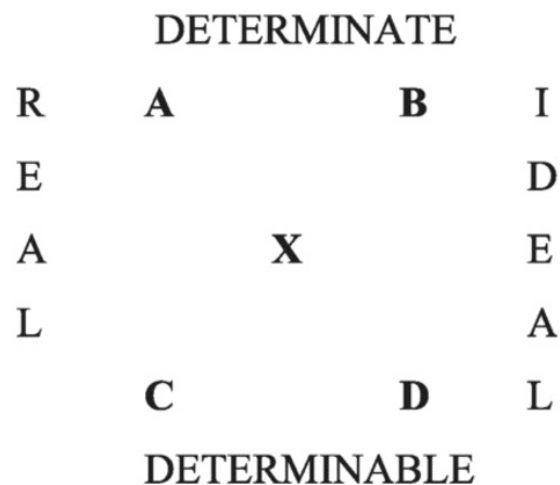
The second half (§§ 14–19) of the new presentation lends itself even more poorly to rapid summary than the first, and this is largely because of the inherent complexity of the subject matter itself. In the purely analytic or ‘regressive’ portion of the presentation we were able to discover and to examine each element or condition of consciousness separately, but in the synthetic or ‘constructive’ portion we are always dealing with a single, complex synthesis, albeit from a variety of angles. Though any philosophical account of this synthesis has to be discursive, the synthesis itself is not, which greatly complicates Fichte’s actual presentation (as well as any attempt to summarize it).

Part Two purports to show how what is purely intelligible (pure willing, the pure I) is posited and experienced – by the finite I, which cannot, however, be separated from the pure I – as something sensible, i.e., how what is unitary and self-identical must necessarily posit itself for itself as something manifold. Such a project would be quite implausible were it not for the fact that pure willing is immediately accompanied by an ‘original act of reflection’. This again is one of the fundamental theses of the new presentation: if an I is to be possible at all, it is not sufficient that it ‘simply posit itself’ (as pure willing); it must also ‘posit itself as self-positing’ (in original reflection). The aim of Fichte’s argument in Part Two is to show how what is originally unitary and self-identical (pure willing, which is itself the immediate object of all reflection) can posit itself for itself *only* discursively, as something manifold. Fichte attempts to establish this claim by *describing* how the I, as a consequence of its own act of original reflection, actually manages to ‘think itself’ and why it can reflect upon itself only in the particular manner that it does.

The first result of this analysis simply confirms what was discovered over and over again in Part One: the irreducibly *dyadic* structure of the I. Even within original reflection, the I appears and *must appear* to itself as both *ideal* and *real*, as a determinately free, conscious subject and as a determinate object of cognition (namely,

as a *body*, capable of further analysis into its ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ organs). Most of Part Two is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of all the other elements that are necessarily involved in the I’s reflection upon itself as a determinate subject and object, as a member of both the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’ series.

From this point on, we will drop any pretence of accurately portraying the contents of Part Two, as well as any effort to describe the baroque intricacies of Fichte’s actual argument. Instead, let us simply observe a few of the more salient features of the model of consciousness that is actually constructed in Part Two. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of this model is its constant reference to and reliance upon the general schema of ‘fivefold synthesis’. Though this schema is fleshed out in various different ways in the course of the second half of the presentation, the basic idea can be illustrated by the following diagram:



Here A represents what is *determinate* in the *real* series; B what is *determinate* in the *ideal* series; C what is *determinable* in the *real* series; D what is *determinable* in the *ideal* one; and X the central synthesis of selfhood, or *finite freedom itself*. This general synthetic scheme expresses the basic structure of the I (or subject/object), to which all five of these elements are essential. As this diagram also illustrates, each of these five elements is connected to all of the others in a myriad of direct and indirect ways – and must, furthermore, posit for itself each element separately, as well as in relation to all of the others.

Simply on the basis of what was established about the structure of I-hood in Part One, it is easy enough to see that this ‘synthesis of the self’ must always involve an

‘ideal’ and a ‘real’ series of acts, powers and domains. But why should there also be a determinate and determinable member of each series? Fichte’s answer is that even original reflection is governed by the law that governs *all* thinking: that is, the principle of determinability or law of reflective opposition, which demands that something determinable must always be posited in relationship to anything posited as determinate. Thus, simply by virtue of its own original act of reflection, the ostensibly ‘simple’ I of pure willing has to reflect upon – and hence posit – itself as something complex and manifold. Why is this multiplicity necessary? The I, Fichte replies, ‘is something manifold simply by virtue of its I-hood’ (GA IV/3: 459; FTP, 333).

One of the more interesting features of the account of the structure of the I in the second half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* is how Fichte employs the concept of a ‘summons’ (*Aufforderung*), a concept first introduced in the *Foundation of Natural Right* in order to show how the determinacy of a particular, freely acting rational individual (for example, the I that I am) can be explained without denying the fundamental freedom of the I. The solution is to recognize that the I originally discovers itself to be ‘summoned’ to employ its own freedom precisely in order to *limit* its freedom, that is, in order to determine itself to be this particular individual. The possibility of such self-determination, in turn, presupposes that the determinate I is related to a realm of sheer determinability, from which it, as it were, freely ‘chooses’ itself.

What is ultimately determinable on the side of the ideal series thus turns out to be a realm of *rationality as such*, a realm which, in turn, is thought – and, as it were, ‘made sensible’ – by the I as *a social world of other free individuals*. An important corollary of this argument is that a rational individual, which must posit itself *as* an individual in order to reflect upon itself as an I at all, is quite unable to do so unless it *also* posits and recognizes the existence not only of ‘reason itself’, but also of *other* rational individuals. A powerful claim concerning the necessarily *intersubjective* structure of all consciousness is thus built into the very foundations of the new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: without recognizing the other, one cannot posit oneself; there can be no ‘I’ without a ‘we’. This integration of an important point from the *Foundation of Natural Right* into the first, foundational division of the system marks another significant

way in which the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* goes beyond anything in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.

A further feature of the I emerging in the second half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* is that the I posits itself as embodied and as able to act on other bodies through its own body. What is determinable in this case is *the natural world as a whole, a world of material objects in space*. But what is ideally determinable and what is really determinable can – and must – also be thought of as mutually conditioning one another. When this occurs the ‘other’ is posited as an *articulated body* and nature itself is posited as an *organic system*. Here again in Part Two, one of the most original features of Fichte’s new presentation of the I’s necessary relation to itself (*qua* sensible body) and to the sensible realm as a whole is the distinctive manner in which time and the categories are deduced as necessary for the possibility of reflectively positing pure willing. Fichte’s genetic account of time and the categories differs just as dramatically from Kant’s as did his earlier, regressive deduction of the same in Part One, and it differs from the Kantian account in the same basic way. For Kant, the categories are rules for synthesizing an independently given manifold of intuition. For Fichte, in contrast,

The categories are the way in which immediate consciousness becomes mediate or indirect consciousness. They are the ways in which the I goes beyond thinking of itself and thinks of something else. They do not merely serve, as it were, to tie together what is manifold; they are also the means by which something simple is made manifold and appears in a dual manner. The category of causality connects a concept of a goal with some real property, as something determinate. All consciousness is self-consciousness. This is the foundation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Yet another sort of consciousness is certainly encountered within experience. Where does this come from? It arises from the fact that the I observes itself as something manifold, and it does this in accordance with certain specific rules, i.e., in accordance with laws. The categories are these ways and means by which the I splits itself up and divides itself into a manifold – though in such a way that it continues to remain a unity.

(GA IV/2: 205; FTP, 391)

Nor is time for Fichte merely the ‘form of inner intuition’. Instead, it is a product of the I’s *reflection* upon its own willing in a particular – and necessary – manner: ‘we think ourselves into time’ (GA IV/3: 475; FTP, 366). Moreover, on Fichte’s account, the categories and time arise *together*. To understand the genesis of time-consciousness is also to understand the necessary categorical structure of experience as a whole. In contrast to the presentation of 1794–95, where time had been discussed only briefly and almost in passing, the deduction of time lies at the very heart of the account of subjectivity developed in Parts One and Two of the new presentation and occupies a correspondingly large portion of the presentation itself. Even a reader puzzled by some of the details of the latter (and it would be a remarkable reader indeed who was not somewhat puzzled at this point) must nevertheless concur with Fichte’s claim that ‘this is the highest and most important point of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, or transcendental philosophy. If you can understand how time arises, then you will understand the origin of everything else’ (GA IV/2: 197; FTP, 380).

Among the formidable obstacles to understanding the account of time in Part Two is the fact that the presentation of this theory is inextricably intertwined with a new and equally intricate account of the essential role of the *productive imagination*, not just in the constitution of time, but in the entire enterprise of ‘original reflection’. The I not only ‘thinks itself’ according to the law of reflective opposition, but, in doing so, must at the same time view its own thinking through the medium of the productive imagination and must, in turn, reflect upon the products of the productive imagination and do so in accordance with the by now familiar principle of reflective opposition. As a result, ‘the representation of I-hood rests on the reciprocal interaction between thinking mediated by imagination and imagination mediated by thinking, between doing and being; and all other consciousness – as well as the system of the same – is based upon this representation of I-hood’ (GA IV/2: 232; FTP, 425). This new theory of the productive imagination is, observes Fichte, ‘perhaps the most difficult, though indisputably the most important, portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ (GA IV/2: 206; FTP, 393).³⁴

With the completion of this analysis of the synthetic structure of consciousness, the ‘genetic deduction’ of experience from the highest principles of I-hood has also come to an end. To the extent that this deduction is sound, the author of the *Wissenschaftslehre*

nova methodo can claim to have succeeded in *fulfilling the promise* stated in the Second Introduction to the new presentation:

Insofar as the I exists only for itself, a being outside of the I must also necessarily arise for the I at the same time. The former contains within itself the ground of the latter; the latter is conditioned by the former. Our self-consciousness is necessarily connected with a consciousness of something that is supposed to be something other than ourselves. The former, however, is to be viewed as what provides the condition and the latter must be viewed as what is conditioned thereby. In order to prove this contention – not as something established, as it were, by argumentation and supposed to be valid for a system of things existing in themselves, but rather as something that has to be established by observing the original operation of reason and is valid for reason – the philosopher must first show how the I exists and comes into being for itself. Secondly, he must show that this being of the I for itself would not be possible unless a being outside of the I also arose for the I at the same time.

(GA I/4: 212–213; IWL, 40–41)

The ‘Novelty’ of the New Presentation

Certain differences between the 1794–95 presentation of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and the 1796–99 presentation of the *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo* are obvious upon the most casual inspection. (1) The new presentation begins with two ‘critical’ or ‘metaphilosophical’ introductions, which serve to orient the reader and situate Fichte’s project in relation to other philosophical projects. There is nothing similar in the earlier presentation, in part, because it was preceded by a dedicated ‘critical’ tract, *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, and in part because various metaphilosophical reflections are inserted into the ‘scientific’ presentation of the *Foundations*. (2) There is nothing in the new presentation corresponding to Part One of the earlier version, with its notorious positing of three ‘fundamental principles’ and its laboured attempt to connect these principles to the ‘logical’ principles of identity, non-contradiction and sufficient reason (‘grounding principle’). Instead, the new presentation begins far more ‘naturally’ with a simple request to ‘think the I and observe how you do this’. Secondly, the organization of the main body of the *Foundation* into ‘Theoretical’ (Part Two) and ‘Practical’ (Part Three) portions is dropped entirely. Instead, the lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* are divided into nineteen sections of greatly varying length. There are excellent internal reasons for dividing the treatise as a whole into two main, roughly equal portions, the ‘ascending path’ or *regressive* argument of §§ 1–13 and the ‘descending path’ or *constructive* argument of §§ 14–19. Such a division, however, does not remotely correspond to the ‘theoretical/practical’ division of the first presentation. (4) The *Foundation* contains nothing like the very illuminating ‘Deduction of the Subdivisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’, which is appended to the new presentation.³⁵ (5) Certain *technical terms* that play a major part in the earlier presentation – terms such as ‘f/act’ (*Tathandlung*) and ‘check’ (*Anstoß*) – do not occur at all in the later version, whereas certain other terms that are central to the latter – e.g., ‘summons’ (*Aufforderung*), ‘intellectual intuition’ and ‘concept of a goal’ (*Zweckbegriff*) – are absent from the first presentation.

Such external differences are merely the most obvious signs of far deeper, systematic differences between the two presentations. The decision to *abandon the*

earlier organization of the presentation into ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ portions, for example, directly reflects Fichte’s growing appreciation of the theoretical/practical character of the I itself. To be sure, he was already quite aware of this character at the time of the first presentation, but the full import of this discovery was somewhat obscured by the artificial ‘theoretical/practical’ division of the presentation. The primary disadvantage of the earlier way of organizing the presentation of the first principles of his system was noted by Fichte in an introductory remark to the new version, in which he observes that

The first presentation was made somewhat awkward by the fact that the discussion of the conditions for the possibility of the principles did not present those conditions in their natural order, but was instead divided into a theoretical part and a practical part. As a result of this division, many directly related issues were separated too widely from one another. This will no longer happen in the present version ... In these lectures the hitherto familiar division between theoretical and practical philosophy is not to be found. Instead, they present philosophy *as a whole*, in the exposition of which theoretical and practical philosophy are united.

(GA IV/3: 329; FTP, 85–86)

One of the main advantages of the new presentation over the older one is precisely that the unnecessary tension between the external *form* of the presentation and the inner *content* of the same has now been eliminated.

As for the differences between the *starting points* of the two presentations, here again the second version would seem to possess important advantages over the first. Not only is the ‘postulated’ starting point of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* much easier to grasp than the *Foundation*’s mysterious move from ‘A is A’ to the principle that ‘the I posits itself absolutely’, but also the relationship between this starting point and what follows (the ‘ascending’ path of regressive analysis) is far easier to understand than Part Two of the *Foundation*. Indeed, the precise systematic relationship between the three fundamental principles of Part One and the dialectical inquiries that make up Parts Two and Three of the *Foundation* is by no means clear or easy to follow, nor is there any general agreement on this issue among scholars. In addition, Part One of the first

presentation, especially when read in conjunction with *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, is virtually guaranteed to *mislead* readers concerning the actual method (or methods) of argument employed in the 1794–95 presentation. Dazzled by Fichte’s preliminary remarks about ‘systematic form’, ‘first principles’ and the ‘deduction’ of additional principles therefrom, most readers approach the *Foundation* expecting something similar to Reinhold’s Elementary Philosophy, that is, a neo-rationalist system of propositions that are formally derivable by mere logical analysis from a ‘single first principle’ (though, admittedly, this expectation is not easy to reconcile with the casual introduction, in Part One, of not one but *three* ‘grounding principles’). The actual modes of philosophical argumentation one encounters in Parts Two and Three, however, are not at all what one may have been led to expect. Most of Part Two, for example, is based upon an essentially *dialectical* method of ‘seeking out’ a new principle capable of mediating the initially posited contradiction between the I and the not-I – a method of proceeding for which there is no parallel in the new presentation and which is, by Fichte’s own subsequent admission, ‘the most difficult method of all’.³⁶ In contrast, however, the ‘Deduction of Representation’ at the end of Part Two and most of Part Three employ a ‘synthetic method’ of regressive analysis and ‘genetic construction’ that is much like the one employed, albeit with much greater clarity, in the first half of the 1796–99 presentation.³⁷

The misleading description of the method and starting point of philosophy that one finds in Fichte’s writings of the spring and early summer of 1794 certainly reflects the powerful influence upon Fichte during this period of Reinhold’s manifestoes on behalf of a ‘scientific philosophy derived from a single first principle’. By the time he was actually embarked upon his new presentation, however, he found himself employing several different methods of argument and presentation, none of which bore more than the most superficial resemblance to the method he had prescribed for himself in advance. Not surprisingly, most of these ‘Reinholdian’ trappings were jettisoned completely in the presentation of 1796–99.³⁸

Another remarkable difference between the first and second presentations, though perhaps less evident at a first glance, is the very different *directionality* or *deductive strategy* of the two arguments. The *Foundation* begins with a posited contradiction between the I and the not-I and then proceeds ‘inward’, as it were, first redefining the

conflict as one between the ‘directions’ of the I’s activities or between the ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ activities of the I, and finally locating it within the necessary internal structure of I-hood itself. The *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* proceeds in the diametrically opposite direction: it begins with an analysis of the concept of the I and then moves, as it were, ‘outward’, from the finite I, to the ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ powers of the same, and finally to the necessary positing by the finite I of the ‘pure I’ and ‘not-I’.

Whereas the *Foundation* proceeds from concept to intuition to feeling to freedom, Part One of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* proceeds from freedom to feeling to intuition to concept.³⁹ Though the latter strategy has certain heuristic advantages, this does not imply that there is anything *defective* about the older strategy. On the contrary, it follows from the very nature of a transcendental argument of the type represented by the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* that what is, from one perspective, ‘conditioned’ must also be recognized, from the opposing perspective, as a ‘condition’. This is one of the many valuable lessons to be learned from comparing the superficially very different deductive paths of the two presentations and learning to recognize that they are actually only two different versions of what is, according to Fichte, essentially the *same* argument.⁴⁰

All of the differences mentioned so far are concerned more with the *form* than with the *content* of the two presentations (though it must be acknowledged that Fichte often insisted upon the *inseparability* of form and content, in philosophy as elsewhere). A similar point might also be made about the differences in technical terminology found in the two presentations. Thus, for example, though the term *Anstoß* or ‘check’ does not occur in the second presentation, the doctrine itself is retained, though what was previously referred to as a ‘check’ upon the activity of the I is now called a ‘feeling of the I’s original limitation or determinacy’ and Fichte’s account of these ‘original limitations’ has now been extended to include not merely those ‘feelings’ that underlie all sensible experience of objects, but also the ‘felt’ summons to limit one’s own freedom in recognition of that of *other* finite Is and the ‘original determinacy’ or pure willing, which underlies conscientious awareness of moral obligation.⁴¹ The same is true for other key terms: the ‘subject/object’ of the second presentation, for example, is simply another name for the ‘f/act’ or *Tathandlung* of the first presentation.

It was, in fact, Fichte’s deliberate and life-long policy to adopt a new philosophical vocabulary for virtually every new presentation of his system. His stated reason for doing

this was, first of all, to avoid giving any comfort to those who might have thought that they could ‘master the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ merely by memorizing a glossary of technical terms.⁴² Furthermore, he considered the task of establishing a fixed ‘scientific terminology’ to be the very *last* and least important task facing the founder of a new system of philosophy. Meanwhile, he remained content to revise and to vary his own terminology from presentation to presentation, improvising along the way whatever terms seemed useful and appropriate in each particular context.⁴³ The most important reason why Fichte refused to adopt any fixed terminology, however, was because he remained profoundly distrustful of the ability of mere words to convey the essence of his thought and always professed to judge the success of his written presentations only by the standard of how well or poorly a particular term or text seemed to achieve its intended effect: that is, by how successful it was in leading – or perhaps provoking – readers to ‘think the *Wissenschaftslehre* for themselves’. His constant willingness to revise his terminology might thus be taken as reflecting his growing frustration, sometimes bordering on despair, at the apparent failure of his writings to achieve their stated goal. Indeed, this seems to have been the primary reason why he refused to publish any of the later presentations of his system and elected to confine himself instead to purely oral presentations – ‘so that misunderstanding can thereby be detected and eliminated on the spot’.⁴⁴ In the light of such considerations, one should not place undue weight on the purely *terminological* differences between the first and second presentations.

The more substantial differences between the first and second presentations can be divided into two classes. On the one hand, certain topics that may have been mentioned or discussed in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* are discussed in much greater detail in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where they are often assigned a weight and a function in the overall argument that they did not possess in the earlier presentation. The important *deductions of time and the categories* in Parts One and Two of the new presentation would be an example of how a topic that plays a relatively small role and occupies very little space in the first presentation becomes central to the second.⁴⁵ Another example would be the model of *fivefold synthesis*. Although it is possible for an ingenious interpreter to find this notion already operative in the *Foundation*,⁴⁶ its role in that presentation is certainly not emphasized and many careful readers of that book have remained innocent of any acquaintance with the concept of

fivefold synthesis. The entire second half of the new presentation, in contrast, is explicitly devoted to an exhaustive examination of the synthetic, fivefold structure of the I. Indeed, Max Wundt went so far as to maintain that ‘the presentation of this fivefoldness is the actual goal of the discussion contained in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1797, and the expression of this fivefoldness is what distinguishes this version from all the others, just as the distinguishing feature of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* is the thought of the eternal striving that never comes to a stop’.⁴⁷

Yet another example of how the new presentation represents a material advance over the older one is the much clearer account in the former of *reflection* and of the *synthetic method* of reflection. To be sure, even in the first presentation one will find references to the ‘synthetic procedure’ of philosophy and acknowledgments of the importance of ‘reflection’ for this procedure, but it often remains unclear precisely how these terms are being employed. That Fichte was aware of this deficiency in the original presentation and was determined to remedy it in the second is confirmed by a remark at the end of the first introduction to the Krause transcript, where he remarks that in the new presentation ‘we will also discuss, in an explicit and thorough manner, the laws of reflection, in combination and in connection with what proceeds from these laws’ (GA IV/3: 329; FTP, 86).

In accordance with this pledge, the new presentation places special emphasis upon the ‘synthetic’ or ‘productive’ character of philosophical reflection. Indeed, the ‘synthetic structure’ of the I itself, as constructed in Part Two, is presented as a direct consequence of the requirement that the I *reflect upon itself*. Nor does Fichte simply *employ* the method of reflection in this new presentation; he also devotes a considerable amount of space to explicit, methodological discussion of the ‘basic law of reflection’. In contrast, only at the very end of the *Foundation* is there any explicit mention of the reflective law that stipulates that everything determinate must be related to something determinable. No sooner, however, is this law explicitly formulated than Fichte observes that ‘we could have argued from the very start in accordance with this law with which we are now very well acquainted’ (GA I/2: 438; SK, 274). Indeed, the new presentation really does ‘argue from the start’ in accordance with just this principle.

In addition to these examples of a shift in emphasis and strategy in the new presentation, there are also some important *topics* and *doctrines* that are encountered for

the first time (at least within the context of a presentation of the foundational portion of the system) in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Three examples are (1) the new account of the *human body* as both a concrete organism (system of sensibility) and an articulated tool of the will and the crucial function played by the necessary *embodiment of the I* in the new deductions of space, time and the categories of relation; (2) the full incorporation of an elaborate theory of *intersubjectivity* (a theory that Fichte had first developed in his *Foundation of Natural Right*) into the new account of the very foundations and constitution of self-consciousness; and (3) what appears to be a radically new conception of the relationship between the supersensible (noumenal) realm and the phenomenal realm of sensible experience, such that the former can be described as the ‘*supersensible substrate*’ of the latter.

What is particularly novel about the account of *the human body* contained in the new presentation is not simply that embodiment is shown to be one of the conditions necessary for the possibility of consciousness, but the particular *way* in which this is demonstrated: the body is posited, first and foremost, as a necessary ‘sensibilization’ of the will’s own efficacy, and is hence the essential link between the practical realm of willing and the theoretical realm of cognizable material objects. The *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* represents one of the first and most thoroughgoing efforts in the history of modern philosophy to take the human body seriously as an important topic of philosophical reflection.⁴⁸ Not only does the body serve as the primary mediator between the I and the material world, but it also plays an important role in making possible empirical recognition of and by other free beings. This important aspect of Fichte’s new presentation still has not received the philosophical attention it deserves.

More attention has been directed to Fichte’s account of the necessary ‘summons’ upon the I to freely limit its own freedom and to recognize the freedom of other free beings. To be sure, much of the interest in this aspect of Fichte’s Jena system has tended to focus on the specific implications of this account of intersubjectivity for social and political theory, but, as the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* makes plain, this new account of intersubjectivity is just as deeply woven into the inner fabric of Fichte’s account of the structure of self-consciousness as is the above-mentioned theory of the body. The true Fichtean I is neither an ‘absolute self’ nor a heroically striving, isolated

individual; instead, it is a concrete and finite social being, one individual among many; and it must posit itself as such in order to posit itself at all.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most controversial innovation of the new presentation is what sometimes appears to be a new willingness on Fichte's part to separate sharply the supersensible realm from the sensible one, and to treat the former as the *supersensible substrate* of the latter. Evidence of this new theory may be found in the new deduction of time, and particularly in Fichte's characterization of time as the 'tinted glass' through which an eternal and supersensible I 'sees itself into' and thus 'falls into' time – in accordance, of course, with the laws of reflection – whereas 'consciousness itself is not in any time at all' (GA IV/3: 476; FTP, 369).⁵⁰

It is difficult to know what to make of this and other similar passages, which certainly seem to support the claim that Fichte is here proposing a new (and fateful) distinction between an unchanging, supersensible reality ('the absolute' or 'pure will') and a changing world of finite Is and empirical experience, which are merely an 'appearance' of the former. This is precisely how interpreters such as Xavier Tilliette interpret Fichte's remarks in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* concerning the 'supersensible substrate of experience'. For Tilliette, this new doctrine represents real *progress* on Fichte's part beyond the resolutely anti-metaphysical philosophy of finite subjectivity presented in the *Foundation*.⁵¹ Other critics, such as Peter Baumanns, Peter Rohs and Alexis Philonenko⁵² endorse this interpretation of the relationship between supersensible substrate and sensible experience in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, but lament it as a sign of Fichte's move away from the more humanistic and future-oriented philosophy of freedom contained in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and towards a more contemplative or 'speculative' theory based upon the recognition of an unchanging, supersensible absolute. The evidence against such an interpretation, however, is strong. For if an I *is an I* at all only insofar as it actually reflects upon or posits itself, then what sense can it make to talk – as Fichte admittedly sometimes does – about the I *apart from this reflection and all that is involved therein* (including time)? As Fichte explains, 'my consciousness begins not with willing, nor with the concept of a goal, nor with the perception of an object; instead, it begins with all these [at once]. It is all these things, and it is only within experience that I first separate them' (GA IV/3: 475–476; FTP, 367). But if it is 'only within experience' that I first

‘posit’ (that is, think or become conscious of) both the phenomenal and the noumenal realms, then in what possible sense can *any* of the elements – taken singly and including the ‘supreme condition of consciousness’ (i.e., pure willing) – be said to be the ‘substrate’ of the others?

It is, to be sure, not altogether clear *how* Fichte’s remarks in the new presentation about the ‘supersensible substrate’ of experience and the independence of the I from time are to be interpreted or how one is to understand the status and reality of the ‘pure will’ and its relationship to the concrete and existing finite I.⁵³ But what does seem to be clear is that *any* resolution of these questions will at least appear to conflict with certain explicit statements and doctrines also contained in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Perhaps the wisest course is to concede the presence of what appears to be a deep and unresolved ambiguity at the heart of the new presentation and then construct for oneself an interpretation that seems most in keeping with what one has independently construed to be ‘the spirit of the new presentation’. In the end it may prove to be impossible to make sense of finite subjectivity without postulating an absolute, supersensible substrate of the same. Or perhaps it is impossible to make sense of ‘pure willing’ except as an explanatory fiction necessarily posited by the finite I in order to analyse and to clarify what is ultimately real: limited freedom. Since the new presentation appears to contain evidence for *both* of these conclusions, one who wishes to understand and to make sense of Fichte’s later Jena system really has no option but to try to ‘think the *Wissenschaftslehre* [*nova methodo*] for oneself’ – which is, of course, precisely what its author most desired to accomplish.⁵⁴

Notes

¹ See Fichte's second series of lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804 (GA II/8: 406–407).

² Fichte himself always denied that there were any fundamental differences between the content or systematic standpoint of his various presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, maintaining instead that the differences were mainly formal or strategic, and that each new version of his philosophy and each new shift of terminology was best understood simply as an effort to find a more adequate way to communicate the same underlying insight or doctrine. To use a favourite Fichtean image, he claimed that each version was true to the 'spirit' of all the others, even as it departed from the 'letter' of the same.

³ *Aenesidemus* was a vigorous attack upon Kant's Critical philosophy, both in the form presented by Kant and in the 'improved' version represented by K. L. Reinhold's 'Elementary Philosophy', to which Fichte had briefly adhered. In the course of preparing his review, Fichte found himself compelled to reconsider both Kant's and Reinhold's presentations of transcendental idealism and to lay the foundations for his own new and radically revised version of the same. See *Eigne Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie/Practische Philosophie* (GA II/3: 21–266) and Reinhold Lauth, 'Die Entstehung von Fichtes *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* nach den *Eigenen Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie*', in Reinhold Lauth, *Transzendente Entwicklungslinien von Descartes bis Marx und Dostojewski* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989), 155–179. Concerning Fichte's review of *Aenesidemus*, see Ch. 2 of Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2013](#)).

⁴ A partial transcript of these private 'Zurich lectures', which Fichte presented in Zurich at the instigation of J. K. Lavater, is published in GA IV/3: 1–48.

⁵ Hints of what might have been contained in these lectures on the philosophy of religion are provided in the essay that provoked the Atheism Controversy, 'On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World' (1798), as well as in other

lectures of this period and in the works Fichte wrote in response to the Atheism Controversy, including *The Vocation of Man*.

[6](#) For the convenience of the reader, page references are provided to standard English translations of Fichte's writings, where available, as well as to the German text in GA. However, some of the English translations have been slightly modified.

[7](#) Accordingly, the published *Foundation of Natural Right* (1796–97) and *System of Ethics* (1798) each begin with a succinct summary of the first principles and general character of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*.

[8](#) In fact, though Fichte sometimes alluded to his own philosophy of nature (or 'physics'), he never attempted a systematic elaboration. One can, however, confidently surmise that a Fichtean 'philosophy of nature' would more closely resemble what is today called 'philosophy of science' than what Schelling and Hegel called by that name. Indeed, it was precisely their strong disagreement over the possibility of a 'philosophy of nature' in the latter sense that eventually led to an open breach between Fichte and Schelling. See Reinhard Lauth, *Die transzendente Naturlehre Fichtes nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, [1984](#)) and Daniel Breazeale, 'Against Nature? On the Status and Meaning of the Natural World in Fichte's Early Philosophy', *Philosophia* [Osaka, Japan] No. **9** (March, 2014): 19–39.

[9](#) Though Fichte frequently promised to develop this portion of his system, he never actually did so. Hence his views on this subject must be gleaned from various occasional writings and comments in his other texts.

[10](#) In contrast to all of the other philosophical sub-disciplines, which are described as generating their *content* along with the *concept* of the same (which is, according to Fichte, simply a corollary of the claim that these sciences describe certain necessary acts of the intellect), and can, for this reason, be described as 'real [*reelle*] philosophical sciences', aesthetics does not produce its object. Yet neither is it a purely 'formal' science like logic. Instead, it occupies a distinctive middle ground in which freedom and necessity are joined, as it were, 'naturally' and without the need for any additional postulates. As in the case of the philosophy of nature, Fichte never lectured on and did not publish a systematic presentation of his aesthetics. See, however, the suggestive comments on this topic contained in his 'On the Spirit and the Letter in

Philosophy, in a Series of Letters’, originally written in 1795 for Schiller’s *Die Horen*, but rejected by Schiller and finally published by Fichte in 1800 (GA I/6: 313–361). For a speculative reconstruction of Fichte’s ‘Aesthetics’ see Daniel Breazeale, ‘Against Art? Fichte on Aesthetic Experience and Fine Art’, *JTLA (Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo, Aesthetics)* **38** (2013) [published October 2014]: 25–42.

[11](#) See GA I/4: 183–281; IWL, 1–118.

[12](#) See the unfinished manuscript, *Neue Bearbeitung der W.L.* (GA II/5: 331–402). For a detailed discussion of Fichte’s efforts to revise and publish the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* after arriving in Berlin and of his reasons for abandoning this project, see Daniel Breazeale, ‘Toward a *Wissenschaftslehre* more *geometrico* (1800–1801)’, in *After Jena: New Essays on Fichte’s Later Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 3–40.

[13](#) A complete transcript of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* was first discovered early in the twentieth century in the manuscript collection of the University of Halle. Though various scholars, including Siegfried Berger, Emmanuel Hirsch, Max Wundt and Heinz Heimsoeth, had access to and reported on the contents of this transcript, it was not published in full until 1937, when Hans Jacob included it in his edition of Fichte’s *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Since the transcriber was unidentified, this text is known simply as the ‘Halle transcript’. In 1982, shortly after the Halle transcript had been re-edited and re-published in GA II/2, another transcript was discovered and published by Erich Fuchs, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Kollegnachschrift K. Chr. R. Krause 1798/99* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982). This transcript, which is even more detailed than the Halle transcript and is known by the name of its transcriber, C. F. Krause, was subsequently published in GA II/3: 307–535, along with yet another partial transcript, also discovered by Fuchs, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Nachschrift Eschen. Fragment* (GA IV/3: 143–196). For details concerning the dating and contents of these transcripts, see the Editor’s Introduction to FTP, 33–49.

[14](#) Fichte’s 1794–95 lectures on the first principles and foundations of his new system had also been preceded by an independent treatise on the task and method of philosophy (*Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*), published in the guise

of a ‘prospectus’ for the use of students who might be interested in attending Fichte’s lectures on the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. The distinction between pure ‘critique’ and pure ‘philosophy’ is, however, not strictly observed in Fichte’s earlier Jena writings. On the one hand, a certain ‘scientific’ status seems to be claimed for the metaphilosophical observations contained in *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*; on the other, the ‘metaphysical’ or ‘scientific’ presentation contained in the *Foundation* is frequently interrupted by metaphilosophical or ‘critical’ reflections.

[15](#) Regarding this distinction and relationship between these two ‘standpoints’, see ‘The Standpoint of Life and the Standpoint of Philosophy’, Ch. 13 of Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*.

[16](#) See Schelling’s *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, which first appeared in the *Philosophisches Journal* in 1795–96 and directly influenced Fichte’s subsequent discussion of this topic in his two ‘Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*’. Concerning Fichte’s somewhat idiosyncratic use of the terms ‘idealism’ and ‘dogmatism’, see the Editor’s Introduction to IWL, xx–xxx.

[17](#) For further discussion, see ‘Idealism vs. Dogmatism’, Ch. 11 of Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*.

[18](#) ‘What idealism presupposes is the following: The intellect acts; but, as a consequence of its very nature, it can act only in a certain, specific manner. If one considers the intellect’s necessary modes of acting in isolation from any [actual] acting, then it is quite appropriate to call these the “laws of acting”. Hence there are necessary laws of the intellect. – At the same time, the feeling of necessity accompanying these determinate representations is also made comprehensible in this way: For what the intellect feels in this case is not, as it were, an external impression; instead, what it feels when it acts are the limits of its own nature. Insofar as idealism presupposes the existence of such necessary laws of the intellect (which is the only rational thing it can suppose, since this is the only way it can explain what it is supposed to explain) it is called “Critical” or “transcendental” idealism’ (GA I/4: 441; IWL, 26).

[19](#) Fichte employs this term in the sense in which it was employed by Euclid: viz., a summons or invitation for the reader to *do something, to act in a specific way*. It is

not insignificant that a ‘philosophy of action’ such as the *Wissenschaftslehre* should begin precisely with a summons to action on the part of the reader.

20 *Tathandlung* is a term combining the word for ‘fact’ (*Tatsache*) with the word for ‘action’ (*Handlung*) and is employed by Fichte to designate an originally productive act (or ‘f/act’) on the part of the I, a f/act that is, at the same time, its own product and/or object (in contrast with an ordinary *Handlung*, which is always directed at an object outside of itself). Fichte introduced this term in his ‘Review of *Aenesidemus*’ (GA I/2: 46; EPW, 64) and then employed it extensively in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.

21 This feature of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* has been particularly emphasized by Günter Zöller in his various essays on this text. See, for example, ‘Original Duplicity: The Real and the Ideal in Fichte’s Transcendental Theory of the Subject’, in *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks and Dieter Sturma (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 115–130 and ‘Thinking and Willing in Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity’, in *New Perspectives on Fichte*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 1–17.

22 Hegel’s misguided but influential critique of Fichte as an exponent of the reflective model of consciousness was first put forward in 1801 in *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*. On this topic see Dieter Henrich, ‘Fichte’s Original Insight’, trans. David Lachterman, *Contemporary German Philosophy* 1 ([1982](#)): 15–52. Though Henrich is surely correct in his defence of Fichte against Hegel’s criticism on this point, he mistakenly believes that it was only in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* that Fichte abandoned his earlier adherence to the ‘reflective model’. In fact, the key principle – that the I posits itself as self-positing – already occurs in the later portions of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.

23 Fichte does, however, recognize one important exception to this generalization: namely, the immediate presence of the ‘I itself’ to the empirical subject that recognizes the moral law. The dutiful and respectful apprehension of the categorical imperative always involves a direct, albeit non-theoretical, apprehension of one’s own freedom and hence of oneself as a freely self-determining subject/object. This is what Fichte

describes as the ‘actual intellectual intuition’. See GA I/4: 446 and 472; IWL, 49 and 56; and GA I/5: 60; SE, 50, as well as Alain Perrinjaquet, ““Wirkliche” und “philosophische” Anschauung: Formen der intellektuellen Anschauung in Fichtes *System der Sittenlehre* (1798)’, *Fichte-Studien* 5 (1993): 57–81.

24 ‘Intellectual intuition ... as such, never becomes an object of consciousness, though it does become an object of consciousness in the form of a concept’ (GA IV/3: 355; FTP, 129–130). ‘We are acquainted with intellectual intuition only through thinking, through abstraction and reflection, and through the inferences derived therefrom in accordance with the rules of our philosophy’ (GA IV/2: 133–134; FTP, 291n.). See too GA I/4: 459 and 464; IWL, 42–43 and 47–48, GA I/2: 48, 56–57 and 64–65; EPW, 65, 70 and 75.

25 This confusion is further compounded by Fichte’s occasional use of the same term in yet a *third* distinct sense: to designate the ‘real intuition’ of freedom that is implicit in moral conscience. For an effort to sort out the various different senses of the term ‘intellectual intuition’ in the early *Wissenschaftslehre*, see ‘Intellectual Intuition’, Ch. 8 of Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*.

26 There is, to be sure, an important element of ‘bi-directionality’ or ‘co-conditionality’ (or, in Fichte’s words, ‘unavoidable circularity’) in the overall deductive structure of the new presentation. The postulated starting point (in this case, the self-reverting act through which the concept of the I is constructed) is, qua starting point, the ‘first condition’ for all that is discovered to ‘follow’ therefrom in accordance with the law of reflective opposition. In this sense, the final term in the overall deduction (namely, the ordinary standpoint of consciousness, which includes the experience of external objects within the realm of nature, of other free beings with which the I stands in a potential ‘relationship of right’ and of one’s own pure will, as the source of all moral obligations) can be said to have been ‘conditioned’ by the free subjectivity with which the deduction began and from which the latter was ‘derived’. On the other hand, it is just as true that this starting point can be said to be ‘conditioned’ by everything that is ‘deduced’ from it, including the experience of the material world, of other free subjects and of moral obligation, since the basic strategy of Fichte’s argument is to show that the former would be *impossible* without the latter. This ‘bi-conditionality’ is nicely captured in Fichte’s recognition that ‘all consciousness is an immediate consciousness of our own acting, and all mediate or indirect consciousness

provides the condition for the possibility of this same acting' (GA IV/3: 138; FTP, 283). By attempting to *discover the conditions for what is immediately postulated*, every transcendental argument displays a similar 'circularity'. The new presentation contains numerous discussions of just this point, one that Fichte grasped more clearly perhaps than any thinker before or after him.

[27](#) Letter to Jens Baggesen, April or May 1795 (GA III/2: 300; EPW, 385). Actually, there is more to Fichte's claim than this. Not only does the *Wissenschaftslehre* commence with an act of free self-positing, but also the system itself is, according to Fichte, the only one that can reconcile human freedom with the 'facts of experience'. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is also a 'system of freedom' in the sense that it implies that one cannot truly posit for oneself one's own freedom without at the same time willing the freedom – and thus the 'liberation' – of all other finite Is. As Fichte wrote to Reinhold on the 8 January 1800, 'My system is from beginning to end nothing but an analysis of the concept of freedom, and freedom cannot be contradicted within this system, since no other ingredient is added' (GA III/4: 182).

[28](#) 'Willing is something immediate and original, which cannot be derived from anything higher' (GA IV/2: 113; FTP, 259).

[29](#) 'There arises for us a time within which we intuit the manifold only to the extent that this manifold exhibits the relationship of dependence – and only insofar as the manifold is intuited in this way is there any time at all ... The first, undivided act of willing is repeated and is, as it were, extended over the manifold, and from this there arises a temporal series' (GA IV/2: 120; FTP, 269).

[30](#) Pure willing is not, however, a *sufficient* condition for consciousness. In order for any actual consciousness to occur, a philosophically inexplicable and incomprehensible 'original determinacy' or 'original limitation' of the I (that is, a manifold of feeling) is also required. The chief difference between the early or Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* and the later versions is that in the later versions Fichte does at least appear to be striving to transcend the 'circle of consciousness' and to appeal to a transcendent ground of the I's limitation, which he calls, variously, 'the absolute', 'pure Being' and 'God'.

[31](#) Thus, concludes Fichte, 'every act of thinking, every act of representing, lies in the middle between original willing and limitation through feeling' (GA IV/3: 440; FTP, 293).

[32](#) See Ulrich Schwabe, *Individuelles und Transindividuelles Ich. Die Selbstindividuation reiner Subjektivität und Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre* (Munich: Schöningh, 2007).

[33](#) ‘Hitherto we have been climbing steadily upward: we thought of something as a possible consciousness, which, however, we then found to be impossible without some second thing, and then a third one, etc. Continuing in this manner we ascended steadily from the conditioned to the condition. But now, after the condition has been presented in its entirety, we will descend from the condition to what is conditioned by it’ (GA IV/3: 438; FTP, 290).

[34](#) There is no real contradiction between this claim and the preceding assertion that the deduction of time is the most important portion of the new presentation. In fact, the account of productive imagination and the derivation of time are so inseparably joined in Fichte’s presentation that neither can be expounded apart from the other.

[35](#) See, however, the ‘Hypothetical Division of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ in Part Three of the first edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 150–152; EPW, 133–135). This was dropped in the second edition, presumably because it had been entirely superseded by the concluding section of the lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, which, at the time of the second edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1798), Fichte was still planning to revise for publication.

[36](#) ‘There are several methods of treating a subject synthetically: (1) One can start with a contradiction and simply try to resolve this contradiction by making certain additional assumptions. This is the method followed in the instructor’s published *Wissenschaftslehre*. It is the most difficult method of all, which is why this particular text was not understood ... (2) Another method is to begin by positing for oneself a principal task, and then to attempt to accomplish this task by introducing intermediate principles. This is the method we have employed so far’ (GA IV/2: 108; FTP, 249).

[37](#) Regarding the various ‘methods’ of presentation employed in the *Foundation* and the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* see Daniel Breazeale, ‘The Synthetic–Genetic Method of Transcendental Philosophy: Kantian Questions/Fichtean Answers’, in *The History of the Transcendental Turn*, ed. Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 74–95 and ‘Inference, Intuition, and Imagination: On the Methodology and Methods of the First Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*’, in *New Studies of Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 19–36.

[38](#) This is, presumably, what Fichte was alluding to in his letter of 31 January 1801 to Friedrich Johanness, when he confessed that the published presentation ‘bears too many traces of the time in which it was written and of the manner of philosophizing which then prevailed’ (GA III/5: 9).

[39](#) Fichte himself calls attention to just this difference in the first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: ‘In the present version, we begin with the immediate object of consciousness, i.e., with freedom, and then go on to display the conditions of the same ... The primary aim of the previous version was to provide an explanation of representations and of the intellect; hence free action, striving and drive were there employed merely as a basis for such an explanation. In the present version, the practical is the immediate object, and the theoretical is derived therefrom. Furthermore, the procedure of the present inquiry is predominantly synthetic, whereas that of the former is more analytic’ (GA, IV/3: 380; FTP, 182).

[40](#) ‘One has to begin with being and infer self-positing therefrom, and vice versa. Similarly, one must infer the intuition from the concept, and vice versa. Both must be present together’ (GA IV/2: 33; FTP, 119).

[41](#) This expansion reflects advances in Fichte’s own thinking after 1794, as reflected in the *Foundation of Natural Right* and *System of Ethics*. The *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* incorporates into its foundational portion key principles from these two systematic subdivisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and this is one of the principal advantages of the new presentation.

[42](#) See the remark on this subject in the preface to the first edition of the *Foundation*, GA I/2: 252; EPW, 238–239.

[43](#) See Fichte’s note on the ‘provisional nature’ of all of his technical terminology in the second edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*: ‘I will continue to make use of circumlocution and multiplicity of expression in order to give

my presentations the clarity and specificity necessary to fulfil my intentions in each particular instance' (GA I/2: 117–118; EPW, 106). See too the 1801 'Public Announcement of a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*' (GA I/7: 158 and 164; IWL, 192 and 201).

[44](#) *Pro memoria* to the Prussian Cabinet of Ministers, 3 January 1804 (GA, III/5: 223). See too Fichte's letter to Reinhold, 2 July 1795 (GA III/2: 343; EPW, 398).

[45](#) To be sure, these topics are discussed more fully in *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre with Respect to the Theoretical Faculty* (1795) (GA I/3: 137–208; EPW, 243–306), which should be considered an essential supplement to the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.

[46](#) See especially Alexis Philonenko, *La liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte* (Paris: Vrin, 1966), 246–252. The importance of fivefold synthesis within the *Foundation* is also insisted upon by Hans-Jürgen Müller in his *Subjektivität als schematisches Bild des Absoluten* (Königstein: Forum Academicum, 1980).

[47](#) Max Wundt, *Fichte-Forschungen* (Stuttgart: Frommann, [1929](#)), 141.

[48](#) To be sure, this account of the *essential embodiment* of the I is not really 'new', since it was first articulated by Fichte in the *Foundation of Natural Right* and then again in the *System of Ethics*. What is new is its integration into the foundational portion of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*.

[49](#) Though commentators as diverse as Reinhard Lauth, Alexis Philonenko and Thomas Hohler have professed to find a doctrine of intersubjectivity in the 1794–95 *Foundation*, the evidence they offer seems meagre and unconvincing. One of the passages from the *Foundation* that is most frequently cited in defence of this claim – 'kein Du, kein Ich; kein Ich, kein Du' (GA I/2: 337; SK, 172) was in fact lifted directly from a passage in Jacobi's *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*, where the term 'Du' is employed simply to designate what Fichte calls the 'not-I' and has no specifically intersubjective or social implications whatsoever. To be sure, it is certainly possible to assimilate the later account of the summons to self-limitation to the overall argument of the *Foundation*, in which case it would be something of an 'ideal' correlate to the sensible *Anstoß* that plays such a central role in the first presentation. In fact, Fichte himself proposed precisely such an assimilation in the *Foundation of*

Natural Right (see GA I/4: 342–343; FNR, 32); but such an accommodation is not, so far as I can determine, even hinted at in the earlier *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. For interpretations of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* that emphasize the concrete and intersubjective character of the Fichtean I, see Ives Radrizzani, *Vers la fondation de l'intersubjectivité chez Fichte des Principes à la Nova Methodo* (Paris: Vrin, 1993) and Katja Crone, *Fichtes Theorie konkreter Subjektivität. Untersuchungen zur Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), as well as Philonenko, *La liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte*.

50 ‘The state of our real activity, pure willing, remains eternally unchangeable with respect to all our possible experience – for nothing new can ever be added to nor can anything be subtracted from this state ... This new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* diverges from the published version in the way it answers this question [concerning how the ideal activity can provide one with a consciousness of one’s entire state]. Prompted by the circumstances of the time, the primary aim of the earlier version was to show that all our consciousness has its foundation in the eternally valid laws of our thinking. In addition to this, however, this new presentation also provides us with an *intelligible* world as a firm substrate for the *empirical* one’ (GA IV/2: 150; FTP, 314).

51 Xavier Tilliette, ‘Bulletin de l’idéalisme allemand II. – Etudes fichtéennes’, *Archives de philosophie* **30** (1967): 596–597.

52 Peter Baumanns, ‘Introduction to Fichte’, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1975), xxiv–xxv; Peter Rohs, ‘Über die Zeit als das Mittelglied zwischen dem Intelligiblen und dem Sinnlichen’, *Fichte-Studien* **6** (1994): 95–116; Alexis Philonenko, ‘Fichte’, in vol. 2 of the Pléiade *Histoire de la Philosophie*, ed. Yvon Belaval (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 930.

53 By far the most sustained effort to analyse and resolve this crucial issue is to be found in Schwabe, *Individuelles und Transindividuelles Ich*, an immense work of 715 pages, which includes by the far the most detailed *commentary* on the entire text of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.

54 ‘My philosophy should be expounded in an infinite number of different ways. Everyone will have a different way of thinking it – and each person must think of it a

different way, in order to think it at all' (Letter to Reinhold, 21 March 1797) (GA III/3: 57; EPW, 417).

Fichte's Later Presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*



Günter Zöller

This contribution aims to introduce the English-speaking reader to an extensive body of Fichte's work far less known and discussed, especially in the Anglophone world, than his earlier work from the Jena period (1794–1799), for which ample primary and secondary literature in English has become available in recent years. Fichte's later work, dating from 1800 to 1814 and finally available in reliable and complete form in the critical edition of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (1962–2012), chiefly comprises numerous further presentations of his core project, the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The following analytic survey of Fichte's later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* moves from a general section on the later Fichte through a section on the specific influence of Schelling on the later Fichte to two sections on the conditions of the possibility of knowledge and on the limits of knowledge, respectively, in the later Fichte and concludes with a section on the metaphilosophical function of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in Fichte's later work.¹

The Later Fichte

When Fichte lost his professorship at the University of Jena in 1799 over charges of atheism, the extensive lecturing and publishing activity in which he had engaged since assuming his professorship in 1794 came to an abrupt end. Beginning in 1799 and for the duration of an entire decade, Fichte's public presence was restricted to individual lecture courses given in private settings in Berlin, the only exception being a couple of university-based courses offered in Erlangen (1805) and Königsberg (1807). It was only with his appointment to the newly founded University of Berlin (1809) that Fichte, once again, was able to develop and execute, during the final five years of his life, a comprehensive curriculum in which his philosophical system received a detailed public presentation. Fichte's later lectures continued to be concerned with the integrated transcendental philosophy and philosophy of freedom of Kantian inspiration to which he had given the novel name '*Wissenschaftslehre*' and assigned the task of critically elucidating the conditions, possibilities and limits of knowledge with regard both to the latter's bearer (subject) and to its target (object).

At the centre of Fichte's later lectures stands throughout the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which Fichte continues to present always anew and in ever-different form and shape to his listeners. Altogether there are thirteen versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* dating from the final decade and a half of Fichte's private and public lecturing activity, usually referred to by the year of their delivery (1800, 1801–1802, 1804/1, 1804/2, 1804/3, 1805/1, 1805/2, 1807, 1810, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814).² A few of those presentations are incomplete, but most of them were completed – and have been completely preserved. With the sole exception of an introductory text from 1810 (*The Wissenschaftslehre Presented in Its General Outline*), which is the final, summary lecture of the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1810,³ Fichte himself did not see any of these works to print publication. Accordingly, Fichte's continued work on his first philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, remained largely unknown with regard to its very existence and entirely ignored with regard to its content by his contemporaries, including his philosophical competitors and successors – first Schelling, later Hegel. In their eyes, Fichte essentially remained for the rest of his life, over a decade and a half, at the stage

marked and publicized by the first and only print publication of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from the years 1794–95.

While Fichte did not make his continued work on the *Wissenschaftslehre* known to a larger public, the context of communication remained essential for the ongoing elaboration of his philosophical thinking. Fichte addressed the continuing concern of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – of elucidating possible knowledge and the willing to be based on it with regard to the mode and extent of its validity – in a successive, multiple and varying manner of presentation that was always co-determined by his regard for the mental capacities and philosophical preconceptions of his listeners. Moreover, the intellectual context in which Fichte sought to lend a persuasive presentation to the *Wissenschaftslehre* underwent considerable change and development over the course of the two decades of his teaching and lecturing activity. In the beginning, Fichte faced the task of establishing the *Wissenschaftslehre* as the final shape and the definitive standard of post-Kantian philosophy against previous and contemporaneous competing attempts, chiefly that of K. L. Reinhold. This initial situation accounts for Fichte's early project of basing knowledge on self-evident first principles and of successively deriving the chief forms and norms of knowledge concerning objects and actions in a system based on such first principles ('deduction'). Moreover, in reaction to the initial reception of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, marked by misunderstanding and lack of comprehension, Fichte developed, still in Jena (as of 1796), a 'new presentation' of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which, rather than departing from apodictically stated first principles of knowledge, began with the philosophical instruction ('postulate') to form the notion of a practically intelligent being ('I'), to observe closely the coming about of the I's basic conception of itself ('self-consciousness') and to capture the latter in an artificial philosophical reconstruction ('history of self-consciousness').

In the presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* undertaken after 1800 Fichte reacts specifically to the substantial changes in the contemporary philosophical landscape, which is now shaped by the meta-critique of F. H. Jacobi and Schelling of the perceived deficiencies of a critical philosophy inspired by Kant and instituted by Fichte. Fichte's later presentations are borne by the effort to meet the fundamental critique of the enterprise of *Wissenschaftslehre*, still directed at its early and sole book publication, with a clarification of the intent and approach of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that is to render

palpable the philosophical merits of his own philosophical system as well as expose the defects of the competing projects planned and executed by his main philosophical competitors and opponents.

Fichte does not react to the criticisms of the *Wissenschaftslehre* offered by Jacobi and Schelling with direct polemical rejoinders and immediate argumentative refutations. Rather, Fichte takes seriously Jacobi's and Schelling's alternative approaches as genuine challenges to the *Wissenschaftslehre* and sees the critical engagement with the opposed positions as a way to achieve greater intelligibility and better comprehension, both for himself and for others, of his own philosophical project. Accordingly, Fichte pointedly draws on Jacobi and Schelling for inspiration and orientation in an effort to revise the presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in view of their voiced criticisms. It is Fichte's strategy throughout the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to avail himself of opposed insights in the light of his own philosophical approach and intent. This strategic procedure results in the seemingly affirmative reception of basic concepts advanced by Jacobi and Schelling and in their apparent integration into the successive presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Throughout the foreign thoughts appropriated by Fichte do not figure as alien import and external influence but appear incorporated and assimilated into the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

Chiefly among the fundamental conceptions that Fichte takes over from his leading critics by transforming them in the spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are the basic philosophical notions of 'life' in Jacobi and of 'the absolute' in Schelling. Both concepts were originally advanced by their authors against Fichte, in order to expose the alleged empty self-referentiality of a philosophizing that took its point of departure from the I and in an effort to oppose to the latter an independent, antecedent and superior dimension of reality. In addition to the basic concepts of life and the absolute as indicators of a dimension of reality transcending that of the I and its self-consciousness, the later Fichte also takes over the associated and correlated conceptions of 'belief' – or rather 'faith' (*Glaube*) – which, according to Jacobi, in principle exceeds the I's knowledge of itself in terms of cognitive certainty and epistemic dignity, and of 'appearance', which, according to Schelling, renders the derivative nature of everything conditioned with regard to something absolutely unconditioned. By integrating the twofold conceptuality of life and the absolute into the further unfolding of his own

philosophical thinking and by even assigning a central position to those borrowed notions, the later Fichte indicates to his listeners the inclusion of a founding dimension outside the I, as claimed and called for by his prominent critics. In the process, though, Fichte subjects the terms and concepts taken over from Jacobi and Schelling to a revised reading inspired by the overall outlook of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with its constitutive commitment to a specifically critical and basically idealist approach to the transcendental account of knowledge.

In addition to Jacobi and Schelling, whom the later Fichte turns from severe opponents into appreciated and appropriated providers of presentational improvements of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte also draws on two historical philosophical figures, lending them increasing prominence in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. These are Plato and Spinoza (GA II/11: 293ff.; GA II/12: 163ff.; GA II/13: 59f., 67f.).⁴ In their case, too, previously opposed philosophical positions are integrated into the *Wissenschaftslehre* in such a way that Fichte appears as the able inheritor of their earlier intellectual efforts. In his recourse to Plato's theory of Forms and to Spinoza's doctrine of substance, Fichte continues his strategy of critical appropriation, already practiced with regard to Jacobi's philosophy of life and Schelling's philosophy of the absolute, to restore substantial reality to the conception of knowledge peculiar to the *Wissenschaftslehre* in view of the latter's contemporary reception as caught up in insubstantial subjectivity ('mere I').

In the critical reception and the scholarly literature on Fichte's philosophy, the presence of elements of thought stemming from Jacobi and Schelling as well as from Plato and Spinoza has often given rise to the assumption of a dramatic further development of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its later presentations, away from the presumed idealism and subjectivism of the earlier Fichte to the alleged realism and absolutism of the later Fichte. The surmised turn in Fichte's thinking typically was understood as a return to a decidedly metaphysical thinking in an ontological or even theological tradition. According to those readings, Fichte's prior orientation towards Kant was eventually replaced by the renewed significance of classical metaphysics with its key topics of being in general (*metaphysica generalis*) and the special being of God, the soul and the world (*metaphysica specialis*).⁵

Yet such revisionist estimations of Fichte's philosophical development overlook the

complex relationship in which Fichte stands to the predecessors and competitors cited by him, which consists not in wholesale adoption and complete assimilation but in carefully selected adaptation and strategically chosen appropriation. For an adequate appreciation of the later Fichte in general and the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in particular it is therefore indispensable to consider the metaphysical motives and traditional topics to be found in the later texts, among them the references to Plato and Spinoza and the borrowings from Jacobi and Schelling, in their respective functional contexts. It stands to reason that throughout Fichte avails himself of other authors and their concepts or doctrines for his own philosophical purposes and in the interest of elucidating and explaining his own philosophical positions.

The essential identity of Fichte's philosophical project, which remains the same over and against its different diachronic presentations and evinces considerable continuity across the sequence of differing versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, becomes clear, if one takes into view the entire span of the preserved and – as of recently – completely edited manuscript texts of Fichte's later lectures. Instead of a few singular achievements, which previously stood at the centre of critical and scholarly attention – chiefly the very first presentation from 1794–95 and the second of the three presentations from 1804⁶ –, the new editorial situation brings into view the systematic seriality of Fichte's philosophical work, which essentially consists in rendering the same set of basic thoughts ever new and each time in a different manner. Fichte's obstinate, repetitive as much as variative philosophical practice is motivated by the conviction that the clothing of complex philosophical thoughts in carefully chosen words is in essence unavoidable, but always open to substitution and sooner or later in need of alternative wording and phrasing, if the living thought is not to degenerate into a lifeless effigy of its former self.

Strictly speaking, then, no single presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, each of which comes with its own favoured forms, can do justice to the living, animated and spirited character of knowledge as such and especially of philosophical knowledge regarding all other knowledge. Only the purposively pursued frequent change of the conceptuality and imagery which has been designed and deployed to cast the nature of knowledge is apt to avoid the false fixation of living thinking in dead thoughts. Moreover, the need for variative re-rendering arises not only in order to ensure the adequate grasp of the *Wissenschaftslehre* through Fichte's contemporary listeners and eventual readers.

The requirement of variation also holds for Fichte himself in his continued exploration of the content and purpose of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In issuing the numerous successive and alternative presentations, Fichte thinks and writes his way towards a cumulative comprehension of knowledge as such – of knowledge in its structural and conditional set-up as much as its final destination.

From Fichte to Schelling and from Schelling to Fichte

Early on, almost contemporaneously with the first formulation of Fichte's foundational philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) and its extension into the twin areas of law and ethics, Schelling joined Fichte as a critical sympathizer. Still seemingly in the role of an ingenious interpreter of Fichte's innovative way of philosophizing, the young Schelling (born 1775) countered Fichte's systematic preference for a specifically critical version of idealism ('transcendental idealism') with the co-original status of criticism and dogmatism as equally valid basic options in philosophy. In the process, realism in the non-empirical, 'transcendental' sense, which maintained the knowability of things (in) themselves and had been rejected by Fichte, following Kant, as incompatible with critical idealism, re-emerged in post-Kantian philosophy as an alternative approach.

During the second half of the 1790s, then, Schelling developed, entirely independently of Fichte, the project of a realist and dogmatic kind of philosophy, the 'philosophy of nature' (*Naturphilosophie*),⁷ through which the transcendental genealogy of the world from the I in general and that of nature from mind or spirit (*Geist*) in particular was to be joined by the reverse procedure of deriving the I, the mind or spirit from nature. The conception of nature underlying Schelling's realist counter-project differed radically from the concept of nature to be found in Kant and Fichte, for whom nature was primarily a product of categorial constitution and of the subject's own positing. In a systematic as well as historical perspective, Schelling's granting of equal status to mind and matter and his maintaining the original independence of nature from mind followed Spinoza's conception of nature as productive and generative (*natura naturans* as opposed to *natura naturata*).

There also was a Spinozist inspiration behind Schelling's further step beyond Fichte, which he undertook in 1801 in the fragmentary *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* and in related writings. Just as Spinoza had assigned to the alternative attributes of being and thinking as their common basis the one, absolute substance (*Deus sive natura*; 'God or Nature'), Schelling traced the complementary realities ('potencies') of nature and spirit (or mind) back to some pre-disjunctive origin ('absolute identity'), which in itself was to be neither natural nor spiritual (or mental) but entirely

undetermined and totally unconditioned ('indifference'). In a third step beyond Fichte, which he undertook in 1804 – chiefly in *Philosophy and Religion* – Schelling replaced his own earlier logically shaped methodology of a deductive derivation of the conditioned from the unconditioned with the dramatic, proto-existentialist conception of a 'leap' (*Sprung*) or 'lapse' (*Fall*), which the absolute supposedly underwent in its transition to the conditioned many.

The later Fichte takes into consideration all of these developments. He examines them in detail and replies to them with great care, typically first in private notes, then in his personal correspondence with Schelling⁸ – which, however, ceases after 1801 because of increasing disagreements – and finally in the later lecture courses on the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Schelling's further philosophical development after 1804, which was marked by a radical re-conception of freedom – human as well as divine – as the faculty of choice between good and evil, contained in the *Philosophical Investigations on the Essence of Human Freedom* from 1809,⁹ did not receive Fichte's attention though.¹⁰

Schelling's successively unfolding projects of a philosophy of nature, a philosophy of the indifferent absolute ('philosophy of identity') and a philosophy of the lapsed absolute are met by Fichte with increasing doubt and critique but also lead him to selectively include central concepts and conceptions introduced by Schelling into the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In 1800 Fichte is still in explicit agreement with Schelling's intent to 'go beyond the I' (GA III/4: 405; Fichte/Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling*, 48). But, unlike Schelling, Fichte envisions this move as not involving the demotion of transcendental idealism to one of two, equally valid, basic forms of philosophy. Rather Fichte claims to have planned and executed the needed realist completion of his philosophy of the I already within the confines of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

In particular, Fichte refers to the integration of the individual I into a comprehensively conceived generic will and to the derivation of the plurality of individual Is through the spatio-temporal individuation of some pre-individual undifferentiated but differentiable mind matter ('the merely determinable element'; GA III/4: 406; Fichte/Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling*, 49), to be found in the *New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*) from 1796–99 and its summary restatement under a popular guise in *The*

Vocation of the Human Being (1800). Moreover, Fichte counters Schelling's call for a transcendence of the I by referring to his own philosophical idea of the practically shaped joining of single individuals into an intellectual community of equals under conditions of freedom ('system of the intelligible'; GA III/4: 406f.; Fichte/Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling*, 49).

With regard to Schelling's philosophical project of a philosophy of nature, originally independent of and alternative to transcendental idealism, Fichte insists that the monistically constituted materiality of nature is, in principle, incapable of accounting for the characteristic dual composition of reality, in which a thinking being refers cognitively as well as conatively to some being that is numerically and modally different from itself. Above all, though, Fichte insists against Schelling on the ineliminable presence of thinking (under the guise of the I) in all being, to the extent that all being arises or occurs only as being thought, even if not so thought explicitly and in specific acts of reflection. For Fichte one can artificially abstract from everything, except from the I itself, which – as the very subject underlying all thinking – cannot possibly do away with itself ('necessary duplicity'; GA II/5: 414).

Fichte's criticism and rejection of Schelling's philosophical innovations also extend to the latter's conception of an undifferentiated ('indifferent') absolute that would belong neither to the ideal sphere of thinking nor to the real domain of being. In particular, Fichte objects to an absolute that by being indifferent is also ineffective, since nothing else could follow from it, and which therefore is not suited to serve as the point of origin of anything, much less as the beginning of everything else. The fact that Schelling still seeks to maintain the possibility of deriving everything finite and unconditioned from something absolute and unconditioned, for Fichte, indicates a constitutive ambiguity in the very concept of the absolute to be found in Schelling. According to Fichte, Schelling's absolute oscillates between something involved in and exhausted by infinite self-referentiality and something engaged in an unending process of rendering itself finite (GA II/5: 492).

With regard to the alleged dual status of the absolute as being both ground and consequent of itself, maintained by Schelling, Fichte claims to detect in Schelling's absolute the clandestine presence of thinking, under the guise of the logical schema of ground and consequent, and hence the secretly idealist constitution of the absolute in

Schelling. To the extent that Schelling's absolute is to found and ground itself as well as all other things, it stands – according to Fichte – under a lawfulness of thinking that belies the claimed indifference and indeterminateness of the absolute. But if the absolute in Schelling is to be regarded as internally articulated pure self-referentiality, then – so Fichte's critical assessment – the absolute thus conceived coincides with the absoluteness that Fichte himself can claim to have detected all along under the form of the will in its basic functional structure as 'pure self-determination' (GA II/5: 493).

On the basis of his critical assessment of Schelling's alleged advances over the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of the absolute, Fichte selectively takes over two distinct traits from Schelling for his own further work on the *Wissenschaftslehre*. First, in a move that builds on as much as improves upon Schelling, Fichte advances a conception of the unconditioned or the absolute that brings it under the traditional titles of 'being' (GA II/8: 242), 'absolute being' (GA II/8: 118) and 'the absolute' (GA II/8: 10) and conceives of it as completely undetermined, as entirely undeterminable and resting exclusively on itself, as completely enclosed in itself and as eluding all attempts at comprehension and determination. The absolute so isolated is attributable neither to the sphere of the subject (thinking) nor to that of the object (objective being), but is to be presupposed with regard to both.

Fichte seeks to do justice to the radical indeterminateness of the reconceived absolute by removing any formal or material determination from his radically reduced notion of the absolute and by equating the latter's being – or rather quasi-being – with its minimal, limitative characterization as pure activity ('*esse in mero actu*'; GA II/8: 228). This deflationary move allows the functional identification of the absolute, as adapted by Fichte from Schelling for purposes of enhancing the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, with the 'absolute I' of the earlier presentations from the Jena period. For the 'absolute I' of the Jena presentations, too, is not an I in the complete sense of an actually self-conscious individual being but only the separately presented element or feature of unconditionality or absoluteness inherent in any such individual I as the latter's transcendental condition of possible self-consciousness. The removal of the I-like features of consciousness, self-consciousness and intentionality from the 'pure I' in the early Fichte finds its exact counterpart and functional equivalent in the structural assimilation of the absolute to the 'absolute I' (GA II/8: 202) in the later Fichte.

In a further basic move inspired by Schelling, Fichte endows the absolute, which originally rests entirely in itself, with a second mode of being through which the absolute gets outside of itself and manifests itself ('appears') in a singular mode and manner. Fichte goes on to identify the basic form of the absolute-in-appearance in such a way that the critically curtailed continuity with Schelling's doctrine of the absolute is as much in evidence as the continuity with the basic outlook of the *Wissenschaftslehre* since its Jena beginnings. According to Fichte, the one, singular appearance of the absolute is none other than knowledge itself and as such – possible knowledge in its absolute, unconditioned validity and certainty, independent of the contingent conditions of its realization and actualization in some particular consciousness and with regard to some particular object.

With his strong double thesis that properly speaking only the absolute – put in traditional theological language, 'God' (GA II/8: 114) – has being and that outside the absolute itself there is only knowledge, the later Fichte, while distinctly drawing on Schelling, sets himself off from the latter, who had always recognized, in addition to knowledge ('the ideal'), natural being ('the real') as an equally genuine manifestation of the absolute. In contrast, for Fichte – the earlier as well as the later Fichte – all objective being is only in knowledge, through knowledge and for knowledge, as the latter's product, and thus amounts to a second-order appearance ('appearance of the appearance'; GA II/11: 31). Put in terms of a traditional model of ontological stratification, whose focus on fixed forms of being cannot quite capture, though, the actively produced ('posited') character of mind and world in Fichte, there are three levels of being to distinguish in the later Fichte: first, being itself and as such as the one and only absolute; second, knowledge as the latter's one and only original appearance; and, third, objects as the plural secondary appearances of the single proto-appearance of the one absolute.

From Being to Knowledge

In taking over Schelling's philosophical phraseology of the absolute and its appearance, the later Fichte effectively resorts to the essentially Platonic view that what alone is truly real – the Forms in Plato and the absolute in Schelling, as reinterpreted by Fichte – also underlies everything else, which possesses only apparent being and for which the Forms or the absolute represent the basic condition and provide the final end. Fichte's later thinking on conditioned being and the unconditioned thus combines an efficient and a deficient meaning of appearance. As mere *appearance*, the appearance of the absolute (knowledge as such) is not and can never be the absolute itself. Yet as appearance *of the absolute*, the appearance also is itself absolute and is even the absolute itself – albeit the latter in the form of appearance.

There is another coinage with which the later Fichte takes up the Platonic dual doctrine of the Forms and of the appearances. Fichte frequently renders the being-outside-itself that the absolute undergoes in its appearance – in which it as much appears as it does not appear – by drawing on the term 'image' (GA II/8: 100). For the later Fichte, the concept of image joins together the secondary, derivative and less real character of a mere appearance with the intrinsic reference of an image to something outside the image to which the image-appearance belongs, the ineliminable difference between the image and the imaged notwithstanding. Moreover, both the earlier Fichte and the later Fichte draw on a twofold sense of 'image', according to which the image-like character of knowledge ('being image' or 'image being'; GA II/12: 240) involves both after-image (*Nachbild*) and fore-image (*Vorbild*) – the imitation of something already there and the ideation of something yet to be brought about. Fichte's imagist understanding of knowledge further strengthens the linkage of his thought to Plato, whose key concept of Form (or Idea) is etymologically derived from the Greek word for 'seeing'. Like Plato, Fichte tends to cast his conception of knowledge in visual terms by assimilating knowing to seeing and by designating the instantaneous obtaining of knowledge as 'intuition' and 'insight' (GA II/8: 272).¹¹

The prevailing phraseology of image in the later Fichte receives a further function through the linguistic linkage of the German noun for 'image' (*Bild*) with the German verb for 'forming' or 'shaping' (*bilden*). As something brought into a certain shape or

form, an image (*Bild*) – for Fichte – is the product or result of formative processes by means of which objects of all kinds, which to that extent are but shapes, forms or images, first come about. By featuring the productive, formative function of the ‘rendering in images’ (*Bilden*; GA II/8: 374) to convey the productive character of knowledge, the later Fichte also takes up his own earlier focus on the subjective principle of knowledge (‘I’) as eminently active and practical. The functional equivalent of the focus on the appearance as image in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the prominent position of the ‘productive power of the imagination’ (GA I/2: 367) in the earlier presentations – a productive cognitive force that already had figured prominently in Kant’s transcendental account of the correlated constitution of the *a priori* cognition of objects and the objects of such *a priori* cognition.¹² In Kant as well as in Fichte, the image constituted by the power of the imagination, through the latter’s productive function, is not merely imaginary and hence unreal but reality itself as rendered in object-images generated by the spontaneity of the understanding in application to the sensorily given manifold.

The later Fichte articulates the difference between the anonymous absolute and the individual image by means of the distinction between truth and semblance. In architectonic terms, this perspective leads to the dual division of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its later presentations into the ‘doctrine of reason and truth’ and the ‘doctrine of appearance and semblance’ (GA II/8: 228). Strictly speaking, the rational doctrine of truth consists in nothing but the basic insight into the being of the absolute and the absoluteness of this singular being. But, according to Fichte, the precise preparation of this core truth – its conceptual articulation and intellectual communication – requires complex procedures that involve removing illusion and error from the proper presentation of the absolute or of being as such. The central doctrine of absolute being then is followed by the doctrine of the latter’s appearance in knowledge, through knowledge and as knowledge. In the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* the detailed doctrine of the absolute’s appearance – Fichte’s phenomenology, so to speak – essentially includes the differentiation of knowledge with respect to its bearer (the subject, previously designated as ‘I’) and its content (the object, earlier identified as ‘not-I’). In addition, Fichte’s late phenomenology of the absolute (or absolute phenomenology) comprises the typological differentiation of the twin structure of subjectivity and objectivity (‘duplicity’;

GA II/8: 410) into the five specifically different world views – and the worlds so viewed – of nature, (juridical) law, ethics, religion and philosophy proper, i.e., the *Wissenschaftslehre* (GA II/8: 412, 418).

In addressing the basic relation in which the absolute stands to its image-appearance, the later Fichte resorts to the dual device of manifestation and diremption. According to Fichte, the absolute finds in the appearance both its proper realization and its utter irrealization. Fichte's ambiguous assessment of the absolute in its relation to the appearance is based on a constitutive ambivalence in the absolute itself, with regard to which Fichte distinguishes an inward and an outward form or manner of being. In its strict immanence ('immanent form of existence'; GA II/8: 148), the absolute is, according to the later Fichte, enclosed within itself, entirely lacking any relation and to that extent completely singular ('*singulum*') – or rather so to be thought of in the artificial philosophical reflection on something which, properly speaking, eludes all rendering in words and concepts. According to Fichte, being so construed is to be conceived of as completely undetermined, as properly infinite and as hence requiring a linguistic rendition by means of the active and infinite verbal form ('*verbal being*'; '*being merely in the act*'; GA II/8: 228, 230).

Moreover, the later Fichte attributes to the absolute a manner of externalization through which absolute being, in addition to and as an alternative to its inwardness or immanence, acquires externality and emanence ('emanent form of existence'; GA II/8: 148). Fichte distinguishes between the inner and the outer form of the being of the absolute by differentiating between the mere 'being' (*Sein*) or the mere 'position' of the absolute and the latter's 'being-there' (*Dasein*) or 'existence' ('the factual existence of being'; GA II/ 8: 244). According to the later Fichte, the twin mode of the absolute does not consist in a pure parallelism but involves a logical sequence through which the absolute, which first is entirely intrinsic, subsequently and additionally turns extrinsic. Fichte insists, though, that the sequence of the two main shapes of being (immanent being, emanent being) does not follow an unconditional lawfulness, which would subject the transition from the first to the second mode to strict rule and formal regulation and attribute to the unconditional or absolute the self-contradictory character of standing under a necessary condition with regard to its own appearance. Rather, for the later Fichte, the absolute's transition from immanence to emanence, or from being to

existence, occurs spontaneously and involves a leap or gap (*'projectio per hiatum'*; GA II/8: 244).

To be sure, for Fichte, the explanatory gap between the inwardness of the absolute ('being') and its outwardness ('appearance') concerns only the contingent fact of the absolute's externalization as such. Under the factual presupposition that the absolute is to appear, the appearance of the absolute – its articulation as knowledge, especially as knowledge of the absolute or 'absolute knowledge' (GA II/8: 338) – ensues with lawful necessity. On Fichte's account, the absolute need not appear; it may also not appear; but, if it is to appear, then it necessarily does so under the guise of (absolute) knowledge and under the latter's own lawfulness ('problematic ought'; GA II/8: 252).

With his theorem of the absolute being and its image-appearance, the later Fichte provides his continued critical theory of knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*) with a foundational dimension that is to assure the absolute validity of knowledge – the unconditional certainty and truth possessed by knowledge as such. Rather than resting entirely on itself, thereby exposing itself to the suspicion of vacuously circling in itself, knowledge, in the later Fichte, proves to be marked by an unconditional character not due to itself alone. Considered that way, the absolute functionally understood as that feature of knowledge due to which the latter is absolute – independent and unconditioned – is not an entity of its own, some super-being that would be and would remain external to knowledge. Rather, absolute being in the later Fichte represents the unconditional character of knowledge, isolated in an artificial and provisional manner, which manifests itself fully and functionally in knowledge as such with regard to the latter's unconditional claim to certainty and truth.

If the absolute, in the later Fichte, rather than representing a separate ontological or even theological entity ('being', 'God'), stands for the logico-epistemic foundational feature of unconditional validity ('absolute knowledge'), then there is also full functional equivalence between the absolute being that figures in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the absolute I introduced in its earlier presentations. Just as the absolute I in the early Fichte is far from amounting to a fully functioning I endowed with consciousness of itself and of the world of objects, but provides only the logico-epistemic structural conditions for any such consciousness, so does the absolute being in the later

Fichte represent not an entity in its own right but only the artificially abstracted absoluteness that belongs to knowledge in an ideal, normative perspective.¹³

The strategic parallelism between the absolute I in its relation to the individual I, on one side, and absolute being in its relation to absolute knowledge, on the other side, to be found in the earlier and the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, respectively, also extends to the self-critique undertaken by Fichte with regard to the potentially misleading implications of his own talk about the ‘absolute I’ and about ‘absolute being’. The early Fichte soon (starting in 1796) replaces the originally separate presentation of the absolute I, as absolutely positing itself and everything else, with the integrated presentation of the pure I as part of a comprehensive formative history of individual self-consciousness.¹⁴ In an analogous move, the later Fichte (starting in 1807) no longer leaves it at the separate introduction of the absolute or of being in advance of its appearance to be found in the presentations from 1804, but includes the absolute in the unfolding of the basic conditioning structure of knowledge – and this in such a way that the absolute only comes to the fore in its appearance (‘absolute appearance’, GA II/11: 306; ‘appearance-to-itself’, GA II/12: 169; ‘appearing-to-itself’, GA II/13: 62). As a result of this altered arrangement in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the I now figures no longer as a separate entity but as the fundamental form of knowing (‘conceptual form’, GA II/17: 11; ‘I-form’, GA II/17: 33; ‘intellectual form’, GA II/17: 145). The central subject of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the later presentations is therefore no longer the I but knowledge as such – under the guise of the I’s form.

From Knowledge to Being

In the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* Fichte lends a twofold form to the integration of the absolute into knowledge: by tracing the origin of knowledge to the absolute and by orienting the development of knowledge towards the absolute. For the later Fichte, knowledge considered with regard to its unconditional, absolute validity (certainty and truth) has its point of origin neither in the subjective, mental processes of a particular consciousness nor in the objective, material properties of particular things. Rather its absolute validity removes knowledge – more precisely, genuine, undoubtedly certain and necessarily true knowledge, as opposed to fallible cognition – from all epistemic and ontic contingency.

But not only does knowledge as such hold solely due to its absolute origin. Reversely, the absolute comes to be realized only in knowledge, especially in absolute knowledge or knowledge of the absolute. To be sure, the absolute is to be thought of – in artificially induced and paradoxically shaped philosophical reflection (‘speculation’) – as the latter’s unthinkable condition. Still, according to the later Fichte’s assessment, it is thinking itself that introduces the absolute as its own extra-cognitive condition under the guise of an ‘absolute presupposition’ (GA II/14: 276; GA II/17: 124f.). Reaching out to the absolute thus occurs in the later Fichte in a twofold perspective. On the one hand, the inclusion of the absolute into the philosophical foundation of possible knowledge introduces a factor or feature that exceeds, by definition, all knowledge, including the proto- or meta-knowledge of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. On the other hand, the functional presupposition of the absolute is but an integral part of the complete self-analysis of knowledge with regard to the latter’s constitutive conditions.

For the later Fichte, the twin character of the absolute as both transcending all knowledge and underlying all knowledge in the manner of an immanent condition does not amount to a contradictory conception. Rather, the tension in the cognitive status and function of the absolute is seen by Fichte to constitute a productive opposition that reflects the complex composition of knowledge whose basic relation to being (‘the absolute’) is equally marked by identity and by difference. In the later Fichte, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is explicitly introduced and developed as an oscillating movement of philosophical thought that purposively wavers between the basic insight of a realist kind

that the absolute is ontologically distinct and epistemically removed from all knowledge, and the alternative, idealist assessment that the absolute is originally as well as ultimately but a functional thought product implicated in the self-legitimation of knowledge.

By having the philosophical presentation of the relation between the absolute and knowledge oscillate between a realist conception of transcendence and an idealist conception of immanence of the absolute with respect to knowledge, the later Fichte takes up and continues his own earlier considerations from the Jena period in which he sought to combine the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with a complementary realism under the guise of a ‘real-idealism’ and an ‘ideal-realism’ (GA I/2: 412; SK, 247).¹⁵ Moreover, just as in the earlier Fichte, in the later Fichte, too, there is a systematic preponderance of the idealist over the realist basic stance of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Knowledge as such and in general remains the philosophical point of origin and the direction of development for Fichte’s philosophical thought. Neither the earlier nor the later Fichte has the *Wissenschaftslehre qua* transcendental theory of knowledge take on the character of an ontology or doctrine of being and mutate from a specifically critical, transcendental-idealist theory into a post-critical, neo-dogmatic transcendent metaphysics.

The later Fichte distances his persisting project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from ancient, pre-critical metaphysics by means of a radical critique of traditional metaphysics’ chief concern with the classical topics of being in general and the special being of God, the soul and the world (in its entirety). Against the established preoccupation of old-style metaphysics with being as such and in general (ontology), Fichte insists that being always occurs only in thinking, through thinking and for thinking, and is thereby subject to epistemic formation of a logical kind (‘form of the understanding’, GA II/9: 167). According to the later Fichte, the foundational discipline of philosophy is not the doctrine of being but the doctrine, or science, of knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*), effectively replacing ontology with epistemology (‘to look for reality in knowledge itself’, GA II/9: 155).

With respect to the ancient special metaphysical topic of the existence and essence of God, Fichte takes issue with the basic assumption of a divine being distinct from the world and endowed with the anthropomorphic traits of personality, intelligence and will. In its stead the later Fichte – who here returns to his own earlier reconceptualization of God as the sum-total of the moral world order (GA I/5: 354; IWL, 151) that gave rise to

the so-called atheism controversy – maintains a cosmologically diffused conception that locates the divine being in the world itself as the animating and elevating principle of human moral advancement. Accordingly, for the later Fichte, ‘God’ refers not to an entity in its own right but to the divine governance of the world by means of the moral law, God being ‘not a fact but a law’ (GA II/9: 163). The theo-cosmological creed of the later Fichte culminates in the assertion that there is ‘no God outside the world’ and ‘no world outside of God’ (GA II/9: 157).¹⁶

With the radical integration of the divine into the world in general and its outright identification with the moral world order in particular, the later Fichte also abandons the ancient metaphysical conception of the world being divinely created and being not only different but distinct from its creator. In the later Fichte anthropomorphic metaphysical creationism is replaced by the complementary conceptions of the worldly character of God and of the divine character of the world. Fichte himself illustrates the fusion of God and world by resorting to the theological *topoi* of revelation and incarnation (GA II/10: 171 and II/13: 333). But he equally stresses that the process through which the absolute appears is itself infinite, open and without a conclusion, unlike in its traditional theological fixation and dating to a particular past or future revelatory event. According to Fichte, the appearance of the absolute, while involving the absolute’s own appearance, is at the same time its appearance as something that itself does not appear and that cannot possibly appear – and that hence ‘reveals itself only as never to reveal itself’ (GA II/10: 171).¹⁷

Finally, Fichte objects to the traditional metaphysical theorizing about the soul with its characteristic assumption of the latter’s independent mode of existence, effectively claiming there to be ‘no soul’ (GA II/9: 157). For Fichte, individual being – that of things as well as that of persons – is neither original nor ultimate. Rather, individuality represents the primary potency of spirit or mind in the state of its particularization and singularization and has its ultimate origin in some pre-individual mode of being and its true destination in the progressive integration of the individual into some larger whole, as manifested in the societal normative modalities of (juridical) law, ethics, religion and politics. Moreover, Fichte vehemently opposes the traditional metaphysical separation of an individualized spiritual being (‘soul’) from its correlated individuated matter (‘body’), arguing that the alleged entities so distinguished from each other with regard to type and

token are ‘mere appearances’ (GA II/9: 157). Both for the earlier and for the later Fichte, matter is the principle of all individuation. Things related to the soul thus only appear in functional correlation and in essential identity with bodily events. What is more, according to Fichte, mind and matter, soul and body are but alternative and complementary views or aspects of the single, unitary yet complex – more specifically, duplex – structural constitution of finite practical rational beings like us, which not only cannot act without each having a body of their own (*Leib*) but could not even think and will in the absence of the latter.

Yet with all the rigorous and radical critique of traditional metaphysics regarding the being of things, the personality of God, the createdness of the world and the spirituality of the soul, the *Wissenschaftslehre* does not result in a polemical anti-metaphysics of philosophical atheism and materialism and it avoids the simplistic substitution of being through knowledge. From the beginning, throughout its development and until the end, the sustained self-analysis of knowledge in Fichte opposes the reduction of knowledge to mere nature and to strict causal determination and aims at the vindication of radical freedom and genuine self-legislation with regard to the activity of knowing and the acting based on such freely and spontaneously established knowledge.¹⁸

Owing to its sustained supra-naturalism (‘beyond all nature’, GA II/17: 239; ‘being-beyond’, GA II/17: 244), the *Wissenschaftslehre* takes on traits that can be seen to lend it the character of a metaphysics – just as Kant could claim for his general grounding of nature and natural science in *a priori* principles, and, furthermore, in the same way as Kant could claim for the correlated founding of freedom and moral philosophy on a second such set of principles the status of a ‘metaphysics of nature’ and a ‘metaphysics of morals’, respectively.¹⁹ Fichte himself names as ancestors of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its later presentations the philosophy of Plato and of Spinoza as well as the gospel according to John, whose Prologue (‘In the beginning was the word ...’) Fichte cites as an anticipation of his own insight into the mutual involvement of knowledge, world and God (GA II/9: 157f.; GA I/8: 269f.).

In the later presentations, the anti- and supra-naturalist motivation and intent of the *Wissenschaftslehre* take on a twofold shape: that of the self-grounding and that of the self-limitation of knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge emerges in the later Fichte as free of natural determination through psychic and physical factors, which may determine

knowledge with regard to its occurrence and articulation in an occasional manner but can never be constitutive of it in its essence as bearing the twofold normative character of certainty and truth. On the other hand, the self-sufficient autonomy of knowledge also turns out to involve limitation and restriction. Knowledge shapes what is known or knowable. The self-formation of knowledge emerges as a formative process that strictly limits the access to what might lie outside and ahead of such forming and shaping through constitutive cognitive conditions.

In consideration of the twofold fact that everything is only in, through and for knowledge but that knowledge is not all there is, Fichte assigns to the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* the ultimate task of ascertaining the boundaries of knowledge, and this from within knowledge so bound. To this end, Fichte pursues the self-grounding of knowledge to such a degree and to such an extent that the maximal intension and extension of knowledge reveals the very bounds of knowledge, its borders with respect to something else entirely and essentially other. In exposing the boundaries of knowledge and elucidating the self-transcendence of knowledge, the later Fichte does not aim at the termination and conclusion of knowledge and at its substitution through alternative sources of insight, such as faith or feeling. Rather the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* aim at the proper completion of knowledge – at its self-perfection and self-fulfilment all the way to the extreme form of a self-surmounting of knowledge.

For the later Fichte, the self-completing final form of knowledge is a knowledge that is enlightened about itself – a stage and shape of knowledge that comprehends its own conditions, possibilities and boundaries in a ‘self-intuition and self-conception of knowledge of itself’ (GA II/13: 201). For Fichte, then, the philosophically optimized form of knowledge is self-knowledge or knowledge as knowledge in the critical, self-critical sense introduced by Kant into the analysis and evaluation of knowledge. Put into the mode of expression that is characteristic for the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which describe knowledge through the metaphor of an image, the self-critical self-completion of knowledge involves grasping knowledge *as* an image and exposing the latter’s constitutive ‘imagism’ (*Bildwesen*) and its overall operative mode as a ‘system of images’ (G II/12: 240; GA II/16: 21; GA II/13: 83). Accordingly, the self-knowledge of knowledge essentially encompasses the insight that knowledge as such, in its chief capacity as ‘image’, refers to some not-knowledge, just as an image refers to

what it images. More specifically, for the later Fichte, knowledge, when enlightened about itself, stands in an essential but inscrutable relation to something that, as such, cannot be known in direct, positive terms, but can only be ascertained indirectly or rather limitatively – by critically reflecting on the inherent limitations of knowledge as such.

From Knowledge to Wisdom

For the later Fichte, the self-knowledge of knowledge is not limited to intellectual insight and theoretical cognition. Rather, in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, knowledge's coming to complete knowledge of itself and of its essential boundedness includes the practical consequence of knowledge's self-sublation and its final transgressional move towards something other than knowledge and radically different from it. The later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* address the intended self-transcendence of knowledge that is to lead through knowledge beyond knowledge in various ways: as the auto-destruction or 'self-annihilation' of knowledge (GA II/17: 111), as the transition from knowledge to the not-knowledge of 'believing' by 'imaging a not-imaging' (GA II/9: 8), as the 'mental subtracting' of knowledge (GA II/11: 221), as the transition from knowledge to life, with the latter involving the 'merging of life with knowing and imaging' (GA II/11: 216), as the depersonalizing of thinking and willing due to which 'thinking makes itself' and any 'will and life of one's own' cease (GA II/12: 211 and GA II/13: 339) and, finally, as the progression from knowledge to wisdom according to the maxim 'now that you possess knowledge, attain wisdom' (GA II/12: 299).

The alternative presentations of the self-transcendence of knowledge in the later Fichte agree in the confrontation of knowledge with something other than knowledge but to which knowledge stands in a certain relation, even if the latter is formally negative and materially empty. Moreover, knowledge is regarded by the later Fichte as being oriented to and moving towards this other as part of its own complete self-realization. The later presentations of knowledge's self-becoming through self-overcoming agree in the inherent oscillation they portray and pursue between the activity and spontaneity of knowledge's autonomous rule and sovereign reign and the passivity and receptivity involved in a knowledge that purposively approaches and eventually reaches its own boundaries by opening itself up to something entirely different, which in turn discloses itself to knowledge by 'offering itself' (GA II/12: 216; GA II/17: 184) at the precise moment of the latter's completion.

The self-annihilation of knowledge sought by the later Fichte is intended to achieve a transformative transition from the intentional distance due to which knowledge always represents being only by means of 'thinking' towards an awareness in which knowledge

immediately and directly partakes in being. The epistemic attitude of ‘belief’ (*Glaube*) that is to supersede as much as complete a knowledge that is based on itself but also essentially enclosed in its vast but limited own circle consists, for Fichte, in the voluntary and to that extent freely chosen commitment to a lawfulness that supports all knowledge by tying it to some ulterior normative standard, viz., the ‘moral law’ (GA II/16:29).²⁰ Ultimately, the sustained reflection on the foundational and formative function of knowledge for everything to be known is to lead to the intellectual abstraction from those very formative features, thus making knowledge attain being by means of deliberative and considered self-negation.

Yet, as Fichte freely acknowledges, the various procedures designed and implemented to effectuate the self-sublation of knowledge meet with only limited success. The coming forth of the absolute *qua* being cannot be commanded. Neither can the self-critique of knowledge be enforced. All that philosophers, and Fichte in their stead, can do is to present in an exemplary manner how everyone, individually and each for himself or herself, has to proceed in order to initiate the called-for transformation of knowledge, the actual accomplishment of which still eludes decision and decree. Accordingly, the possible descriptions of the altered and enhanced state of (not-)knowledge to be found in the later Fichte remain minimal and negative. Moreover, the intended intellectual abstraction from the very form of knowledge only occurs in the medium of thought or ‘intelligibly’. Finally, the annihilation of knowledge consists in the idealist recognition of the ultimate nullity of everything finite as mere appearances, rather than in any actual annihilation and definitive destruction.

In order to get as close as possible to the radically reformed character of self-critically transfigured knowledge, Fichte, in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, has recourse to knowledge’s counter-concept of ‘life’. The earlier Fichte had opposed life to knowledge, the latter taken as mere ‘speculation’ and as such lacking life to the point of being ‘not-life’ or a ‘mere image of life’ (GA I/7: 247). In contrast, the later Fichte employs a widened conception of life that even includes the liveliness of knowledge as a self-organized activity of its own marked by the teleological transition into action. The later Fichte conveys the fusion of life and knowledge by featuring ‘life under the form of the understanding’ (GA II/17: 187) and by introducing a cognitively enhanced type of life, viz., ‘formative life’ (GA II/17: 14). In terminological

terms, the later Fichte replaces the earlier opposition between life and not-life with the distinction between artificially detached or (metaphorically) ‘dead’ life, also rendered by Fichte through the Latin noun for ‘life’ (*vita*), and life as actually lived and authentically experienced, for which Fichte resorts to the Latin verb for ‘living’ (*vivere*) (GA II/10: 119).²¹

The linguistically cast difference between a nominal and a verbal version of life has its counterpart in the internal difference, drawn by the later Fichte, between fixed or objectified knowledge, on the one hand, and fluid or agile knowledge, on the other hand. Accordingly, Fichte conceives of the sought-after self-transcendence of knowledge as the conjunction of the theoretically intended with the practically achieved realization of knowledge. For the later Fichte, the called-for self-overcoming of knowledge is not the latter’s abdication but its intensification, which is to enhance knowledge from the knowledge of being and objects to the knowledge of life and especially to the self-knowledge of knowledge’s original and final identity with life.

Ultimately though, the vitalization of knowledge that the later Fichte envisions and propagates is to lead beyond knowledge itself, however much it is rendered vital and energetic. To be sure, the final end of philosophically vitalized and intellectually energized knowledge – of philosophically self-enlightened knowledge – is not simply not-knowledge, empty and void. Rather than knowing less or even nothing, the knowledge brought about by knowledge itself by way of its self-annihilation and the attainment of not-knowledge is to be not less but rather more than ‘mere’ knowledge. In particular, according to the later Fichte, knowledge, in going beyond itself, is to become effective and practical and so partake in life not only by providing after-images (theoretical knowledge) but by active participation under the guidance of fore-images (practical knowledge). For the later Fichte, the efficacy of knowledge, borne by practical insight, concerns above all the pointed pursuit of a conduct of life chosen in freedom and under rational guidance and resulting in a mind-set and its associated manner of conduct traditionally termed ‘wisdom’. Wisdom is here understood, in a retrieval of ancient insights, as opposed to – or rather, as superior to – ‘mere’ knowledge and as involving ‘reflectedness’ and ‘reflection’ (GA II/11: 183, 191; GA II/14: 38f.), reminiscent of the ancient ethos of cognitive and conative self-rule and self-mastery (*sophia*, *sophrosyne*).

With regard to Fichte’s life-long philosophical project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the

final direction and ultimate orientation of knowledge towards wisdom implies the transition from a doctrine of knowledge or science (this being the literal meaning of the German neologism *Wissenschaftslehre*) to a ‘doctrine of wisdom’ (*Weisheitslehre*) (GA II/11: 318). But, not unlike knowledge, including the meta-knowledge of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, wisdom along with its philosophical representation as doctrine of wisdom is not something easily available through information and instruction. For the later Fichte, wisdom represents the ideal of practically efficacious theoretically garnered knowledge. Knowledge becomes wisdom by going over into action, especially into a rationally based practice resulting from certain and true cognition (‘knowledge’). The purposive enhancement of knowing into willing and doing envisioned by the later Fichte also accounts for the prominent position of specifically practical concepts in the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, such as ‘practical I’ (GA II/13: 160), ‘drive’ (GA II/13: 166), ‘will’ (GA II/13: 175) and ‘absolute freedom’ (GA II/13: 179), all of which can be traced back to the earlier presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with their characteristic focus on the primacy of the practical, to which the later Fichte thus returns.

In the later Fichte the primarily practical orientation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* manifests itself in the project of supplementing the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the narrower sense (*W.-L. in specie*, GA II/8: 376) through a *Wissenschaftslehre* that is to find its ‘application’ (GA II/16: 30) in life. In particular, knowledge’s turn towards life takes a twofold form. Within the architectonic of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself, Fichte’s philosophical system receives completion through the inclusion of the doctrine of (juridical) law and the doctrine of ethics. The later Fichte presents both applied parts of his system in separate lecture courses (*Doctrine of Right* and *Doctrine of Ethics*, both 1812). Outside the architectonic system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but on the basis of the latter, the later Fichte develops a critical diagnosis of the history of humankind in the past and present which culminates in a prognosis for the future of human culture and development under the twin signatures of reason and freedom, presented in a popular form with the explicit intent of achieving wider influence. Those lectures on ‘various topics in applied philosophy’, delivered in 1813 and posthumously published in 1820 under the title ‘The Doctrine of State’, in addition to containing his political testament, also offer the basic features of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in a condensed form that would

prove final upon Fichte's sudden death, from an infectious disease, at the age of 51 (GA II/16: 15–38).

Notes

1 In view of the substantial continuity between the succeeding presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the essential unity of Fichte's philosophy over its extensive development, this contribution avoids confronting an 'early' and a 'late' Fichte and refers to the 'earlier' and the 'later' (rather than the 'early' and the 'late') presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

2 For monographic treatments of some of the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Wolfgang Janke, *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes 'Wissenschaftslehre 1805'. Methodisch-systematischer und philosophiegeschichtlicher Kommentar* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999); Katja V. Taver, *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1810. Versuch einer Exegese* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999); Ulrich Schlösser, *Das Erfassen des Einleuchtens. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1804* (Berlin: Philo, 2001); Matteo Vincenzo d'Alfonso, *Vom Wissen zur Weisheit. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre 1811* (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2005); and *Die Wissenschaftslehre von 1807 «Die Königsberger» von Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Eine kooperative Interpretation*, ed. Helmut Girndt and Jacinto Rivera de Rosales (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006). Recent more general monographic treatments of the later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* include Wolfgang Janke, *Vom Bilde des Absoluten. Grundzüge der Phänomenologie Fichtes* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993); Gaetano Rametta, *Le strutture speculative della Dottrina della scienza. Il pensiero di J. G. Fichte negli anni 1801–1807* (Genoa: Pantograf, 1995); Jean-Christophe Goddard, *Fichte (1801–1813). L'émancipation philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003); Simone Furlani, *L'ultimo Fichte. Il sistema della 'Dottrina della scienza' negli anni 1810–1814* (Milano: Guerini, 2004); and Rebecca Paimann, *Die Logik und das Absolute. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre zwischen Wort, Begriff und Unbegreiflichkeit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006).

3 For an English translation, see 'The Science of Knowledge in its General Outline', trans. Walter E. Wright, *Idealistic Studies* 6 (1976): 106–117.

4 On the extent of the affinity between Fichte and Spinoza, see Günter Zöller, 'Identitas discernibilium. Spinoza und Fichte über Streben, Trieb und Affekt', in *Subjektivität und Autonomie. Praktische Selbstverhältnisse in der klassischen*

deutschen Philosophie, ed. Stefan Lang and Lars-Thade Ulrichs (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2013), 259–273.

[5](#) For a classical example of such a metaphysical reading of the later Fichte, see Max Wundt, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Sein Leben und seine Lehre* (Stuttgart: Frommann, [1927](#); reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976) and id., *Fichte-Forschungen* (Stuttgart: Frommann, [1929](#); reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976). For a decidedly anti-metaphysical reading of the entire Fichte, see Günter Zöller, *Fichte lesen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2013).

[6](#) For a recent first English translation of the latter presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see *The Science of Knowing: J. G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. Walter E. Wright (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, [2005](#)).

[7](#) For an English translation of one of the chief texts from this body of work, see F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature, as Introduction to the Study of this Science, 1797*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, introduction by Robert Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[8](#) For a recent English translation of the later philosophical correspondence between Fichte and Schelling, see J. G. Fichte/F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*, trans. Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, [2012](#)).

[9](#) For an English translation, see F. W. J. Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, trans. J. Gutmann (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1936).

[10](#) On the textual and doctrinal details of Fichte's sustained engagement with Schelling, see Günter Zöller, 'Das Absolute und seine Erscheinung. Die Schelling-Rezeption des späten Fichte', *Jahrbuch des deutschen Idealismus/Yearbook of German Idealism* **1** (2003): 165–182 and id., 'Fichte, Schelling und die Riesenschlacht um das Sein', in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. Reinhard Hiltcher and Stefan Klingner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012), 221–236. For a systematic comparison between Fichte and Schelling on knowledge, see Lore Hühn, *Fichte und Schelling oder: Über die Grenze des menschlichen Wissens* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1994).

[11](#) On Fichte's ocular and optical conception of knowledge, including philosophical knowledge, see Günter Zöller, 'An Eye for an I: Fichte's Transcendental Experiment', in *Figuring the Self: Subject, Individual, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, ed. David Klemm and Günter Zöller (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 73–95 and id., '«Life into Which an Eye Is Inserted». Fichte on the Fusion of Vitality and Vision', *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 69 (2014): 601–617.

[12](#) See CPR, A118 and B151.

[13](#) On the general agreement between Fichte's earlier and later presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Günter Zöller, 'On revient toujours ... Die transzendente Theorie des Wissens beim letzten Fichte'. *Fichte-Studien* 20 (2003): 253–266.

[14](#) For a systematic account of the amended Jena presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Günter Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[15](#) On the realism that remains in much of German idealist philosophy, see Günter Zöller, 'German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer', in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 200–218.

[16](#) For a closer analysis of Fichte's critique of traditional theology, see Günter Zöller, "«Das *proton pseudos* der gewöhnlichen profanen Philosophie". Gott und Welt in Fichtes Erlanger Darstellung der Metaphysik', in *Fichte in Erlangen 1805. Beiträge zu den Fichte-Tagungen in Rammenau (19.-21. Mai 2005) und in Erlangen (1.-3. Dezember 2005)*, ed. Michael Gerten (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009), 359–379 and id., 'Ex aliquo nihil. Fichtes Antikreationismus', in *Der Eine oder der Andere. 'Gott' in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie und im Denken der Gegenwart*, ed. Christoph Asmuth and Kazimir Drilo (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 39–54.

[17](#) On the dynamic and open relation between the absolute and its appearance in the later Fichte, see Günter Zöller, "[E]in ewiges Werden". Die Selbstdarstellung des

Absoluten als Wissen beim mittleren Fichte’, in *Systeme in Bewegung (1800–1809)*, ed. Violetta Waibel (Hamburg: Meiner, forthcoming).

[18](#) On the difficult relation of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* to metaphysics, see Günter Zöller, ‘Fichte und das Problem der Metaphysik’, in *Wissen, Freiheit, Geschichte. Die Philosophie Fichtes im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2010), 21–48.

[19](#) See AA 6: 216f.; MM, 371.

[20](#) On the complementary relation between belief or faith and knowledge in the later Fichte, see Günter Zöller, “‘Einsicht im Glauben’. Der dunkle Grund des Wissens in der Wissenschaftslehre 1805’, in Gerten, *Fichte in Erlangen 1805*, 203–219.

[21](#) On the close relation between life and knowledge in the later Fichte, see Günter Zöller, ‘Leben und Wissen. Der Stand der Wissenschaftslehre beim letzten Fichte’, in *Der transzendentalphilosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit. Beiträge aus der aktuellen Fichte-Forschung*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Marco Ivaldo and Giovanni Moretto (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 307–330.

Fichte's Philosophy of Right and Ethics



Allen W. Wood

Fichte's entire philosophy was animated by moral and political concerns. His views on right and ethics, which are often innovative and sometimes extreme, were passionately held. Fichte's conversion to Kant's critical philosophy in about 1790 was above all a conversion to the Kantian moral outlook, its conception of human dignity as rooted in freedom, and the moral vocation of human beings as rational agents. The decisive period in Fichte's career, the Jena years of 1794–99, was dominated by the production of his chief ethical writings. As his conception of a fundamental principle of a Doctrine of Science (*Wissenschaftslehre*) developed beyond that of the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794, his philosophy found some of its clearest expression in his publications on right and ethics. Fichte's chief works in this area are two extensive treatises he produced during his Jena period: *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796–97) and *The System of Ethics* (1798). The exposition of these two important works is the chief business of this chapter. Towards the end of his life, however, after recasting the foundations of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte gave two series of lectures in 1812, which appeared among his *Nachlaß*, and were first published in the middle of the nineteenth century in the first comprehensive edition of Fichte's writings, edited by his son: *The System of the Doctrine of Right* and *The System of Ethics*. Following changes in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* during his years in Berlin, these late lectures display a basic change in the foundations of Fichte's moral theory, but the significant revisions in his practical philosophy itself were relatively few.

It is customary to think of Fichte's ethical thought as Kantian. As a first approximation this is no doubt correct, but it may also lull us into an underappreciation of Fichte's distinctiveness and originality. As an ethical thinker, Fichte is related to Kant,

even in the most straightforward chronological sense, not as a follower but as an independent contemporary. Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* was published before Kant's *Doctrine of Right* (which appeared in January 1797), and Fichte's *System of Ethics* was probably written slightly later than, but certainly quite independently of, Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* (also 1798). Even if the ethical theories of the two philosophers arose in a broad sense from a common idea or inspiration, they differ significantly in almost every particular as regards the way this idea is worked out.

Whereas Kantian ethics represents a strikingly original resolution of eighteenth-century issues about duty, reason, interest, virtue and moral feeling, Fichte's ethical theory focuses attention more strongly on the relation of moral personality to its embodiment and individual identity. Even more, it gives a systematic place to the moral agent's relation to a living moral community. Thus Fichte initiated thought about just those issues which were to determine ethics and social thought in the nineteenth century and beyond. For this reason, the common underappreciation of Fichte's moral and political thought has serious consequences for our understanding of where our own ideas and problems originated.¹ Until we understand Fichte better, we also cannot properly understand ourselves.

Fichte's First Principle

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is a 'science of science as such' (GA I/2: 117–118; SW 1: 43–45; EPW, 105–106). This first principle is the I. Every act of awareness, Fichte maintains, involves an awareness of the I: 'No object comes to consciousness except under the condition that I am aware of myself, the conscious subject' (GA I/4: 274–275; SW 1: 526–527). For Fichte what is crucial about this awareness is not only its ubiquity and certainty, but even more that it is an awareness of my *activity*, which is present even in my most passive states of perception. In every thought 'while engaged in this act of thinking, in this movement of transition from thinking of the I to thinking of the table, the walls, etc., you take note of the activity and freedom that are involved therein. Your thinking is, for you, an *acting*' (GA I/4: 271–272; SW 1: 521–522; IWL, 106). The starting point of every philosophical science for Fichte is to cognize this act, in the Kantian sense of cognition: that is, to intuit it, and then bring that intuition under a concept.

The intuition in question is an intellectual intuition – an immediate presence of the I to itself through its own action. The task is then to form a concept of what is intuited. Every act of conceptualization, however, involves distinguishing the item brought under a given concept from those excluded from it. Therefore, reflective self-awareness involves the I's self-limitation: the I must distinguish itself from what it is not. From this Fichte infers that the very possibility of the I requires its limitation by a 'not-I': 'The following is ... implicit in our principle: *The I posits itself as limited by the not-I*' (GA I/2: 285; SW 1: 126; SK, 122; translation modified). To posit the I is at the same time to 'counterposit' a not-I (GA I/2: 268; SW 1:105; SK 105, GA I/3: 330; SW 3:18; FNR, 19). This means that the activity of the I must be twofold: that of the I, directed towards a not-I; and that of a not-I, directed back against the I as a 'collision' or 'check' (*Anstoß*) of the I's activity (GA I/2: 354–362; SW 1: 210–219; SK, 189–196). Since both are conditions of the I's existence, Fichte regards both as activities of the I: the former is 'ideal' activity, the latter 'real' activity (GA I/2: 402–404; SW 1: 267–269; SK, 235–237).

As the fundamental science, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is supposed to ground all other particular sciences, including both theoretical and practical sciences: 'The absolute first principle must be shared by all parts of the Doctrine of Science, since it is supposed to

provide the foundation, not merely for a portion of human knowledge, but rather for knowledge in its entirety' (GA I/2: 150–152). Fichte intends this not in the sense that other sciences are each grounded on some particular principle or principles belonging to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but rather in the sense that they are each grounded on the fundamental principle itself. The boundary between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and particular sciences is marked by the way the first principle is taken. '[A]s soon as an action which is in itself free has been given a specific direction, we have moved from the domain of the general *Wissenschaftslehre* into that of some particular science' (GA I/2: 134–135; SW 1: 63–64; EPW, 120). The division of theoretical from practical science, Fichte says, is based on considering the two ways in which the I can relate to the not-I. If the I adopts a dependent relation to the not-I, then it is determined as 'intelligence' and the science is theoretical. If we consider the I as independent in relation to the not-I, then its relation is one of *striving* and we are dealing with the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Fichte apparently always regarded the practical as the foundation of the theoretical, so that his earlier procedure is not to be understood as founding the practical on the theoretical but, on the contrary, as a regressive method, moving from what is grounded back towards the ground. The I, therefore, is always regarded as fundamentally a practical rather than a theoretical principle.² Both in the *Foundations of Natural Right* and in *The System of Ethics*, the direction taken by the first principle is the I's 'finding itself as will'.

In *The System of Ethics* this principle is explicitly given fundamental status; it approaches the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from a distinctively practical (or even ethical) standpoint, and in that sense it is still a derivative science resting on the *Wissenschaftslehre* as its foundation. It is a bit different with the *Foundations of Natural Right*, not only because it apparently predates the transformation in Fichte's thinking on this point, but also because for Fichte the science of right is a *theoretical* rather than a practical science.³ This is because the science of right (or law) tells us merely what conditions must be satisfied *if* free beings are to co-exist as free beings in a community; it does not directly enjoin us to create such a community (GA I/3: 320; SW 3: 9–10; FNR, 10–12). For Fichte the theory of right (or law), which deals with rights, property and political legitimacy, was constructed first precisely because it is entirely independent of ethics or morality. Right deals solely with external actions, not at all with inner

motivations; it concerns only the conditions under which people might live together while retaining their freedom. The theory of right does not appeal to moral considerations: that is, to the inner aims of freedom, and the actualization by free beings of the final ends of their existence.

Both right and ethics depend, however, on the absolute freedom of the volitional act which is the I. The I is an act which is self-positing, not caused by anything outside it, and any act of the I is one that could have been other than what it was, and was chosen from a plurality of possibilities open to the agent. Willing is free self-determination, a transition from indeterminacy to determinacy with consciousness of the transition. The concept of an unfree will, therefore, is self-contradictory. Fichte thinks freedom is the way our volition appears to us. We cannot demonstrate that this appearance is not an illusion, but we cannot coherently act or cognize the world without presupposing that it is not an illusion.

Although this free act is the starting point for transcendental idealist philosophy, the concept of a self-positing act is an abstraction from ordinary experience. In ordinary experience, every free volitional act is situated – the act of the I is an act of a living body, situated among other things that limit its possibilities, while leaving some possibilities open. It is the aim of transcendental philosophy to begin from this abstraction and then work its way through the synthetic method towards the conditions of our action as it is experienced concretely.

Critical or idealist philosophy, which begins from the act of the I, accepts the appearance as true, while dogmatic or materialist philosophy, which begins from the assumption of a thing in itself, tries to explain it away as an illusion, the result of necessary causal interactions between things. Fichte maintains that idealism, on its assumptions, can account for our relationship to things. Dogmatism, however, is self-undermining, because it cannot account for our consciousness of things. The dogmatist must cling to the thing in itself as an act of faith. But dogmatism cannot be theoretically refuted by idealism, because the two philosophical approaches share no common principle from which either might directly refute the other. Both the doctrine of right and the doctrine of ethics presuppose freedom, but they begin with the free act of willing in different senses. Right begins from the act of will as externally efficacious, directed towards objects in the material external world, while ethics begins from the act of will

solely in its self-positing relation to itself, and elicits from it a norm or law of action that is self-given.

Recognition and the Relation of Right

The condition for reflective self-awareness, or forming a conception of oneself as an I, is that the I as activity is opposed and limited by the not-I. In part this means opposed and limited by a material world, but it also means opposed and limited by other Is. An I cannot conceive of itself at all unless it conceives of itself as one of a plurality: 'For consciousness of one's own individuality is necessarily accompanied by another sort of consciousness, namely, consciousness of a "you", and it is possible only on this condition' (GA I/4: 229; SW 1: 476; IWL, 61). 'No Thou, no I' (GA I/2: 337; SW 1: 189; SK, 172).

Fichte's argument for this in the *Foundations of Natural Right* is based on the idea that the I must act on a not-I and be checked by that same not-I in one and the same moment. From this he derives the conclusion that the I must *itself* limit its own action in accord with a *concept* of limitation from outside: this concept he calls a 'summons' (*Aufforderung*). The external source of a *concept* of action can be thought of only as another I, who issues the summons. Therefore, the I is possible only on the condition that it conceives of another I, which summons it to act, and to limit its actions, in certain ways (GA I/3: 340–348; SW 3: 30–40; FNR, 29–39).⁴

To understand another as a rational being who issues such a summons, and to display such understanding in action, is to 'recognize' (*anerkennen*) the other (GA I/3: 352–354; SW 3: 44–46; FNR, 42–43). Since every free being necessarily wills to make use of its freedom, the basic demand I necessarily make on every other free being is that it should limit its action in such a way that I am allowed a sphere for the exercise of my freedom (GA I/3: 352–353; SW 3: 45; FNR, 42–43). Fichte argues that, for this reason, I must assume that others will recognize me, but I cannot expect others to do so unless I treat them as rational beings. I am therefore bound by mere logical consistency (and prior to any moral requirement) to recognize all others and treat them accordingly (GA I/3: 349–356; SW 3: 47; FNR, 44). Recognition must be presupposed as the condition of all interactions between free beings, and it must be presupposed as a reciprocal relation, which Fichte calls the 'relation of right'. It grounds the 'principle of right': '*I must in all cases recognize the free being outside me as a free being, i.e. I must limit my freedom through the concept of the possibility of his freedom*' (GA I/3: 358; SW 3: 52; FNR,

49). By the principle of right each free being is to have an external sphere for the exercise of its freedom, and others are to limit their freedom accordingly. This external sphere begins at the point of origin of one's action on the external world itself. We have seen that the I must be limited by a not-I. Fichte interprets this as saying that the I and an external, material world must exercise a mutual causal influence on one another. But since only matter can act on matter, the I too must be matter – or at least it must have a material vehicle for its relations of activity and passivity to the not-I. To be an I therefore, one must be *embodied*, and the starting point of the external sphere recognized by others must be the body (GA I/3: 361–363; SW 3: 56–59; FNR, 51–56). But because human beings are free, their modes of activity are endlessly perfectible and adaptable (GA I/3: 372–374; SW 3: 71–73; FNR, 67–69). Hence the sphere of a rational being's activity may be extended indefinitely, which is the eventual foundation of all rights of property (GA I/3: 417–423; SW 3: 129–136; FNR, 116–123). More immediately, it is the foundation of 'original rights' (*Urrechte*), that is, those not based on any positive laws, but that serve as the basis of any conceivable community of free beings (GA I/3: 390, 403–410; SW 3: 94, 111–119; FNR, 87, 101–108). These original rights are fundamentally only two in number: the inviolability of the body, and the right to act freely on the external world (GA I/3: 407–408; SW 3: 117–118; FNR, 107–108).

Regarding property rights, Fichte insists that they are entirely derivative from, and analysable into, rights one has over against others to non-interference with one's *actions*. Thus he says that, properly speaking, persons stand in relations of right only to other persons, never to non-rational things (GA I/3: 360; SW 3: 55; FNR, 51). Fichte even goes so far as to deny that there is any right of property, literally speaking, to the substance of things, or to land (GA I/3: 421–423; SW 3: 134–135; FNR, 121–122; cf. GA I/7: 54; SW 3: 401; CCS, 92).

Fichte maintains that the recognition of others, including treatment of them in accordance with their original rights, does not require any moral principle as its rational basis, but is grounded only on the logical requirement to engage in consistent or consequent thinking. He fully realizes, however, and even emphasizes, that this does not necessarily provide us with a reason for respecting the rights of others in practice, or for expecting others to respect ours, since where it is advantageous to violate another's right it will also be advantageous to think inconsequently and to contradict oneself (GA I/3:

386–387; SW 3: 89; FNR, 82). The actualization of a community of rational beings must therefore depend on an external force capable of coercing rational beings to observe its laws. Each of us, he argues, has a ‘right of coercion’ – that is, it is not contrary to right to coerce others to the extent that they have violated the principle of right. But Fichte argues that no satisfactory community can come about in this way, since that community requires that each have a guarantee *in advance* that others will subject themselves to the principle of right (GA I/3: 394–395; SW 3: 98–99; FNR, 90–91). This, in turn, is possible only if all equally subject themselves unconditionally to the judgement of another party, transferring to it their power as well (GA I/3: 396; SW 3: 101; FNR, 93). Using this power, it must establish laws protecting rights and erect what Fichte calls a ‘law of coercion’ bringing about, whenever someone attempts to violate these laws, the opposite of what that person intends should happen, so that such intentions annihilate themselves (GA I/3: 429–430; SW 3: 145–146; FNR, 129–130). This right, subject (as we will see below) to a mutually advantageous contractual arrangement, is the basis of penal law.

The Form of Government

Fichte follows Rousseau in distinguishing the government from the law it administers. But, unlike Rousseau, he does not understand this as a separation of the legislative power from the governing power. On the contrary, all law is understood merely as the application of a fundamental law or constitution, which, as the foundation of a state, is unchangeable (though it may be added to by amendment). Since the constitution must be a law freely accepted by everyone bound by it, its adoption must be unanimous, not merely by a majority vote (GA I/3: 433–434; SW 3: 151–152; FNR, 134–135). Those who cannot consent to it must emigrate, and find a different place on earth where they can consent to enter into relations of right with others. For Fichte, the human right to emigrate and immigrate is absolute (GA I/4: 163; SW 3: 384; FNR, 333).

All particular acts of the community, including acts of legislation (applying or amending the constitution) are to be performed by a single governmental power, which (Fichte argues) cannot be coherently conceived as divided. He therefore rejects the conception of the separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial. All legitimate governments, however, must be representative in the sense that their powers are conceived of as delegated to them by the whole people according to the constitution. Representation in this sense, however, excludes only two forms of government: ‘despotism’, in which the ruler is not subject to the law, as in contemporary absolute monarchies; and ‘democracy’, in which the people as a whole directly administers the law instead of delegating its power to representatives (GA I/3: 437–440; SW 3: 157–160; FNR, 139–141). But Fichte distinguishes ‘democracy’ in this (pejorative) sense from democracy ‘in the narrower sense of the word’, which means the popular election of representatives (GA I/3: 441–442; SW 3: 162–163; FNR, 143). Democracy in the narrower sense is a legitimate form of government – even the form of which Fichte most approves. He nevertheless insists on the legitimacy of other forms, including mixed and hereditary forms of aristocracy, as long as the people consents to them. It is unclear, however, whether Fichte recognizes the legitimacy of hereditary monarchy, even in a constitutional form, though he allows for a ‘president of the government in perpetuity’, as in an ‘elective commonwealth’ (*Wahlreich*) (GA I/3: 442; SW 3: 163; FNR 143–144).

Although Fichte believes in an undivided governmental power, he equally insists that the government (especially in its executive function) must be accountable to the law. Unlike Kant, he was not content to regard the rights of the people against the government as real but in principle unenforceable. Instead, he proposes what is his most innovative political idea: that of the ‘ephorate’. This term, meaning ‘overseers’ (from the Greek, ἐπὶ + ὁρᾶω), was applied to a Spartan political institution, but Fichte insists that what he means is entirely different and that the closest ancient analogue to what he has in mind was the Roman tribunes of the people (GA I/3: 449n; SW 3: 171n; FNR, 151n). The ephors, as Fichte imagines them, are a group of highly respected citizens elected by the people for fixed terms (GA I/3: 455–456; SW 3: 181; FNR, 159). They are to remain entirely independent of the government and to exercise no governmental function or power; but they are to possess an absolute negative power: the power to indict existing government for misconduct, suspend its operation and call for a convention of the people for the purpose of trying the government on the indictment (GA I/3: 448–450; SW 3: 172–173; FNR, 151–152).

But what if the government and the ephorate together collude to oppress the people? Despite the precautions taken in his proposals to prevent this, it may happen. In that case, there is no recourse except that the people as a whole should rise up against the government and stand in judgement of it:

But – and one should note this well – the people are never rebels ... for the people, both in fact and as a matter of right, is the highest authority, above which there is no other ... A rebellion can only be a rebellion against a superior. But what on earth is superior to the people! The people can rebel only against themselves, which is absurd. Only God is above the people; therefore, one can say: if the people have rebelled against their ruler, then one must presume that the ruler is a god, which just might be difficult to prove.

(GA I/3: 456–457; SW 3: 182; FNR, 160)

From such remarks it is not hard to understand why Fichte was notorious for his Jacobin political views.

Fichte's conception of an ephorate should not be seen as an institutional lever for popular uprisings against the government, but instead as a way of guaranteeing that such uprisings would never be necessary to protect the people against a despotic government: '[T]hese provisions have been set up, not to be implemented, but to make the situations in which they would have to be implemented impossible. It is precisely where these provisions have been set up that they are superfluous, and it is only where they have not been set up that they are necessary' (GA I/3: 460; SW 3: 187; FNR, 164).

Fichte's conceptions of individual right and political legitimacy are anti-absolutist, republican and, to a far greater extent than Kant's, egalitarian. Like Kant, and again to a far greater extent, he was aware that they leave the regimes he saw around him quite beyond any hope of legitimacy. At the same time, despite his reputation, Fichte agreed with Kant that the most effective and lasting political improvement would come not from popular uprisings but through gradual, principled reforms from above – in effect, from a process in which illegitimate regimes might gradually legitimate themselves through enlightened self-transformation from within. He accepts the legitimacy of the existing political order, but only provisionally, contingent on its tendency to fundamental self-change: '[E]very state constitution is rightful ... so long as it does not make it impossible to progress towards what is better ... The only constitution that is utterly contrary to right is a constitution the end of which is to preserve everything just as it now is' (GA I/5: 314; SW 4: 361; SE, 341). Any government committed to principled conservatism would apparently invite its own immediate revolutionary overthrow.

Fichte's Contract Theory

The common governmental power which is to make possible a relation of right between people can be consistent with their freedom only if it is the result of their mutual consent. Consequently, Fichte argues, the state must be founded on an express declaration establishing a will common to all members of a state, that is, a 'civil-political contract' (*Staatsbürgervertrag*) (GA I/3: 432–437; SW 3: 150–155; FNR, 133–137). Fichte argues for the necessity of a series of such contracts as transcendental conditions for the possibility of a relation of right – which, in turn, as we have seen, is regarded as a condition for the possibility of a relation of community or mutual recognition between free beings.

Are these contracts intended to be genuine and actual agreements, whose bindingness is the ground of political obligation; or are they merely theoretical devices, employed as part of a transcendental argument for a conception of political right? I think the right approach to this question is one that recognizes the hypothetical nature of Fichte's investigation into political right. He is describing the conditions under which a genuine community of right is possible. The correct conclusion, I believe, is that, for Fichte, a legitimate political order would in fact involve the express consent of all to a civil contract. He is not claiming that any actual states fulfil these conditions. He therefore need not answer the question of how (or whether) they are fulfilled in actual states, or how the consent of all to the civil contract is to be obtained.

The relation of right assigns each individual an external sphere for free activity. This sphere begins with the individual's body, but extends to all the individual's *property*. The first condition of a relation of right between persons is therefore an agreed determination of the limits of their respective external spheres of action. Each lays claim to a determinate sphere of action, while relinquishing the rest to determinate others, with the limits of these spheres mutually agreed upon by all. This agreement Fichte calls the 'property contract' (GA I/4: 8–9; SW 3: 196; FNR, 169–170).

This agreement confers no right unless each has reason to believe that everyone's property rights will be coercively enforced by all. Hence the property contract presupposes an agreement of all that will unite their strength in protecting the property of each. This second agreement is the 'protection contract' (GA I/4: 9–11; SW 3: 197–199;

FNR, 170–172). The protection contract differs from the property contract in that the former requires only refraining from interference in the external sphere of others, whereas the property contract requires a positive action, and indeed a continued disposition to act positively in the protection of others' rights. This raises a serious problem about the possible validity of the protection contract (hence of the property contract), because the bindingness of a contract on me is conditional on the fulfilment by the other parties of their obligation. In the case of the protection contract, as long as we must rely solely on the individual dispositions of the contractors, there can be no assurance for the future that this condition will be met (GA I/4: 10–11; SW 3: 198–199; FNR, 171–172).

It can be met only if each person enters into an agreement not with another, or even with all the others taken severally, but with a real whole made up of all united together. Only such a whole can provide the guarantee required to make the protection contract valid (GA I/4: 13–14; SW 3: 202–203; FNR, 175–176). (Compare this with Rousseau's *On the Social Contract*, 1:6: '*Each of us puts his person and his full power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole*'.⁵) This whole must, Fichte says, be thought of by analogy with a natural product – an organism, each of whose parts is determined in its nature, and even made possible, only through the whole. An injury to any part of a living body is felt by all organs as an injury to the whole, and each reacts as if the injury were to itself. In the same way, the social whole is one in which each one is disposed to protect the right of any other as if it were one's own right (GA I/4: 14–15; SW 3: 203–204; FNR, 176–177). The agreement through which such an organic whole is established Fichte names the 'unification contract' (GA I/4: 15; SW 3: 204; FNR, 177). Only under these conditions, therefore, would any of the contracts be valid.

Personal Rights

Fichte's view about the proper role of the state is limiting when it comes to individual freedom in self-regarding matters, but expansive wherever people's rightful freedom might be threatened by others – in particular, in the economic sphere.

The body of each person is inviolable; the state's only office in relation to it is to protect this inviolability both from other individuals and from the state itself (GA I/4: 43–44; SW 3: 240–241; FNR, 209–210). The proper extension or 'surrogate' of a person's body is that person's *domicile* (GA I/4: 45–46; SW 3: 242–243; FNR, 211–212). 'Domestic right' for Fichte is therefore sacrosanct. In a person's dwelling the individual is sovereign, and beyond the power of the state. My house, says Fichte, is beyond the jurisdiction of the state, which may enter it only upon my explicit request (GA I/4: 46; SW 3: 243; FNR, 212). Consequently, Fichte insists on very strong rights of privacy: '[T]he state does not know what goes on in my house; it does not have the right publicly to know about it, or to act as if it did' (GA I/4: 47; SW 3: 247; FNR, 215).

In the same spirit of protecting individual liberty from state encroachment, Fichte's theory has no place at all for 'victimless crimes'. There are a number of actions and practices which Fichte's austere ethical theory regards as utterly immoral but which, according to his theory of right, the state is absolutely forbidden to criminalize or punish: suicide (GA I/4: 117–118; SW 3: 331; FNR 286), fornication, adultery, concubinage and prostitution (GA I/4: 116–118; SW 3: 329–331; FNR 285–287) – even infanticide when committed by the child's mother while it is still young enough to be helpless and wholly dependent on her; it is then considered part of her body (GA I/4: 137–139; SW 3: 354–356; FNR, 306–308). Of course Fichte regards infanticide as exhibiting extreme moral depravity, but the state can criminalize infanticide only by bringing it under laws requiring parents to raise their children. From a legal standpoint, it cannot be considered murder, since a very young child has no right (not even the right to life) over against its mother.

Fichte's conception of marriage right is patriarchal, and rests on his conception of the meaning of sexual intercourse. From Fichte's principle that free activity is the final end of every I, together with the passive role of the woman in the act of intercourse, Fichte deduces (by a tortuous if subtle chain of argument) that sex cannot be an end in

itself for a woman, hence that she must conceive of it only as a means to expressing love. Love, in fact, for Fichte, enters the world only through women: he holds that men learn to love only through responding to the love of a woman. Marriage is possible, therefore, only as a consequence of a woman's love for a man, and no marriage can be valid at all without love on the woman's part. Fichte thinks parents may compel a son to marry a person of their choosing, but not a daughter (GA I/4: 130; SW 3: 345; FNR, 298–299). To attempt to compel, or even persuade, a woman to accept a man she does not love is in his view a punishable crime, comparable to rape (GA I/4: 105–106; SW 3: 317; FNR, 274–275). Fichte then argues that a woman who loves purely and completely cannot rationally will otherwise than to surrender her entire personality and all her rights to her husband (GA I/4: 100–104; SW 3: 310–315; FNR, 269–273). She cannot want to have any will other than his, and wants no public existence except one that is mediated by him. In other words, it is unfeminine and incompatible with her nature as a woman to demand respect for her fundamental human rights as a rational being.

Some of what Fichte says about the rights of women was in his time equally radical in the opposite direction. In Fichte's view, the state must always grant a divorce whenever both parties request it, and also whenever the wife does not love the husband; when divorced, a woman receives back her full rights as a person and a citizen (GA I/4: 127–132; SW 3: 342–348; FNR, 296–301). Accordingly, Fichte holds that not only divorcees, but also all unmarried adult women and widows, ought to have the right to vote. Husbands, moreover, he says, ought not to cast their vote without consulting their wives, and a wife is entitled to exercise her husband's franchise whenever, for whatever reason, he himself chooses not to exercise it (GA I/4: 132–133; SW 3: 348; FNR, 301).

Parting company with virtually all his contemporaries (with both Kant and Hegel, for instance, as well as with the practices in all countries at the time where there was voting or representative government of any kind), Fichte appears to regard as permissible no property or occupational qualifications for the voting franchise.

Criminal Law

Every crime, Fichte argues, whatever its nature or magnitude, is a direct violation of the social contract. This contract therefore becomes void regarding criminals, permitting anyone else with right to perform any act whatever towards them – or rather, this would occur were it not for the fact that, in order to secure their continued membership in the community in case they should violate the right of another, rational beings necessarily agree to an ‘expiation contract’: all citizens agree that, should they commit a crime, they may be deprived of rights in proportion to the wrong they have committed, and on this condition they promise to extend to criminals the opportunity to rejoin society again (GA I/4: 59–61, 67–72; SW 3: 261–263, 268–274; FNR, 227–229, 233–238).

Despite his use of the term ‘expiation’ (*Abbüßung*), Fichte’s theory of punishment decisively breaks with Kantian retributivism, in that the only purposes Fichte recognizes for punishment are deterrence and civil amelioration of the criminal (which he sharply distinguishes from moral improvement, since it deals solely with external conduct) (GA I/4: 61–62, 70–71; SW 3: 262–264, 273–274; FNR, 228–230, 237–238). The idea that punishment is an ‘end in itself’ required by justice he regards as an unprovable assertion, based on an ‘inscrutable categorical imperative’; the attempt to implement it in the state involves claiming prerogatives for human institutions which could belong only to God (GA I/4: 76–78; SW 3: 282–284; FNR, 245–247).

The only crime not subject to the expiation contract is murder, which always condemns its perpetrator to a condition of ‘rightlessness’ (*Rechtlosigkeit*) (GA I/4: 71–72; SW 3: 277–278; FNR, 241). (Fichte appears to regard rape as a crime equal in gravity to murder (GA I/4: 107–108; SW 3: 318–319; FNR, 276).) But he rejects the death penalty, since he holds that intentional killing, except in cases of self-defence against immediate threat of bodily harm, is always morally wrong (even when it is not contrary to right). Because it occurs outside the expiation contract, death at the hands of the state can never be a legitimate *punishment*, even for murder. The state may kill a murderer if there is a direct danger to the lives of others, but it may do so not by its judicial power but only by its police power; it may kill the murderer only to protect its citizens, as it would protect them from a wild animal (GA I/4: 75–76; SW 3: 282–283; FNR, 244–245). His preferred way of treating murderers seems to be exile; but states are

permitted to attempt to reform murderers on the condition that the public can be guaranteed to be safe from them (GA I/4: 72–73; SW 3: 280–281; FNR, 243–244).

Economic Justice

Fichte's father (an impoverished linen weaver) was an emancipated serf. Fichte never forgot his origins, and was never reconciled to a condition of poverty for any human being. He regarded it as an elementary question of justice that no human being should ever be vulnerable to the oppression of another, and he realized that such vulnerability is inseparable from a condition of need.

All property, according to Fichte, depends on the property contract, through which people apportion their respective external spheres for free action. The purpose of entering into this contract is to acquire a sufficient external sphere to perpetuate one's free activity in the future, that is, to satisfy one's external needs. Fichte infers that only they who thereby acquire some property are parties to the property contract; but not only that – they must have enough property that they can live independently by what they own (GA I/4: 21–25; SW 3: 212–215; FNR, 184–187).⁶ Even prior to the state's fundamental duty of protecting the private property of its citizens is its responsibility to distribute property in such a way that no individual falls into destitution. Conversely, every citizen must have an occupation, which is known to the state and which the state can guarantee as a sufficient means of livelihood.

[A]ll property rights are grounded in the contract of all with all, which states: 'We are all entitled to keep this, on the condition that we let you have what is yours'. Therefore, if someone is unable to make a living from his labor, he has not been given what is absolutely his, and therefore the contract is completely canceled with respect to him, and from that moment on he is no longer obligated by right to recognize anyone else's property.

(GA I/4: 22; SW 3: 213; FNR, 185–186)

Each person possesses his own property, only insofar as, and on the condition that, all citizens are able to live off what belongs to them. If all are not able to do so, then each person's property ceases to be his own, and becomes the property of those who cannot live off their own. This happens, of course, always in accordance with some particular judgment by the state authority. The executive power is just as responsible for such repartitioning as it is for all the other branches of state

administration, and the poor (those, of course, who have entered into the civil contract) have an absolute right of coercion to such assistance.

(GA I/4: 22; SW 3: 213; FNR, 186)

Let all be sated and dwell securely before someone decorates his dwelling. Let all be comfortably and warmly clothed before anyone dresses himself sumptuously ... It does not matter if someone says: 'But I can pay for it'. It would not be right if someone could pay for something he can do without while his fellow citizen finds that goods that are absolutely necessary are either unavailable or unaffordable. And moreover, what the former would use to pay for these goods is not even, by Right, and in a rational state, his own.

(GA I/7: 61; SW 3: 409; CCS, 99)

This implies, for example, that if a farmer does not have enough land to make a decent living, the state is required to redistribute land. Fichte provides the state with broad redistributive rights, responsibilities and resources in other ways as well. He maintains that, since the dead are no longer parties to the social contract, there is no natural right of inheritance. The property of those who die reverts to the state and wills or testamentary dispositions are valid only if *the state* should choose to recognize them as ways in which *it* chooses to distribute *its* property among its citizens (GA I/4: 56–57; SW 3: 257–258; FNR, 224–225). Further, Fichte holds that the state has the right and even the duty strictly to regulate all trade and commerce. It is to fix prices on all necessities of life so that all may afford them and it must guarantee that there are sufficient but never excessive numbers of people in each economic branch of society, so that every citizen is required to work and guaranteed a decent living from that work (GA I/4: 22–24; SW 3: 213–215; FNR, 185–187).

Fichte proposes a market economy, but one very strictly controlled by the state; external trade is to be carried out by the state itself, never by private citizens. This is the meaning of the title of Fichte's treatise of 1800: *The Closed Commercial State*.⁷ It is tempting to compare Fichte's recommendations with the system that prevailed in Eastern Europe for part of the past century. (That system certainly bears a closer resemblance to Fichte's economic proposals than it does to anything one could find in the writings of

Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels.) Before we let ourselves be carried away by such comparisons, however, we should recall that Fichte's proposals of a state-run economy are advanced solely on the ground that the state's task is to secure all citizens their rightful property. The state's right and duty to regulate the economy is for Fichte consequent solely on the absolute right of individuals over their own lives in self-regarding matters, absolute freedom of expression in the public sphere of scholarship and the absolute right of both emigration and immigration.

Fichte's Later Political Thought

During his Berlin period, Fichte wrote quite a bit about politics. He emphasized the role of the state in human progress, and his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807), written while Berlin was under French occupation, display a German nationalism that was not evident in his earlier writings. Perhaps because these lectures were later appealed to by German nationalists, even including the Nazis, Fichte's later political views have become the object of criticism. Fichte also displays in his later works a degree of tough-mindedness about politics, especially in the international realm, which shows itself in his essay *On Machiavelli* (1807).⁸

My view is that these concerns have often been exaggerated in the literature. I suspect they may be motivated in part by the later associations of Fichte's *Addresses*, from which scholars find it difficult to abstract. It is not clear that Fichte withdrew any of his earlier enthusiasm for individual rights or for freedom of expression and communication. Both are reiterated in his later writings. If these are understood as the background for his later writing on politics, then his views cannot be as hostile to human liberty as they have often been portrayed. The *Addresses* itself is not in any way a militaristic document. It outlines a system of compulsory universal free public education, following (with some thoughtful modifications) the progressive educational theories of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). Fichte was closely associated with the educational reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), who in 1810 appointed Fichte to the first chair in philosophy in the newly founded University of Berlin. It is far more appropriate to think of this last association, which was quite real and based on events in Fichte's lifetime, rather than the associations created in people's minds by Nazi propaganda a dozen decades after Fichte's death.

The very late 1812 *Theory of Right* is still strikingly close to the Jena system. It is grounded on the same sharp distinction between right and morality, employs the same deduction of the civil contract from original right and the property contract, and includes the same denial of property in land (GA II/13: 232; SW 10: 546) and the same emphasis on the right of each citizen to be guaranteed against poverty in exchange for labour (GA II/13: 223; SW 10: 533), while incorporating the economic modifications Fichte had proposed in *The Closed Commercial State* of 1800 (SW 10: 587–590; cf. GA II/13:

262–264).⁹ The theory begins with the relation of right rather than the concept of recognition, but the theory of recognition is not repudiated, and if not thematized, it is still alluded to (SW 10: 514; cf. GA II/13: 212). Fichte still maintains that the state is a temporary institution in human affairs, that ‘the law of right has application only insofar as the moral law does not reign universally, and as a preparation for the dominion of the latter’ (GA II/13: 202; SW 10: 502).

The most conspicuous modification of the earlier political theory is Fichte’s withdrawal of his proposal of an ‘ephorate’ as a way of preventing governmental abuse of power. Fichte continues to believe in the correctness of the principles that motivated the suggestion, but ‘on riper reflection’ has come to doubt its workability (SW 10: 632; cf. GA II/13: 283–284). First, he objects that there is nothing to prevent the ephorate itself from abusing its authority; secondly, he fears that it will suffer oppression from the government – as the Roman tribunes were controlled by the patrician class. Finally, though Fichte still accepts the view that in trying the government the judgement of the people must be formally just, he fears that in such a case it might do material injustices (GA II/13: 283–284; SW 10: 632–633). The revolutionary assembly of the people, he thinks, is apt to result merely in replacing one bad state of affairs with another (GA II/13: 284; SW 10: 634). In sum, Fichte thinks that the constitutional provision for an ephorate is unworkable as long as people are as bad as they are at present, and that, if they improve enough to make it workable, they will no longer need it (GA II/13: 284; SW 10: 633). As things are, he says, the only real protection we can have against abuses of power by the government is an educated and thinking public (GA II/13: 284; SW 10: 633–634).

The I as Practical Principle

Fichte's philosophy of right, grounded on recognition, the summons and the relation of right, could be described as a 'second person' theory in the sense recently used by Darwall.¹⁰ This cannot be correctly said, however, about his theory of ethics or morality. It is grounded not on interpersonal relationships, but solely on the individual I's striving to actualize its absolute freedom. Fichte's *System of Ethics* (1798) begins with a deduction of the principle of morality from the I's self-awareness of its freedom and its drive for absolute independence of everything external to it, including the empirical desires which belong to the I in virtue of its embodiment and its relation to the external material world (GA I/5: 37–58; SW 4: 18–45; SE, 24–48). The moral principle, as Fichte presents it, is in fact really only a certain *concept*: that of an absolute 'ought' or categorical imperative or moral law which has objective validity for the I, is considered as self-legislated by it, applies to every situation and morally significant decision it makes, and overrides any other grounds or reasons for action (GA I/5: 58–71; SW 4: 45–61; SE, 48–62). What this means is that any concept of myself as a free being is always essentially a *normative* conception of myself. For me to be a determinate entity and at the same time free, I must conceive of myself as subject to rational *demands*, so that certain free activities are conceived of as proper to me, and others excluded as not truly mine – not in the sense that I *can't* perform them, but rather in the sense that I *ought* not to, because if I do so I am not being my authentic self or living up to what I am. Or, as Fichte also puts it: the I, which is *formally* free in always having the ability to do otherwise than it does, achieves freedom in a different sense, *material* freedom, by actions that bring its empirical I into harmony with what I truly am, the pure or ideal or absolute I (GA I/5: 132, 140; SW 4: 139, 146; SE, 132–133, GA I/3: 30; SW 6: 296–297; EPW, 148–149). But 'what I am' here does not mean some 'nature' I was born with, some metaphysical essence which, as a natural given, it is my task to 'actualize'. On the contrary, the self which is normative for me is an 'I', that is, an activity of freedom; the ideal with which I ought to harmonize must be my own free creation.¹¹

Fichte argues in Part I of *The System of Ethics* that the concept of such a law is derived solely from the I's awareness of its own freedom or self-determination. But the

concept of the law is purely formal and even its applicability to particular actions must be deduced separately from the principle itself. This applicability is the subject of Part II, while the actual application is taken up in Part III.

Applicability of the Moral Principle

Part II begins with a lengthy transcendental deduction of the conditions of the I's action. The I is necessarily embodied, and stands in relation to an external material nature on which its life is dependent. This means that the I always finds itself as willing, and is characterized by a striving or fundamental drive, originally unconscious, which is a condition of the possibility of every determinate volition or desire (GA I/2: 397; SW 1: 263; SK, 232).

Fichte locates this insatiable striving in the organic body which, in reciprocal interaction with the external world, is a condition of the I's possibility. Consciousness of this indeterminate striving is 'longing' (*Sehnen*), but any determinate form it assumes is called 'desire' and the immediate sensuous experience of such a desire is called a 'drive' (GA I/5: 104–109; SW 4: 105–110; SE, 101–105). Desire in general is directed outwards at objects. Its general form is to seek to abolish their independence, yet not by destroying them but rather by making them conform to the I, or to its 'practical concepts' of what they ought to be, assigning to each object its 'final end' (GA I/5: 123–125; SW 4: 128–130; SE, 122–125, GA I/2: 390; SW 1: 260; SK, 229–230, GA I/3: 31–32; SW 6: 299; EPW, 150–152).

The I's fundamental drive (*Grundtrieb*, *Urtrieb*) is originally one, but is experienced in two forms: the 'lower' or empirical drive, expressing the I's organic life and its dependence on material nature (GA I/5: 120–125; SW 3: 125–130; SE, 119–125); and the 'higher' or pure drive, which expresses the I's striving for absolute freedom and independence – freedom for freedom's sake (GA I/5: 125–132; SW 4: 130–139; SE, 124–133). This drive is the source of the moral principle.

One *particular*, involving feelings produced by sensuous encounter with specific objects and aiming at determinate ends, the other *ideal*, aiming at the absolute freedom or self-sufficiency of the I: this 'tendency to self-activity for the sake of self-activity', or 'the *absolute tendency towards the absolute*', is the source of the moral principle (GA I/5: 45; SW 4: 28; SE, 33). But we would be badly misled if we thought that for Fichte the ethical drive is to be identified with the pure drive, and that the ethical consists only in the dominion of this drive over the empirical drive. For originally the two drives are one, and the ethical drive is a drive for the whole I (GA I/5: 57–58; SW 4: 43–44; SE,

46–47). Free action is possible only when they are reunited. The ethical drive is therefore a mixed drive, which derives its form – the form of the moral principle – from the pure drive, but its content always from the empirical drive (GA I/5: 141–143; SW 4: 151–153; SE, 143–145).

Ordinary moral consciousness becomes aware of the ethical drive through the conviction that some particular action is its duty, and this conviction arises out of the feeling of conscience (GA I/5: 146, 155–164; SW 4: 156, 166–177; SE, 148, 157–168). Fichte draws a distinction between the theoretical judgement that some particular action is my duty and the conscientious conviction that I ought to do it. *Theoretical inquiry*, according to Fichte, never by itself reaches certainty, either about the true or about the right (GA I/5: 156; SW 4: 166–167; SE, 157–159). The certainty or conviction needed for moral action requires a practical decision, arising out of a feeling of harmony between the pure I and the empirical I (GA I/5: 160–161; SW 4: 172–173; SE, 163–164). Conscientious conviction does not guarantee the theoretical correctness of the judgement about what the agent ought to do. Our cognitive faculties are fallible, and theoretical error is still possible. But the feeling of certainty supplied by conscience is a certainty that I have followed my best judgement about what to do. And no more than that, Fichte thinks, can be asked of me. From the ordinary moral point of view, actions required by duty are those accompanied by this conscientious conviction, and the application of the moral law consists in following one's conscience (GA I/5: 144–146; SW 4: 154–156; SE, 146–148).

The Content of Duty

Fichte provides a transcendental deduction of the conditions of conscientious conviction, and regards it as a philosophical confirmation of the ordinary moral standpoint regarding the application of the moral law. But *The System of Ethics* also seeks a philosophical or ‘scientific’ account of the content of duty. Fichte attempts a deduction of this content in Part III of *The System of Ethics*.

The final end of the ethical drive is the complete independence or self-sufficiency of the I. But this end is unreachable, since complete independence would abolish the not-I, and with it a transcendental condition of I-hood itself. The task of determining the content of duty, therefore, is the same as that of determining what ends the I can strive for when the final end of absolute self-sufficiency is united with the conditions of I-hood (GA I/5: 193–194; SW 4: 211–212; SE, 200–201). Fichte considers this task in three (very unequal) parts. First, our duties towards our body and its natural drives; second, our duties regarding our cognitive faculty; and third, our duties regarding our relations with other rational beings. He categorizes these according to the Kantian categories of relation: causality, substance and reciprocity. Under each, he divides the duties according to the Kantian categories of quality: negative, positive and limitative (GA I/5: 193–199; SW 4: 212–218; SE, 201–207).

By far the most extensive topic is our duties regarding other rational beings. For here, not in the foundations of ethics but in the application of the moral law, Fichte does introduce a ‘second person’ perspective. In considering our relation to others, we must unite our striving for complete independence, and our striving to bring the external world into agreement with our practical ends, with the ethical demand that we must not violate the freedom of others but must further their promotion of their ends (GA I/5: 202–205, 208–209; SW 4: 222–225, 229–230; SE, 211–213, 217–219). The only resolution of this potential conflict, Fichte argues, is that we must proceed on the assumption that the ends of all rational beings are in agreement. The end of the self-sufficiency of the individual I must therefore be transformed into the self-sufficiency of the community of rational beings, or the self-sufficiency of *reason* (GA I/5: 208–211; SW 4: 230–233; SE, 218–222).

In practice, this means two things. First, we must act in a way to which we can suppose that all rational beings might rationally agree; this heuristic test Fichte identifies with the Kantian universalizability formula (GA I/5: 211–212; SW 4: 233–234; SE, 222). Secondly, we must interact communicatively with others, attempting to reach actual agreement, and we must understand our moral convictions as provisional formulations of the actual agreement of all rational beings which is the final end of this endless (uncompletable) collective task (GA I/5: 212–214; SW 4: 234–236; SE, 222–224). Fichte then begins a lengthy investigation into the necessary social conditions for this communicative project (GA I/5: 214–227; SW 4: 236–253; SE, 225–242).

The Social Unity of Reason

Fichte holds that the true human society will be attained only when people freely act on the same principles because, through a process of communication, they have reached rational agreement on these principles. A society based on authority or coercion is therefore not merely imperfect, it is less than human (GA I/3: 37; SW 6: 307; EPW, 157). The state, which is founded on coercion, is thus ‘a means for establishing a perfect society’, but ‘[l]ike all those human institutions which are mere means, the state aims at abolishing itself. *The goal of all government is to make government superfluous*’ (GA I/3: 36; SW 6: 306; EPW, 156). In the end, therefore, ‘the state falls away as a *legislative and coercive power*’ (GA I/5: 226–227; SW 4: 253; SE, 241). But a coercive political order is provisionally necessary, not only from the standpoint of right (which we have already considered) but also from the standpoint of our ethical ends, since rightful freedom is a condition of free rational communication. Also provisionally necessary is society regarded as a ‘church’, that is, as sharing a symbol or creed – certain provisional beliefs on the basis of which further communication reaching agreement can be possible (GA I/5: 213–223; SW 4: 236–248; SE, 224–236). But the most important institution, Fichte argues, is the ‘learned republic’, a sphere of free rational communication between human beings simply as scholars (GA I/5: 223–226; SW 4: 248–252; SE, 236–241). Fichte models this on Kant’s conception of the realm of public communication necessary for enlightenment; and both philosophers view the university as the centre of this learned republic.

The System of Ethics thus connects the theory of duties with a conception of the rational society. This is, as we have seen already in Fichte’s philosophy of right, a society made up of estates. It is the task of the state to ensure that every citizen belongs to an estate. All citizens are eligible for every estate, and it is the ethical task of each individual to choose an estate appropriate to that individual’s talents, and to be educated for this estate (GA I/5: 231–232, 242–245; SW 4: 258–259, 271–274; SE, 246–247, 259–262).

Fichte divides society into the ‘*lower class*’ which provides for the material needs of society and the ‘*higher class*’ that exercises cultural (educational) influence or governmental rule over the rest of society. As we have seen, however, Fichte regards individuals as equal in status whatever their estate. The estates belonging to the higher

class, Fichte says, exist for the sake of the estates belonging to the lower class: ‘The members of the government, as well as the estate of teachers and guardians, exist only for the sake of these first three estates’ (GA I/7: 58; SW 3: 405–406; CCS, 97).

The lower class (*The System of Ethics* § 33, GA I/7: 56–65; SW 3: 403–414; CCS, 95–103) contains the following groups:

<i>Producers</i>	Those who gain raw or natural products (GA I/7: 56–60; SW 3: 403–407; CCS, 95–98)
	<i>Agriculturalists</i> (<i>Foundations of Natural Right</i> § 19 (A))
	<i>Miners</i> (<i>Foundations of Natural Right</i> § 19 (B))
	<i>Domesticators of animals</i> (<i>Foundations of Natural Right</i> § 19 (C))
<i>Artisans</i>	Labourers on raw or natural products (<i>Foundations of Natural Right</i> § 19 (D))
<i>Merchants</i>	Facilitators of the exchange and delivery of goods (<i>Foundations of Natural Right</i> § 19 (E))

The higher class (GA I/5: 300; SW 4: 343; SE, 324–325) contains the following groups:

The teaching estate (GA I/7: 58, 60; SW 3: 405, 408; CCS, 97–98)

Scholars (*The System of Ethics* § 29)

Moral teachers of the people: clergy (*The System of Ethics* § 30)

Fine artists (*The System of Ethics* § 31)

State officials (*The System of Ethics* § 32, GA I/7: 57–58; SW 3: 405; CCS, 97)

The military estate (GA I/7: 58, 60; SW 3: 405, 408; CCS 97–98)

The Ground of Evil in Human Nature: Inertia, Cowardice, Falsity, Despair

Fichte is a merciless critic of all ordinary ways of thinking and acting, which he regards as fundamentally false and immoral. Fichte is also an acute moral psychologist, whose insights anticipate much that is found in more recent philosophy, especially in the existentialist tradition. At the same time, Fichte often traces moral evil to the *social* conditions of its existence, which lie in habits, ways of life and social institutions that put their own self-perpetuation ahead of the aspirations of human freedom and the values of human dignity. His stern moralism is deeply allied with his social radicalism.

Fichte holds that every action that proceeds from conscience, even if it is based on theoretical error about what to do, is free of moral blame, because acting on conscientious conviction is the most that can be demanded of us. The demands of conscience regarding self-honesty, however, are uncompromising. Thus no immoral action can occur without *self-deception* or (in Fichte's biblically inspired phrase) the 'darkening of moral consciousness'. Like Sartre, Fichte thinks that people have a profound and tenacious propensity to flee the burdens their freedom imposes upon them, and he describes with acuteness and sensitivity the subtle forms of false consciousness – such as 'floating', 'hesitation', 'thoughtlessness', 'distraction', 'indistinct consciousness' – that moral self-deception can take (GA I/5: 178–180; SW 4: 194–196; SE, 184–186).

Falseness, however, is a vice which Fichte traces to the more basic vice of cowardice, which makes people afraid to tell the truth, or even to face up to it: people lie because they are 'terrified to apply the force that might be needed in order to maintain one's self-sufficiency ... This is the only explanation for slavery among human beings, both physical and moral, the only explanation for submissiveness and parroting [*Nachbeterei*]' (GA I/5: 185; SW 4: 202; SE, 192). The real origin of falseness, however, is social and political: 'All falseness, all lies, all spite and perfidy exist because there are oppressors; and anyone who subjugates others must be prepared for the same' (GA I/5: 186; SW 4: 203; SE, 193).

Cowardice itself is rooted in a still deeper vice, which Fichte calls 'laziness' or 'inertia'. People are free, but resist exercising their freedom. Instead of asserting their freedom and achieving their authentic selfhood, they prefer a life of everyday habit, of

the customary track, that of the *Gleisner* and the *Schlendrian* (GA I/5: 183–184; SW 4: 200–202; SE, 190–192).

Fichte's political convictions are evident even in his choice of pejorative moral epithets. *Schlendrian* is derived from *schlendern* = to dawdle or loiter. A *Schlendrian* is a fuddy-duddy or stick-in-the-mud, a believer in traditional ways, slow to liberate himself from old habits. In J. S. Bach's *Coffee Cantata*, 'Herr Schlendrian' is the comical father who growlingly (and unsuccessfully) attempts to enforce on his spirited daughter Ließchen the old-fashioned belief that women should not be permitted to drink coffee. A *Gleisner* is a hypocrite, a two-faced double-dealer. Fichte exploits the etymological connection of this word with *Gleis* = rail, implying that being in a rut consorts well with a dishonest flight from yourself. Both terms imply that one can be a social conservative only by suppressing one's awareness of human freedom and dignity, and in this way being fundamentally dishonest with oneself as well as with others.

Idealism for Fichte is a revolutionary philosophy because it bases everything on the I's consciousness of its freedom, its ability and vocation of thinking for itself and of being content with nothing as it is but striving ceaselessly and tirelessly to make it what it ought to be. For this reason, Fichte regards all forms of materialism, particularly those stressing determinism and reducing human beings to cogs in a universal mechanism, as allied with the old regime, with social and political oppression.

The spiritual force through which each human being may be lifted out of the inertia of complacency is the experience of *respect*. To feel respect for anything, according to Fichte, awakens respect for oneself, and respect for myself calls me to fulfil my *Bestimmung* as a free individual. By the same token, the deepest form of evil is that attitude through which self-respect is suppressed, an attitude to which (writing nearly half a century before Kierkegaard) Fichte gives the name 'despair'. In despair the human being 'seeks to flee from himself' in order to avoid the torture of self-despising, falling into self-deceptions, 'deafening his conscience' and finally finding comfort in the thoughts that all goodness is an illusion, the will is unfree, everyone acts solely from self-interest, everything is as it is and nothing can ever get any better. The despairer is thus 'divided [*entzweit*] from everything good because he is divided from himself' (GA I/5: 279–281; SW 4: 318–319; SE, 302; translation modified). Like Kierkegaard, Fichte regards despair as the opposite of faith, though for Fichte this is a faith in God and

immortality held on moral grounds (GA I/5: 306; SW 4: 351; SE, 332, GA I/5: 429; SW 5: 209–210).

The remedy for despair, as for all moral evil, is, as always, free rational social interaction. No one has a right to compel another to be virtuous, or to make another good (or wise, or happy) against the other's will (GA I/3: 39; SW 6: 309; EPW, 159). But the despairer can be brought out of despair if others show that they do not despair of him, and provide him with a good example, so that having something he can respect will awaken his respect for himself (GA I/5: 280; SW 4: 318; SE, 302). The moral improvement of the human race will occur only insofar as all come to regard themselves as members of a single great community, all drawing strength from the whole and influencing one another for good through free and mutual give and take (GA I/3: 40–41; SW 3: 310–311; SE, 159–161). Thus, if Fichte's conception of the sources of moral evil anticipates existentialism, his conception of its cure anticipates Habermas's theory of domination-free rational communication.

Fichte's Later Ethics

In the dozen or so years after Fichte was dismissed from his professorship at Jena on grounds of 'atheism', his philosophy underwent a number of decisive developments.¹² His changing conceptions of fundamental philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, under the influence of his erstwhile follower and then critic Schelling, became more speculative. Fichte's thought also became more religious in its orientation, like the later philosophy of Schelling, making greater accommodations for divine revelation.

Accordingly, the *basis* of ethical theory would seem to have changed fundamentally, in accordance with Fichte's latest (and last) conception of a *Wissenschaftslehre*. The world, according to Fichte, is the image (*Bild*) of God (GA II/13: 392; SW 11: 117). It is not the I which has the concept, Fichte says, but the 'concept' which 'has' the I – in which it becomes 'a seeing, a seeing of seeing, a self-seeing' and becomes 'the absolute eye, the faculty of seeing, understanding' (GA II/13: 352; SW 11: 64–65). The concept, however, is also God's image, not in the sense of a copy or imitation, but in the sense of a necessary manifestation. The 'concept' in this sense is the ground of the world, or of being (GA II/13: 308; SW 11: 5), but also the ground of an independent world of images, which, like the practical concepts of things in Fichte's earlier philosophy, provide ethical theory with its ends and principles. Ethical theory is taken to be a science distinct from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, presupposing it and grounded on it, taking as its point of departure a fact of consciousness, namely the grounding of being on the concept, which Fichte interprets as equivalent to the thesis that reason is practical (GA II/13: 310; SW 11: 7).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to decide how far these changes involve Fichte in a metaphysical or ontological form of idealism, rather than the epistemological or transcendental form that (at his own repeated insistence during the Jena period) characterized his philosophy before 1800. But the changes in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* after 1800 (whatever their nature) make it all the more remarkable that, in his final system-cycle, Fichte's 1812 lectures on right and morality involve relatively little modification in the substantive ethical and political views present in Fichte's treatises of the Jena period. Just as the I as practical activity was opposed to objectivity and constituted its foundation, so now the concept, which takes the I as its conscious form, is

likewise contrasted with being or the existing world, and regarded as its foundation. In practical philosophy, this is once again taken to mean that the real is grounded on a spiritual activity which proposes ideals and demands according to which it is to be transformed. Much of the *Ethics* of 1812 focuses on the subjective side of the ethical disposition, which rests on the principles of ‘selflessness’ (GA II/13: 369; SW 11: 86), ‘universal philanthropy’ (SW 11: 92; GA II/13: 373), ‘truthfulness and openness’ (GA II/13: 376; SW 11: 96;) and ‘simplicity’ (GA II/13: 378; SW 11: 99). It would be a mistake to think that Fichte’s ethical theory has lost its earlier social orientation.¹³ Although his language now has religious overtones, Fichte continues to hold that ethics requires us to represent all rational beings as a community, or, as he now puts it, a ‘communion’ or ‘congregation of Is’ (*Gemeinde von Ichen*) (GA II/13: 353; SW 11: 65). This, however, is not so distant from his Jena-period presentation of the moral community, in terms derived from the Apostle’s Creed, as the ‘communion of saints’ (GA I/5: 229–230; SW 4: 254–255; SE, 243–244).

Fichte is a major voice in modern moral and political philosophy, fully the equal, in depth and importance, of Kant, Hegel, Marx or Nietzsche. Few modern social thinkers have been as radical in their starting point or their conclusions, none at all has also been so seminal in influence – though regarding this last fact the modern continental tradition has usually been oblivious to it or in denial. No social thinker of comparable power or historical importance in any tradition whatever is now so seldom read or discussed.

Notes

¹ See Allen W. Wood, 'Fichte's Philosophical Revolution', *Philosophical Topics* **19**(2) (1991): 1–28.

² See Günter Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1998](#)).

³ See Luc Ferry, 'The Distinction between Right and Ethics in the Early Philosophy of Fichte', *Philosophical Forum* **19** (1987–1988): 182–196; and Frederick Neuhouser, 'Fichte and the Relationship between Right and Morality', in Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds.), *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Perspectives* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 158–180.

⁴ See Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies in Freedom, Right and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2014](#)), 194–228; and Allen W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 77–84; for a contrasting treatment, see Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, [1992](#)).

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. V. Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50.

⁶ See Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 193–205.

⁷ For two recent but contrasting treatments of this work, see Isaac Nakhimovsky, *The Closed Commercial State: Perpetual Peace and Commercial Society from Rousseau to Fichte* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2011](#)); and David James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy: Property and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸ See James, *Fichte's Social and Political Philosophy*, 201–205, and Gunnar Beck *Fichte and Kant on Freedom, Rights and Law* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, [2008](#)), 129–184. For a general discussion of Fichte's later political thought, see Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Recht und Sittlichkeit in J. G. Fichtes Gesellschaftstheorie* (Freiburg and Munich: Alber, 1975), §§ 19–36, 175–320. For a

good review of the literature on this topic, see Douglas Moggach, 'Fichte's Engagement with Machiavelli', *History of Political Thought* **14**(4) (1993): 573–589.

[9](#) Peter Baumanns, *J. G. Fichte: Kritische Gesamtdarstellung seiner Philosophie* (Freiburg and Munich: Alber, [1990](#)), 398–399.

[10](#) Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[11](#) See Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, trans. Paul Stern (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 132–143; and Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1990](#)), Ch. 4.

[12](#) See Baumanns, *J. G. Fichte: Kritische Gesamtdarstellung seiner Philosophie*, 175–442.

[13](#) See Verweyen, *Recht und Sittlichkeit in J. G. Fichtes Gesellschaftstheorie*, 259–260.

Fichte's Political Economy and His Theory of Property



Jean-Christophe Merle

Fichte's *The Closed Commercial State* (1800) presents a rather detailed model of political economy that is clearly a state-directed economy. It is of paramount importance to correctly understand what its exact status is.

What Fichte's Economic Model Is Not

It is not a utopia. Indeed, it is neither a classical utopia that is located nowhere nor a modern utopia that is located in the future, nor is it a programmatic utopia. It cannot be a classical utopia, because – unlike classical utopias – it does not at all rely on virtue, but only on the authorization held by the state (i) to exert coercion for implementing the legal duties correlative to legal rights. Furthermore, it is not established by some kind of fiction such as a miracle or a revelation, but by the state in virtue of the authorization held by it (ii) to exert coercion so as to establish the ‘commercial’, that is, ‘economic’, closure of the country. (iii) Instead of being the stable greatest happiness found in classical utopias, the end of *The Closed Commercial State* primarily consists in implementing the concept of law, and in making possible the ethical progress of humankind. Neither can it be a modern utopia like H. G. Wells’ *A Modern Utopia*, since it does not sketch a future image of a world that would have adapted to the challenges of evolution. Finally, it cannot be a programmatic utopia, (i) because its establishment expressly does not rely on the well-informed and active consent of the people, but instead on secrecy and coercion without any consent. For this very reason, Fichte calls *The Closed Commercial State* a ‘makeshift state’ (*Notstaat*), which refers to a case of necessity that does not comply with the concept of law, but that is nevertheless necessary for achieving a situation in which the implementation of the concept of law is possible. (ii) Unlike programmatic utopias that at first only gather volunteers, i.e., a small, yet highly motivated group, *The Closed Commercial State* incorporates all state citizens.

Instead of being a utopia, *The Closed Commercial State* is expressly what is mentioned in its subtitle: ‘A philosophical sketch offered as an appendix to the Doctrine of Right [*Rechtslehre*] and as a test of a politics to be delivered in the future’ (GA I/7: 37; CCS, 73). Accordingly, its First Book is devoted to ‘Philosophy – what is Right [*Rechtens*] with respect to commerce in the rational state’. Now, the ‘Doctrine of Right’ is the third main division of the *Foundations of Natural Right*, and its subtitle is ‘Systematic application of the concept of right; or the doctrine of right’. Admittedly, after a historical analysis and a diagnosis of the economic situation of his time in the Second Book of *The Closed Commercial State*, the Third Book seems to no longer belong to the sphere of law, because its title is ‘Politics – how the commerce of an existing state can be

brought into the arrangement required by reason; or, on the closure of the commercial state'. Now, this Third Book is essentially a more determinate elaboration – taking into account the historical diagnosis of the economic situation of his time – of the 'civil contract', that is, the citizens' property contract, to which the first section of Part Two of the *Foundations of Natural Right* is devoted. Thus, Fichte's economic model, throughout the entirety of *The Closed Commercial State*, is primarily grounded in his legal concept of property. Despite Fichte's dedication of *The Closed Commercial State* to Carl-August Struensee, Prussia's finance minister in charge of excise (*Akzise*, which was a kind of sales tax) and customs tax for trade and industry, and his hope to influence Prussia's decision-making in economic policy, as well as despite its abundant and varied reception in the public debate on political economy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,¹ *The Closed Commercial State* is not primarily inspired by political economists of Fichte's time, but rather by his legal theory.

Although comparing Fichte and Kant on property is interesting because of their commonalities (for instance, concerning their concept of law, as we will see later) and their direct opposition to each other on several points (for instance, on the concept of property), and despite the fact that Fichte began his philosophical career by trying to be a better Kantian than Kant through a systematization of Kant's philosophical theory, Kant's *Doctrine of Right* cannot be considered as an inspiration for Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* and the subsequent *The Closed Commercial State*. For not only did Fichte publish the first part of his *Foundations of Natural Right* half a year prior to the publication of Kant's *Doctrine of Right*, but also his deduction of the concept of right is unlike Kant's, leading to a radically different conception of property and to a radically different model of political economy.

The title *The Foundations of Natural Right* might also suggest that the natural law tradition is indispensable for understanding both this text and *The Closed Commercial State*, if at least three elements that are fundamental for the natural law theory of property were not entirely missing in Fichte: the *dominium terrae*, the asocial passions of human beings and the foundational conventionalist origin of property (which sometimes – but not necessarily – is a foundational social contract model). All these elements are present from early Christianity to early modern natural law theory – for instance, in Grotius and Locke.

The *dominium terrae*, dominion over the earth, referred to in the Bible² is interpreted as an original community of possession. Whether it is interpreted as a positive original community of possession (the earth belongs to all human beings in order that all of them may collectively make it prosper – for instance, in Ambrosius of Milan and Grotius) or as a negative original community of possession (the earth belongs to no one, in order that each human being may use it – for instance, in Pufendorf and Rousseau), the *dominium terrae* includes the following elements. (i) All human beings are equally entitled to use the earth, and not only the original community of possession, but also private property, thus ensuring that the earth is used in favour of each human being – including non-owners. (ii) The burden of proof lies on the side of the proponents of private property, and (iii) these proponents must explain why the original community of possession is not sustainable, and why the introduction of private property is the second-best solution.

The explanation is provided by the existence of social vices: greed, envy, laziness, etc. that unavoidably lead to conflicts between human beings as well as leading them to neglect the cultivation of the earth. Under circumstances that pertain to the *conditio humana*, peace and industriousness applied to the cultivation of the earth can be achieved only through the introduction of private property and each person's industrious devotion to their own property – the latter point being inspired by Aristotle's *Politics*. The introduction of private property then occurs through some kind of explicit or tacit convention(s). The convention(s) may consist in either a distribution or the recognition of the right of first occupancy (*ius primae occupationis*).

Yet, this second-best solution admits at least two problems. First, whereas the goal set by the *dominium terrae* is to make the earth prosper and make it available for all to use, some private owners may prefer not to cooperate with others in order to obtain a positive-sum game and may instead privilege competition that will make them richer and more powerful than would be the case with communal use. They may even let the fruits they acquire spoil if they cannot benefit from their use or if this would reinforce inequalities in their favour. (Locke attempts to show that this does not happen, because labour is the source of almost all increase in value.) Secondly, some non-owners may not find an owner who is willing to provide them with the opportunity to work for their

subsistence, as tenants, day labourers or servants, or an owner who provides them with their basic necessities. The natural law tradition attempts to solve such problems by setting limits on property rights as justified by reference to the past *dominium terrae* in general and its requirement that the earth be useful for all human beings. To these limitations belong, for instance, the right of innocent use (*ius innoxia*), which allows the use of another's property if such use does not harm the owner or hinder the owner's use of her property, and the right of necessity (*ius necessitatis*) that in cases of extreme necessity or emergency – that is, if one's life is in immediate danger, for instance, imminent death from starvation – allows the use of another person's property even without her consent. The problem remaining with these solutions is that they consist in limiting private property through minor exceptions.

In his *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution* (*Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution*), Fichte tries to find a solution to the problems raised by ownership by challenging the perennial status of the conventionalist introduction of private ownership. The core argument of this writing is the assertion of a natural right to leave any contract – including the social contract – at any time, without compensation for provisions of the social contract that violated natural rights. Indeed, according to Fichte, a contract binds the parties only as long as both parties accept the contract. This is valid for the convention(s) introducing property rights. Serfdom (or bondage) had been abolished in Prussia in 1807. Fichte's view on the validity of contracts implies the possibility for every bonded person or serf to terminate their contract. In a more general way, the possibility of terminating any contract at any time leads to the right of any person to reject any convention on property rights that is to her disadvantage. Now, Fichte considers the right of first occupancy (under the assumption that there is a negative original community of possession, i.e., that originally the earth belongs to no one) combined with one's own labour, not only at the time of acquisition, but throughout the entire time thereafter, to be a right that provides everyone with an advantage:

This race after a possession [*Besitze*], which can be futile, these conflicts and hostilities, which necessarily develop, do not please us, human beings proclaimed, as they became citizens – and they said this rightly. Henceforth, each takes what is

nearest him and thus saves himself and others from this procedure. He takes what was in his father's cottage and around his grandfather's cottage; each of us sacrifices his right to appropriate this settled possession, if he wants his part of his right to appropriate the belongings of any other deceased fellow citizen. You do not have, according to this, the civil right of inheritance for free. In receiving it, you have, however, relinquished an alienable human right, the right to inherit from any deceased person, whenever you can.

(GA I/1: 274–275)

In this quotation, Fichte uses at least two arguments of Lockean origin. Locke writes

The same Law of Nature, that does by this means give us Property, does also *bound* that Property too. *God has given us all things richly* ... But how far has he given it us? *To enjoy*. As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labour fix a Property in. Whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others. Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy.³

(i) Alongside first occupancy, Locke sets an additional condition to appropriation: labour exerted on the object – Fichte's and Locke's example is a field considered as a producer's good. (ii) Under this condition, the physical limitation of each individual's labour plays a role in limiting the extent of property. The author of the *Contribution* could share Locke's view, once he had complemented it with the provision related to inheritance quoted above:

Nor was this *appropriation* of any parcel of *Land*, by improving it, any prejudice to any other Man, since there was still enough, and as good left; and more than the yet unprovided could use. So that in effect, there was never the less left for others because of his inclosure for himself.⁴

Fichte's *Contribution* contains many insoluble problems, some of which are relevant to the issue of property. One problem is that, in this text, the criterion for the validity of any contract is not the distributive advantage, as it is in social contract theories until now (for instance, in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*), but the real will of the person. As in the

Hobbesian state of nature, where there is no authorization and power of coercion, force prevails, and any possession is endangered at any time. A second problem is that the *Contribution* presents a situation in which there is no division of labour, and there can be no division of labour. In fact, the division of labour presupposes the assurance of receiving products that one does not produce oneself in exchange for one's own products, and receiving them in a sufficient amount. The contracts that may be renounced at any time without any compensation as well as the absence of any power of coercion radically hinder the establishment of confidence. A third and more radical problem is that, whereas the *Contribution* declares the existence of many natural or human rights, it does not present any system of rights and correlative duties, so that it cannot at all be considered as a legal order. These problems and further ones radically disappear in *Foundations of Natural Right*.

Fichte's Concept of Property

In his *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte defines his concept of right in the following way:

The relation between free beings that we have deduced (i.e. that each is to limit his freedom through the concept of the possibility of the other's freedom, under the condition that the latter likewise limit his freedom through the freedom of the former) is called the *relation of right*; and the formula that has now been established is the *principle of right*.

(GA I/3: 358; FNR, 49; see also GA I/3: 410; FNR, 109)

This concept must still be determined, which happens in the 'Systematic application of the concept of right; or the doctrine of right' (Third main division of the *Foundations of Natural Right*):

It is possible to talk about rights only under the condition that a person is thought of as a person, that is, as an individual, and thus as standing in relation to other individuals; only under the condition that there is a community between this person and others, a community that – if not posited as real – is at least imagined as possible. What initially, and from a merely speculative perspective, are the conditions of personality become rights simply by thinking of other beings who – in accordance with the law of right – may not violate the conditions of personality.

(GA I/3: 403; FNR, 101)

Accordingly, Fichte first inquires into the 'conditions of personality' ('First chapter of the doctrine of right') – the result of this inquiry being 'original rights' – then into the conditions of the community – the result of this inquiry being the 'right of coercion' and the organs of state, i.e., the 'political right or right within a commonwealth' – and finally into the determinate system of rights, that is, the 'civil contract' or 'citizens' property contract' (GA I/4: 9; FNR, 170). Thus, rights resulting from the consideration of personality alone are viewed by Fichte as a methodical fiction, the function of which is to then consider this mere fiction under the conditions of a community, in order to define

either ‘posited’ (i.e., ‘positive’) or ‘real’ rights (i.e., rights within a system of rights and correlative duties, in the Hohfeldian sense).

The conditions of personality are the body and property (or ownership). The system of rights is defined by Fichte as an ‘equilibrium of right’ (GA I/3: 410; FNR, 109), that is, an equilibrium or equal and mutual limitation of the original rights.

Fichte provides the following definition of property:

The part of the sensible world that is known to me and subjected to my ends – even if only in thought – is *originally* my property. (It is not, simply for that reason, my property *in society*, as we shall see more precisely in what follows.)

(GA I/3: 407; FNR, 106)

Along with this definition, Fichte provides a justification for it: ‘No one can affect that part of the sensible world without restricting the freedom of my efficacy’ (GA I/3: 407; FNR, 106). This justification relies directly on the ‘First theorem’, that is, on the ultimate deduction or foundation of the concept of law in self-consciousness, namely ‘A finite rational being cannot posit itself without ascribing a free efficacy to itself’ (GA I/3: 229; FNR, 18).

In this way, Fichte characterizes property as a sphere of action, and he keeps this definition of property in all his subsequent writings, for instance, in *The Closed Commercial State*:

I have described the right to property as an exclusive right to *acts*, not to *things*. So it is. So long as all remain quiet in the neighbor’s midst, they will not come into conflict; it is only when they first bestir themselves and move about and create that they collide against one another. Free activity is the seat of the conflict of forces. Hence, it is free activity that is the true object [*Gegenstand*] concerning which the conflicting parties negotiate treaties. In no way are things the object of the treaty. The ownership of the object of a free act first issues and is derived from the exclusive right to a free act.

(GA I/7: 54–55; CCS, 92–93)

The contrast between this definition of property and the Kantian one is striking, especially considering that Kant formulates a concept of right and a concept of the ‘rightful mine (*meum iuris*)’ that are very similar to Fichte’s:

Right is therefore the sum of the conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom.

(AA 6: 230; MM, 387)

That is *rightfully mine (meum iuris)* with which I am so connected that another’s use of it without my consent would wrong me.

(AA 6: 245; MM, 401)

Yet, in the next sentence, Kant adds the following to this definition: ‘The subjective condition of any possible use is *possession*’ (AA 6: 245; MM, 401). Now, Kant distinguishes ‘intelligible possession’ from ‘empirical possession’, and he recognizes only the former as being property (merely empirical possession is no property): ‘*Intelligible possession* (if this is possible) is possession of an object *without holding it (detention)*’. Because of the ‘subjective condition’, Kant considers that

the *real definition* of this concept [of the rightful mine] – that which also suffices for the *deduction* of it (cognition of the possibility of the object) – goes like this: something external is mine if I would be wronged by being disturbed in my use of it *even though I am not in possession of it* (not holding the object).

(AA 6: 249; MM, 403)

Four years later, in *The Closed Commercial State*, Fichte criticizes precisely this point:

I will not weary myself pondering how I could maintain the *ideal possession* of this tree if no one who approaches lays his hand on it and it stands to me alone to pick its fruit at whatever time pleases me.

(GA I/7: 55; CCS, 93)

Fichte draws another distinction within the concept of the sphere of activity: the distinction between the original sphere of activity and property, the latter being the sphere of activity *within* a legal order. Concerning original rights, Fichte writes that

The person has the right to demand that in the entire region of the world known to him everything should remain as he has known it, because in exercising his efficacy he orients himself in accordance with his knowledge of the world, and as soon as a change occurs in the world he immediately becomes disoriented and impeded by the course of the world's causality, or he sees results completely different from the ones he intended.

The part of the sensible world that is known to me and subjected to my ends – even if only in thought – is *originally* my property. (It is not, simply for that reason, my property *in society*, as we shall see more precisely in what follows.) No one can affect that part of the sensible world without restricting the freedom of my efficacy.

(GA I/3: 407; FNR, 105–106)

In these quotations, we observe two major and radical differences between Kant and Fichte. (1) According to Fichte, this merely intelligible sphere of activity is not the legal one. In fact, the legal sphere of activity is a sphere in which one has the right and the duty to exercise one's activity, so that it always has an empirical efficacy. According to Kant, legal possession, that is, property, is intelligible possession, which does not necessarily include empirical possession. (2) According to Kant, the object of property is some external thing, which Fichte emphasizes through choosing a 'tree' as an example. On this point, Kant and Fichte defend radically opposed theses:

An external object which in terms of its substance belongs to someone is his *property (dominium)*, in which all rights in this thing inhere (as accidents of a substance) and which the owner (*dominus*) can, accordingly, dispose of as he pleases (*ius disponendi de re sua*). But from this it follows that an object of this sort can be only a corporeal thing (to which one has no obligation). So someone can be his own master (*sui iuris*) but cannot be the owner *of himself (sui dominus)* (cannot dispose of himself as he pleases) – still less can he dispose of others as he pleases – since he is accountable to the humanity in his own person.

(AA 6: 270; MM, 421)

In my opinion, the fundamental error of the opposed theory of property – the first source from which all false assertions about property derive ... is this: that one posits the first, original property in the exclusive possession of *a thing*.

(GA I/7: 85; CCS, 129–130)

This quotation clearly shows that the same property in the Kantian sense – i.e., ownership of the same external thing or substance – may be used for diverse activities, which are not constitutive of that property, but which are instead mere ‘accidents’ that are not even conceptually, but, rather, empirically derived from the substance of property. And these activities are permitted, yet not obligatory: they are at the disposal of the owner. This quotation also attests to the different concepts of freedom at the root of Kant and Fichte’s respective concepts of property. In fact, Kant grounds property right on freedom as it is conceived in the ‘postulate of practical reason with regard to rights’:

It is possible for me to have any external object of my choice [*Willkür*] as mine, that is, a maxim by which, if it were to become a law, an object of choice would *in itself* (objectively) have to *belong to no one* (*res nullius*) is contrary to rights.

(AA 6: 250; MM, 404–405)

Mere abstention is also an object of choice, so that one may legally abstain from using one’s property, in Kant’s view, which is also the case for Fichte’s original right to a sphere of possible activity, as opposed to the property right to a sphere of activity in a community with a legal order. Fichte’s concept of freedom essentially includes efficacy. Now, my legal efficacy in the world depends on the efficacy of other persons. In this regard, it is not only the actions of other persons but also their abstention that influence my efficacy in the world. Let us take the example of the activity of the tailor, which is property in Fichte’s view. Not only does the tailor have the duty to engage in her profession, which is not at her disposal, but, also, those who are not tailors are not allowed to tailor their own clothes on their own. Furthermore, Fichte considers that being a tailor cannot be a sphere of activity in a country inhabited only by nude persons. There cannot be any property of the tailor’s activity without the tailor as well as all other

persons actually exerting their efficacy through their work. Therefore, according to Fichte, property consists neither in merely having a thing at one's disposal nor in merely having a sphere of activity at one's disposal. The same object may be used either simultaneously for several activities performed separately by several persons, or for the same activity performed separately by several persons, so that in both cases it can be said that conceptually no one is the owner of the object, or it may be used for only one activity and only by one person performing this activity. In the latter case, the ownership of the activity of the tailor includes a real efficacy, which is really performing this activity.⁵ As we will see, this would even include a precise number of working hours. The property of an activity also includes a right to the activity of the suppliers of the raw materials or manufactured products necessary to perform this activity. The tailor, being dependent on the peasant who produces the cotton or the linen and on the weaver who produces the textiles, has a right to their performance. In other words, property is the combination of, on the owner's side, the right and the obligation to perform an activity and, on the side of others, the obligation to abstain from some activities and to perform still others, and finally, on both sides, the obligation to exchange the products of these activities. Last but not least, the property in relation to an activity is property in relation to self-activity, in accordance with the 'First theorem', from which the right of property is ultimately deduced and that mentions 'free activity': 'A finite rational being cannot posit itself without ascribing a free efficacy to itself' (GA I/3: 329; FNR, 18). Thus, the property of the sphere of activity pertains exclusively and strictly to the sphere of one's own independent activity. This implies that labour cannot be dealt with as a commodity. This radically excludes the object of the young Marx's core critique of what made the private capitalist possession of the means of production possible: 'Labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* – and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally'.⁶ Because of the core role of individual property for all in Fichte's theory of property, this theory is radically not a communist one, whether in the pre-Marxist or in the Marxist sense, nor is it a capitalist theory. Furthermore, it is fully incompatible with both.

Admittedly, there is also in Fichte an ownership of mere objects that are not activities: 'The ownership of the object of a free act first issues and is derived from the exclusive right to a free act' (GA I/7: 55; CCS, 93). Now, not only is this ownership

derived from the ownership of an activity – it is the ownership of the products that I have exchanged against the products of my activities – but also it is an ownership over which activities have a priority. This ownership of the products cannot be used for production, unless one owns the property of the corresponding activity. Thus, apart from the property of a sphere of activity, the only kind of property that exists in Fichte is that of consumer goods, as opposed to producer goods. As the origin of the Latin word *consumere* indicates, consumer goods are destined to be used up, that is, destroyed, or in other words to be short-lived. Typically, this applies to the means of subsistence, which play a core role in Fichte's economic model. One of the aims of Fichte's economic model consists in keeping transient any increase of the products that are at the disposal of the individual for consumption in order to avoid any permanent luxury and even any permanent enjoyment of material goods. Instead, increases of the production of consumer goods are used to decrease the amount of working hours. In turn, Fichte views this reduction of working hours as time to be used for moral, religious or cognitive activity. Indeed, as we will see later, one aim of Fichte's economic model is to avoid, on the one hand, malnutrition and poverty, and, on the other hand, luxury, idleness and laziness.

Admittedly, Fichte's remembrance of his own childhood influenced him in this regard. He emerged from a humble environment, owing the opportunity of an academic education that was granted to him entirely to the fact that he was lucky to find as a benefactor a local lord who was impressed by his early cognitive abilities.⁷ Fichte, observing the idle and lazy aristocracy living in luxury alongside crowds of people – especially day labourers and bonded workers – who were constantly busy slaving away trying to earn their bare meagre subsistence in the face of the prospect of starving tomorrow, describes in 1788, in *Zufällige Gedanken einer schlaflosen Nacht* (*Chance Thoughts on a Sleepless Night*) a book that he hoped to write,

which [would] expose all the corruption – here ridiculous; there terrifying – of our governments and of our morals, present its necessary consequences in a natural way which avoids excess, and sketch out the principles of a better government and better morals, along with the way to achieve them.

(GA II/2: 104)

In fact, from his *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution* (1793) to his *Characteristics of the Present Age* (*Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*) (1805) and finally his *Addresses to the German Nation* (*Reden an die deutsche Nation*) (1807), we find a denunciation of the vices (individualism, hedonism and laziness) which lay behind the economic conditions and theories of his time. *The System of Ethics* (1798) also teaches the 'dutifulness of almsgiving [that] arises from the duty to preserve the life of our fellow human beings' (GA I/5: 263; SE, 283).

However, the economic model that Fichte begins to construct as early as the *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution* is intended to be based solely on legal theory, not on personal or collective morality. Therefore, Fichte grounds and limits the 'dutifulness of almsgiving' with the following argument that pertains to a failure of the state, that is, to the unachieved realization of the concept of law:

A claim for assistance from one's fellow human beings can have no other end than to acquire some position or property from private persons, since this has been denied one by the state.

(GA I/5: 263; SE, 283)

Fichte requires the prohibition of idleness and laziness not only of rich people, but also of poor people:

It is simply intolerable that human beings should have no other end in begging for alms than obtaining alms, and that they should make begging into an estate [*Stand*].

(GA I/5: 263; SE, 283)

In fact, not only the concept of right but also the concept of ethics is grounded on self-activity, and laziness is considered by Fichte as the very source of evil (GA I/5: 164–188; SE, 168–195). Whereas, for Kant, evil among human beings consists in making an exception for oneself, which breaks the law and is incompatible with the status of the rational being as a self-legislator.

From an economic perspective too, it is important to limit the amount of consumer goods available to each person to the means of subsistence. In fact, providing each person with more would make it possible to hoard part of one's production, depriving other persons performing professional activities of the possibility of obtaining all the products that they were entitled to expect from the person who is now hoarding part of her production.

The Organization of *The Closed Commercial State*

The concept of right, i.e., the mutual limitation of the spheres of action, and the system of rights and correlative duties, requires the completeness, and therefore the ‘closure’, of a legal order. Admittedly, a global legal order that would rule over all legal rights and all correlative legal duties all over the world would be a ‘closed’ and complete system too. Fichte considers this possibility:

[S]omeone who does not live in a state can rightfully be coerced by the first state that encounters him either to subject himself to it, or to stay away from it.

In consequence of this proposition, all human beings living on the earth’s surface would gradually become united in a single state.

(GA I/4: 151; FNR, 320)

Yet, he rejects it for the following reason:

But it is just as possible that geographically separate groups of human beings, knowing nothing of one another, would unite to form separate states ... The fact that oceans, rivers, and mountains carve up the earth’s surface and divide the human beings who live on it, would be another reason why it was necessary for different states to come into existence.

(GA I/4: 151–152; FNR, 320–321)

In *The Closed Commercial State*, Fichte emphasizes another kind of factor that may play a role, and one that he found in the case of Germany did at that time play the decisive role: historical factors originating in the history of the Middle Ages since the collapse of the Roman Empire:

The peoples of the ancient world were very rigidly separated from one another by a multitude of circumstances. For them, the foreigner was an enemy or a barbarian. The peoples of modern Christian Europe, in contrast, may be considered as one nation ... they also came to be bound together, after their dispersal throughout the

provinces of the Western Roman Empire, by a single common religion and the same submissiveness to its visible head. The peoples of different descent who later joined them acquired, along with the new religion, the same basic system of Germanic customs and notions.

(GA I/7: 92–93; CCS, 139)

However, what was missing in this Medieval period, dominated by personal subjection, was a state:

Were one to apply our concepts of state, authority, and subject to these individual settlements of half-barbarians, one would be led completely astray. For indeed they lived in the state of nature ... It is only through the relation of the serfs to their masters and the vassals to the feudal lord that these crowds of people were connected to one another. The few judicial actions that took place – and these were, properly speaking, only acts of arbitration – were merely a *consequence* of these relations. They were far from being an *end in itself*, with *the laws the true and proper means of binding together* the nation.

(GA I/7: 93; CCS, 139)

To this situation, the Reformation added the disappearance of religious ties. In this way, when trade developed between people, followed by competition between them (mercantilism, that is, a policy of importing raw materials and exporting manufactured products, above all luxury goods) and then by the controversy over free trade (*laissez-faire* theories vs. protectionism), it did so without common legal regulation, that is, according to Fichte, in a ‘state of nature’. As a result, it generated not only commercial wars, but also real wars,⁸ and not only enriched some people, but also impoverished others, which meant depriving citizens of their basic rights. In this context, over the course of the centuries, ‘foreign trade’ between people had been ‘closed incompletely’ (GA I/7: 111–112; CCS, 160), the partial closure having been intended as a remedy for various disadvantages of free trade among them. Such disadvantages are related to the fact that there was no complete and coherent system of rights and correlative duties

regarding production and consumption. Yet, the partial character of the closure makes it impossible to solve those problems:

Nor will the incomplete measures that have been described – measures that involve neither a calculation made of the number of goods that should be brought to market given the needs of the buyers, nor the fixing of prices – end the war described above between buyers and sellers.

(GA I/7: 109; CCS, 158)

In other words, it belongs to the concept of a state in any regard – not only in economic matters, but in all legal matters – that it is closed, because it must be a system: ‘It is the state alone that unites an indeterminate multitude of men into a *closed whole*, a *totality*’ (GA I/7: 54; CCS, 92), and Fichte consequently considers in his ‘Right of Nations’ in the *Foundations of Natural Right* the relationships between a state and a foreigner exclusively as a relationship between two states. Thus, what matters for Fichte is the closure, which is indispensable for conceptual reasons, and not primarily the national character of the state, which is needed for empirical and circumstantial reasons. Unfortunately, Fichte does not elaborate in a Kantian way on the option of a global rule of law that would also include a complete economic system of property.

Within this closed framework, the state is in charge of the allocation of property in the sense of spheres of (professional) activity. The main problem faced by the allocation of property is the diversity and the heterogeneity of items of property understood as spheres of activity. Now, since all human beings have the same original right to property, the citizens’ property contract ought to adopt a neutral principle of allocation. Yet, one may interpret this requirement in different ways. For instance, Ronald Dworkin’s ‘equality of resources’ considers that a just division and distribution of resources in a situation in which ‘no one is antecedently entitled to any of [the] resources’ requires that ‘they shall instead be divided equally among them’⁹ – which corresponds to Fichte’s fiction of the original right – in which such a division should proceed by taking into equal consideration all ends and kinds of ends that might ever be pursued by the members of society. Fichte’s *Foundations of Natural Right* adopts a radically different option, namely a neutral, yet negative stance in relation to the diversity of human ends. (i) Only

ends pursued by all human beings are allowed to be taken into account; and (ii), among these ends, there ought to be a hierarchy and subordination to one end, which represents a radical reduction of the diversity of the ends:

Now these ends can be quite varied, even with regard to the use of a single object, and so they can also be quite varied with regard to the use of different objects. The question is: can all of a citizen's possible ends be subordinated to one, single end?

(GA I/4: 21; FNR, 184)

Fichte provides this response:

the highest and [most, JCM] universal end [*der höchste und allgemeinste Zweck*] of all free activity is to be able to live. Everyone has this end; therefore, just as freedom in general is guaranteed, so too is this end. If this end were not attained, freedom and the person's continued existence would be completely impossible. ... To be able to live is the absolute, inalienable property of all human beings.

(GA I/4: 22; FNR, 185)

Now, one may object that this end – that is, access to sufficient means of subsistence – may well be an end that nobody can renounce, and that this may qualify it as a basic end and a 'most universal end', but being 'the highest and most universal end' means something else, because human beings and animals have this end in common, especially considering what precedes in Fichte's argumentation:

This pain is *hunger* and *thirst*, and thus we find that the need for nourishment alone is the original impetus – and its satisfaction the ultimate end – of the state and of all human life and conduct. This is true, obviously, only so long as the human being remains entirely under the direction of nature, and does not elevate himself through freedom to a higher existence.

(GA I/4: 21–22; FNR, 185)

Now, not only does an empirical basic end such as self-preservation belong to a lower existence as opposed to the 'higher existence' mentioned by Fichte, any other individual

end does so too. In Fichte's theory of ethics, religion and philosophy, higher ends pertain to the community, for instance, to the ethical community, to the religious community of ends, etc.

Admittedly, *The Closed Commercial State* adds another kind of universal end that the just allocation of property has to take into account:

Everyone wishes to live as pleasantly as possible. Since everyone demands this as a human being, and no one is more or less human than anyone else, everyone has an equal right in [making] this demand. In accordance with this equality of their rights, the division must be made in such a way that one and all ... must be able to live about as pleasantly as the other ... Should someone live less pleasantly than he is able, the reason for this must lie with him alone and not with anyone else.

(GA I/7: 55; CCS, 93)

Now, this additional universal end is considered by Fichte to be neither more basic nor more important nor higher than self-preservation. In fact, *The Closed Commercial State* introduces it as an answer to an issue that the *Foundations of Natural Right* left open: if, after having allocated the spheres of activity in such a way that subsistence is guaranteed, there are resources left for an extension of each sphere of activity, *then* pleasure as an end is to be taken into account. Hence, pleasure is a subsidiary criterion for allocating the spheres of activity, at least temporarily. Even the production of luxury for all is then allowed to be a subsidiary criterion: 'Only as many hands as then remain may be directed toward the manufacture of goods that can be dispensed with, satisfying the need for luxury' (GA I/7: 60; CCS, 99). However, both of these subsidiary ends of the closed commercial state are dispensable, because they are not derived from any normative requirement. (If goods that generate mere pleasure are produced, *then* they must be equally affordable to all, and the same applies to luxury items. But there is no normative requirement that the state produces goods for mere pleasure or luxury products.) Now, for Fichte, who is in no way a utilitarian, pleasure certainly does not belong to a 'higher existence'. From the viewpoint of self-efficacy, pleasure as an end is even lower than subsistence as an end. In order to explain this point, let us first present the role of hunger and thirst in its relation to self-efficacy in Fichte's teleological perspective on nature:

Nature has destined the human being ... for freedom, i.e. for activity. Nature attains all of her ends, and so she must have provided for this end as well ...

If we assume that every human being wishes for something in the future, then nature would surely attain her end if she had arranged things so that the possibility of any future whatever for the human being *were conditioned by present activity*...

But since there could be human beings who did not wish for anything in the future ... nature's arrangement would be a vicious circle. Therefore, she had to unite both sides in some third thing within the present, namely *pain*.

(GA I/3: 21; FNR, 184–185)

If the relief of the pains that are hunger and thirst, on the one hand, and pleasure, on the other hand, are both considered by Fichte as being universal ends, that is, ends of all human beings, why does he grant the former priority over the latter? Self-preservation is not the primary goal of freedom. Yet, only the end of self-preservation necessarily motivates self-efficacy, because one must exert some efficacy in order to access the means of self-preservation. Under some circumstances, pleasure motivates not efficacy, but the opposite, i.e., inactivity: one's pleasure may well consist in lying idle the entire day on the beach or in a hammock. Ends concerning a 'higher existence', being related to the community, are not individual ends, that is, ends concerning the future *individual* condition of the human being. Thanks to an increasing division of labour – and, therefore, of production – the closed commercial state can always produce more, so that it can increase the time available for higher spheres of labour than agriculture, handcraft and manufactured production, such as science, arts and popular education, as Fichte explains it in §§ 28–33 of his *System of Ethics*. A characteristic of these new spheres of labour is that the end of their efficacy is neither subsistence nor pleasure, but progress towards ever-purer self-activity. Another characteristic is that the activities of those spheres are not indirectly related to the community through the exchange of products; instead they are directly related to the community, its progress and its increasing cohesion: arts and sciences aim at educating the people towards their higher destination. Fichte privileges the allocation of the benefits of growth to such activities rather than to the production of luxury goods. (This preference is also due to further reasons, such as the necessity to balance supply and demand, as we have seen above.) Yet, this end is not

included in the concept of law, but in its application in politics, which is also influenced by ethics and stands, according to Fichte, at a higher level than law. Thus, the people are not coerced into using their free time for pleasure rather than for an education that leads to a 'higher existence'.

Fichte's organization of labour into corporations (*Zünfte*) complies with two requirements: (i) an egalitarian allocation of the spheres of activity; and (ii) progress, i.e., greater efficacy and production. With regard to the latter purpose, (ii), in *The Closed Commercial State*, and even more in his late *Rechtslehre* (*Doctrine of Right*, 1812), the division of labour aims at increasing productivity and diversifying activities, which is not the same as increasing and diversifying production, as explained above. Admittedly, productive labour represents a form of self-efficacy, but it does so only at a lower level. As such, labour is only a means, whereas our higher existence ought to be our highest end. With regard to the former purpose, (i), there must be a common unit of measurement for the spheres of activity. This uniform measurement is the amount of working time necessary to obtain the same product, once the exchange of products is considered. The fact that, irrespective of the income that is the same for all jobs, some positions are more attractive than others and that the life quality provided by the different spheres of activity is not the same for all professional occupations is not taken into consideration. On the contrary, qualifications and professional ability matter, as well as making supply match demand and ensuring progress. Thus, some persons may have to change from one professional occupation to another. In this way, Fichte's planned economy does not exclude the flexibility of labourers. What it excludes, as we have already seen, is the investment of private savings in the economy. Savings originating from an increased productivity that is not fully used to increase free time or products designed only for pleasure or even luxury can be invested in technical innovation. Yet, this is the task of the state, since it leads to modifying the amount and the extent of the spheres of activity. In the *Rechtslehre* (1812), we find Fichte's first attempt to make the investment of private savings possible, as well as private innovation, while still keeping the equality of the spheres of professional activity. He allows a return on investment for a limited period of time, and only with state authorization on a case-by-case basis.

As is the case for any radical programme, major problems lie not only in the consistency, feasibility and sustainability of the programme, but also in the transition

from the *status quo ante*. This is for two reasons. Fichte does not conceive of the transition to the closed commercial state as a gradual process, but as a sudden introduction that is similar to a revolution. First, as I mentioned above, according to Fichte, the closed commercial state and the economic order of his time are based on two radically different principles of practical philosophy, and particularly on two radically different legal concepts of property. Thus, they require very different, and mostly opposed, institutions. Secondly, the closure of the state, inaugurating its autarky, could not be announced in advance, because the people are not able to understand the measures needed and hence can approve them only once they see their advantageous effects:

[T]here is no need to seek council with the public and inform them in advance before carrying these things out, since doing so would only arouse doubt, questions, and mistrust, all of which are most fittingly removed through the visibly good result of these measures.

(GA I/7: 123; CCS, 176)

Thus, unlike in the *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution*, in *The Closed Commercial State* Fichte does not advocate a revolution based on the typical early modern model of revolution (the English, American and French model). A typical early modern model of revolution would include widespread promotion of the principles and the aims of the revolution, as well as the popular support that is needed for a contractualist justification of the new regime, as opposed to the unfair and unfree *status quo ante*. According to *The Closed Commercial State*, the people would first have to be educated in order to understand why the closure of the state is necessary. Since the closure cannot wait, and because it is likely that the appropriate popular education would become possible only after the closure, the closure must occur secretly. Furthermore, because neither the education nor the closure suddenly produces its advantageous and convincing effects, but rather only gradually, one can assume that the authoritarian transitional period is supposed to last for a while. On the one hand, one may still consider Fichte's closed commercial state as republican, because it is built on a rule of law designed to fulfil the common good of all citizens. On the other

hand, its rejection of the Kantian imperative of publicity expressed in *Towards Perpetual Peace* seems hardly republican, unless one partly understands republicanism in a Machiavellian way, as is the case in Fichte's essay on Machiavelli (1806). Unfortunately, Fichte himself did not address this problem in *The Closed Commercial State*.

The requirement of secrecy might be a reason why Fichte downplays the extent of the constraints resulting from the state's closure, not to mention the strict system of rights and correlative duties that constitutes his economic model:

There is no need here for severity, bans, or penal laws, but only for a very easy and very natural provision. *In one moment*, through this provision, *all silver and gold will become completely useless to the public for every purpose save exchanging it for the new national currency*.

(GA I/7: 124; CCS, 176–177)

Admittedly, there are also measures to smooth the transition, for instance,

Even those goods whose cultivation or manufacture will prove altogether impossible, and that in the future should be dropped from trade, need not be brought out of circulation all at once. Rather, this can be done little by little.

(GA I/7: 116; CCS, 166)

In fact, Fichte mentions several prohibitions and strict instructions: prices are fixed by a state that also has a monopoly on foreign trade; there are considerable restrictions on travel abroad, etc. However, gradually, the new institutions, instead of being viewed as constraints, should become supported by a new mentality:

It is clear that in a nation that has been closed off in this way, with its members living only among themselves and as little as possible with strangers, obtaining their particular way of life, institutions, and morals from these measures and faithfully loving their fatherland and everything patriotic, there will soon arise a high degree of national honor and a sharply determined national character. It will become another, entirely new nation. The introduction of national currency is its true creation.

(GA I/7: 139; CCS, 195)

Concluding Remark

The detailed measures of Fichte's *The Closed Commercial State* – and especially his problematic views on the transition to the implementation of his model of a state-directed planned economy – are not the strongest part of his economic thought. But his concept of property and the emphasis that he places on the correlative duties linked to it remain the most interesting part of his economic theory. This concept grants both labour and individual private property more significance than is the case even in Locke. Indeed, contrary to Locke, it not only allocates the product of one's labour to the producer until the introduction of money, but also guarantees each person's dominion over their labour and the product of this labour.

Notes

[1](#) *The Closed Commercial State*'s posterity includes positions and authors as diverse as the social republicanism of Charles Renouvier (see 'Fichte', in Jean Reynaud, *Encyclopédie Nouvelle*, 1st edn 1843 (reprint Geneva: Slatkine, 1991)), the democratic socialism of Ferdinand Lassalle (see *Die Philosophie Fichtes und die Bedeutung des deutschen Volksgeistes*, Berlin, 1862) and Jean Jaurès (see *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution Française*, Paris 1901–1904 (reprint Paris: Editions Sociales, 1969–1972)), Max Weber's wife Marianne Weber's corporatism ('Fichtes Sozialismus und sein Verhältnis zur Marx'schen Doktrin', in C. J. Fuchs, G. von Schulze-Gävernitz and Max Weber, *Volkswirtschaftliche Abhandlungen der Badischen Hochschulen*, vol. IV, Tübingen, 1900, 220–342) and the authoritarian economics of Nazi Germany (see, for instance, H. Brunner, *Die Wirtschaftsphilosophie Fichtes*, Nuremberg, 1935).

[2](#) 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth' *Genesis* 1.28.

[3](#) John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. V, § 31, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[4](#) Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. V, § 33.

[5](#) This concerns all kinds of activities, and can also be used as the basis for the critique of the expropriations undertaken by colonialists of the early modern period:

Think, for example, of an isolated inhabitant of a desert island who sustains himself by hunting in the island's woods. He has allowed the woods to grow as they might, but he knows them and all the inconveniences they afford for his hunting. One cannot displace or level the trees in his woods without rendering useless all the knowledge he has acquired (thus robbing him of it), without impeding his paths as he pursues game (thus making it more difficult or impossible for him to acquire his sustenance), that is, without disturbing the freedom of his efficacy.

(GA I/3: 407; FNR, 106, footnote)

[6](#) Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 71.

[7](#) See Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1922–[1927](#)).

[8](#) In his essay on Machiavelli (1806), Fichte considers the closure of the state as the only way to terminate all military conflicts.

[9](#) Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 66–67.

The *Wissenschaftslehre* and Historical Engagement



Ives Radrizzani

It is well known that Fichte's aim was to complete the system of transcendental philosophy, of which Kant – according to Fichte – had laid only the foundations¹ (a view also shared by a number of his contemporaries). Opinions may differ as to whether Fichte achieved his aim; however, this is not the place to decide. What is interesting to note in this Fichtean approach to philosophy is the idea that philosophy might be *completed*. This is because Fichte had precisely the idea of completion in mind when he preferred the term '*Wissenschaftslehre*' (*Doctrine of Science*) to the term 'philosophy', since 'philosophy' was etymologically overburdened with a dimension of quest that had henceforth become obsolete in the light of the new transcendental science.²

What is the place of history in a system programmatically claiming closure, since history itself is inherently open, at least in the direction of the future? Is a philosophy of history (or, strictly speaking, a history according to the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*) at all possible in such a framework of thought?

If philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre* can be completed, it is because it does not pretend in principle to exhaust the concrete in its concreteness and operates only at the level of principles; in other words, it performs a strictly *a priori* deduction.³ This conception of philosophy may seem too narrow or rigid to certain people, yet it is directly embedded in the tradition of the Kantian critique. Remaining loyal to this aspect of Kant's Critical philosophy, Fichte assigned to the *Wissenschaftslehre* the task of uncovering the transcendental structure of knowledge or of consciousness. The innovation he suggests mostly consists in the systematization of the transcendental conditions revealed in the course of this deduction.

On the basis of such a conception, a philosophy of history is possible only if history allows philosophy to make use of it, that is, if history offers certain elements or a structure that may be deduced *a priori*. Philosophy must elevate itself above the factual course of history in order to reveal its conditions.⁴ As Klaus Hammacher has pointed out well, Fichte intended to forge a path to history by means of speculation.⁵ This approach was hardly new in itself, since some years earlier in *The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784) Kant had already proposed to sketch the ‘leading *a priori* proposition’ of world history,⁶ by which Fichte was largely inspired.⁷

If philosophy can be completed, then the philosophy of history – to the extent that it depends on philosophy – should likewise be capable of completion, i.e., it should be possible to exhaust the *a priori* structure of the factual event. However, the purely factual element in it is ignored, since in its current state it does not form a part of philosophy understood in this sense. In other words, it should be possible to present an exhaustive deduction of the transcendental structure of history.

Unfortunately, ‘should’, the conditional, is unavoidable here. In fact, Fichte failed to provide any scientific exposition of this part of his system. Moreover, he does not appear to have accorded this discipline any place in the various plans elaborating the structure of his system.⁸ In the *Characteristics of the Present Age* (1804–5) – his major work in terms of the philosophy of history – which belongs to the category of his so-called ‘popular’ writings, he claims to have discovered the contents of the presentation ‘in the framework of a coherent conception of thought’. Yet he then remarks that he has not presented that content within such a ‘popular’ context in the ‘systematic form of this coherent conception of thought’ (GA I/8: 276; CPA, 116; translation modified). Therefore, from such popular writings as *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar* (1794) and the *Characteristics of the Present Age*, the interpreter finds himself forced to reconstruct a scientific exposition that Fichte never wrote, and to connect the fundamental propositions of the philosophy of history to their transcendental support.

In what follows we will first of all try to reconstruct the major elements of the transcendental theory of history. It is essentially composed of three parts: (1) the deduction of historicity (the entry into history), (2) the deduction of historical objectivity (knowledge of the past), and finally (3) the deduction of the *a priori* structure of history (universal plan). We will then examine the question of the usefulness of this theory. In

fact, in virtue of the Fichtean thesis of the primacy of the practical, such a theory of history can only be a means for acting in history, and this acting would be its goal. With the problem of action it then becomes necessary to abandon the strictly *a priori* level on which philosophy operates. Hence, we will have to examine how Fichte envisages the mediation between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* levels.

The Transcendental Theory of History

The Entry into History

As mentioned above, the *Wissenschaftslehre* does not presume to exhaust the concrete in its concreteness. Since it moves on the *a priori* level it cannot deduce the *a posteriori*. On the other hand, it can deduce that the *a posteriori* has to exist. To put it differently, it is worth deducing the very fact *that there is history*. The fundamental proposition of the Fichtean version of transcendental idealism states that all consciousness is self-consciousness.⁹ Therefore, if there is to be consciousness of history, consciousness must find the foundation of historicity within itself.

This deduction of ‘being-in-history’ as a transcendental condition of consciousness is closely connected with the doctrine of intersubjectivity. In particular, it is related to the theory of the summons (*Aufforderung*), and it is worth outlining its details here.¹⁰ The series of physical limitations encountered by the I in nature do not suffice to awaken consciousness. In order for the I to posit itself as an individual it also needs a moral limitation. A limitation of this kind does not offer the same necessity as a physical limitation, since it requires freedom. Thus, the I has to impose this limitation freely on itself; however, it cannot do this unless it has this concept. In addition, it cannot forge this concept alone, but it has to be communicated to it precisely by means of a ‘summons’ to determine itself freely. Accordingly, the human being is fundamentally a social being who can posit him- or herself as an individual only in interaction with other individuals who are the source of the necessary summons to awaken his or her consciousness. By means of this summons the human being becomes connected to society and to the sphere of history.

This deduction of the entry into history has an extremely strong existential resonance for the modern reader. Indeed, anyone seizing the summons addressed to him- or herself becomes plunged into facticity, and independently of his or her will becomes attached to a particular link in the chain of history: “‘Someone summons me’: this means that I am supposed to attach something to a given series of acting. The other person initiates [this series] and proceeds to a certain point, and this is the point where I have to begin’ (GA IV/3: 513; FTP, 455). It does not depend on the I whether its awakening to consciousness occurs at this particular time or in that particular place. In a general way it

is not free to determine its sphere of action. Its will does not have any involvement in its being-cast-into-the-world.

This radical facticity is perfectly compatible with the absolute freedom underpinning Fichte's entire system, because (1) the entry into history is free: I discover my facticity only when I seize the summons to free activity that is addressed to me; and (2), within the sphere of action indicated to me by the summons, I am absolutely free to determine my action.¹¹ As soon as I have seized the summons to free action as such, my response is free, whatever the particular nature of my response.¹²

Freedom is therefore at work in history, and even though Fichte uses the image of a chain to designate the latter, he indicates that it has nothing to do with a 'chain of physical necessity'. He is more specific: the chain of acting of free beings 'always occurs in leaps ... Freedom consists in this: of all that is possible, only a portion of the same is attached to the chain' (GA IV/3: 513; FTP, 456). If we look towards the past, the chain is closed, and yields a view of the totality of possibilities preserved in the course of time by historical protagonists, and which have become objectively real. On the other hand, the chain is open in the direction of the future, since the section of possibilities that will become effectively attached to this chain depends on the imprescriptible freedom of those historical protagonists. In other words, history is open, and each of its moments is undoubtedly conditioned but not determined by the 'given series of acting'. Hence, the course of history is not predetermined.

Knowledge of the Past

The second part of the deduction relates to the type of knowledge allowed by the objective enchainment of the links in the chain of acting. It is not possible to deduce *a priori* the effective course taken by history precisely because the chain ‘always progresses by jumps’ – the course of history is the result of people making use of their freedom. Therefore, a science aiming to reconstruct this chain can only be an empirical science, one based exclusively on factual proofs and furnishing a strictly *a posteriori* knowledge.¹³ Such a science fits the criteria of objectivity on account of its perceptual support; nevertheless, it necessarily remains exterior to its object since it can only reconstruct a chain of facts and not a chain of freedom.

By establishing the recognition of free beings at the heart of the phenomenal world, Fichte overcomes the Kantian dualism of phenomena and noumena, though this does not mean that Fichte accepts the possibility of intellectual intuition in the Kantian sense, i.e., the possibility of the immediate perception of the freedom of others.¹⁴ I can only infer the will of others from its manifestations.¹⁵ Now, to the degree that historical science presumes to lay claim to objectivity, it must refrain from these kinds of inferences and keep to the facts.¹⁶ It therefore does not investigate a chain of free acting always progressing by jumps, but a chain of facts placed between them in a causal relation (a chain of cause and effect).¹⁷ However, the ultimate foundation of free acting resides in the free will, and historical science (unless it transgresses its limits) remains radically cut off from the last motor of history. To express it in another way, it does not retain anything from the chain of acting except the theoretical element because the practical element is absolutely outside its sphere.

The Universal Plan

The third part of the transcendental theory of history deals with the structure of history. If it is true that the chain of free acting always progresses ‘by jumps’, and if it is therefore impossible to deduce *a priori* the effective course of history, this does not imply *ipso facto* that history fails to possess any other determination than openness. If this were the case, then it would mean that it would be impossible to give a *sense* to the events taking place in its course, due to a lack of a system of reference permitting us to measure their respective impacts. It is impossible to judge history without a meta-historical criterion, or, more precisely: history is its own judge. Or again, to use the famous expression of Schiller employed in turn by Hegel: ‘History is the tribunal of the world’.¹⁸ Fichte had already forcefully rebelled against such a conception in his *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public’s Judgement of the French Revolution*, attacking those who ‘wanted to wait until after the event had happened to designate the robber a hero or a murderer, and Socrates a criminal or a virtuous philosopher’ (GA I/1: 210–211).

Fichte believes he can find this meta-historical criterion in the very structure of reason. His thesis is that history possesses a fundamental structure independently of the always-unpredictable action of people; it is linked with the very structure of reason itself and can therefore be deduced *a priori*. The absolute I (or reason) is the principle of the system and cannot be limited, precisely because of its absoluteness. But it cannot have a consciousness of itself except by positing certain limits to itself. However, since the absoluteness of the I cannot be suppressed, the I cannot posit limits, even freely, without seeking to push these limits back, to efface progressively the otherness in a liberating and perfecting process and to reconstitute the lost unity.¹⁹ Yet since otherness (as a physical and moral limitation) was the condition of the possibility of the I, and the source of the summons by which it entered into history, it tends to suppress its own condition of possibility and to exit history. This meta-historical goal is inscribed in the very structure of reason and provides the entire historical process with a meaning.

The idea of such a meta-historical goal certainly provides a corrective to the model of an open-ended history outlined above. But it does not imply that this goal must ever be attained. Because freedom is the developmental driving force of history, the

realization of this goal is not necessary. Hence, at the horizon of humanity's entire historical development, after it has freely entered the path of history, the state of perfect freedom rationally governing the entire spectrum of human relations²⁰ only has the status of a Kantian regulative idea. Its function is to provide a key to reading history, a meta-historical standard for judging the progress achieved in the effective course of history, as well as a guide to the rational construction of the future.

Thus, history is situated between an ahistorical moment characterized by the absence of freedom (following Rousseau, Fichte also calls it the state of nature, in which humanity is entirely dominated by instinct) and a meta-historical moment characterized by the triumph of reason and freedom. The genuine historical space defined between these two poles is characterized by a process of progressive liberation from instinct.

In addition to these two poles (between which the drama of history unfolds), it is equally possible to deduce *a priori* all the stages through which history should necessarily pass during the course of liberation to attain the goal of reason. For Fichte, there are three stages associated with the two end terms of history, and they constitute the five elements of a 'universal plan'. This liberation from instinct cannot of course effectuate itself straightaway, but commences in certain individuals who take advantage of their superiority to put in place an unequal system and an authoritarian regime aimed at upholding these inequalities. The next stage is liberation from all forms of authority and it consists in the pursuit of a purely formal freedom that is equal for all. The reign of formal freedom requires in turn its correction in the form of science. The task of science is to determine theoretically the means of rationally correcting the individualistic excesses of the system of generalized egoism generated by the purely formal use of freedom. At this stage it is no longer a matter of liberating oneself from some kind of shackle at any price, but of understanding the difference between an 'empty' freedom and that 'real' freedom which is consciously working towards the advancement of the goal of reason.²¹ Finally, the last stage leading to the end of history consists in putting into practice the knowledge already acquired at the previous stage.²²

With this deduction of the universal plan – a formal framework in which the effective course of history is inscribed – everything that could be deduced *a priori* has been deduced and the purely philosophical approach to history reaches its conclusion. The results are as follows. (1) We now know why, generally speaking, there is history.

(2) We know the logic of historical truth (the conditions of seizing the progressive jumps in the chain of free acting by means of history as empirical science). (3) Finally, we know what history *should* be, in other words, we know the law for the advancement of freedom (the course history would necessarily take due to the structure of reason if people always acted freely in accordance with rational ends). In order to go further, for example, in order to measure the possible gap between what history *should be* and what it *is*, it is necessary to leave the strictly *a priori* level on which the transcendental philosophy of history must strictly remain and to consult empirical facts.

The *Wissenschaftslehre* and Historical Engagement

It therefore remains to be seen how Fichte envisages the mediation between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* levels. He himself designates the mediation of knowledge and life as the ultimate goal of history, and we can affirm without fear of exaggeration that few philosophers have been so dedicated to making sense of the events of their time as Fichte. We immediately think of his commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution, or, after the Napoleonic occupation of Germany, his glorification of the idea of a German nation in his famous *Addresses to the German Nation*, which have been so criticized and have given rise to so many misunderstandings. However, is the *a priori* knowledge he developed capable of such mediation? To put it bluntly: is the *Wissenschaftslehre* only a series of highly ingenious fantasies disconnected from all reality – an ambiguous house of cards whose function is to give a whiff of scientific credibility to tendentious standpoints – or does it offer an efficient instrument to ‘scientifically’ intervene in the effective course of history?

After for a long time being influenced by the judgements of Jacobi, Reinhold, Schelling and Hegel, the majority of Fichte’s readers preferred to view him as one of those extreme and unbalanced manifestations of the speculative faculty. Under the erroneous label of subjective idealism, or even absolute idealism, they attributed to him that insane project of wanting to create the world starting from the I, crudely confusing beings with notions of beings. In the domain of literature, this image of the philosopher fumbling about in obscure regions of abstract equations finds its most sublime expression in Madame de Staël’s witty comparison, where the profound depths of Fichtean speculation made her irresistibly think of Baron von Münchhausen extricating himself from a boggy swamp by hauling himself up by his own hair.²³

Nevertheless, this fanciful image of the philosopher barricaded up in his ivory tower pales in comparison with another tenacious cliché. For all his extravagances, Baron von Münchhausen is at most a harmless fool and not at all dangerous. Fichte, on the other hand, is a dangerous activist. Estranged from all reality, he attempts to take possession of the latter by twisting it to fit his concepts. Hence, for Benjamin Constant, Fichte is the prototype of those ‘men who believe that everything can be fixed by ordinances and laws

because they have never had to deal with real life'. And, including Friedrich Schlegel in his judgement, he exclaims that 'They are madmen, who if they were in government would repeat exactly what Robespierre did with the best intentions in the world'.²⁴ In the same vein Edgar Quinet 'is hardly surprised that Fichte, the most spiritualistic metaphysician in Germany, wrote two volumes²⁵ showing that the French Committee for Public Safety had stolen his system from him. If the pure idea survives, it would repopulate the earth if necessary; here we find the basic policies of Saint-Just, and they are identical to Fichte's entire metaphysics'.²⁶ In what follows we will examine how transcendental philosophy in its Fichtean formulation could warrant such a charge of terrorism of the pure idea.

The theory of the summons demonstrates that the human condition is essentially characterized by an involvement in history. As sure as I am conscious, I am plunged into a sphere of intersubjective relations and connected to the chain of history. The individual I does not constitute a unity somehow already formed before its encounter with another person. On the contrary, individuality can only develop out of otherness. Only when I am faced with another person can I posit myself as an I. It is only by being connected to the chain of acting that I become conscious of myself. Being freely involved in history is a part of my factual condition.

This involvement in history is not only a state of fact, it is also a duty. Indeed, because the entry into history is linked to seizing the *Soll* ('ought') included in the summons and to the moral limitation of possible actions of the individual I that is in the process of developing, history immediately finds itself invested with an ethical dimension. Thus the human being is not only a thoroughly social being plunged of necessity into historical facticity, but is in addition always invested with historical responsibility.

What about the philosopher? To be sure, insofar as he is a human being he is subjected to the same conditions as any other human being and is subject to the same duty of historical engagement. It is also clear that the strictly *a priori* nature of the science to which he has chosen to dedicate himself alienates him from the field of praxis. But philosophy is not a game,²⁷ and theoretical interest should never override or replace practical interest. Fichte argues that taking delight in juggling concepts and then losing the practical dimension from which they derive their meaning is a distortion of the spirit and has all the hallmarks of illness.²⁸ For this very reason, when pursuing the path of abstract

speculation, the philosopher must remember that speculation is not an end in itself but solely a means of guiding a concrete involvement in history.²⁹

Therefore, the philosopher cannot remain comfortably installed on the *a priori* level to which philosophy has to restrict itself, otherwise the knowledge he generates would be perfectly ‘useless’ and his life ‘a total waste and loss’. Strengthened in his general knowledge of what history *should be* (the universal plan), he has to (1) ask what history *is*, and (2) indicate and seek to put in place the means permitting him to reduce the gap between what history *is* and what it *should be*.³⁰

Making a Diagnosis of the Epoch

As mentioned above, the usefulness of the universal plan would be to furnish a key allowing us to judge history. We would now like to examine how a judgement of this kind is possible and especially to know what value to attribute to it. Since it is impossible to deduce *a priori* the effective course of history, it is impossible to make a diagnosis of an epoch based on purely rational principles.³¹ This means that any judgement about history cannot have the value of a scientific statement. The philosopher is necessarily concerned with conferring some usefulness on his science and therefore turns to the empirical world. However, if he does this, he is forced to leave the transcendental level on which this science must remain. In the confrontation between what history should be and what it is ‘everyone must consult within himself the experiences of his life and compare them with the history of the past, as well as with his expectations of the future; for here the business of the philosopher is at an end, and that of the observer of the world and of humanity begins’ (GA I/8: 196–197; CPA, 3; translation modified). Hence, it is not as a philosopher that the philosopher passes judgement on history, and as soon as philosophy exposes itself to the empirical world it cannot confine itself to its own transcendental level, so that it remains, strictly speaking, a science without application.

To say that the philosopher must open himself to the empirical world means that he must ‘examine experience’, ‘acquire empirical knowledge’, ‘study the events of former ages’, and look around himself and observe his contemporaries (GA I/3: 53–54; EPW, 171–172). In short, he must become what Fichte calls an ‘observer of the world and of humanity’. Nevertheless, such an accumulation of historical knowledge does not suffice to make a diagnosis of the epoch, i.e. to determine the place it occupies in the formal framework of the universal plan. For a ‘philosophical characterization grasps each thing in such a clear and consequential manner which the endless fluctuations of reality can never attain; this is why ... it remains in the sphere of an idealized picture’ (GA I/8: 203; CPA, 12; translation modified). The gulf between the purely *a posteriori* knowledge of the observer of the world and humanity and the purely *a priori* knowledge of the philosopher is identical to that between fluctuating reality and an idealized picture.

Any historical judgement, that is to say, the subsumption of a particular epoch under a particular stage of the synoptic picture of the possible progress of humanity, belongs

not to the domain of exact science but to that of opinion.³² It necessarily bears a margin of error due to the one-sidedness of the experiences undergone by each ‘observer of the world and humanity’. This does not mean that the judgement is merely arbitrary. In fact, between philosophical knowledge and historical knowledge Fichte distinguishes a third mode of knowledge that leaves a part to personal evaluation: he describes it as ‘philosophical–historical’ knowledge, which (as its name suggests) is supposed to mediate between the first two modes. This mixed mode is based ‘partly on experience’ and partly on philosophy, because the investigation of history has ‘a view informed by philosophy’. Fichte defines this mixed mode as the knowledge of the means necessary for the satisfaction of philosophically deduced needs.³³ The second part of the task defined above, i.e. the search for the means necessary to diminish the gap between what history *is* and what it *should be*, therefore directly depends on this mixed mode of knowledge; and the judgement of history also depends on it to the extent that the diagnosis is implicitly contained in the search for a remedy. Now that the modality and value of historical judgement have been ascertained, let us see what interpretation of the major events of his time Fichte believed he could offer in the light of his ‘universal plan’.

Fichte’s judgement of his own age is manifestly situated in the Rousseauian tradition. Among other things, we know he was an avid reader of Rousseau. The structure of the three first stages of the universal plan – the paradise lost of the state of nature, which is scarcely present any longer except among children and savages, the descent into the hell of history which starts with the birth of inequalities (second age), the growing depravity of civilization culminating in the establishment of a system of generalized egoism and the loss of all social values (third age) – this structure seems to be directly inspired by the model depicted in Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*.³⁴ Following Kant, Fichte thought that, after reaching the halfway point of its development (third age), humanity undergoes ‘the hardest of evils under the guise of outward prosperity’ (AA 8: 26; IUH, 49).³⁵ The condemnation of the age even takes on a religious connotation in Fichte. The age dominated by the cult of ‘everyone for himself’ is the age of ‘perfected sinfulness’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 9), and he emphasizes that whoever is inflamed by a love of the Absolute must consider it as ‘the worst and most corrupt of all the ages’ (GA II/7: 81).

Fichte had pronounced the same judgement long before the discovery of his *Wissenschaftslehre* and the deduction of his universal plan. In the summer of 1788 he had already sketched in his *Chance Thoughts of a Sleepless Night* the project of a work ‘that would demonstrate the *total* corruption of our governments and of our morals’, and would paint a picture of the depravity of his age, especially with regard to politics, rights, the sciences, art, the economy and education, and expose the prevailing ‘egoism and complete absence of any social virtues’ (GA II/1: 104–106). From this moment on Fichte viewed his age as the reign of evil and thought corruption was the leading motif enabling him to understand all the phenomena of his time. In 1792 he revealed to his friend von Schön his intention of becoming a Freemason, explaining to him that the Masonic institution could serve him as a means for attaining a ‘higher purpose’ (GA III/1: 328). Faced with the moral decadence in which the age took such delight, he ardently wished for the return of a moral authority such as that exercised by the knights and secret tribunals in the Middle Ages, and believed that Freemasonry, not in its historical form but thanks to the prestige surrounding it, could perform this function. Shortly afterwards, Fichte definitely asked to become a member. Finally, in the *Characteristics of the Present Age* (1804–5), Fichte still adhered to this dark diagnosis, supplying a systematic examination of the various repercussions of generalized corruption.

Nevertheless, Fichte glimpsed some encouraging possibilities in the midst of this age that he otherwise viewed in an extremely sombre light. First of all, there was the momentous discovery of Kant’s philosophy which plunged him into a new world, and, by teaching him about absolute freedom and duty, revealed to him the remedy for passing beyond the third age: ‘I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought could never be proven – for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc. – and I feel all the happier for it ... What a blessing for an age in which morality has been destroyed from its very foundations and from whose dictionaries the word *duty* has been erased!’ (GA III/I: 167; EPW, 357).³⁶ For Fichte, Kant had made a decisive breakthrough in the science of reason (fourth age). Despite all the criticisms directed at his master and Kant’s official disavowal of him, Fichte always considered himself to be a

humble follower of Kant. By systematizing the Kantian philosophical contribution and giving it ‘scientific’ form, he too hoped to add to the science of reason.

The second major event of the age was the French Revolution, which Fichte also compared to the Copernican revolution undertaken by Kant.³⁷ It is difficult to determine precisely the place Fichte assigned to it in his universal plan, for the latter originated long after the age in which Fichte sang the praises of the French Revolution. The Revolution was primarily the toppling of the system of external constraint imposed by the henchmen of throne and altar. In this respect, it could initially seem as if it should be interpreted as the transition from the second to the third age. However, several indications lead us to believe that Fichte attributed a much greater role to it. In the first place, it does not appear likely that precisely when Fichte was denouncing the depravity of his age he would be as enthusiastic as he was for the great Revolution, if the latter were simply a matter of inaugurating the ‘state of perfected sinfulness’, even if this still represented an ‘advance’ on the regime of external constraint prevalent in the second age. It would then also be difficult to understand the parallel with the Copernican Revolution, or even with his own project.³⁸ The view Fichte retrospectively cast on this event provides us with an extremely valuable clarification concerning the meaning it held for him. He wrote in 1813 that ‘The French nation was occupied in fighting for the reign of freedom and rights’ (GA II/16: 62). Yet, if the French Revolution is an undertaking aimed at promoting the same goals as the Copernican Revolution and the *Wissenschaftslehre*, of which it would constitute a kind of practical complement, it would be tempting to conclude that Fichte interpreted it as an attempt to inaugurate the fifth and final age. Why then did he consider Kant’s Copernican Revolution to be ‘infinitely more important’ (GA I/1: 204)? In his hesitation to classify the French Revolution under one of the categories of the universal plan we believe we discern the sign of a profound disquiet on the part of Fichte, who agreed with the goals of the Revolution but not with the means employed. The French Revolution was based on ‘external force’ (GA III/2: 298; EPW, 385), and not on science, and even if Fichte enthusiastically embraced the nation promising to promote political liberty,³⁹ he recoiled in horror before the frequent ‘return to brutal violence’ (GA III/3: 171). He admitted that no reasonable person could ‘contest the *principles* on which the French Republic is based, or any other formed on the same model, since these are the only ones compatible with human dignity’. However, he saw that republican practices

were scarcely better than those of the opposing party and ‘sometimes even appeared to be worse’ (GA III/3: 348).⁴⁰ Once the Revolution had been betrayed by the ‘usurper’ Napoleon he definitively kept his distance, yet not from the ideals of the Revolution but from the application of the Revolution. He remarked a little later that the failure had been foreseeable; it rested on ‘chaotic musings over speculative tasks devoid of speculative principles ... it is then hardly surprising that on the basis of such principles it unfolded in the way it did!’ (GA II/16: 67).⁴¹ And even if speculation is merely a means with respect to acting, it is an indispensable means.⁴² In other words, what the Revolution really lacked in order for it to succeed was the *Wissenschaftslehre*!

The third major event is Napoleon’s ‘usurpation’ of power; he was the executioner of the Revolution for Fichte.⁴³ The new political state of affairs required a thorough re-evaluation of the situation. France no longer embodied the values of progress. Despite having a few years earlier wanted to become a citizen of the ‘Great Republic’,⁴⁴ it was with the worst possible fears that Fichte observed the advancing Napoleonic troops. After the defeat of the Prussian forces at Jena and Auerstadt in October 1806 he decided to flee to Denmark via Königsberg. According to the excellent formulation of Xavier Léon, ‘the legitimate war had changed camps’.⁴⁵ France had failed in its mission. If possible, it was up to Germany to take up the banner! The *Addresses to the German Nation* were written entirely with the goal of stimulating the spirit of resistance with regard to the policy of brutal expansionism pursued by Napoleon. In Fichte’s mind this policy aroused a fear of, if not a return to barbarity, then at least a regression to the second age – i.e. that of submission to a foreign authority. History continued to make strides. He wrote that ‘time is taking giant strides’. An age characterized scarcely three years earlier as ‘the current epoch’ had now become relegated to the past: ‘it has at some point run its course and come to an end’ (GA I/10: 104; AGN, 9). The *Addresses* therefore occupy a pivotal period in universal history. One epoch concludes, and another is about to commence. The new epoch must necessarily be that of the science of reason, if the stages of the universal plan follow according to a law of physical necessity; this is not the case, since freedom is the driving force of history. Hence it is a critical moment. For Fichte, the ideals of the Revolution have ceased to be defended by France, so that the hopes of ‘all modern humanity’, of those ‘among every people ... who refuse to believe that the great promises made to the human race of a reign of law, reason and truth are vain and an

empty phantom' (GA I/10: 297; AGN, 195), should now be pinned on Germany: this reorientation of universal history depends on Germany's capacity to resist the French invader. Either Germany abdicates and humanity enters into a period of decline, or it is galvanized by the 'new education' advocated in the *Addresses*, discovering sufficient internal forces to elevate itself to the standpoint of science. Faced with the 'phantom of a universal monarchy' fuelling the Napoleonic project of grinding down 'all the seeds of what is human in humanity' (GA I/10: 273; AGN, 172), and the despotic aim of imposing by means of military force the one-sided culture of a nation on all the other nations, Fichte proposed a universal monarchy of science under the aegis of the German nation, fixing as mission for the German people to 'conquer the government of the world by science' (GA II/9: 415).

Thus, in the light of his *a priori* plan, this is how Fichte believed he could decipher what he considered to be the major events of his time. Let us recall that such a reading would not in principle have any claim to the certitude of an exact science. Depending in part on empirical knowledge that cannot be found united all at once in a single 'observer of the world and of humanity' on account of the finite nature of human reason, it necessarily contains (1) a risk of error, since the philosopher is always susceptible to mistakes when identifying the present parties; and (2) an element of instability, since the chain of observed historical facts is not closed and the relations between the diverse parties are subject to change. This means that in the name of the same principles the philosopher could be led to adhere to different causes depending on the changes in his observations. Nevertheless, there exists a common denominator between these diverse and seemingly utterly opposed stances: the philosophical ingredient of the philosophical-historical mode of knowledge. In fact, the engagement of the philosopher is always made in the name of the principles which have been 'scientifically' deduced in the central part of his system. Therefore, the cause he defends is the one which seems, according to his historical knowledge, most in conformity with these principles.

We have seen in what manner Fichte judged history; it now remains for us to outline the means he prescribed to intervene in history in a concrete manner and to seek to reduce the gap between what history *is* and what it *should be*.

The Active Construction of the Future

In this final section, in passing from the plan of the interpretation of history to that of acting in history, we descend a rung lower in the problem of application. Thanks to the philosophical–historical mode of knowledge developed above, we are now supposed to know ‘the particular cultural level of one’s society at a particular time’; we are also supposed to know the ‘particular level it has to reach next’; on the other hand, we do not know the ‘means it has to employ to do so’; and, if we are to believe the text *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*, this lacuna ought to be filled in order that this knowledge remains ‘useful for society’ and is not ‘completely fruitless’ (GA I/3: 53; EPW, 171). But we now encounter a formidable difficulty, and, to express it perfectly clearly, if this knowledge of the means has to be a criterion of utility for the Fichtean philosophy, then we would have to conclude the total uselessness of the latter.

The knowledge of the means that is required presupposes a manageable progression of the chain of free acting; in other words, the philosopher should possess a knowledge of the future analogous to the historian’s knowledge of the past, so that, rejecting the dimension of freedom, he merely considers a series of facts placed in a relation of dependence (chain of cause and effect). The infinitude of the empirical world and hence the necessary incompleteness and one-sidedness of the observation of the world and of humanity posed a first limit to the philosopher’s will to master the real world; the ‘progression by jumps’ in the chain of freedom imposes a second limit.

On the one hand, humanity’s pursuit of a final goal is in fact based on absolute freedom (i.e. obedience to the moral law); however, the latter can only be conditioned and not determined by the calculation of the technical–practical requirements of the action commensurate with this goal:

When I regard my will as a fact and efficient cause in the world of sense determined according to the dictates of conscience, I am indeed compelled to refer it to that earthly purpose of humanity as a means for accomplishing an end; it is not as if I should first survey the world plan and from this knowledge calculate what I had to do; but the specific action that conscience directly enjoins me to do immediately reveals itself to me as the only means through which in my position I can contribute to the attainment of that end.

(GA I/6 281; VM₁, 442–443; translation modified)

In other words, knowledge of the means (if we admit that such knowledge is possible) could not turn me away from what the voice of conscience directs me to do, if we suppose that the duty and intended efficacy happen to be in conflict.

On the other hand, this calculation is simply impossible, for ‘at any given moment we do not know what is most conducive to this end’ (GA I/6 278; VM₁, 438; translation modified). In fact, the calculation implies that the will belonging to the chain of freedom should be sure of its result in the chain of facts. But, Fichte declares, ‘I am responsible only for the *will* ... but not for the result’ (GA I/6 282; VM₁, 444). In line with Kant, Fichte defends a radical discontinuity between the order of phenomena and that of noumena: good will may produce the opposite effect to what was intended; an ill-intentioned action could apparently have beneficial results:

But is my goal then always attained? – is it not enough that we will what is good in order that it may happen? Alas! Most good resolutions are entirely lost for this world, and others even appear to hinder the purpose which they were designed to promote. On the other hand, the most despicable passions of men, even their vices and crimes, often forward more certainly the good cause than the endeavours of the virtuous man who will never do evil that good may result!

(GA I/6 277; VM₁, 438; translation modified)

The affirmation of such discontinuity between the intention (of which only I am the master) and the act (which is inscribed in the sensible world to the exact extent to which it obeys the laws governing it and eludes me) makes it impossible to determine the appropriate means for the intended goal. The pursuit of a final goal for humanity is therefore protected from any kind of attempt at instrumentalization.

This declared agnosticism of the consequences of our acting must not lead us to refrain from and give up acting, for acting is the most profound core of our being, our essence and our destiny.⁴⁶ Whatever doubt we may harbour concerning the success of our undertakings, invested as we are with historical responsibility, we are in some way ‘condemned’ always to engage ourselves ever more in action with all our forces and to fight for progress.

Our attempts may have an uncertain conclusion or even terminate in glaring failure, but this can only produce despair in those who adopt a purely ethical point of view and whose obedience to the commandment of duty is blind.⁴⁷ On the other hand, for those who raise themselves up to the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre* or to the standpoint of religion, Fichte affirms that ‘there is no longer anything displeasing and deformed in the world’ (GA I/8: 381; CPA, 267). The religious point of view does not eliminate the discrepancy between the chain of freedom and the chain of the results of freedom (the chain of facts), but it makes one understand the necessity of everything.

Certainly, [the religious man] does not understand *how* every single moment of this life is contained in that eternal development of one original divine life, because the infinite has no limit, and can therefore never be grasped by him. However, he immediately knows and clearly perceives that all these moments are absolutely only contained within that development of one life.

(GA I/8: 380; CPA, 265; translation modified)

The religious point of view does not have any direct practical consequences: ‘True religiosity ... does not appear in the phenomenal world and it does not drive the human being at all to do what he would have otherwise done without it’ (GA I/8: 379; CPA, 263; translation modified). Like the moral person, the religious person acts out of duty, but in his eyes the duty is clothed with a higher significance because he understands its necessity: ‘It is necessity which guides us and our race, and it is not by any means a mere blind necessity, but that same perfectly clear and transparent inner necessity of divine being; and only after we have come under its gentle guidance can we be truly free and penetrate being’ (GA I/8: 305–306; CPA, 156–157; translation modified). Supported by his faith in Providence, and hence convinced of the necessity of everything, the religious person cannot despair any longer about the apparent lack of success of his undertakings.

Conscious of the limits of his reading of history and of the possible inadequacy of his efforts to achieve his proposed universal goal, Fichte insists that man has to act in conformity with the voice of duty. If he is aided by a religious vision – or furthermore by the point of view of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, or the point of view of the Absolute – he

calmly looks upon the world and does not regret his actions, even if he has the impression that they have carried him further away from, rather than drawn him closer to, his goal.

We have reached the end of our study, and therefore reaffirm that only a recourse to the religious point of view ultimately allows the Fichtean system, if not to effect a painless transition from the *a priori* to the *a posteriori* level, then at least to render acceptable the gap which necessarily remains, and to smooth over its roughness, so as to comprehend the relation among speculative inquiry, political judgements and moral activism. Far from extolling a terrorism of the pure idea for which he is often reproached, Fichte's philosophy offers a radical critique of the attempts to master rationally the political sphere.

Notes

Translated from the French by Laure Cahen-Maurel and David W. Wood, revised by David James.

1 See, for example, the ‘First Introduction’ to the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where Fichte asserts that ‘Kant ... constructed no system, but only wrote *Critiques*, i.e., preliminary inquiries concerning philosophy’. Fichte’s two principal criticisms of Kant are (1) that he had not ‘systematically established’ ‘[a]ll the human mind’s modes of acting, as well as the laws governing the same’ but simply ‘picked [them] up from experience’; and (2) that he had only furnished proofs ‘by means of induction and not through deduction’ (see the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* in the version of the so-called ‘Krause manuscript’: GA IV/3: 307–535, here 325; for a second version, see GA IV/2: 17–305. English translation: FTP, 79–80).

2 See the ‘Zurich *Wissenschaftslehre*’: ‘The term *philosophy* can hardly be retained. It has become unsuitable ... Hence, philosophy, or what we seek, is science *par excellence*, *Wissenschaftslehre*’ (GA IV/3: 22). See also *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre or, of So-Called ‘Philosophy’*: ‘Afterwards, this science (if philosophy ever becomes a science) will be justified in casting off a few names which it has previously assumed out of (a by no means exaggerated) modesty: the names “esoteric amusement”, “hobby” and “dilettantism”’ (GA I/2: 117–118; EPW, 106). As science, philosophy develops ‘a cognition that is not merely discursive and pieced together from experience, but systematic, in the sense that it all can be derived from a single point to which everything else is connected’ (GA IV/3: 328; FTP, 84).

3 On the strictly *a priori* procedure of philosophy, see, for example, ‘A philosophical view of the present age can only be called philosophical if it traces the diverse phenomena lying before us in experience back to the unity of a single common principle, and if this one common principle can in turn completely deduce and explain these phenomena ... If the philosopher must deduce from the unity of his presupposed principle all the possible phenomena of experience, it is obvious that in the fulfilment of this purpose he does not require the aid of experience; that in following it out he proceeds merely as a philosopher, confining himself strictly within the limits imposed upon him by this character, paying no heed whatever to experience, and thus

absolutely *a priori*, as this method is termed in scientific terminology’ (GA I/8: 196; CPA, 2–3; translation modified).

On the irreducibility of history to the *a priori* level of the philosopher, see, for example, ‘Now this development of the human race does not take place at once, as the philosopher pictures to himself in thought, but, disturbed by foreign powers, it takes place gradually, at different times, in different places and under particular circumstances. These conditions do not by any means arise from the idea of the world plan, but are unknown to it; and since there is no other idea of a world plan, they are an absolute unknown to philosophy: and here begins the pure empiricism of history; its *a posteriori* element; history in its own proper form’ (GA I/8: 304; CPA, 154; translation modified).

Reinhard Lauth has shown very well how transcendental philosophy admits *a priori* and in principle that the whole of reality has a non-deducible part that can only be grasped *a posteriori*, because it is essentially based on a non-deducible idea of freedom. See ‘Le véritable enjeu des *Discours à la nation allemande* de Fichte’, in *Approches de Fichte*, ed. Ives Radrizzani, *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* **123** (1991): 269.

[4](#) ‘The philosopher must provide an account of the conditions of factual existence, yet insofar as they lie beyond all factual existence and all empiricism’ (GA I/8: 298; CPA, 146; translation modified).

[5](#) Klaus Hammacher, ‘Comment Fichte accède à l’histoire’, *Archives de philosophie* **25** (1962): 388.

[6](#) Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784) (AA 8: 15–31; IUH, 41–53).

[7](#) This topic requires a more specialized treatment. Suffice it to say that Fichte had already found in Kant the principle underlying his rejection of the Rousseauian conception: the idea that humanity could not remain at the state of nature if it were not to miss its vocation. See AA 8: 21 and 25–26; IUH, 44–45, 48–49; GA I/3: 64; EPW, 181).

[8](#) See the ‘Hypothetical Division of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’, Part III of the small treatise entitled *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2: 150–152; EPW, 133–135), as well as the ‘Deduction of the Subdivisions of the

Wissenschaftslehre’ in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (GA IV/3: 520–523; FTP, 467–474).

[9](#) See *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: ‘We are engaged in the presentation of the central thought [of transcendental idealism]: all consciousness is nothing but self-consciousness. As part of our presentation of this point, we must provide a genetic demonstration that – and how – the sort of consciousness with which we are ordinarily familiar flows from our consciousness of ourselves’ (GA IV/3: 481, supplemented by GA IV/2: 197–198; FTP, 381).

[10](#) This doctrine occupies a central place in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (§§ 13ff.), and is also present in the *Foundations of Natural Right* and in the *System of Ethics*. For a more detailed treatment of this theory, see my monograph, *Vers la fondation de l’intersubjectivité chez Fichte – Des Principes à la Doctrine de la Science Nova Methodo* (Paris: Vrin, 1993).

[11](#) See *Foundations of Natural Right*: ‘The subject has freely chosen; it has absolutely given to itself the nearest limiting determination of its own activity’ (GA I/3: 349; FNR, 40).

[12](#) For example, see the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: ‘Either I act in accordance with the summons or I do not act in accordance with it. If I have understood this summons, I can, of course, still decide to determine myself not to act [in the manner required]; I can decide to resist the summons and can act by not acting at all. Granted, the summons must [first] be understood; then, however, one must act, even if one does not heed this summons ... In every case, I give expression to my freedom’ (GA IV/3: 469; FTP, 351–352).

[13](#) ‘History is mere empiricism: it only has to furnish facts, and all its proofs are founded upon facts alone’ (GA I/8: 301; CPA: 150, translation modified).

[14](#) ‘Even though I consider everyone to be rational and free, no one demands that I hear or see his rationality; no one demands that I should perceive his freedom and rationality through any of my external senses’ (GA IV/3: 510; FTP, 448). On Fichte’s position with regard to Kant’s notion of intellectual intuition, see GA IV/3: 347–348, 425; FTP, 115, 261–262.

[15](#) ‘This free intellect outside of me is quite definitely the counterpart to myself, though I arrive at this intellect by a different route (by an ascending one). In my own case, I begin with the concept of freedom and then proceed to perform an individual free action. Here, on the other hand, in the case of a [free] being outside of me, I ascend from an action that appears to be the cause of the same, which I merely infer, and of which I cannot have any sensation’ (GA IV/3: 512–513; FTP, 454).

[16](#) ‘[The task of the mere collector of facts] is highly honourable if properly pursued. He has absolutely no support, no guide and no fixed point, except the mere outward succession of years and centuries, wholly irrespective of their content ... He is an annalist. ... [In each epoch] the most diverse elements lie in immediate contact and are intermixed ... The mere empirical historian must faithfully collect these elements as he finds them and place them in order beside each other’ (GA I/8: 304–305; CPA, 155; translation modified).

[17](#) See *The Vocation of Man*: ‘In the world of sense, which works on a chain of material causes and effects, and in which whatever happens merely depends on what proceeded it, it is never a matter of *how and with what motives and intentions* an action is performed, but *only what the action is*’ (GA I/6: 279; VM₁, 440; translation modified).

[18](#) Friedrich Schiller, ‘Resignation’ (a poem from 1784), v. 95; G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1817)*, ed. W. Bonsiepen and K. Grotzsch, *Hegel. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 13 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), § 448.

[19](#) See, for example, *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*: ‘All of the individuals who belong to the human race differ among themselves. There is only one thing in which they are in complete agreement: their ultimate goal – perfection ... If all men could be perfect ... then they would be totally equal to each other. They would constitute but one single subject ... Accordingly, the ultimate and highest goal of society is the complete unity and unanimity of all of its members’ (GA I/3: 40; EPW, 159).

[20](#) ‘The goal of humanity on this earth is to order with freedom all the relations in life according to reason’ (GA I/8: 198; CPA, 5; translation modified).

[21](#) Fichte makes the third epoch, which he equates with the present age, ‘the age of empty freedom’ (GA I/8: 209; CPA, 21). He contrasts this empty freedom with the real freedom of a person who makes use of the science of reason ‘to forge a path up until being’ (GA I/8: 306; CPA, 156–157).

[22](#) The deduction of the universal plan is the subject of the first lecture of the *Characteristics of the Present Age*.

[23](#) This anecdote had the whole of Berlin in stitches and is notably related by George Ticknor who was personally present at the meeting between Fichte and Madame de Staël. See *Life, Letters and Journals of George Ticknor* (London, 1876), I, 410ff. This and other reports are quoted in, FG, III, 240–244.

[24](#) Benjamin Constant, *Journal* [7 May 1804], in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 277 (FG, III, 251).

[25](#) An allusion to the *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public’s Judgement of the French Revolution*.

[26](#) Edgar Quinet, *Le christianisme et la Révolution française* (Paris: Fayard, 1984) (reprint of the second edition), 242.

[27](#) See, for example, *The Closed Commercial State*: ‘Nevertheless, the philosopher, so long as he holds his science to be not a mere game but something serious, will never either grant or presuppose that it is *absolutely* impossible to carry out his proposals. For in this case, he would without doubt employ his time toward something more useful than what is, by his own account, a mere play of concepts’ (GA I/7: 42; CCS, 83).

[28](#) *Ascetics as an Appendix to Morality* § 4: ‘Remedies particularly against the corruption of the mere speculative disposition’ (GA II/5: 73ff.).

[29](#) See, for example, *Ascetics as an Appendix to Morality*: ‘We have to bear in mind that knowledge is not the final goal [of the researcher], but that the entire and complete development of man is the final goal’ (GA II/5: 75) and the *Philosophy of Freemasonry*: ‘The will is not for the sake of knowledge, but knowledge for the sake of the will’ (GA I/8: 443).

30 ‘It is, therefore, not enough merely to know what talents man has and the means for developing them. Such knowledge would still always remain entirely fruitless. In order to obtain the desired utility, an additional step is required: one must know the particular cultural level of one’s society at a particular time, as well as the particular level it has to reach next and the means it has to employ to do so’ (GA I/3: 53; EPW, 171). Also see the ‘Sketch of a Plan for Founding a Critical Institute’ that Fichte sent to the Schlegel brothers. Fichte explains that this ‘Institute’ would present a ‘programmatic history of literature and art’, and would have dealt with history especially. The latter discipline would have consisted of two parts: (1) an introductory part (corresponding to what we have developed under the name of the transcendental philosophy of history), whose function is to ‘indicate what history should be’; and (2) ‘contemporary history’, which ‘constantly examines things in the light of this idea up to any improvements that ensue’ (GA III/4: 168–171).

31 ‘One cannot, however, determine the level of a particular society at a particular time solely on the basis of reason. For this one has to examine experience as well’ (GA I/3: 53; EPW, 171).

32 Fichte speaks of a ‘declared opinion’; he affirms that he ‘can only assert this opinion, not prove it. Such a proof lies beyond the domain of the philosopher and belongs to that of the observer of the world and humanity’ (GA I/8: 207; CPA, 18; translation modified).

33 GA I/3: 53; EPW, 171.

34 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’Inégalité parmi les hommes* (Amsterdam, 1755). Fichte knew this text very well, yet he took a more critical stance towards it in *The Characteristics of the Present Age* (GA I/8: 330; CPA, 192).

35 ‘For my part I am of the opinion that the present age stands exactly in the middle of the whole span of time ... on the basis of my earlier calculation it is in the age that was the third age’ (GA I/8: 206–207; CPA, 16; translation modified).

36 Fragment of a letter from Fichte to Friedrich August Weißhuhn in 1790 (August–September).

[37](#) ‘There is one and only one sure way to prevent violent revolutions: to thoroughly instruct people in their rights and duties. In this respect the French Revolution gives us indications and colours to illuminate the picture for the weak-sighted. Another infinitely more important one [an allusion to the Copernican Revolution], of which I will not go into detail here, has furnished us with the materials’ (GA I/1: 204).

[38](#) See especially Fichte’s draft of a letter (to Baggesen?), April–May 1795: ‘My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves ... During the very years when France was using external force to win its political freedom I was engaged in an inner struggle with myself and with all deeply rooted prejudices, and this is the struggle which gave birth to my system ... Thus in a certain sense this system already belongs to the nation of France’ (GA III/2: 298; EPW, 385–386).

[39](#) See Fichte’s letter to Franz Wilhelm Jung, 5 September (?) 1798 (GA III/3: 138).

[40](#) Letter from Fichte to F. W. Jung, 10 May 1799.

[41](#) On the usurpation of Napoleon, see Reinhard Lauth’s excellent article ‘Le véritable enjeu des *Discours à la nation allemande* de Fichte’, 256ff.

[42](#) See *Philosophy of Freemasonry*: ‘Acting is surely the thing, the *ultimate thing*! Yet why do you want to act without examining and knowing in detail what you do?’ (GA I/8: 442).

[43](#) Betraying the revolutionary ideals is the crime for which Fichte could never forgive Napoleon: ‘Those people who want to speak as badly of him as possible always point only to the bloody corpse of the Prince Enghien, as if this was the pinnacle of his deeds. I mean another one, however, in relation to which the murder of Enghien pales in comparison almost to nothing ... The French nation was struggling to attain the realm of freedom and right ... As this self-knowledge began to dawn, the supreme direction of affairs – I shall remain silent concerning through which means – fell to this man ... If there had been any affinity with this concept [of freedom] in his way of thinking ... he would not have given up this end, but instead sought the means to it. The fact would not have remained hidden from him that this means is a regular education of the French nation towards the standpoint of freedom lasting perhaps for

several generations ... What he instead did, how he cunningly and slyly cheated the nation of its freedom, need not be set out here' (GA II/16: 61–62).

[44](#) See Fichte's letter to F. W. Jung, 5 September (?) 1798: '[As a lover of political freedom and of that nation promising to propagate it], I would not desire anything else than to dedicate my life to the service of this great Republic'; and, in a letter from 10 May 1799 addressed to the same correspondent: 'Clearly, from now on [after the massacre of French emissaries at Rastadt], only the French Republic can be the fatherland of the honest man ... I hereby solemnly place myself ... in the hands of the Republic' (GA III/3: 138 and 349).

[45](#) Quoted by Martial Gueroult in his article 'Fichte et la Révolution Française', reprinted in Martial Gueroult, *Études sur Fichte* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974), 234. The reference to Xavier Léon is inexact and we have not been able to locate the source.

[46](#) 'Not for idle contemplation of yourself ... no, you are here for action' (GA I/6 253; VM₁, 406; translation modified) and 'We do not act because we know, but we know because we are called upon to act: practical reason is the root of all reason' (GA I/6: 265; VM₁, 421).

[47](#) '[The moral man] obeys the law of duty in his breast, absolutely because it is a law unto him; and he does whatever reveals itself as his duty, absolutely because it is duty. But does he therein understand himself? – This duty, to which at every moment he consecrates his whole existence, does he know what it is really in itself and what is its ultimate aim? So little does he know this, that he loudly declares it ought to be so absolutely because it ought; and makes this very impossibility of comprehending and understanding the law, this absolute abstraction from the meaning of the law and the consequences of the deed, a characteristic mark of genuine obedience ... His obedience therefore remains a blind obedience ... If there lies in reason itself a power and therefore an impulse to penetrate to the meaning of the law of duty, then this impulse will be a source of constant disturbance and dissatisfaction to him' (GA I/8: 379–380; CPA, 263–264; translation modified).

Ending Individuality: The Mission of a Nation in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*



Alexander Aichele

The *Addresses to the German Nation* is, by far, the most controversial of Fichte's works. Academic opinion concerning the content of these addresses ranges from regarding them as the centrepiece of Fichte's philosophy of history or political philosophy to brushing them aside as pure Prussian propaganda. And, if the *Addresses* are taken seriously at all, assessments vary between cosmopolitan, even socialist utopian, readings and proto-National Socialist ones.¹

I want to show, first of all, that without any doubt the *Addresses* are a serious contribution to political philosophy based on an idealist philosophy of history and, secondly, that their content concerns the foundation of a totalitarian state of universal, but certainly not cosmopolitan, Germanness in which national community eliminates individualism. The first part will place the *Addresses* in the context of Fichte's philosophical development, and the second part deals with their most important features, in particular his criticisms of enlightenment, his educational ideas and his concept of originality (*Ursprünglichkeit*).

The Addresses to the German Nation and the Characteristics of the Present Age

Denied after Napoleon's crushing defeat of the Prussian army in 1806 the active role in the field as a kind of military chaplain² to which he aspired, Fichte focused on political issues.³ The resulting *Addresses to the German Nation* derive from a series of public lectures held every Sunday after service between 13 December 1807 and 20 March 1808 at the Prussian Academy of Sciences. Fichte repeats his original announcement (GA I/9: 289) in the Foreword of the *Addresses*. They 'are a continuation of my *Characteristics of the Present Age*, which I presented during the winter of 1804–5 in the same location (and which were printed by this publisher in 1806). What had to be said to the public in and through them is expressed clearly enough in the work itself, and it therefore had no need of a foreword' (GA I/10: 99; AGN, 3). Therefore, in order to understand the *Addresses* properly, one has to turn first to the *Characteristics of the Present Age*.

Philosophy of history

The *Characteristics of the Present Age* does not aim at historiographical description but at a ‘philosophical picture of the present age ... which traces the manifold which lies before us in experience back to the unity of the one common principle, and in turn deduces that manifold from this unity and completely explains it’ (GA I/8: 196; CPA, 2; translation modified). This claim, however, does not propose a determination of each and every single event in history by means of some highest principle. Otherwise there would be no such thing as history at all, whose whole movement is completely formed by free human actions that are the source of contingency in the world.⁴ Since even the possibility of history depends on human freedom, the philosopher’s deductive conceptual principle cannot be obtained from experience. On the contrary, he must ‘independently of all experience seek out a concept [*Begriff*] of the age, which as concept can be found in no experience whatsoever, and present the ways in which this concept enters experience as the necessary phenomena of this age’ (GA I/8: 196; CPA, 2; translation modified). What Fichte intends to provide is a transcendental explanation of a certain kind of event by exhibiting the necessary relation of this kind of event to a certain general concept which is obtained *a priori*. Insofar as this involves purely conceptual relations, scientific knowledge of history is possible.

Since human freedom is the necessary condition of history, an *a priori* distinction between different ages can only be made according to all the different possible relations between the ideas of freedom and humankind. If there is more than one such relation, the relations may change, and if they may change, the form of explanation offered exclusively by a philosophy of history should be of use. These conceptual relations in themselves form integral parts of the logical totality of ‘the whole of time’ and ‘presuppose a unifying concept of this time, the concept of a pre-determined, although only gradually developing, completion of this time, in which each successive period is determined by the preceding one ... it presupposes a *world plan*’ (GA I/8: 197; CPA, 3; translation modified). Leaving aside all metaphysical implications, the different periods of universal time are clearly logically deducible, while any single events that fill them are not. These events are, however, like Kant’s categories, objects of juridical deduction in the sense of the legitimation of the classification of them as belonging to a certain age,

that is, their being subsumed under the concept of one age or another one.⁵ Thus Fichte offers the following summary: ‘The former, the world plan, is the concept that unifies the entire life of humankind on earth; the latter, the chief epochs of this life, are the concepts that unify each particular age of which we have just spoken, from which in turn the same phenomena are to be deduced’ (GA I/8: 197; CPA, 3; translation modified).

Since the world plan both determines the succession of the different ages and, at the same time, unifies ‘the progressive life of the species [*Gattung*], by no means that of the individual’ (GA I/8: 198; CPA, 4; translation modified), history takes a linear course towards a universal end. History’s teleological principle is as follows: ‘*the end of the life of humankind on earth is this: that in the same life humankind may freely order all its relations according to reason*’ (GA I/8: 198; CPA, 4; translation modified). Therefore, the relation between reason and freedom acts as a criterion when it comes to classifying ages. The former, being ‘the basic law of the life of a human species’ (GA I/8: 199; CPA, 5; translation modified), is the necessary condition of the possibility of humankind in general, while the latter is the necessary condition of any genuinely human action.

This leads to a fundamental division of history ‘into two principal epochs and ages: the one in which the species exists and lives without as yet having freely ordered its relations according to reason; and the other in which this rational arrangement is freely brought about’ (GA I/8: 198–199; CPA, 5; translation modified). Since there is no difference in reason in general, it is the conscious establishment of such an order which distinguishes these two principal ages from each other. While during the first epoch ‘reason acts as obscure instinct’, and for lack of insight into the grounds of its activity not ‘through freedom’, it is clearly conscious of these grounds in the second epoch (GA I/8: 199; CPA, 5; translation modified). Moral freedom, therefore, consists in ‘*consciousness or the science of reason*’ (GA I/8: 199; CPA, 5; translation modified). This, however, by itself does not imply acting according to reason. Thus, from both the possibility of consciously acting contrary to reason and the opposition between freedom and instinct further differences emerge.

Fichte finally comes up with five ages. The life of humankind starts with the ‘epoch of the absolute dominion of reason by means of instinct: *the state of innocence of the human species*’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 7; translation modified). Since reason by itself

advances to consciousness of itself, that is, of its freedom, this state of innocence has to be left. This is brought about ‘by the more powerful individuals of the species’ (GA I/8: 200: CPA, 6) not only pursuing their private interest but also acting in the service of instinctive reason. Such representatives of reason turn ‘the results of reason as instinct ... into an *external ruling authority*, upheld by coercive means’ (GA I/8: 200; CPA, 6; translation modified). The founding of the political state marks the second epoch and the beginning of history in the stricter sense. It is ‘the age of positive systems of life and doctrine, which never go back to their ultimate foundations, and hence have no power to convince but on the contrary merely desire to compel, and demand blind faith and unconditional obedience: *the state of incipient sin*’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 7; translation modified). But such coercive rule cannot be legitimate since no universal grounds for submission that are comprehensible to every rational being can be given. Therefore, a common right to refuse to obey exists, which again takes the form of instinct ‘as the impulse to personal freedom’ (GA I/8: 200; CPA, 6), thus leading to liberation from the dominion of reason as instinct. However, as reason has not yet come to self-consciousness and instinctive reason no longer rules, ‘reason in any form’ is eliminated and ‘the age of absolute indifference towards all truth, and of complete lack of restraint without any guidance: *the state of completed sinfulness*’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 7; translation modified) begins. Such is the diagnosis of his own present time that Fichte makes in 1804.

At this point of collective unfreedom individuals have to press ahead again for the sake of absolute freedom and make the transition to moral freedom. Fichte is doubtlessly referring to his own philosophical work. Of course, neither working on nor completing the *Wissenschaftslehre* would amount to a departure from the previous state. Rather, the *Wissenschaftslehre* has to be approved universally as the one valid science of reason which, at the same time, explains the idea of freedom. Only then dawns the fourth age ‘in which truth is recognized as the highest thing, and is loved before all other things: *the state of incipient justification*’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 7; translation modified). When this science is commonly employed in all practical relations, history comes to an end with the ‘epoch of reason as art: the age in which humanity with more sure and unerring hands builds itself up into a fitting image and representative of reason: *the state of completed justification and sanctification*’ (GA I/8: 201; CPA, 7).

Since Fichte paints a philosophical picture of his own present age hardly any remarks on the last two epochs are to be found. With the *Addresses*, however, it is another matter. Furthermore, they should be understood as an attempt to intervene in the course of history in order to bring about these epochs. Simply trying to bring them about would mean that Fichte's views on philosophy had changed. According to the *Characteristics of the Present Age*, a philosopher has to abstain 'from the vain desire that his age should be impelled forward to some obvious extent through his exertions' (GA I/8: 203; CPA, 9). If, therefore, the *Addresses*, which beyond any reasonable doubt aim to have a political and historical impact, are of any philosophical relevance at all, Fichte must be seen to have changed his position concerning the philosopher's influence on the course of history.

His essay *On Machiavelli as Author, with Selections from His Writings*, written and translated in Königsberg, where the Prussian King and government had fled during the winter of 1806–7,⁶ provides evidence of this change. Fichte used parts of this essay as an introduction to the published version of his *Addresses*.⁷ Now, it is Machiavelli's empirical account of history and his decidedly realistic approach to political issues which fascinate Fichte. From his point of view, Machiavelli discovers some law-like (in a mechanical sense) rules governing the course of material history, and knowledge of these rules favours individual attempts to guide history by political means. In short, Machiavelli shows Fichte the way to offering some philosophical advice concerning policy without forcing him to give up his *a priori* model of history.

While the 'whole part of Machiavelli's doctrines on how to bring reluctant people under the yoke of the law' (GA I/9: 240) is outdated, his reflections on foreign policy are not. Here there are 'eternal' – that is, philosophically justifiable – 'rules which the intellect and reason provide for the administration of states' (GA I/9: 244). The supreme principle of all foreign policy is the assumption of a common 'maliciousness' according to which 'everyone will seize an opportunity to harm another as often as he believes to see his own benefit in it' (GA I/9: 239–240). Under the premise of the common European tendency towards universal monarchy, the primary objective of political 'calculation' is a state's own security and, if possible, profit (GA I/9: 241). Two political maxims follow: (1) your 'neighbour ... is constantly ready to expand at your cost on the first occasion he is able to do so securely' and (2) 'Whoever does not grow dwindles when others grow'

(GA I/9: 242). Hence, sheer self-preservation is not an option. This insight leads to two practical rules. First, as domestic policy serves foreign policy, every opportunity to increase one's own means of enforcing power must be used and any decrease must not be tolerated. Secondly, international relations are to be based on guarantees which can be enforced by one's own means. In the case of conflict capitulation is not allowed: 'Courageous defence may make good any damage, and should you fall, at least you will fall honourably. Relenting in a cowardly manner will not save you from ruin but will allow you just a short term of shameful and honourless existence until you fall by yourself like an overripe fruit' (GA I/9: 243). The chances for peace, then, lie exclusively in reciprocal military deterrence.

Indeed, such harsh instructions for good government are justified by philosophy. Since the end of history depends on the science of reason and no one knows beforehand which nation may finally achieve it, there is for the sake of humankind an absolute obligation to preserve one's own nation and its particular culture. It goes without saying that this holds as well – and should, in fact, be explicitly complemented by the obligation to expand – if the science of reason has already been developed somewhere, as is the case with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Like any practical rule, the ones that Fichte extracts from Machiavelli would also be senseless if their object either would or could not be realized necessarily. If their final object is the (happy-) end of history, it cannot occur by necessity. Therefore, historical progress also cannot unfold necessarily, which means that each epoch of Fichte's complete series may or may not take place, but if it does take place, it will succeed and be succeeded by the other ages according to the series. Thus, necessity holds for the possible succession of the ages but not for their actual succession. That is why individuals, especially politicians and rulers, are able and, in fact, obliged to exert a guiding influence on history. Obviously, guiding decision-makers themselves in times of need should be the philosopher's noblest duty. Fichte tries to achieve this and to 'intervene powerfully in the wheel of time' (GA II/10: 284)⁸ with his essay *On Machiavelli* which was meant for the eyes of the Prussian king and government.⁹

Individual vs. Species: The Absolute State

The *Characteristics of the Present Age* aims to provide a philosophical diagnosis of Fichte's own age. In order to identify its necessary phenomena he uses the idea of the 'absolute state', which corresponds to the last epoch before history ends, because he intends 'to show how the rational concept of the state was gradually realized among human beings, and at what stage of the development of the absolute state our own age stands' (GA I/8: 306; CPA, 115; translation modified). Fichte defines it as the rational state: 'The absolute state is in its form, according to our opinion, an artistic institution, intended to direct all individual powers towards the life of the species and to merge them with it: thus to realize and present ... the general form of the idea outwardly in individuals' (GA I/8: 307; CPA, 116; translation modified).

Crucial for understanding this definition – and the *Addresses* – is Fichte's normative idea of the species (*Gattung*). He opposes it to 'the personal, sensuous existence of the individual' to such an extent that it entails 'unconditional rejection of all individuality' (GA I/8: 246; CPA: 54), that is, the concepts of the species and of individuality are mutually exclusive. Since the species is the means through which the process of reason's increasing self-awareness takes place, this process and the progressive eradication of individuality are one and the same thing. Thus, complete awareness renders each rational being indistinguishable from and, therefore, identical with other rational beings. Consequently the species denotes a whole whose parts have an identity only by belonging to the whole and, as such, cannot exist independently of it.¹⁰ The species is not, therefore, 'a mere empty abstraction' but 'is the only thing that truly exists' and a 'self-enclosed organic whole' (GA I/8: 212; CPA, 18; translation modified). The species does not simply act as the *ratio essendi* of its parts (that is, individuals). What is more, individuals lack substantiality because the existence of the whole transcends the existence of its parts and the whole exists independently of them. According to the science of reason, individuals are thus mere phenomena, while only the species exists in truth.

Clearly, then, there exists in the state of complete self-awareness simply nothing that an individual could give up at all, since the actualization of the individual's very own self is just the loss of individuality. Because such a state is the essential objective of humankind, 'the rational life consists in a person forgetting himself in the species, placing

his life in the service of the life of the whole, and sacrificing it for its sake' (GA I/8: 219; CPA, 27; translation modified).¹¹ However, common insightful self-abandonment without any reflection on possible losses to oneself or even on duty is the sign of the 'religion of reason' (GA I/8: 394; CPA, 200) that flowers after the end of history when the absolute state has also become superfluous. But, in the 'age of completed sinfulness', even the absolute state is a distant prospect, and individuality and its moral complement, which is self-interest, dominate. In order to establish the absolute state, self-interest must first be broken and the individual must be brought to act in accordance with the idea of humankind and its normative quality. We shall see that this is precisely what the 'national education' that Fichte develops in the *Addresses* aims to achieve.

Yet the absolute state is no end in itself but, rather, serves the highest moral goal of humanity because it acts as a necessary condition of the religion of reason. Thus, in order to establish the absolute state, the government is entitled to employ all reasonable means of bringing it about, including the right to demand and, in fact, to force individual persons to make painful sacrifices: 'Since the state cannot count upon the inner life and the original activity of the idea in the minds of human beings ... since it instead operates externally upon individuals who feel no desire whatsoever to sacrifice their individual life for the species, but on the contrary a reluctance to do so, it follows that this institution must be a coercive institution [*Zwangs-Anstalt*]' (GA I/8: 307; CPA, 116–117; translation modified).

Such measures can be put into effect through appropriate laws and adequate education that, once again, in order to be common to all must be legally founded. Hence, it is the legislator who is responsible for the establishment of the absolute state. Whether the sovereign be a single person or some or all of the citizens, one condition must clearly be met, namely the achievement of insight into the idea of the species and into the truth of the science of reason. Although Fichte leaves the constitutional question open, he emphasizes the following point: 'Everything great and good [i.e. in history, AA] ... has an existence only because noble and powerful men have resigned all the enjoyments of life for the sake of ideas' (GA I/8: 224; CPA, 31). It is therefore quite possible that a single person or a few individuals will establish the absolute state. If so, the idea that it will, at least for some time, take the form of a totalitarian institution of enforced blessings cannot simply be dismissed. However, Fichte would reject this reproach as unreasonable since it

proves only the critic's lack of insight, because the totality – in the sense of an all-encompassing whole – of the absolute state follows straightforwardly from its end, that is, the idea of the species.

Fichte's modification of his philosophy of history equally changes the situation regarding a person's awareness of the rational end of the state: this individual is now, for the sake of the progress of humankind, morally committed to doing everything in his or her power to accelerate the establishment of the absolute state, especially if he or she is aware of the science of reason by virtue of, for example, having read the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Then – if he or she does not possess legislative power – this individual will try to effect other political or educational improvements. It is from this standpoint that the *Addresses* should be judged.

Fundamental Features of the *Addresses to the German Nation*

The *Addresses* follow both the analysis of history provided in the *Characteristics of the Present Age* and the modified philosophy of history found in *On Machiavelli*. But the state of completed sinfulness now belongs to the past and a new age has dawned, which has to be the state of progressive justification. Fichte makes this clear right from the start:

With us, more than with any other age in the history of the world, time is taking giant strides. Within the three years that have passed since my interpretation of the current epoch, it has at some point run its course and come to an end. At some point selfishness has annihilated itself by its complete development, because it has thereby lost its self and the independence of that self; and, since it would not willingly posit any other end but itself, another, alien purpose has been imposed upon it by an external power.

(GA I/10: 104; AGN, 9)

Grasping the nature of Fichte's act of intervening in the wheel of time first requires a quick survey of his presentation of the age which 'has ceased to be the present' (GA I/10: 104; AGN, 9).

The Selfishness of Enlightenment

Fichte himself summarizes the results of his *Characteristics of the Present Age* at the beginning of the *Addresses*:

In those lectures I showed that our age lies in the third principal epoch of world history, which epoch has mere sensuous self-interest as the impulse of all its vital stirrings and motions; that this age also understands and comprehends itself completely by recognizing this impulse as the only possible one; and that through this clear insight into its nature it is deeply grounded and unshakeably fixed in this its vital essence.

(GA I/10: 104; AGN, 9)

This essence can be reduced to a single term: ‘selfishness’ that is aware of itself and considers itself to be justified. It ‘is developed to its highest degree when, after it has captured, with only a few insignificant exceptions, the totality of those ruled, it then takes possession of the rulers also and becomes their sole impulse in life’ (GA I/10: 109; AGN, 14). Such a government will rest in ‘torpid repose, and the sad delusion entertained by selfishness that it enjoys peace so long as its own borders are not attacked’ (GA I/10: 109; AGN, 14). In short, it has forgotten or ignores every rule that Machiavelli discovered so long ago, as Fichte believes himself to have seen it do with his own eyes during his time with the Prussian government in Königsberg. Sloth in foreign policy corresponds inwardly to a ‘slackening of the reins of state, for which the foreign words are humanity [*Humanität*], liberality [*Liberalität*] and popularity [*Popularität*], but which in German are more correctly called slackness [*Schlaffheit*] and undignified conduct [*Betragen ohne Würde*’ (GA I/10: 109; AGN, 14). Fichte even specifies the cause of this deplorable situation: ‘The enlightenment of the understanding, with its purely sensuous calculations, was the power that dissolved the connection established by religion between a future life and the present one, and at the same time held such supplementary and vicarious agencies of the moral way of thinking as love of glory and national honour to be misleading chimeras’ (GA I/10: 111; AGN, 16).

Fichte’s concept of selfishness can thus be explicated by analysing his concept of enlightenment. This again requires a short look at the *Characteristics of the Present Age*.

Enlightenment is marked essentially by its unconditional opposition to authority ‘and with it, reason in every shape which it has yet assumed’ (GA I/8: 243; CPA, 51). Whereas in the second age reason as instinct imposes its rule ‘with external authority and power’ (GA I/8: 242; CPA, 50; translation modified), ‘would-be-Enlightenment [*Auf- und Ausklärung*]’ (GA I/8: 223; CPA, 30)¹² has in the third age done away with reason by proving that very same rule’s incomprehensibility. This leads to the illegitimacy of reason’s entitlement to authority and liberation from any form of dominion, including that of reason. The fundamental impulse of the age of enlightenment is thus witty criticism ‘assuming a scientific form’ (GA I/8: 247; CPA, 59). It ‘sets up this maxim: “simply not to let anything count as valid except that which it comprehends” – obviously by this is meant comprehends immediately, and without any effort or work, by means of the already available healthy common sense that has been bequeathed to it’ (GA I/8: 243; CPA, 51; translation modified). As the idea of the species transcends common sense, enlightened rationality remains by far empty and hollow. Rather, it grants legitimating power only to ‘the mere empirical conceptions of experience’ (GA I/8: 248; CPA, 56), thereby banishing any *a priori* justification and with it any objective certainty of truth in favour of probability, as ‘the worst of all philosophical systems, that of Locke’ (GA I/8: 274; CPA, 81) proves to do. According to Fichte, probability entails the arbitrariness of all possible empirical judgements which degrades every scientific proposition to the rank of mere opinion.

Highly doubtful as this claim may be, it holds even in the field of morals. Since reason – which is no longer instinct, but is not yet present as science – does not set a universal objective, every individual will set her or his own goal, and this is the exact opposite of a rational life for the species. Thus, ‘there remains nothing except this latter [i.e. individual, personal, AA] life; everywhere it has actually broken through and achieved clarity and consistency, [there is] nothing except mere pure and naked egoism’ (GA I/8: 243; CPA, 51; translation modified). In accord with this generally accepted conception of science and morals, we have the following scenario: first of all technology and the arts serve individual luxury; secondly, politics either ‘attempts to govern degenerate man by means of high-sounding phrases without the aid of firm and inflexible power’ or acknowledges its own nullity in constructing ‘its political existence out of a confused patchwork gathered from many different ages long since dead’; and thirdly,

religion degenerates ‘into a mere doctrine of happiness, designed to remind us that man must be temperate in enjoyment in order that his enjoyments may be lasting and varied’ (GA I/8: 215–216; CPA, 22).

In spite of this downright dismal account of the third age, there are a few ways in which the Enlightenment provides the conditions necessary for the possibility of historical progress. First and foremost its empty and negative, but absolute, freedom must precede rationally determined freedom. Likewise, the science of reason ‘finds no fault with the maxim of absolute intelligibility, but rather recognizes it as its own’ (GA I/8: 282; CPA, 90), and actually radicalizes it, since the science of reason does not accept that anything is absolutely incomprehensible. Finally, enlightenment deserves no blame for striving to reach all human beings, because even the newly dawned age of ‘true, real knowledge’ ‘will strive to disclose itself to all’ (GA I/8: 256; CPA, 63; translation modified). As the backdrop against which Fichte delivers his *Addresses*, this fourth age will thus feature freedom from unfounded authority and submission to rational judgement (that is, positive or real freedom), a scientific character in terms of both form and content, general recognition of the science of reason and its widespread dissemination.

Education towards the Standpoint of Reason

Fichte believes that progress is at stake. By adding political destruction to homemade moral fragmentation, French occupation threatens to annihilate German culture and even to send it on the path of a historical regression from which no return would be possible. In order to avert this danger for the Germans and, as it will soon be seen, the whole of humankind, the *Addresses* launch a very distinctive proposal: because control of constitutional, legislative, domestic, foreign and military policy and ‘even the administration of justice and the passing of judgement will now and then be taken out of our hands’, only the education of which no one has thought remains to save the possibility of progress and, at the same time, to bring about a national rebirth (GA I/10: 243; AGN, 144–145). Although the focus of Fichte’s ‘new education’ is right from the very beginning of the *Addresses* on ‘form[ing] the Germans into a totality that in all its individual parts is driven and animated by the same single interest’ (GA I/10: 114; AGN, 19), restoration of the Prussian state, let alone the Holy Roman Empire, is by no means the objective of his programme. Rather, Fichte aims at humankind’s progress, starting with the securing of its preconditions. In order not to confuse this structural point with the highly questionable implications of his concepts of nation and originality, both these concepts will be discussed in the next section.

‘The specific nature of the proposed new education ... consisted in this, that it was the deliberate and sure art of cultivating the pupil to pure morality’ (GA I/10: 131; AGN, 35). This ‘amount[s] to a complete regeneration of the human race’ (GA I/10: 215; AGN, 118) by means of the reversal of the relation between the universal ideas of the mind and the individual worldly matters that the third age had made into something absolute:

As a rule the world of the senses has been considered as the proper, real, true and actually existing world; it was presented to the pupil first; starting from it he was led to thought, and usually to thought about and in the service of this world. The new education reverses this order exactly. For it only the world grasped by thought is the true and actually existing world; it aims to introduce the pupil to this world from the outset. To this world alone does it wish to bind all his love, all his pleasures, so that

in him there necessarily arises and emerges a life lived only in this world of the spirit.

(GA I/10: 216; AGN, 118)

Thus, Fichte's idealistic (in a literal sense) educational plan will lead to a life lived in and through the idea as described in the *Characteristics of the Present Ages*, a life which at all times requires sacrificing one's own, merely apparent individuality for the sake of the only true reality, which is that of the idea of the species as a totality. Even if the term 'species' has almost completely disappeared in the *Addresses*, the thought of the sacrifice of individuality for the sake of a totality nevertheless retains a crucial importance – still 'the root of all morality is self-control, self-conquest, the subordination of one's selfish impulses to the idea of the whole' (GA I/10: 232; AGN, 132) – while the term's content will reappear in Fichte's attempt to determine the essential nature of the German nation. Putting such an education into general practice will produce the absolute state. As Fichte puts it: 'Hitherto only flesh, matter, nature lived in most men; thanks to the new education spirit alone shall live in the majority – indeed soon even in all – and impel them. The firm and certain spirit, which earlier we spoke of as the only possible foundation of a well-ordered state, shall be produced as a rule' (GA I/10: 216; AGN, 118). Even its character of a coercive institution is preserved. First, 'the state, as the supreme administrator of human affairs and the guardian of its young charges, answerable only to God and its conscience, has the perfect right to compel them [i.e. supporters of the old form of education, AA] for their own good' (GA I/10: 245–246; AGN, 147). Secondly, as Fichte laconically demands, 'the noble man', who 'embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal' – that is, as the ideal life of the species – in case of war 'joyfully sacrifices himself and the ignoble, who exists only for the sake of the former, should likewise sacrifice himself' (GA I/10: 205; AGN, 107).

Moreover, Fichte's basic anthropological premise shows, again in accordance with the *Characteristics of the Present Age*, that elimination of sensuous individuality by education is rational. He rejects the 'usual assumption, that man is by nature selfish and this selfishness innate even in the child' as 'a very superficial observation and quite false' (GA I/10: 229; AGN, 130). The 'first error of the existing education' that necessarily follows from the wrong assessment of individuality by the Enlightenment lies 'precisely

in this acknowledgement and in this reckoning on the pupil's free will', which 'no education can take from him' (GA I/10: 177; AGN, 23). Since the science of reason proves the nullity of all individuality, as it is maintained only by sensuality, it at the same time demonstrates the nullity of such a particular individual will. The aim of eliminating selfishness in accordance with the science of reason is only a superficial, secondary aim, however. The real aim of Fichte's project is to produce insight into the idea of the totality of the species and thus into the idea of de-individualization. For any life according to reason stands in the service of this totality, and this in turn means that any life that strives for individual well-being or the perpetuation of existence for its own sake is contrary to reason. And so it cannot be free and is, therefore, unworthy of any human being. In order to make the pupils conscious of reason or real freedom, the fundamental stages of education will consequently have to eliminate this misunderstanding of the nature of free will. Using the means offered by J. H. Pestalozzi's pedagogical theories, this can easily be done by transforming a child's 'natural drive towards clarity and order' (GA I/10: 228; AGN, 129) into knowledge (GA I/10: 137; AGN, 41–42). In this way, freedom of will will be 'annihilated and subsumed by necessity' (GA I/10: 118; AGN, 23).

Without having to deal in detail with Fichte's reception of Pestalozzi's theories,¹³ a short remark on his idealistic appropriation of the latter's principle of self-activity may be helpful. Even before he mentions Pestalozzi, Fichte emphasizes the merging of the education of the will with the 'cultivation of the pupil's faculty of cognition' (GA I/10: 121; AGN, 26). The pupil's innate desire for order must first be consolidated by becoming '[l]ove of the good simply as such, and not for the sake of its usefulness for us' (GA I/10: 120; AGN, 25), that is to say, according to the *Characteristics of the Present Age*, it must become 'virtue' (GA I/8: 326; CPA, 136–137). As this feeling of 'profound pleasure' (GA I/10: 120; AGN, 25) in the good, viz. the rational, lacks reflexive transparency, it must be brought about before knowledge of the 'extent of the moral world' (GA I/10: 233, AGN: 133) becomes possible. For the sake of the constant improvement of the state of the world, the objects of such pleasure cannot be given sensuously but must belong to 'a certain state of affairs that does not yet exist in reality' (GA I/10: 120; AGN, 25). Thus, the pupil enjoys 'an image of this state which, before it comes into being, is present to the mind' (GA I/10: 120; AGN, 25), and the pupils will themselves spark this pleasure in the good through the active production of such an

image according to rules that they themselves discover with the teacher's guidance while producing this image. Education culminates thereby in the pupils' cognition of the ideal constitution of their own being, that is, in their consciousness of the one universal reason. According to Fichte, this insight corresponds to a philosophical education because it grasps 'general and universally valid laws ... according to which such a permanent quality of things becomes necessary' (GA I/10: 121; AGN, 26). Nevertheless – and this may well be Fichte's main motivation for having recourse to Pestalozzi's teachings – there is, as the *Characteristics of the Present Age* already emphasizes – 'no logical means by which this insight may be forced upon man' (GA I/8: 388; CPA, 200). On the contrary, it rests on a certain feeling which the art of education, based on scientific knowledge while being no science in itself, is able to create. Fichte equates this feeling with the 'German love of fatherland' (GA I/10: 214; AGN, 117) that is itself founded on the decision to undertake the general implementation of the new education. The way in which the insight into the universality and totality of reason that is to produce itself cannot be conceptually or logically deduced, but rests instead on a feeling, love of fatherland, implies, therefore, that a fully developed love of fatherland corresponds to complete insight into the totality of reason together with the essence of the species: 'Whoever feels this within himself will be convinced; whoever does not feel it cannot be convinced, for on this assumption only does my proof rest' (GA I/10: 215; AGN, 117).

Originality and Germanness

It is impossible for there to be any such thing as a particular or culture-dependent reason, for there is only one eternal reason. However, an education towards the standpoint of reason has to be essentially and exclusively a national education. Fichte makes this sufficiently clear at the start of his Fourth Address:

We have said that the proposed means of cultivating a new race of men must first be applied by Germans to Germans, and that it is a task that quite properly and immediately pertains to our nation. This proposition, too, is in need of proof and here also we shall begin, just as we have done thus far, with that which is highest and most general. We shall demonstrate what the German in and of himself, independently of the fate that has now befallen him, is and has always been in his essential character, ever since he came into existence. And we shall show that his aptitude for and receptivity to a culture such as we envisage lies already in this essential character and separates him from every other European nation.

(GA I/10: 143; AGN, 47)

What Fichte wants to emphasize is clearly the unique, essential and exclusive German aptitude for elevation to the standpoint of reason by means of education, that is to say, Fichte wants to disclose the specific differences which distinguish the German nation from other nations. The essence of Germanness will thus be explicated with reference to its special relationship to reason. This will demonstrate the German nation's crucial importance for the progress of humankind. However, for such proof the same holds as for the general implementation of Fichte's educational project: acceptance of its premises, and therefore its result, cannot be logically grounded, for they are grounded instead in pre-logical, and for this reason unconditional, *a priori* insights that provide the conditions of logic itself.¹⁴ In our context this simply means that knowledge of reason and the corresponding form of consciousness somehow – that is, in the form of an 'obscure feeling' – presuppose an awareness of reason. Fichte has either to take this feeling for granted on the part of his listeners or to create it in them. Again, this feeling consists in a love of the fatherland that has been ennobled as something rational (GA I/10: 198–204; AGN, 127–135). Therefore, only given this residuum of reason might

Fichte's proof be convincing. Since nothing can be proven on the basis of an 'obscure feeling', but only 'through clear knowledge' of 'a supersensuous object' (GA I/10: 148; AGN, 51), the 'highest and most general' object with which his proof begins cannot be a logical universal but must instead be a metaphysical universal, that is, an idea which at first expresses itself by means of feeling and is then to be transformed into knowledge by Fichte's proof, which would be 'lost' (GA I/10: 215; AGN, 117) to his audience should it for its part exhibit a general and refractory attitude that is contrary to reason.

The opposition between reason and an attitude that is contrary to reason explains the existence of different 'national characteristics' (GA I/10: 145; AGN, 49). It shows itself in the diversity of languages, and its criterion is 'originality', which is not an empirical one but one that follows from 'the essence of language in general' (GA I/10: 145; AGN, 49). The content of this criterion of originality is that '[i]t is not really man who speaks; [but] human nature' – that is, reason – 'speaks through him' (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50). Thus 'one would have to say: there is but one language and this language is absolutely necessary' (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50). Now, for historical reasons, various languages exist, with each in its own way forming a necessary 'offshoot' of 'the one and pure human language' (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50). The language of a particular people – defined by Fichte as a linguistic community (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50) – may well, therefore, be more or less original or unoriginal. However, given Fichte's criterion, the first case is impossible: if a particular language is original, reason speaks through it; if it is not, reason does not speak through it. For the necessary development of language and the unity of reason, no language can be rational and irrational at the same time. Therefore, a language is either original or it is not. Since the controlled development of language, if such a thing were possible, would require a science of reason which does not yet exist during this process, a particular people's language 'is as it is by necessity' (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50). Thus, 'it is not really the people that expresses their knowledge, but rather knowledge that expresses itself through the people' (GA I/10: 146; AGN, 50). This means that the condition of a spoken language itself shows its speakers' cultural condition measured in terms of their progress in becoming conscious of reason as judged by the science of reason alone.

Trying to legitimate his fundamental distinction by means of a philosophy of language,¹⁵ Fichte appeals to the idea of a continuous linguistic development related to

sensuous cognition, that is, to a particular people's 'sphere of intuition' (GA I/10: 150; AGN: 53), and directed at the progressive clarification of supersensuous cognition. An original language, which in this sense is able to integrate any number of foreign parts as long as it does not assume the foreign sphere of intuition, Fichte calls a living language. Such a language alone will bear witness not only to the condition of its speakers' awareness of reason but also to the possibility of progress concerning this matter. If the 'onward flow' of a people's linguistic development is 'interrupted' (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 54), progress in becoming conscious of reason is likewise interrupted. In this case the 'symbolic designations of the supersensuous' (GA I/10: 174; AGN, 51) lose their 'immediate intelligibility and determinacy' (GA I/10: 153; AGN, 57) and seem 'entirely arbitrary' (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 54), as Fichte illustrates with the example of 'three notorious words "humanity", "popularity" and "liberality"' (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 55) already familiar from his critique of enlightenment. Because any designations of the supersensuous depend on a particular linguistic community, and no deictic reference concerning their meaning can be given because this meaning can only be grasped in the light of 'the totality of the sensuous and spiritual life of the nation as it is embedded in language in perfect unity' (GA I/10: 154; AGN, 57), an unoriginal language is in itself 'at bottom dead and unintelligible' (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 55). Any progress of consciousness that takes place according to a necessary order has, then, become impossible, because linguistic development no longer allows for necessity but proceeds arbitrarily once its development has been interrupted. Thus reason can no longer express itself in an intelligible way through the life of such a linguistic community, that is to say, it cannot do so at all. Therefore, a living language alone 'has the power to intervene directly in life and to stimulate it' (GA I/10: 149; AGN, 53).

According to Fichte, the German language is an original and living language. It is, moreover, the only one. This is first of all for historical reasons: the Germans 'remained in the original homelands of the ancestral race, whereas the latter [i.e. the other tribes of the same race] migrated to other territories, the former retained and developed the original language of the ancestral race, whereas the latter adopted a foreign language and gradually modified it after their own fashion' (GA I/10: 144; AGN, 48). Consequently, any such language must be a dead one. This is the case with all the relevant peoples except the Scandinavians, whom Fichte takes to be 'undoubtedly ... Germans' (GA I/10:

143; AGN, 47). Thus, among Germanic languages, German is the only living or original one, while all others have already vanished. It is the same ‘with the neo-Latin peoples’ (GA I/10: 152; AGN, 55), that is, the communities which speak a Romance language, who ‘in the strict sense ... have no mother tongue at all’ (GA I/10: 154; AGN, 57). For by adopting and modifying Latin ‘they receive only the flat and lifeless history of an alien culture but not a culture of their own’ (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 54). With this the ‘unintelligibility’ of the ‘supersensuous part’ of language becomes a necessary, structural feature and, therefore, ineradicable, because these people ‘are not in possession of a living language by which they could scrutinize the dead one’ (GA I/10: 154; AGN, 57). Each spoken Romance language, according to Fichte, has been virtually stillborn, and at best ‘may on the surface be stirred by the breeze of life, and thus give the appearance of vitality’ (GA I/10: 151; AGN, 54–55). All the relevant languages still spoken in ‘civilized Europe, as the existing domain of culture’ (GA I/8: 329; CPA, 139), except German, thus lead the sorry existence of zombies and – as is customary for zombies – the people who speak these languages are not even in the position to know this.

This uniqueness of the German language with respect to its philosophical and progressive importance would not be called into question even if one were to assume the possibility of other original languages. Fichte mentions Greek and, perhaps, Latin. Greek has at least been an original language, but, obviously, it is no longer spoken by any living ancient Greek, and so it is in any case dead. The main reason Fichte does not even discuss the possibility of another spoken original language beyond Europe’s borders may well have to do with the economy of his *a priori* model of history, for the progress of humankind depends on the development of the science of reason and, evidently, this can only be achieved using a living language. This has now been achieved. In fact, Fichte has done it himself. But, taking into account the fact that a living language cannot be translated with respect to its supersensuous part, there is only one culture in which progress is possible; there exists, in fact, only one culture worthy of the name. And, conversely, cultural progress depends on the existence and development of the very language that makes it possible. Precisely this culture is, according to Fichte’s revised view of history, in extreme peril. Therefore, there exists an unconditional duty to save German culture. In preventing such a catastrophe by, at least, (re)gaining national sovereignty, the Germans should not hope for foreign help (GA I/10: 107; AGN, 11–12),

and they must, therefore, try to achieve it alone, under all circumstances and by all means, but clearly not by using philosophical arguments (GA I/10: 184–185; AGN, 86–87).

Eventually, this enterprise of the ‘continued development of human relations according to their archetype’ will create ‘something new that has never before existed’ (GA I/10: 157–158; AGN, 61), viz. the absolute state or the establishment of the conscious unity of individuals and the species. However, even the possibility of consciousness of the species now depends on the possession of the living language which is German. Unfortunately, such a higher life is open only to Germans, because the moral obligation to establish the conscious rule of reason cannot be recognized and *a fortiori* cannot be realized by members of other linguistic communities, since they do not possess and cannot understand the science of reason that sets out the rules of cultural unity and unconditionally commands their universal implementation. For there is no rational progress beyond the science of reason which is the ‘one end in itself, beyond which there can be no others’, that is to say, ‘spiritual life’ (GA I/10: 159; AGN, 62). Fichte identifies the science of reason with philosophy and philosophy with his own *Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/10: 158; AGN, 61). Consequently, ‘philosophy proper’ (GA I/10: 184; AGN, 86) has to be German philosophy. Any other, especially – in Fichte’s terms – ‘foreign’ (*ausländische*) (GA I/10: 164–165, 183–185; AGN, 66–67, 85–87) reflections, including those of the ‘German philosophy of the present day’ (GA I/10: 184; AGN, 86), are more or less unclear expressions of either instinctive reason or its destruction by the empirical intellect.

Conversely, true philosophy, which is complete in itself and has penetrated beyond appearance to its very core, proceeds from the one, pure, divine life, – from life simply as such, which is what it will remain for all eternity, ever one; but not from this or that particular life. It sees how this life endlessly closes and opens again only in the world of appearance, that only by reason of this law is there a being and a something at all. For this philosophy being arises, whereas the other assumes it as given. And so only this philosophy is properly German, that is, original; and inversely, if someone were a true German, then he would not be able to philosophize in any other way.

Thus there seems to be only one German philosopher (that is, Fichte himself), and Germanness and originality are one and the same thing. Besides these insights Fichte seems to hint at the possibility of becoming a true German by philosophizing. Does this hold even for speakers of (un)dead languages? At first sight this might be the case since Fichte describes Germanness as a kind of epistemic state:

And so what we have understood by Germans in our description thus far stands out in perfect clarity. The proper ground of distinction lies in whether one believes in something absolutely primary and original in man himself, in freedom, in infinite improvability, in the perpetual progress of our race; or whether one does not and indeed fancies that one distinctly perceives and grasps that the opposite of these things holds true. All who either live creatively, bringing forth the new themselves, or, should this not have fallen to their lot, at least decisively abandon things of vanity and keep watch to see whether somewhere they will be caught by the stream of original life, or, should they not have made it this far, at least have an inkling of freedom and do not hate or fear it, but love it: all these are original men; they are, when viewed as a people, an original people, the people as such: Germans. All who resign themselves to being secondary and derivative, and who distinctly know and understand themselves thus, are indeed secondary and derivative, and become ever more so through this belief of theirs; they are an appendage to life, which stirred before them or beside them out of its own motive force, they are an echo resounding from the cliff-face, an echo of a voice that has already fallen silent; they are, viewed as a people, outside the original people and strangers and foreigners unto it.

The distinction between Germanness and foreignness turns out to be universal. Fichte first introduced it as a cultural difference between German philosophy and foreign philosophy which is itself rooted in the opposition between a living and a dead language. All these differences remain. For the end of historical progress stays fixed and Fichte has made sufficiently clear that it can start only from the people of the living language, who

are at present, and will be in the future, the Germans. Thus, there can be no ‘original men’ who are not Germans. Since all epistemic attitudes enabling insight into the end of historical progress somehow depend on originality and originality presupposes a living language, the speakers of dead languages are unable to achieve this insight. Therefore, becoming a ‘true German’ presupposes being German. Therefore Germanness forms the transcendental condition of humankind’s progress. The absolute state which has to be established consequently has to be a German nation-state.

Fichte’s concept of a German nation turns out to be quite distinctive: the only members of the species who may belong to it are those who at least enjoy the possibility of becoming true Germans, that is, they are neither the speakers of dead languages and members of a corresponding culture nor Germans who have adopted foreign culture. Or, to express the matter the other way round: if no cultural formation exists at all, it should be possible for every member of the species to be made or to be educated to become a true German. Indeed, the possibility of such a suspiciously paradoxical universal national education that produces Germanness, which lends a somewhat twisted cosmopolitan aspect to Fichte’s project, seems to be of vital importance to any further progress. For if historical progress can and must proceed only from Germanness, should anything in this direction happen at all, then the self-same progress will have to consist in the successive universal spread of Germanness. At first its particular originality, as made transparent by the science of reason, is obviously to be maintained and strengthened by means of a national education. After that there will need to follow the restoration of German sovereignty, which, due to the necessary lack of foreign insight, must happen violently and must likewise be prepared by a national education.¹⁶ And, because there exists an unconditional duty to promote humankind’s progression to a higher life which forbids isolation and, consequently, historical stagnation, German culture should eventually expand until it has become universal. Thus, the mission of any nation to bring about the end of history is one that belongs exclusively to the Germans. According to Fichte, its attainment implies the establishment of a universal German nation-state. The question as to whether this amounts to some kind of unconditional obligation to engage in cultural imperialism cannot be dealt with here.

Despite the glaring chauvinism of the philosophical and political fundamentals of his *Addresses to the German Nation*, Fichte does not, however, teach racism. For, in spite of

all his preferences for Germanness, he never uses ethnic or biological criteria to distinguish it from foreignness. Rather he constantly refers to the one universal reason. In reason's ever more perfect worldly expression lies all historical progress and cultural evolution. However, reason has in the final analysis become German, and it has come to speak only German, too. But this is obviously wrong.

Notes

[1](#) See Alexander Aichele, ‘Einleitung’, in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die Deutsche Nation*, ed. Alexander Aichele (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2008), vii–viii and lxxv–lxxxix. A history of the distinctive reception of the *Addresses* since Clausewitz (‘Philosophy of the General-Staff’) is being prepared by the author.

[2](#) See Marie Johanne Fichte, in FG, III, 439 [Nr. 1741]; Fichte GA III/5: 367 (Beyme to Fichte, 20 August 1806) and 371 (Fichte to Hardenberg, 18 October 1806).

[3](#) See Aichele, ‘Einleitung’, ix–xiv.

[4](#) See Emil Lask, *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1902), 9 and 218.

[5](#) See Alexander Aichele, ‘Metaphysisches oder logisches Systemprinzip? Die Dynamik des Unbedingten und seine Deduktion in Schellings Naturphilosophie von 1799’, in Christian Danz and Jürgen Stolzenberg (eds.), *System und Systemkritik um 1800* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2011), 125–132.

[6](#) See Stefan Reiß, *Fichtes „Reden an die Deutsche Nation” oder: Vom Ich zum Wir* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 86–97.

[7](#) It is a pity that Gregory Moore in the introduction of his impressive translation of the *Addresses* does not mention the essay *On Machiavelli*.

[8](#) Prologue to *Vesta* (unpublished).

[9](#) Immanuel Hermann Fichte, ‘Vorrede des Herausgebers’, in *Fichtes Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), Vol. XIII.

[10](#) Lask, *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte*, 251.

[11](#) On the difference between logical universals and ideas, which Fichte explains but does not apply constantly, see Aichele, ‘Einleitung’, xl–xli.

[12](#) Fichte here plays on words in a way that is perhaps untranslatable and whose meaning is not entirely captured by the phrase ‘would-be-Enlightenment’. By his use

of the term ‘*Ausklärung*’ Fichte associates the enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) with the cleaning of cesspits or latrines so as to imply that being an *Aufklärer* in this age is almost the lowest thing that one could possibly be.

13 See Rudolf Lassahn, *Studien zur Wirkungsgeschichte Fichtes als Pädagoge* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1970) and Reiß, *Fichtes „Reden an die Deutsche Nation” oder: Vom Ich zum Wir*, 181–201.

14 See Jürgen Stolzenberg, ‘Absolutes Wissen und Sein. Zu Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1801/02’, in *Fichte-Studien* **12** (1997): 320–322.

15 In his excellent treatment of the issue David James shows that, in his *Addresses*, Fichte seems to be at odds with his own philosophy of language. See David James, *Fichte’s Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2015](#)), § 7.2. It is not up to me here to decide which of Fichte’s doctrines should be taken seriously.

16 See Alexander Aichele, ‘Singend sterben – mit Fichte nach Langemarck: Authentischer Fichteanismus im Ersten Weltkrieg’, in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* **81** (2007): 632.

10

Fichte's Philosophy of Religion



Hansjürgen Verweyen

The Pre-critical Period

From early on Fichte's relation to religion marked his biography – often in very strange ways. A Saxon nobleman, E. H. von Miltitz, missed the Sunday sermon when visiting Fichte's hometown, Rammenau. Don't worry, people reassured him. There is a youth in the village who can repeat the sermon from memory.¹ In this way, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, at the age of nine – oldest of ten children of a ribbon maker – found a patron for attendance at one of the most famous secondary schools in Germany (Schulpforta: 1774–1780) and for subsequent university studies. From 1780 to 1784 Fichte studied theology, initially at Jena and then in Leipzig. When he ended his studies, his source of support came to an end. The next eight years he scraped together a living essentially as a household tutor – in Saxony, Switzerland, Poland and West Prussia.

Fichte not only had a deficient education in a theology limited by rationalism and made uncertain by historical biblical criticism. He also had scarcely experienced the institution of the church as a vital religious force.² He first got to know a Christianity with genuine radiant power in Zurich. Here in the Rahn family's house he met men who thought critically and had deep religious substance – and his future wife, Marie Johanne Rahn. Having grown up in this environment, she was able to be a support for Fichte's religious strength, without letting herself be disturbed by his restless spirit.

There are only a few sources for Fichte's theological–philosophical development prior to the composition of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*.³ Some of these must be considered more closely, if one wishes to evaluate correctly the extremely tension-filled development of his philosophy of religion.

G. E. Lessing's influence on the early Fichte is uncontested today.⁴ Still, how far does it extend, and did it also affect Fichte's thinking after the early period? Above all, through Lessing's agency 'Spinozism' became an important factor for the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – the backbone of Fichte's philosophy of religion. We will return to this point.

Until now, the complex relationship between Lessing's theological writings and Fichte's philosophy of revelation has not been sufficiently considered. Lessing's assertion that 'contingent historical truths can never become the proof for necessary truths of reason'⁵ did not fail to influence Fichte. Attempts at apologetically reinforcing the belief

in revelation in the context of the debate with historical critical exegesis seemed senseless to him.⁶ But all his life Fichte pursued the question of the unconditional claim historical–empirical events have on pure practical reason differently from Hegel⁷ and (with essentially different emphasis) also from Kierkegaard.⁸ In his struggles with this question, he finally found his way – at least initially – to a philosophy of revelation that not only overcame the Enlightenment’s answers right up to Lessing and Kant, but also retains its meaning after the ‘end of metaphysics’ and is still able to indicate new directions within a philosophy that follows the ‘linguistic turn’.

In Fichte’s earliest statements about religion, his emphasis on the affective dimension attracts attention. He contrasts the religion of ‘living inner conviction’ to the ‘religion of the understanding’.⁹ The thought of the thoroughgoing determination of all occurrences by an absolute reason – a thought that had absorbed Fichte as early as 1784,¹⁰ and that he had not yet overcome even after reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*¹¹ – brought him into increasing conflict with his religious intuitions. Reading the *Critique of Practical Reason* first freed him from this.¹² Still, there remained a surplus of religious convictions that could not be expressed within the framework of Kantian philosophizing, especially in regard to the concept of divine providence.¹³ Fichte wanted to have a *Critique of the Concept of Providence* follow immediately after his *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*.¹⁴ The plan was not carried out. Still, the concept of providence was a central motive for the important return to the philosophy of revelation in Fichte’s late phase.

Philosophy of Religion in the Horizon of Kant: *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*

Biography and philosophy – what an absurd amalgamation in regard to Fichte’s first-born work!¹⁵ He presented the first draft of the manuscript on revelation (1791) to Kant personally – with the request for a loan. Instead of this, Kant helped get the work printed. It first appeared anonymously (in 1792) and overnight it made the previously unknown man into a celebrity – people took Kant himself to be the author of the book.

Fichte himself did not value his first work very highly¹⁶ – and indeed with some justification. Many inconsistencies in the train of thought can be seen in an exact comparison with the 1791 draft.¹⁷ The second edition (1793) complicated even more things than it corrected. Here we will concentrate on the main points of Fichte’s arguments in comparison with Kant’s views.

Postulating God

One cannot easily find a common denominator in Kant's 'moral proof of the existence of God'¹⁸ because of its various versions. Has Fichte contributed to clarifying this? Regarding his book on revelation, the following can be determined.

(a) Fichte begins from the *Critique of Practical Reason*'s version of the postulate. With all the difficulty that Kant's text creates for interpretation, one can still say that Fichte misses the salient point when, in his first step, he sees the final purpose of the moral law ('the highest morality [*Sittlichkeit*] united with the highest happiness [*Glückseligkeit*']) already achieved in the existence of a being 'in whom the highest moral perfection [*moralische Vollkommenheit*] is united with the highest blessedness [*Seligkeit*]' (GA I/1: 19–20; ACR, 142–143).¹⁹ For Kant this has to do with the implications of moral action, not speculation about God's nature.

(b) With Kant, reflection on these implications leads at last to the central thought in his postulation of God: I am never permitted to lose sight of moral action's final purpose, namely that the world finally assume the form that it ought to have within the horizon of pure practical reason. The basic question that the moral agent poses for him- or herself is this: 'what sort of world he would *create*, were this in his power, under the guidance of practical reason' (AA 6: 5; R, 35). Given how rarely agreement between moral and natural law is to be met with, I can hope for the realization of this purpose only by assuming a God (who guarantees the eventual harmony of both laws). Without this assumption, I would lose all respect for an unconditionally commanded moral law whose duty obligated me to do something that was in principle unrealizable. It is interesting that – in a second attempt²⁰ – Fichte had already found an analogous idea even before the appearance of Kant's book on religion. In connection with a short remark in the 1791 draft,²¹ Fichte understands the necessary congruence between a rational being's degree of happiness and its degree of moral perfection as what 'is unconditionally right' and adds that, 'If we regard this idea merely as a concept, without regard to the faculty of desire determined by it, it can be and become for us nothing more than a law given to our judgment by reason for the purpose of reflecting on certain things in nature in order to regard them in another respect than that of their *being*, namely, in

that of how they *ought to be*' (GA I/1: 24; ACR, 33). To consider the world in respect of its 'ought to be' – from this perspective, Kant's postulation of God wins its real persuasive power as an implication of moral action; and here as well is the first beginning point for Fichte's system of transcendental philosophy, one that he discovered in a deeper reading of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

(c) Even more astonishing, then, is the reflective level to which Fichte's remarks on postulating God sink in the second edition of his book on revelation (1793).²² There he no longer begins from the idea of right,²³ but rather from 'rights' in the sense of something not forbidden by the moral law, but that is only seldom obtained through rigorous pursuit of duty in the world. The existence of God must be postulated so that everything permitted by the moral law but renounced by those who act from duty can be added as a supplement.²⁴ From this perspective, Fichte's later critique of the connection between the moral law and the idea of happiness becomes understandable (in the course of which he unfortunately did not distinguish between Kant and his own early work).

(d) Amid the ambiguity of this early work in philosophy of religion, one should not overlook an important point. Even within this attempt, conducted strictly according to Kant's critical premises, Fichte remains concerned to make the question of God into something more than a mere postulate; more precisely: to think God not merely functionally – as a condition for the possibility of realizing the final purpose, as the rewarder of virtue, or as an authority for strengthening the will in its struggle against inclination.²⁵ Two obstacles place themselves in the way of this. For one thing, in thinking consistently about Kant's *Critique*, he must recognize the extent to which his original image of God is mixed up with eudaimonistic elements. Even the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* is an eloquent witness for this – right into the second edition. The demand that he defer further reflections on the philosophy of religion until the systematic foundation for the philosophy of freedom has been grasped in all clarity follows from this.

The second, most important obstacle is located in the boundary between Kant's philosophy and Fichte's own first beginning of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In this context, the concept of being is derived from objectivity. From this perspective, to think God as

being, therefore, means always to grasp him pre-transcendentally and not from the living act of reason. Only after Fichte had recognized the entire system of reason as an appearance of absolute being did it become possible for him to take up again the tasks that had been posed for him by his original concept of religion, against which it was shattered in 1791–92.

The Concept of Revelation

Does reason fundamentally need revelation in order to find its own autonomous destiny? Lessing's answer remains ambiguous.²⁶ Kant allows revelation to serve as the 'introduction' of a higher ethical insight that is needed at particular times. But this gives revelation a merely accidental necessity, which in the end represents nothing more than a 'ladder' to be knocked away later, and which leads to a reason that is enlightened about itself.²⁷

Though still constrained by Kant's premises, Fichte's efforts in the book on revelation (1792) go further. He believes that he can show revelation's strict necessity, at least in one specific case (even if it is conditioned and not absolute): if rational beings were to experience total moral collapse, then, under these conditions and for such men, the call of the moral law could be announced only through a special divine initiative in the sensible world. And this initiative would *have* to happen, because 'God is determined by the moral law to promote the highest possible morality in all rational beings by every moral means' (GA I/1: 48; ACR, 65). In the proposed case, assuming that such rational beings had not become entirely incapable of morality, then 'that single purely moral stimulus' would need to be brought to them through 'the vehicle of the senses'. This could happen only if God proclaimed himself as 'lawgiver by means of a special appearance in the world of sense, determined expressly for this purpose' (GA I/1: 47–48; ACR, 65). In fact, according to Fichte, it 'can certainly be conceived a priori that mankind could have come into a situation, either from its origins or through various fortunes, such that it was compelled in continual, hard struggle with nature for its subsistence to direct all its thoughts continually to what was in front of its nose, to be able to think of nothing but the present, and to be able to hear no other law than that of need' (GA I/1: 56–57; ACR, 74).

Fichte's idea here brings into play a perspective that is considered neither by purely *a priori* speculation, nor within a concept of history as continuous progress (in which God functions as an educator). Indeed not without recollecting his own dark experience,²⁸ Fichte proceeds on the basis of a concrete possibility which could have obtained not just in the 'barbaric beginnings' of the human race, but rather which must always be taken into account as an extremely real danger for humanity. What is attractive

about Fichte's idea is the attempt to conceive freedom as a universal principle standing under the moral law in a genuinely systematic way, precisely in its most extreme possibility of alienation in history. Thus, an *a priori* transcendental deduction and a philosophy of history are connected together for the first time, at least provisionally.

Is this attempt successful? According to Fichte, the solution would have to lie in a self-disclosure of divine *authority*, that gains a hearing as nothing other than the *holiness* of moral reason which is completely realized in God and which is to be recognized in freedom.²⁹ Fichte himself recognizes that in this way revelation is established only materially – but not in a formal sense – as a (conditional) necessity. When divine authority has called attention to the moral law, it has made itself unnecessary as such.

We can bypass here Fichte's further, more detailed, remarks on the knowability of revelation.³⁰ They are interesting in comparison with analogous Enlightenment discussions generally, and especially with Kant's book on religion, but not in connection with the unfolding of Fichte's transcendental conception after 1793. In his first publication of 1792, Fichte does not get further than the concept of revelation's conditioned necessity as an external impetus towards moral action. Already by 1796 Fichte had indicated the decisive basis for the idea that revelation is constitutive for human autonomy in general. However, only in his late philosophy does he find his way to a concept of revelation that really goes further.³¹

***Wissenschaftslehre* as a Temptation to Atheism?**

The ‘community of scholars’ who had exultantly greeted ‘Kant’s Fourth Critique’ (from Fichte’s pen!) could best save face by helping the newly rising star in 1794 to a professorship in Jena. Five years later, they were happy just to be rid of the uncomfortable, divergent self-thinker³² without having lost too much face, because of his incompetent manoeuvrings in the so-called ‘Atheism Controversy’. How did things stand from a philosophical perspective?

The Beginnings of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*

Kant's transcendental explanation of the facts of consciousness had convinced Fichte of the untenability of every deterministic system – whether of an empirical–materialistic or a speculative variety. But, the results of the three 'Critiques' did not fit together into a systematic whole. For this a central point would have been required, out of which reason's separate 'regions' could have been recognized as deriving from a common ground. For a philosophy of freedom in connection with Kant, this central point could only be the manifestness of the I, experiencing itself as free and real in the ought.³³

This sort of systematic beginning was unconditionally required by the Kantian experience of freedom. If reason is really sovereign over itself, then it must succeed in understanding the multiplicity of living consciousness as proceeding from a unitary ground, i.e. genetically. On the other hand, if unity in multiplicity can be produced only regionally and by starting from pre-given data of consciousness, then reason's autonomy is impossible. Such insights into the coherence of the whole, succeeding merely partially and belatedly, demonstrate on the contrary reason's fundamental dependence on something that is not itself.

Just how much Kant's philosophy leaves to be desired, here, seems to show itself particularly in the juxtaposition of the assumption of a 'thing in itself' and the postulate of God. Namely, if moral reason's orientation towards realizing the 'highest good' – the thorough harmony of nature's lawfulness with the moral law – leads necessarily to the assumption of God, i.e. of a final rational ground out of which both of the disparate legislative systems within the world of appearance come into unity, then the assumption of the 'thing in itself' as a being situated outside reason cannot remain standing.

Earlier we called attention to the idea with which Fichte in 1792 tried to make Kant's postulation of God more precise. It is interesting to consider how this idea was repeatedly taken up by Fichte in the context of his first approach to the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Fichte begins every presentation of his *Wissenschaftslehre* with the *unity of knowing*: no principle of explanation outside reason is admitted for the variegated facts of consciousness; the manifold of consciousness must be displayed in its ultimate coherence from this alone. According to the beginning of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, the absolute

unity of the I as the final explanatory principle is presupposed by all empirical consciousness which moves within the opposition of 'I' and 'not-I'. From this perspective, it is sufficient to indicate how the I that is in motion within multiplicity finds its way 'back' to a unity adequate to its origin.

On this basis, two of Fichte's statements become understandable as variations of the perspective already developed in 1792 – that things be considered not only with regard to their *being*, but also with regard to their *ought to be*. In his first sketch of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the *Eigne Meditationen über ElementarPhilosophie* of 1793–94, he says, in regard to the final identity within the manifold, 'I believe that this is philosophy's highest task. It is not possible unless things can be adequate determinations of our pure I. "Let justice rule". With God it is so. (This yields a Spinozism. But a completely different one; namely, not a theoretical or speculative, but rather a moral one)' (GA II/3: 132). This note corresponds to the remark in the first lectures aimed at a wider public,³⁴ in which Fichte attempts to grasp more precisely Kant's postulation of God as the origin of the *Wissenschaftslehre*:

Man's ultimate and supreme goal is complete harmony with himself and – so that he can be in harmony with himself - the harmony of all external things with his own necessary, practical concepts of them (i.e. with those concepts which determine how things ought to be). Employing the terminology of the Critical Philosophy, this agreement is what Kant calls the 'highest good'. From what has already been said it follows that this 'highest good' by no means consists of two parts, but is completely unitary: the highest good is the *complete harmony of a rational being with himself*.

(GA I/3: 31–32; EPW, 150–151)

Indeed, the absurdities to which Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre* could lead, especially in its adaptation for a wider public, become clear in the statement that follows a few lines later than the passage just cited:

Man's final end is to subordinate to himself all that is irrational, to master it freely and according to its own laws. This is a final end which is completely unachievable and must always remain so – so long, that is, as man is to remain man and is not supposed to become God. It is part of the concept of man that his ultimate goal be

unobtainable and that his path thereto be infinitely long. Thus it is not man's vocation to reach this goal. But he can and he should draw nearer to it, and his true vocation qua *man*, that is, insofar as he is a rational but finite being, a sensuous but free being, lies in *endless approximation towards this goal*.

(GA I/3: 32; EPW, 152)

Fichte gives here a most remarkable twist to Kant's postulation of God! Hegel's criticism of the 'bad infinity' of a 'perennial ought-to-be' applies equally to Kant and to the early Fichte.³⁵ Should I undertake an aim that is in principle unachievable? Here this self-containment that undermines the final seriousness of moral action has only the supplementary function of protecting against a pantheistic fusion of human and divine being. Fichte did well to avoid philosophical speculations on religion as much as possible until the principles of his transcendental philosophy had been more clearly developed.

The Atheism Controversy

Things worked out differently from what had been planned. Once again a strange interplay of philosophy and life arose in the biography of a thinker who worked to erect a transcendental system without any empirical contribution.

A student of Fichte's, the Reverend K. Forberg, had sent Fichte and Niethammer, as co-editors of the *Philosophisches Journal*, an essay entitled 'The Development of the Concept of Religion' that at first glance could appear to present good Kantian doctrine: 'Religion ... is a *duty*. It is a duty to believe in an order of things in the world wherein one can expect the eventual success of all good plans, and wherein the effort to promote the good and to prevent evil is not absolutely in vain; or, which is the same thing, it is a duty to believe in a moral world-governance or in a God who rules the world in accordance with moral laws.'³⁶

Forberg believed that committing oneself to atheism in the field of speculative reason was quite compatible with this practical belief of reason, and he was able to vary his line of thought accordingly: 'Before one's conscience no one can answer to a maxim other than that of doing good and preventing evil where one knows how and can do so ... in the hope that chance (or the deity, understood as a power that is unknown to us) will clear all difficulties out of the way'.³⁷ This is something quite different from Kant's concept of religion.³⁸

Fichte advised Forberg against publication,³⁹ but Forberg would not hear of it. So the editors suggested that the essay be published with accompanying remarks, which Forberg did not permit. Thus it came about that Fichte added a short essay of his own: 'On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World' (1798).⁴⁰ Fichte's second text on the philosophy of religion saw the light of publication; and, as a result of the Atheism Controversy it aroused, it led finally to his losing the appointment at Jena.

Fichte's remarks in the course of this controversy can be viewed from various perspectives. First, Fichte had to justify himself as a teacher in a university where that half of the student body who were pursuing theology had philosophy as a required subject.⁴¹ Seen in this light, it is understandable that even Fichte's good friends shook their heads in amazement. For our purposes, another perspective is decisive by itself: are Fichte's statements to be understood as the adequate expression of a philosophy that

viewed itself as the systematic fulfilment of Kantian thought and which could be regarded as *prima philosophia* in the classical sense?

Regarding what Kant had designated as the final purpose of moral action, Fichte now wrote the following: ‘To the extent that I adopt this goal that is posted for me by my own nature and make it into the goal of my real acting, I at the same time posit that it is possible to accomplish this goal through real acting’ (GA I/5: 352; IWL, 148). This is clear progress over the passage cited earlier: the final goal of moral action is not pushed back ‘to infinity’ as in principle unrealizable for human beings. This anthropomorphic perspective cannot stand against the seriousness of the ‘holy will’.

The consequence of this is that the (artificial and philosophically inconsistent) boundary that Fichte had previously erected between ‘God’ and ‘humans’ disappears. In human freedom, as in the entire world, all that counts for pure practical reason is what understands itself, or can be understood, as a ‘vehicle’ or ‘material’ of the moral or (which is the same thing) divine order of the world: ‘My entire existence, the existence of all moral beings, and the sensible world, as the common theater of our actions, thereby obtain a relation to morality. There thus opens before us an entirely new order, of which the sensible world, with all of its immanent laws, is merely the passive foundation’ (GA I/5: 353; IWL, 149). Whoever genuinely allows himself to be grasped by the comprehensive demand which the ‘holy will’ invokes in the manifestness of the ought must reject as futile any protest about some ‘natural limit’ which seems to be set for moral action: ‘You are not permitted to lie, even if the world should fall into ruin as a consequence of your refusal to do so. This, however, is no more than a figure of speech, for if you were able to believe, in all seriousness, that the world would crumble ... then, at the very least, your own nature would be utterly self-contradictory and self-destroying’ (GA I/5: 354; IWL, 150).

This rigourism of Fichte’s ethics, in which one could justifiably find the crucial point of his entire philosophy, seems remote from reality. But this rigourism is not entirely mistaken, given the naïveté with which Fichte approaches the problem of the necessary lie.⁴² It is more than interesting, however, just how similarly Anselm of Canterbury explained the question of free will with lying as an example.⁴³ In fact, using the example which Kant introduces towards the end of § 6 of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (AA 5: 30; CPrR, 163–164) – can I give false testimony that costs an honourable man his life

but protects me from an otherwise impending hanging? – one quickly arrives at the point where a decision for or against the unconditional ought (and the belief in the ultimate realization of the final purpose at which it aims) cannot be evaded by rational arguments. But one's right to choose the image of God that one holds is inseparable from this.

Fichte was rightly aware that his concept of God was superior not only to the representations of God that were familiar within theology, and which were seldom free of eudaimonism and 'economic' thinking, but also to Kant's ideas about God. Already at this phase of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, God does not merely come in functionally as a guarantee for the highest good's realization, but rather God provides the source of the moral law as a fact of pure practical reason in the form of the 'absolute I'. But could Fichte remain content with what he had achieved so far? His concept's thinness at this point is revealed in the fact that he could cite Faust's answer to the question of Gretchen as a 'concretion' of his idea (see GA I/5: 356–357; IWL, 153). This famous Goethean text remains closer to Spinoza's pantheism than to Kant's philosophy, Fichte's restrictive paraphrasing notwithstanding.

Fichte's claim that God could have neither personality nor consciousness was the greatest stumbling block in the Atheism Controversy. These would be inadmissible transferences from finite self-experience to the absolute's 'pure act'. Something Fichte wrote in reply to K. L. Reinhold on 8 January 1800 already shows that this statement called for further reflection. Responding to objections raised by Jacobi, Fichte writes that 'God's consciousness may yet go through. We must admit a connection of the divine with our knowing that we cannot appropriately think otherwise than as a knowing, materially considered, but not according to the form of our discursive consciousness. It is only the latter that I deny, and I will deny it as long as I possess the power of reason' (GA III/4: 180–181).

The decisive religious–philosophical question concerning the early beginning of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is whether the relation between God and pure reason, as expressed in human consciousness, can in general be conceived appropriately in the concept of an 'absolute I'. Hegel criticized the leap – on which Fichte did not reflect – from the 'absolute I' to its externalization in the relation of 'I' and 'not-I', and he found his way to a solution that in the end neither left God free nor left freedom really free, and above all degraded the ought from being the very fulcrum of the transcendental system to being a

mere moment in the absolute's self-unfolding. The primordial fact of unconditional obligation cannot be explained on the basis of an absolute that cannot exist without its opposite.

But Fichte also did not succeed in deducing the 'fact of pure practical reason' – of course not by demonstrating it, and not even by showing its necessity within the transcendental system from the point of unity which the latter must have. So long as the system's highest point of unity is called 'I', only the one side of this primordial fact can be enunciated, namely the actual and not merely apparent freedom that is released along with the 'ought', rather than the moment of the 'ought' as such. But how are the 'I' and the 'absolute' to be distinguished unless the 'I' is finally once again derived from some 'not-I' (the regression into dogmatism of which Fichte had rightly accused Schelling)? Only when this question had been sufficiently answered could an adequate concept of God be formulated within the transcendental system. Fichte first arrived at a solution of this basic problem after 1800. Here we must spare ourselves a review of the laborious path to the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*. We shall start rather with the result on which Fichte's most famous writing in the philosophy of religion, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben* of 1806, depends.

Philosophy of Religion at the Apex of the *Wissenschaftslehre: Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*

In 1801 Fichte writes to Schelling that ‘the highest synthesis ... has not yet been made, the synthesis of the spirit world. As I prepared to make this synthesis, they cried Atheism’ (GA III/5: 45). Still, the situation had a positive side, as Fichte wrote to his wife on 5 November 1799: ‘In working out my current book [*The Vocation of Man*, 1800], I have gained a deeper look than anyone so far into religion ... I believe that without this fatal controversy and without its bad consequences, I would not now have come ... to this clearer insight’ (GA III/4: 142). In what did this decisive step beyond the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* consist?

The Fulcrum of the Later *Wissenschaftslehre*

In the horizon of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*, why the ‘absolute I’ burdens itself with the limitation of appearing in consciousness only as the opposition of ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ remains completely incomprehensible. The phenomenon of obligation was not really understandable on that basis. To be sure, one can call the dynamic which results from this opposition on the basis of the absolute I a rational drive to realize absolute unity, a striving that is as indestructible as it is unfulfillable. The I puts itself into the elementary situation of the absurd – as Albert Camus characterized it, reaching back to the myth of Sisyphus. From the viewpoint of the later *Wissenschaftslehre*, the *entire I is phenomenal*; it *exists* because absolute being expresses itself, appears, and yet remains absolute being.

One would need to have felt something of the fascinating quality of Spinoza’s philosophy, in contrast to all earlier metaphysics, to grasp the simple clarity of Fichte’s solution in its full force. No one who recognizes that human reason unavoidably presupposes an absolute, even in its most sceptical judgements and in all its questions, can evade the problem of how quite generally that can happen without the absolute being destroyed in the same breath. For, given that the absolute *exists*, how can something else exist outside of this being, such as the act in which finite reason presupposes the absolute? Is it an accident of absolute substance? In that case, not only is the independence of all finite beings annulled, but also the absoluteness of being is not even preserved. The solution, which Fichte managed to arrive at in thinking through Kant’s philosophy after 1800, is this: absolute being is able to go beyond itself only in the act of a freedom that grasps itself and all possible existence in the same act, rigorously and without remainder as an *image* of the absolute. Only so can it enter a relation that does not bind ‘absolute’ and ‘finite’, thereby making the absolute itself finite. Rather it leaves everything ex-sisting, all ‘stepping-outwards’ (*Nach-außen-treten*) exactly as it was in the absolute unity of being. Any image given as complete and in which intuition saw absolute being before itself would not fulfil this condition. In that case intuition would remain something that was not entirely dissolved in the intuited image. The image must make itself into nothing else than an image of the absolute; it must be a freedom that negates the appearance of its own independence, so that the absolute can be absolute.⁴⁴

From this, knowing's highest point of unity – knowing itself as a mere form of the absolute's presentation and appearance – all structures of consciousness must be deducible as necessary conditions of the possibility of this image-being, and everything that really presents itself as underivable must show itself as necessarily underivable for the sake of the image. In the conceptual scheme of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*: the pure doctrine of truth and reason has to precede the 'phenomenology' or the doctrine of appearance (GA II/8: 206, 228).

‘Doctrine of Religion’ as Popularized *Wissenschaftslehre*?

At the end of April 1806 there appeared under the title *Instructions for a Blessed Life, or the Doctrine of Religion* (*Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch die Religionslehre*) lectures that Fichte had given in Berlin between 12 January and 30 March 1806 on Sundays at noon. The list of participants reveals an impressive collection of highly respected people from society and politics – including several women.⁴⁵ Describing this public, Schelling spoke of this audience as ‘Berlin wives, cabinet councilors, merchants and the like’, and Hegel spoke of a ‘philosophy for enlightened Jewish men and women, councillors of state, Kotzebue’. Given all the misunderstandings evident in the many reactions and reviews by the ‘leading thinkers’ of the time, Fichte’s most famous text on religion offers enough occasions for criticism. Above all, why did he attempt to popularize the most decisive results of his philosophical system? Did Fichte flee to a select audience of those who were well disposed towards him, after he had become a caricature to his philosophical contemporaries? Here only a few central points can be raised.⁴⁶

The real basis for Fichte’s ‘popularization of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ lies in the central role that religion plays in his system. For Fichte, in contrast to Hegel, religion is not the last preliminary step before ‘absolute knowledge’, i.e. philosophy, rather it is this knowing itself: ‘religion consists in this, that one immediately intuits, has, and possesses God in one’s own person and not in another. But this is only possible by means of pure, independent thinking; since one becomes one’s own person only through this; and this alone is the eye to which God can become visible’ (GA I/9: 69). Whoever does not come to this ‘true inner independence of the spirit, remains subject to opinion and, throughout every day of his life, possesses no understanding of his own, but rather only a supplement to an alien understanding’ (GA I/9: 68).

Compared with the truly religious person’s foundational insight, scientific philosophy is ‘merely its *artificial* and *systematic development*, but in no way its content’ (GA I/9: 68). So as not to remain purely ‘intuitionistic’ or ‘decisionistic’ and thereby fall back into fundamentalism, every religious insight must be open to the transcendental deduction of its place within the total system of a self-consistent reason. Every free action must presuppose the possibility of a deductive, theoretical recapitulation of its *groundedness*

from absolute certainty's point of unity – otherwise it would still have to reckon tacitly with heteronomy. But such a deduction can never be undertaken with the goal of *grounding* the manifestness of real freedom out of an unconditional claim of obligation.

The double need that drives Fichte to his popular philosophy and leads to many misleading formulations comes from this. On the one hand, religiosity must be saved from falling back into a 'self-imposed immaturity' (Kant). On the other hand, it needs protection from that enlightened spirit of the age that, in its modesty, is awkward before any clearly determined thinking, feels itself hurt by the strength of philosophical reflection, and decrees the latter to be heresy by the unanimous resolutions of the council of critics (see GA I/9: 75). One of Fichte's most pressing purposes in these lectures is the demonstration that both belief in heaven from a desire for reward and scepticism as a social game result from the same root in a reason that has not yet come to itself – and they do so to an equal degree.

Outlines of the 1806 Text on Religion

What remains valid in Fichte's later philosophy? What makes it so strange and not simply to the contemporary person? Perhaps this question can be more easily answered if we begin by transposing Fichte's enterprise into the language of Albert Camus – as had previously been hinted at above in connection with the early *Wissenschaftslehre*.

If people do not immunize themselves against ultimate questions in one way or another, they experience themselves as being under a divine curse: like Sisyphus, one knows oneself to bear the imprint of something unconditioned. One cannot avoid striving for an ultimate unity. But at the same time, multiplicity and conflict appear to be ineliminable conditions of existence.

Against Camus, and all critics of religion, Fichte is of the conviction that one can 'imagine Sisyphus happy'⁴⁷ only when one can see the origin and meaning of the unconditioned's imprint. But a philosophy worthy of the name also knows that humanity's 'divine determination' does not lose its appearance as a 'divine curse' so long as human conditionedness through multiplicity and conflict has not been recognized as a necessary condition of the possibility of ultimate meaning, happiness, or 'holy living' (*seliges Leben*).

Fichte's answer to the age-old question concerning the relation of 'unity' and 'multiplicity' has already been sketched: this question can be solved through an act of freedom in which autonomous reason overcomes all appearance of independent, existing being – that is, being apart from the absolute – and recognizes that all existence has reality only as an 'image of God', that is, as a condition of its possibility. This resolution is not possible without a religious act. And Fichte correctly sees that this religious answer has found expression in the theology of John's Gospel as summarising the 'essence of Christianity'.

On the basis of this fundamental clarity, Fichte undertakes a 'transcendental phenomenology' in two directions. (1) The *Wissenschaftslehre* itself has the task of exhibiting the 'facts of consciousness' as necessary conditions of the possibility of the absolute's revelation in human freedom. But we must keep in mind that, beyond this speculative–theoretical illumination of consciousness's general structure, 'being apart from God' can express itself only as a striving for unconditioned unity. In human

existence, this striving manifests itself as various forms of love, defined according to the type of knowledge considered as unconditionally worth acquiring. (2) Fichte undertakes a phenomenology of these diverse (individually or epochally determining) ‘world-outlooks’ in his popular scientific lectures from 1804. In his religious text of 1806, understood as ‘instructions’ for a blessed life, this kind of critical phenomenology of the main forms of human ‘predilection’ assumes a privileged position. In contrast, in the fourth lecture Fichte conducts the (philosophically exacting) transcendental derivation of the ‘facts of consciousness’ only provisionally, and only so far as seems necessary to him for clarifying the true character of existence as an image – and hence for understanding the various world views.⁴⁸

(1) Free reason should understand itself as the image of absolute being. For this purpose, it needs, *first of all*, the cognition of a fixed, self-sufficient being. Human beings encounter this initially as a sensible world, even before they become aware of their own freedom. Yet, even when it becomes clear that objective being exists only by way of subjective – and especially intersubjective – agency, one does not lose the feeling that an actual being stands behind this mere *image* of being, dependent on subjective seeing. To rationally master this feeling – the ineradicable dowry of ‘naive realism’ – is certainly philosophy’s most difficult task. This epistemological problem appears in Fichte from the perspective of practical reason: reality in the strong sense belongs solely to the absolute and to its complete manifestation in free reason. All else can only be ‘appearance’ (*Schein*). How Fichte employs this term in his philosophy of religion and beyond is confusing.

On the other hand, in order to become the image of the absolute, reason must also recognize itself as an unconditionally free capacity. But what Fichte says about this topic in the fourth lecture – under the key phrase ‘free reflection’ (with its objective outcome being ‘endless multiplicity’) – is inadequate.⁴⁹ The most important moment in reason’s self-recognition as an unconditionally free capacity is the necessarily intersubjective constitution of freedom. That in this context Fichte speaks only briefly about the possibility of deducing this structure of freedom (GA I/9: 102) is particularly ominous, since the decisive question is whether Fichte achieves a concept of the absolute’s appearance as a result of which the unity of divine life can be seen as possible in

principle rather than merely reported as a belief, and this depends on the understanding of intersubjectivity.

According to Fichte, splitting ‘into a system of Is or individuals that remain to be perfected’ belongs ‘to the absolute, fundamental form of existence that cannot be annulled by the Godhead himself’; ‘therefore no individual posited by this split, i.e. no individual that has become actual, can ever perish’ (GA I/9: 159). In these individuals ‘the entirety of divine existence is split for the infinite development out of itself in time, and ... equally apportioned’ (GA I/9: 159). ‘Each one, without exception ... holds his own exclusive portion of supersensible being that belongs to absolutely no individual other than himself’ (GA I/9: 160), with the goal ‘that in each individual’s action purely that form appears which the divine essence assumes in that individual, and that every individual recognize God in the actions of others, as he is manifest outside that individual, and that all others equally see God, as he manifests himself outside of them, in the actions of that individual; that therefore God manifests himself wholly always and to all eternity in all appearance’ (GA I/9: 163–164). ‘Finally ... the kingdom of God must also eventually appear ‘ (GA I/9: 173).

In fact, the solution to the conflict between unity and multiplicity is hinted at in this paraphrase of the purpose of all existence. The fundamental division into ‘subject’ and ‘object’ is retained. But at the same time it is overcome by the fact that the real truth of this relation is exposed as an act of intersubjective recognition. Each subject becomes an image of the absolute when it makes itself an image of the other; when it stakes everything on this, that God’s true image, which they are, achieves a breakthrough in the other; when it finds its true being in joy at every other. That each individual elevates him- or herself to this freedom and experiences the sensible world no longer as the final resistance but instead as a medium for God’s appearance in the ‘completed system of Is’ is the presupposition for this realization of the divine being, mirrored in the interpersonal recognition of God’s image.

Unfortunately, Fichte overlooks the difficulty of the eschatological paradox that results from this concept of divine revelation. The more unreservedly I surrender myself to God’s unalterable will to manifestation in this world, the more painfully I experience the ‘delay in his coming [*Parousie*]’. God’s appearance will first be completed when, in every freedom that encounters another,⁵⁰ and in the world that mediates them – ‘God

alone as he is in himself shines back from every side and in all directions' to each (GA I/9: 172). Whoever really rests in God's will will create from that basis the strength and infinite patience which does not allow despair over the world's meaning. It is in this that I see the enduring validity of Fichte's philosophy of religion. But his view that religious people can call up 'unshakeable peace' at any moment of time by looking to the future – 'indeed for this moment he has all infinity in front of himself and can posit as much as he wishes millennium after millennium, that costs him nothing' (GA I/9: 173) – removes ultimate seriousness from the present moment that is always provided for human action; for instance, it takes away responsibility for this our earth here and now.

(2) Given this transcendental phenomenology, i.e. the derivation of the individual moments, especially the stages of consciousness, that are necessary for freely completing existence as an image of the absolute, it becomes possible in principle that existence remains stuck at one of the necessary steps of being's appearance, before it has raised itself to genuine life. In his lectures on 'The Characteristics of the Present Age' (*Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, presented in 1804–5), Fichte had attempted to divide the course of history into five epochs, on the basis of this possibility. Applying the fivefold structure that is presented in the *Wissenschaftslehre* in ever new variations, Fichte shows how the possibility that individuals become fixated in particular moments of consciousness leads to five 'world views' that can be encountered not only diachronically, but synchronically as well. 'Absolute being's self-maintenance' (see GA I/9: 134, 167) expresses itself as absolute affect, or as 'love' in existence at each of its stages. Thus, the inflexibility with which each world view appears, holding on to a particular stage of existence and to the resulting interpretation of the whole, becomes understandable.

Fichte's characterization of the lowest world view, the belief in disparate being, is not difficult to understand at bottom, since it could be identified as a particularly impressive example of a common admonition: 'Get real, people!' However, Fichte's insufficiently differentiated use of the word 'appearance' (*Schein*) for the sensible world does create problems of understanding as does his tone as well, in which the bitterness of his personal experiences, above all his final break with Schelling, all too frequently breaks through.

Fichte's comments on the second world view, the belief in law, are not easy to reconstruct because of the fusion between inferences required by his system⁵¹ and philosophico-historical judgements. He speaks about a 'law of class and of equal right' (GA I/9: 107) and also includes in this world view 'jurisprudence, as setting up legal relations between people' (GA I/9: 107), as he in fact had done earlier, but really he deals only with the standpoint of 'lower morality' (that remained valid until Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*; see GA I/9: 108⁵²),⁵³ which complicates things.

Using penetrating arguments, Fichte rejects postulating God for the sake of one's own happiness as generally incompatible with morality (GA I/9: 135ff., 147ff.). He then expounds, at the level of first principles, what he had already presented with great acuity in 1799 during the Atheism Controversy.⁵⁴ But the postulate as characterized in this way can already be discerned in the second edition of Fichte's text on revelation (1793) just as in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.⁵⁵ Indeed, in 1799, Fichte had still produced God's existence from the highest end of moral action – in agreement with Kant.⁵⁶ But now he reduces morality empirically to an ethics of sentiment: 'Wishing, and acting, without any further intention beyond the action. What then is there that lies outside of wishing and acting, and beyond the independence of spirit in itself? Nothing at all, except a life of sensory pleasure' (GA I/9: 136).

Despite the great number of immature statements, one should not overlook the crucial idea with which the later Fichte actually brings systematically into focus the insight that had already guided Kant: that true freedom consists in nothing else than the pure 'I can' of the unconditional 'I ought'. What remains of the 'I' when it thoroughly consummates this clarity? In this realization, freedom to *choose*, which is merely a condition of the possibility of genuine freedom, loses its natural appearance of freedom. If one vitally experiences the unconditional demand of the 'you ought', the I knows itself not as choosing but rather as chosen to fulfil the 'holy will' (Kant) that expresses itself here, and it experiences itself as able to release itself from all earlier striving and compulsion, which now reveal themselves as a being driven, as the semblance of a need-to-be. The truth of free choice consists in the I's being choosable by that act of absolute being which is untouched by any external determination and which shines forth in obligation's manifestness. If, as regards its unconditional being, the I nevertheless wishes to hold on to its free choice, then it collides against the expression of reason's one true

will. Insofar as it was conceived as freedom for self-chosen ends, rather than for the ongoing possibility of choosing the right means, a freedom to choose asserted from this point on would be mere persistent attachment to an illusion.⁵⁷

According to Fichte, if this experiential seed of obligation finds fulfilment in the full capacity of human freedom, then a ‘blessed life’ is achieved, which unfolds itself in the three standpoints of ‘higher morality’, ‘religion’ and ‘science’ – (*Wissenschaft(slehre)*). These represent not really three distinct world views so much as three differing aspects of a single life, that does not grasp the world as a dissemination either of things that differ in themselves or of self-sufficient freedoms, but rather as the still hidden image of God, which unveils itself in the surrender of human freedom to the call of real being. These ‘standpoints’ supplement each other reciprocally. ‘*Higher morality*’ completes the objective side of this life, the I’s self-forgetting surrender to the disclosure of the true image. And, in order not to forget, in its engagement with this goal, the unitary life which carries the whole movement, ‘*religion*’ is needed as the subjective moment, i.e. as self-aware resting in the divine power. Not that religion should in any way be considered as a ‘self-sufficient matter’: rather, it is the clear eye ‘of the inward spirit that penetrates, animates, and imbues ... all thinking and acting’ (GA I/9: 113). Finally, the standpoint of *science* ‘goes beyond the realization *that* absolutely every manifold is grounded in the one and is traceable back to it, an insight that religion already guarantees, to the realization of the *how* of this connection; and what remains only unconditionally given for religion becomes genetic for it’ (GA I/9: 112). ‘Science’ (*Wissenschaft(slehre)*) is the task, belonging ‘to the domain of higher morality’, of bringing religion – the inward eye of true living – to that complete and thorough clarity which belongs to the image and impression of God (GA I/9: 112).

Seldom has the many-sided interconnectivity of ‘action’, ‘contemplation’ and ‘reflection’ been illustrated more clearly than Fichte has done here, or so it seems to me. What is the real reason why these statements appear so alienating in many places, despite all the fascination that emanates from them? We cannot take up here the special problems that arise from Fichte’s claim to have provided the adequate philosophical ‘translation’ of Christian theology – particularly his ‘no’ to the doctrines of the Trinity, creation and sin/redemption.⁵⁸ It is a difficult question whether Fichte, despite all his distancing from the ‘middle’ Schelling and Hegel, does not after all embrace a subtle

pantheism, and thereby fail to do justice to Johannine theology.⁵⁹ We conclude by focusing on one especially central point. As remarked earlier, in connection with the ‘system of Is that remain to be perfected’, Fichte in 1806 had not yet succeeded in appropriately presenting the realistic character of the ‘sensible world’ in its complementary aspects as ‘nature’ and ‘history’.⁶⁰ In the following period he undertook important self-corrections,⁶¹ for which the rupture in understanding between Fichte and Schelling could surely have been a serious obstacle.⁶² In the context of our overview, this question about the concept of *history* within Fichte’s philosophy of religion is of particular interest.

History as the Site of Divine Revelation⁶³

Fichte's attempt in 1792 to demonstrate a (conditional) necessity for historical revelation on the basis of Kantian philosophical principles remained problematic.⁶⁴ But by 1796 he had already made the decisive step towards a genuine transcendental proof of history as the site of divine revelation in his 'Deduction of Intersubjectivity' (§§ 1–3 in the *Grundlage des Naturrechts*). The act of recognizing and summoning another rational being is a transcendental condition of the possibility of each individual self-consciousness, in which act the mentioned self can first become aware of its freedom. This already supplies a solution in principle for the most fundamental problem concerning the connection between revelation and autonomous reason: the address from another rational being that calls to me does not necessarily impede my freedom; it is even indispensable so that my autonomy can first unfold. Although Fichte still talks about 'education' in relation to this deduction, Lessing's idea of revelation as a pedagogical measure that is useful but not rationally necessary is fundamentally revised here. The summons to being an I can certainly be conceived of as the original educative act. But who then educated the first human being? It must be another spiritual being that is not human: 'A spirit took them into its care, exactly as is portrayed in an old, venerable document that generally contains the deepest and most sublime wisdom and presents results to which all philosophy must return in the end' (GA I/3: 347–348; FNR, 38).

In 1797 Fichte takes up this hint in the context of linguistic and philosophical reflections. In his 1795 article *Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache* Fichte had still explained human speech by invoking the necessity of a social arrangement among self-conscious individuals. Now he pointed out that spoken communication was already necessary for the constitution of individual self-consciousness, and he traces the origin of the human race, and thereby of language, back to a primordial appeal by God, i.e. to a 'miracle'.⁶⁵

The idea of an 'original people's' education by God first arises in this context.⁶⁶ This thought exerted remarkable influence on Fichte's thinking about history in general and revelation in particular right up to his late phase in 1812–13. So, for example, in his effort to develop an original rigorously transcendental deduction of interpersonal and history in cultural–historical terms, Fichte located the 'cradle of humanity' in Central

Asia. The Jews were first ‘relieved of their early crude superstition and raised to better concepts of God and the spiritual world’ (GA I/8: 332) with the spread of true moral insight from Mesopotamia. As a matter of history, even Jesus had drawn his revelation not through the medium of the Jews, but rather from this Asiatic origin.⁶⁷ Many obscurities in Fichte’s national ideas – up to and including the projection of a ‘national religion’⁶⁸ – are easier to understand against the backdrop of this strange theory of a ‘primordial revelation’. But one must not overlook the fact that Fichte at the same time laboured for years to find a more appropriate explanation of the concept of revelation.

The *Anweisung zum seligen Leben* is a vivid example of this struggle and also of his vacillation. On the one hand, he says here that the true doctrine of religion brought by Jesus is ‘as old as the world’ (GA I/9: 115).⁶⁹ On the other hand, he stresses that ‘the realization of the absolute unity of human existence with the divine ... was in no way present prior to Jesus’ and that the emergence of this insight in Jesus must be regarded as a ‘stupendous miracle’ (GA I/9: 121). It was not until 1812–13 that Fichte first broke free of this very muddled image.

We cannot pursue here the most interesting, but very complex, new developments in Fichte’s conception of revelation that appear in his philosophical–historical reflections of 1813.⁷⁰ The one really detailed and coherent discussion of the concept of revelation in his late work occurs in an ‘appendix’ to the *Sittenlehre* of 1812.⁷¹

Here Fichte ties directly into remarks that he had made in his 1798 *Sittenlehre* about the ‘needed yet needy symbol’ (*Notsymbol*).⁷² The indispensability of a ‘creed’, or a ‘confession’, exists for every ‘church’ (i.e., in Fichte’s perspective at that time, for every community obligated by the demands of morality), because the true and the good can come to presence only in the free interaction of individuals; but a common basic conviction is necessary as a point of origin for this interaction. The required ‘symbol’ for such a fundamental agreement must in any case always in principle be only a ‘symbol based on need’ (*Notsymbol*), i.e. it must always remain open to possible improvement.

The 1812 text does not differ in its judgement that all of a religious community’s symbols must remain open to further development. But while it had remained completely obscure in 1798 how a symbol is established and what grants it validity – at that time Fichte said only that it is ‘an absolute duty to establish something, no matter what it might be, about which at least most people agree, as a *symbol*, i.e. it is an absolute duty

to bring together, to the best of one's ability, a visible church community' (GA I/5: 219; SE, 231–232) – now the symbol's origin is explicitly traced back to revelation. Fichte's explanation of 'spiritual nature' (i.e. the life of a historical community) and how it is promoted by means of 'faces' (as Fichte translates ἰδεα)⁷³ in his *Five Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar* (1811) are important for a full understanding of this presentation.⁷⁴ A society lives on the basis of what has conveyed itself linguistically–historically as spirit. This 'conveyance' happens in relation to 'faces' expressed in sensory images (*Sinnbilder*), through which the breakthrough from material to spiritual being sometimes succeeds. In a living language every advance in the penetration of spiritual content ties itself to the understanding that is already sedimented in such sensory images. Thus, any victory over matter which had previously been gained and which had found its expression in the original symbols resonates in the whole of the linguistic tradition, and this does not lead spiritual development away from the experience of material reality, but rather deeper into the 'sense' of the 'sensible' given.

This general insight into the nexus of 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) gives Fichte an entrée into renewed reflection on ecclesiastical symbols. How does such a symbol come to be? The concept (i.e. the knowledge that all manifesting being is, or more especially ought to become, the image of God or absolute being, according to Fichte's later philosophy) 'breaks out to consciousness everywhere throughout the world, and indeed, as surely as it is the absolute concept, into an ethical consciousness with the directive: "be shared and spread to the greatest possible extent". As surely as this is an original breakthrough of what has never been present in the world, this happens in an inconceivable way that connects with no previous link; *like genius, as revelation*' (GA II/13: 382).

How does Fichte now understand the relation between such historically occurrent revelation and autonomous reason, especially philosophy? From the start Fichte was convinced that there was no difference in content between genuine revelation and genuine philosophy, except in the form in which the content was known. He characterizes this difference here as one between 'feeling' and 'vision'. That is, he goes behind the superficial opposition between authority and autonomy to the decisive difference that stands between the immediate assumption of heteronomy ruling in the highest ethical and religious intuition and the independent fulfilment of that realization, in

which I grasp the necessary genesis of thinking according to irrefutable principles of reason.

More important still is that Fichte lays out the completely *reciprocal* priority of revelation and autonomous reason with unprecedented clarity. Every revelation that addresses free moral reason (and nothing else could be recognized as a revelation according to the 1792 principles) presses forwards not only to be assumed in faith but also to be reflected in reason's own power, which is the priority of philosophy from the standpoint of the *telos*. However, Fichte equally clearly emphasizes the character of philosophy as the mere fulfilment of content given by revelation:

When it comes to true philosophy, moral faith is what develops itself to clarity and to the drive towards wanting to be seen. Philosophy presupposes it: it must already have the object that it wants to see in a clear light. But in empirical existence, moral faith comes only through revelation, inspiration. Therefore, in its empirical being all philosophy begins from the church and its principle, revelation, however much it raises itself above every church in regard to form. So the philosopher is and remains a member of the church, because he is necessarily raised in the church's lap and has begun from there.

(GA II/13: 390)

It is remarkable here how a philosopher for whom nothing else was important besides the systematic explanation of the conditions of the possibility of freedom – which in its sharpest form had even produced the Enlightenment! – came to a conclusion as a result of this work that was entirely analogous to what Anselm of Canterbury had formulated seven hundred years before, in his notion of faith seeking its 'necessary rational grounds' (*rationes necessariae*).

Notes

Translated by Walter E. Wright. The translator gives special thanks to his colleague Michael Pakaluk for reading this translation in draft and suggesting many improvements.

[1](#) See FG, I, 6–9.

[2](#) On this point, see Fichte’s comments in letters (especially GA III/1: 162, 194, 204); his remarks about the pressure to orthodoxy in the fragment ‘On the Purposes of Jesus’s Death’ (GA II/1: 89) – a perspective that he also expressed in the two sermons preserved for us from early days (GA II/1: 65, 428), and that recurs similarly in the journals on the education of the Ott children (GA II/1: 179–180); and, finally, the disparaging note on the state of religion in ‘Accidental Thoughts from a Sleepless Night’ (GA II/1: 105).

[3](#) See GA II/1 and some letters in GA III/1, further FG, I, 3–25. On this see Reiner Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl. Die Theologie Fichtes in seiner vorkantischen Zeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969); Hansjürgen Verweyen, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), vii–xv; Michael Kessler, *Kritik aller Offenbarung. Untersuchungen zu einem Forschungsprogramm Johann Gottlieb Fichtes und zur Entstehung und Wirkung seines ‚Versuchs‘ von 1792* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1986), 17–24.

[4](#) See FG, I, 16–17; Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl*.

[5](#) See G. E. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, Vol. VIII (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 441.

[6](#) The fragment ‘On the Purposes of Jesus’s Death’ (1786) (GA II/1: 67–98) already shows this. It becomes clear here how Fichte – to be sure, in implicit conversation with Reimarus – makes an effort to secure the basic fact of Christianity (Jesus’s death and resurrection) reflexively and systematically, without taking up the question of historical criticism.

[7](#) See above all G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, in *Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, Vols. 3–5, ed. by Walter Jaschke

(Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983–84). In particular, Vol. 3, 285; Vol. 5, 84–85, 182.

[8](#) In his *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

[9](#) See the fragment from 1786 cited in [note 6](#).

[10](#) See K. G. Fiedler's letter to Fichte dated 28 January 1785 (GA III/1: 9–10).

[11](#) See the fragment 'Some Aphorisms Concerning Religion and Deism' (1790), GA II/1: 287–291, especially the Editor's Forward, 285–286.

[12](#) Near the end of August 1790. See Fichte's letters to F. A. Weißhuhn (GA III/1: 67–68) and to M. J. Rahn on 5 September 1790 (GA III/1:169–174, especially 171).

[13](#) This Fichte in his early period believed he perceived in the smallest details of personal life. See, for example, his letter to M. J. Rahn of 15–16 March 1790 (GA III/1: 83).

[14](#) See the plan of Fichte's letter to F. A. Weißhuhn on 11 October 1791 (GA III/1: 269–270) and also the letter to G. Hufeland on 28 March 1793 (GA III/1: 379). The systematic location for placing the concept of providence is briefly indicated in the book on revelation (GA I/1:119; ACR, 137).

[15](#) See Verweyen, 'Einleitung', in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, xv–xviii.

[16](#) See the biting sarcasm that he poured on his reviewers in his satire *Friedrich Nicolai's Leben und sonderbare Meinungen* (1801): 'After he (Fichte) had written a bad book – as he himself admitted at the time – he was mightily praised in a famous newspaper and immediately invited to collaborate on the same paper . . .' (GA I/7: 450; see also GA III/1: 252, 268, 280; GA III/2: 181; GA III/3: 207).

[17](#) See Verweyen, 'Einleitung', in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, xviii–xl.

[18](#) As the title of § 87 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has it.

[19](#) The corresponding passage in the 1791 draft was marked by parentheses as a side remark (GA II/2: 29). Directly on the difference between Kant and Fichte, see R. Stadler, ‘Der neue Gottesgedanke Fichtes. Eine Studie zum “Atheismusstreit”’, *Theologie und Philosophie* 54 (1979): 481–541, especially 492ff. (although he misunderstands the development of Fichte’s philosophy of religion).

[20](#) The reflection essentially surpasses the draft of 1791.

[21](#) ‘the right is not right because God commands it, rather God commands it because it is right’ (GA II/2: 33).

[22](#) If one asks for the basis of this, one must some day reconsider Fichte’s eudaimonistic ideas prior to his encounter with Kant’s critical philosophy (on this point, see Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl*, especially 98–99). Possible as well is the influence of Heinrich Stephani, who postulated God’s existence on the basis of unfulfilled sensible urges in earthly existence and deduced rights from things left open as permitted by the moral law in his *Vorlesungen über die wichtigsten Gegenstände der Moralphilosophie mit besonderer Hinsicht auf die deutsche Konstitution und die iezige grosse Völkergährung in Europa*. Regarding Fichte’s connection with Stephani, see J. G. Fichte, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution*, ed. Richard Schottky (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1973), note 4 to the Preface, 255–257, 282.

[23](#) ‘ . . . which is to be distinguished from a right, of which the teachers of natural right speak’ (GA I/1: 24n; ACR, 32n).

[24](#) See GA I/1: 149–153, 20–21; ACR, 24–28, 30–31.

[25](#) For more precise analysis of the background to the earliest fragments, see Verwey, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, xxvi–xxviii.

[26](#) See Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, § 4 with § 21 and § 77.

[27](#) See AA 6: 125ff.; R, 130ff.

[28](#) See GA I/10: 126, 129, 222, 236ff.

[29](#) See GA I/1: 63; ACR, 79–80. Obviously, Fichte is trying here to grasp the Old Testament revelation in philosophical concepts.

[30](#) See here Verweyen, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, xxxii–xl.

[31](#) See below, in the section ‘[History as the Site of Divine Revelation](#)’.

[32](#) *Selbst- und Querdenker* [translator].

[33](#) See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, § 6 (AA 5: 30; CPrR, 163–164).

[34](#) The first five of these lectures, given in 1794–95, were published in 1794 under the title *Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of the Scholar*.

[35](#) See G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke. In Verbindung mit der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft herausgegeben von der Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–), Vol. IV, 6–7, 34ff. (1801); Vol. IV, 387ff. (1802); Vol. IX, 324–332 (1807); Vol. XXI, 120–123 (1832).

[36](#) *Philosophisches Journal* 8 (1798): 21–46; cited from J. G. Fichte, *Werke – Auswahl in sechs Bänden*, ed. and intro. by Fritz Medicus (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1911), vol. III, 145–146; AD, 44.

[37](#) J. G. Fichte, *Werke – Auswahl in sechs Bänden*, 146; AD, 44.

[38](#) See especially Kant’s argument with Spinoza’s ‘atheism’ in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (AA 5: 452–453; CJ, 317–318).

[39](#) See, on this matter and the further course of the Atheism Controversy, GA I/5, 321–345, 377–407; GA I/6: 3–24.

[40](#) GA I/5: 347–357; IWL, 141–154.

[41](#) See K. Heussi, *Geschichte der Theologischen Fakultät zu Jena* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1954).

[42](#) See especially GA I/5: 257–258; SE, 275–276.

[43](#) See Anselm of Canterbury, *De libertate arbitrii*, Ch. 5ff.

[44](#) Fichte scarcely knew that on the basis of patristic speculations about the Trinity a decisive ‘self-thinker’, Anselm of Canterbury, had already groped towards this idea: ‘For the Word, by virtue of the fact that it *is* a word or image, bears a relation to the other, because it is Word and image only as it is the Word and image of something’. And, concerning the ‘I’: ‘the rational creature ought to devote itself to nothing so earnestly as to the expression, through voluntary performance, of this image, which is impressed on it through a natural potency’. Both citations are from *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (LaSalle, IN: Open Court, 1962), 102 and 132–133, respectively.

[45](#) See here and in what follows the editors’ foreword in GA I/9: 4ff.

[46](#) More thoroughly, see Hansjürgen Verweyen, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, ed. Hansjürgen Verweyen (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), xiii–lxiv.

[47](#) Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1955), 91.

[48](#) See here the precise execution of such a transcendental phenomenology in *The Wissenschaftslehre in Its General Outline* (1810) – the sole version of the later *Wissenschaftslehre* published by Fichte himself – in the translation by W. E. Wright, *Idealistic Studies* 6 (1976): 106–117. Also, briefly, Hansjürgen Verweyen, ‘New Perspectives on Fichte’, *Idealistic Studies* 6 (1976): 118–159, especially 140–144; and ‘Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaftslehre und Gesellschaftslehre beim späten Fichte’ in *Der transcendente Gedanke. Die gegenwärtige Darstellung der Philosophie Fichtes*, ed. K. Hammacher (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1981), 315–329.

[49](#) One can compare here the clear explanation in the 1810 *Wissenschaftslehre* §§ 5–10 (see above, [note 48](#)).

[50](#) ‘in aller begegnenden Freiheit’ [trans.].

[51](#) ‘systematischen Schritten’ [trans.].

[52](#) See Fichte's remark in his 8 May 1806 letter to Jacobi: 'Moral philosophy [*Sittenlehre*] cannot occur otherwise than it has with Kant and me; but moral philosophy itself is something quite limited and subordinate; I have never taken it differently and neither has Kant, especially as author of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the pinnacle of Kantian speculation' (GA III/5: 355–356).

[53](#) Here must be considered, first, that in the standpoints developed in the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* according to the law of fivefoldness, the 'belief in personality, and, given the former's multiplicity, in the unity and sameness of personality, the principle of *legality*' follows the 'Principle of Sensibility' in second place and thereupon is first called the standpoint of morality and of religion. The division of morality into two standpoints in the *Anweisung zum seligen Leben* is new by contrast and did not work out entirely well for Fichte. Secondly, how difficult the efforts, beginning in about 1800, to find a new determination of the main connections between right and morality had become for Fichte must be kept in view. Detailed proofs can be found in Hansjürgen Verweyen, 'Einleitung', in J. G. Fichte, *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, 4th revised edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), xxxviii–xxxix.

[54](#) See GA I/5: 436ff.; AD, 110ff.

[55](#) In his *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik* (1797) Fichte had emphasized that the eudaimonistic misunderstanding of the God-postulate could not rightfully appeal to Kant (see GA IV/1: 402ff., especially 417).

[56](#) See Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 87.

[57](#) It is also interesting here that Anselm of Canterbury completed the same idea (against the authority of St. Augustine!): the choice between good and evil does not belong to the essence of freedom (*De libertate arbitrii*, Ch. 1). Evil can be chosen only outside the manifestness of unconditional obligation. But apart from just this manifestness, 'choice' reveals itself as the act not of real freedom, but rather of a wilful I that holds fast to itself against the realization of pure reason, as an empty appearance of independence.

[58](#) On this, see Verweyen, 'Einleitung', in J. G. Fichte, *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, li–liii.

[59](#) In the context of the 1806 text on religion compare this with the specific passage ‘God is hidden from him by humanity’s eye simply because he is hidden from himself by this his own eye, and because his seeing is never able to reach his own being. What he sees is always the same; as we said before: he does not see himself as he is because his being is one and his seeing, on the other hand, is infinite’ (GA I/9: 169).

[60](#) See Friedrich Schlegel’s remark in his review of *Fichtes neueste Schriften* (*Heidelbergerische Jahrbücher der Literatur für Theologie, Philosophie und Pädagogik*, Vol. 1, 1808, 129–159, here 151): ‘It is remarkable that the author, who recognizes a higher “supersensible” individuality, still always speaks only polemically about multiplicity in relation to the merely sensible multiplicity of the insignificant world of appearance; although with this individuality he still must necessarily recognize a higher, supersensible, divine and holy plenitude’.

[61](#) See for instance the passage in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1810 (GA I/10: 342) in which Fichte brings up the truth of the sensible world as a necessary condition of the possibility of intersubjective recognition.

[62](#) See Fichte’s note from 1813: ‘Then what is the law of world-facts, i.e. of that which gives freedom its task? This question is very deep: until now I have helped myself by ignoring and denying it. To be sure I can yet get a deeper, genuinely absolute understanding of freedom’s infinite modifiability, and giving this inner support. Hence, what I have posited as absolutely factual could have been posited through an *understanding*. (With this I would once again come even closer to Schelling)’ (GA II/15: 301).

[63](#) In this section too only a sketchy summary is possible. See more fully Verweyen, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, xl–lv.

[64](#) See the section ‘[The Concept of Revelation](#)’.

[65](#) See GA IV/1: 296–303.

[66](#) See GA IV/1: 303.

[67](#) See GA I/8: 302–303, 332, 340ff.

[68](#) See GA II/10: 409–426, GA II/15: 218–220.

[69](#) This expression is taken up again in the *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808) (see GA I/10: 171) and is heard once again even in the *Staatslehre* of 1813 (see GA II/16: 100).

[70](#) See Verweyen, ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung, I–IV and the same author’s Recht und Sittlichkeit in J. G. Fichtes Gesellschaftslehre* (Freiburg: Alber, 1975), §§ 34–36.

[71](#) See GA II/13: 380–392.

[72](#) See GA I/5: 218–220; SE 230–231. (*Not* suggests both ‘need’ or ‘deficiency’ and ‘necessity’. Fichte plays on both meanings here in ways that are important to his meaning [trans.].)

[73](#) See GA I/10: 148.

[74](#) See especially GA I/10: 148ff.; also on this point see Reinhard Lauth’s succinct, precise sketch in his ‘Einleitung’, in J. G. Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, 5th edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978), xvii–xxxvii; and Verweyen, *Recht und Sittlichkeit in J. G. Fichtes Gesellschaftslehre*, 212–224.

Fichte and the Development of Early German Romantic Philosophy



Elizabeth Millán

Even a cursory look at the contributions of Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) and Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) (1772–1801), the main philosophers of the early German Romantic Movement in Germany (*Frühromantik*) reveals Fichte's influence upon their thought. Any perusal of Novalis' *Schriften* takes us to his *Fichte Studien*, early notebooks written during the years 1795–96.¹ In Schlegel's work, fragments on Fichte abound. Schlegel's engagement with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is concentrated in two collections of fragments, *Zur Wissenschaftslehre 1796*² and *Geist der Wissenschaftslehre 1797–1798*,³ but observations and critical remarks concerning Fichte's place in the intellectual landscape of the period can be found throughout the fragments that Schlegel wrote during the peak of his romantic period (1794–1808). Those who dig no deeper than a superficial glance at titles might be left with the impression that Schlegel and Novalis were proselytizers of Fichte's philosophy, seeking to spread the spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

However, a deeper look at the philosophical positions of the early German romantic philosophers reveals a different, far more complicated story of Fichte's influence upon the early German Romantics, easily challenging the simple tale of students following in their teacher's footsteps. Certainly, both Novalis and Schlegel admired Fichte's philosophy. And, as Manfred Frank notes in his lectures on early German Romanticism, family connections granted Novalis privileged access to Fichte's writings. As Frank recounts, a certain Baron Ernst Haubold von Miltitz (1739–1774), who was a relative of the Hardenberg family, had discovered the young Fichte in Rammenau, and, impressed with the young Fichte's intellectual talents (Fichte had been able to recite from memory a sermon that the baron had missed but had wished to hear), took on financial

responsibility for Fichte's education. Fichte remained grateful to the family, sharing his writings with them. Novalis' father took over the guardianship of Miltitz's son when the baron passed away, hence the relation between the Hardenberg family and Fichte became closer, as they then became the recipients of Fichte's gratitude.⁴ Together with Hölderlin, Novalis first met Fichte in May 1795 at Friedrich Niethammer's house – but, due to the family circumstances sketched above, Novalis would have had access to Fichte's writings even earlier. Despite the close personal connections that Novalis had to Fichte, his philosophical loyalties put him into closer company with Friedrich Schlegel and the critique of Fichte's foundationalism developed by Schlegel.

In Friedrich Schlegel's writings much admiration for Fichte is expressed. In *Athenäum Fragment* Nr. 216, Schlegel claims that 'The French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's *Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age'.⁵ One can understand Schlegel's reference to Fichte's philosophy as a reference to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a work in which Fichte attempts to establish an absolute first principle for philosophy, an attempt that Schlegel (and Fichte, too) believed had revolutionized the field of philosophy. Ultimately, Schlegel rejected Fichte's attempts to establish a first principle for philosophy; indeed, Schlegel rejected *any* attempt to establish a first principle for philosophy. Schlegel, in keeping with his project to unite science, art and philosophy, fuses three areas of innovation in *Athenäum Fragment* Nr. 216: the philosophical innovation present in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, the literary innovation found in Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister* (1795–96) and the social–political innovations ushered in by the French Revolution.⁶ Already in the details of this fragment, we find hints of a theme that distinguishes the very approach to philosophy favoured by the early German Romantics from Fichte's approach to philosophy. Unlike Fichte, Schlegel did not consider philosophy as the science of sciences, there are no hierarchies in his thought, and he pushed for a fusion between disciplines that would guide us in our infinite progress to truth. In Schlegel's border-fusing, art and aesthetic experience take a leading role; philosophy becomes aesthetic in a way that it never did for Fichte.⁷

Even if not aesthetic, Fichte's philosophy was, as Schlegel observed, revolutionary in its own right – introducing new forms and posing new narrative challenges to the reader, and, of course, with the bold shift from a fact (*Tatsache*) of consciousness to an

act or performance (*Tathandlung*) of consciousness uncovering a new starting point for all philosophizing. Yet, while lauding Fichte's philosophy as 'one of the greatest tendencies of the age', Schlegel was also one of the first to point to the limitations of Fichte's approach to philosophy. Fichte's philosophy shaped early German Romantic philosophy in significant ways, yet Schlegel, Novalis and another prominent Friedrich of the period, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), were far from being blind followers of Fichte's philosophy; in fact, they were some of his staunchest critics, led in part by an early critic, Carl Christian Erhard Schmid (1761–1812), the unfortunate victim of Fichte's infamous act of annihilation. Schmid was a tutor and mentor of Novalis, and a key figure in the story of the romantic reception of Fichte's thought (by way of avenging Fichte's act of annihilation, below I shall turn to some details of Schmid's role in the story of the romantic relation to Fichte's thought). Achieving clarity about the relation between Fichte's philosophy and the work of the early German Romantics will shed light both on some of Fichte's central positions and on the trajectory of early German Romanticism. In what follows, I shall offer a portrait of Fichte's influence on the development of early German romantic philosophy, arguing that Fichte shaped the aesthetic turn that is one of the lasting legacies of early German Romanticism. To make my case, I will focus upon how the reception of Fichte's philosophy shaped the philosophical views of Schlegel and Novalis. I shall also briefly discuss how Fichte's thought shaped the views of the most poetic of the early German Romantic thinkers, Hölderlin.

The Soul of Jena

As Hölderlin made clear in a letter to Christian Ludwig Neuffer dated 1794, ‘Fichte is now the soul of Jena’.⁸ The students were drawn to his passion and his skills as a lecturer, and undoubtedly by the content of his lectures. Yet, quickly, critiques of his foundationalism and of his forgetfulness surfaced, in particular, his forgetfulness of the limits of possible knowledge. As a result of this lapse, many thinkers of the period dubbed Fichte a ‘transcendentist’. For the early German Romantics, a ‘transcendentist’ failed to recognize that the absolute first principle for philosophy could not be the starting point of all philosophy. As we shall see, Schmid accused Fichte’s philosophy of being nothing more than an infinite fiction (*unendliche Dichtung*) precisely because Fichte allegedly goes beyond the bounds of all possible experience to establish a first principle for philosophy. Those calling Fichte a ‘transcendentist’ held the view that Being must precede consciousness. Indeed, as Manfred Frank indicates in his lectures,

[T]he initial idea that, in my opinion, expresses the basic conviction common to the early German Romantics ... consists in the supposition that Being – as the simple seamless sameness [*Einerleiheit*], in contrast to the identity of the Kantian–Fichtean *cogito* – cannot be understood on the basis of the relations of judgment and reflection, all of which are occupied with reuniting original divisions and can always merely presuppose an original simply unity.⁹

Precisely the conviction described by Frank is clearly expressed by Hölderlin in a letter to Hegel from 26 January 1795. In this letter we find the following description of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* and some of the problems that Hölderlin found with Fichte’s views, problems worth lingering upon as they are part of what we might call a general romantic diagnosis of the ills of Fichte’s approach:

Fichte’s speculative paper – the basis for the whole *Wissenschaftslehre* – as well as his published lecture about the vocation of the scholar, will be of great interest to you. At the beginning, I suspected him of dogmatism; he seemed, if I may hazard a guess, really to have stood, or still stands at the crossroads – he wanted to go beyond the fact of consciousness in the *Theory*, this was evident from many of his

remarks, and this is just as surely and even more obviously transcendent, than when earlier metaphysicians wanted to go beyond the being of the world – his absolute I (= Spinoza's substance) contains all reality; it is everything, and there is nothing outside of it; there is thus no object for this absolute I, for otherwise all reality would not be in it; but a consciousness without object is unthinkable, and if I am myself this object, then I am as such necessarily limited, even if it is only in time, and thus not absolute; therefore, it is not possible to think consciousness in this absolute I; as absolute I, I have no consciousness and to the extent that I have no consciousness, to that extent I am (for myself) nothing, which means that the absolute I is (for me) nothing.¹⁰

Hölderlin defends the claim that Being, the inner unity of mind and world, determines consciousness. In what was to become his most influential text, *Urtheil und Seyn*, composed in 1795, Hölderlin develops his position in greater depth (even if not greater length, the text is a mere two pages). In *Urtheil und Seyn*, Hölderlin shows that Fichte's I cannot be the first principle of philosophy because judgement (which Hölderlin unpacks in terms of original division or *Ur-Theilung*) already marks a division between subject and object. In the shift from self-consciousness as the founding principle for philosophy to it as merely one prominent theme amongst others, we have what Manfred Frank claims is the 'first consummate expression of early German Romanticism'.¹¹ Being simply cannot be adequately comprehended by consciousness. This does not mean that Being remains completely unknown to us; the path towards it is opened by aesthetic experience. The acknowledgement that Being is available to us only through the glass darkly, as it were, connects the work of the prominent romantic thinkers of the period; it is an insight that connects Hölderlin, Schlegel and Novalis' reception of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹² Just how clear, complete and certain the science of philosophy harvested in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* really is, was called into question by romantic thinkers such as Hölderlin, Schlegel and Novalis.

Accepting Hölderlin's claim that Fichte was indeed the 'soul of Jena', at least in the estimation of the early German Romantics, it behoves us, before examining more details of the romantic critique of Fichte's philosophical approach, to explore the nature of Fichte's particular philosophical soul.

In his writings, Fichte privileges the scientific aspect of philosophy. Even in his more popular writings, we find the scientific aspects of philosophy and of life privileged. Indeed, the popular text referenced by Hölderlin, Fichte's 1800 work *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, provides abundant examples of such privileging. As Daniel Breazeale notes, 'though written in Berlin, *The Vocation of Man* can be plausibly interpreted as the final and crowning achievement of Fichte's "Jena Period"'.¹³ Hence, we may not be misguided in looking for the spirit of the 'soul of Jena' in the *Bestimmung* text. In Book Three, Faith, Fichte writes that

[S]cience, first awakened by the pressure of need, shall later penetrate into the invariable laws of nature more thoughtfully and calmly, survey the whole power of this nature, and learn to calculate its possible developments. While remaining close to living and active nature and following in its footsteps, it shall conceive of a new nature ... In this way, nature is to become ever more transparent to us until we can see into its most secret core, and human power, enlightened and armed by its discoveries, shall control it without effort and peacefully maintain any conquest once it is made.

(GA I/6: 269; VM₂, 83)

Fichte is not humble in declaring humanity's dominion over nature, indeed, over the power to 'conceive of a new nature'. For Fichte nature can be exhaustively grasped simply by the charts and graphs of the scientist. He seems to be 'in the dark when it comes to anything that goes beyond charts and graphs'. This darkness was well described by the author/s (Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin are each possible authors – Fichte is not) of the 1796 text *Das Älteste Systemprogramm/The Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism*,¹⁴ or what we can call a Romantic Manifesto. Following this manifesto, we are led to the claim that the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet, for without aesthetic sense, one cannot understand ideas. Following this line of reasoning, we might ask how well Fichte really understands the idea of freedom, a cornerstone of his philosophy, if he lacks aesthetic sense. In the philosophical universe of Fichte's *Bestimmung* text, human will, reason and the development of science make the laws of nature transparent to us

and enable us to have mastery over nature. Part of our *Bestimmung*, or cultivation, involves domination over nature. So the ‘soul of Jena’ does not appear to be an aesthetic soul, but more of a scientific soul. Yet, this scientific soul served as a most powerful *Anstoß* for the aesthetic turn taken by the early German Romantics.

There is no neglect of beauty or aesthetic experience in the work of the early German Romantics. We may return to the above-mentioned tendencies fragment, Nr. 216, for evidence of the privileged space art had in Friedrich Schlegel’s thought. Schlegel was captivated by Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; it represented for Schlegel the paragon of what art could accomplish, immortalized, in the company of the French Revolution and Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, as a tendency of the age. While Schlegel could only be partially supportive of the French Revolution (which collapsed all too soon into a Reign of Terror) and Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (which he claimed had undesirable dogmatic, mystical aspects), he saw in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* a universal *Mischgattung*, a romantic model of what art could and should achieve.

Early in his essay *Über Goethes Meister*, Schlegel tells us that in *Wilhelm Meister* ‘art will become science, and life an art’.¹⁵ Given that the theme of the unity of poetry, philosophy and science shapes so much of Schlegel’s work, if *Wilhelm Meister* is indeed a novel in which such unity is achieved, we begin to see why Schlegel would identify it as a tendency of the age, and further would claim that an understanding of the work would reveal everything that was happening in literature. There is an important sense in which Schlegel’s *Über Goethes Meister* provides us with an answer to a question posed in *Athenäum Fragment* Nr. 168, namely, ‘what philosophy is fittest for the poet?’¹⁶ Schlegel begins to answer the question in the very same fragment where it is raised, telling us that the philosophy fittest for the poet is a philosophy of freedom:

[W]hat philosophy is left for the poet? The creative philosophy that originates in freedom and belief in freedom, and shows how the human spirit impresses its law on all things and how the world is its work of art.¹⁷

The creative philosophy sketched in this fragment is precisely the sort of system we find in Fichte’s work – one reason why Schlegel was attracted to Fichte’s work. Yet, while Fichte’s ‘creative philosophy’ is one ‘that originates in freedom and belief in freedom’,

and did indeed show ‘how the human spirit impresses its law on all things’ – all of which curried great favour with Schlegel, it was Goethe’s *Meister*, rather than Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, which showed ‘how the world is its [the human spirit’s] work of art’. In a letter from 21 June 1794, Fichte also praised Goethe’s contributions to philosophy:

Philosophy will not have attained its goal so long as the results of abstract reflection fail to conform to the purest spirituality of feeling. I consider (and have always considered) *you* the representative of the latter on that level of humanity which we have presently achieved. Philosophy is right to turn to *you*. *Your* feeling is its touchstone.

(GA III/2: 143; EPW, 379)¹⁸

Fichte’s philosophy as developed in the *Wissenschaftslehre* certainly ‘originates in freedom’, yet does it show ‘how the world is its work of art’? While Fichte, with his view that ‘[i]t is no more necessary that all men should be philosophers than it is necessary that they should all be poets or artists’ (GA I/3: 254; EPW, 324),¹⁹ would not have been interested in being dubbed a poet or even a composer of poetic philosophy, there was a kind of *Dichtung* to be found in Fichte’s work, at least in the estimation of one of Fichte’s contemporaries, Schmid. Yet Schmid did not find traces of ‘the purest spirituality of feeling’ that Fichte found in Goethe, but rather only a blameworthy, *unendliche Dichtung* in Fichte’s idealism, an empty fiction far from poetry and certainly not beautiful, in fact, something much more akin to a *müßiges Hirngespinnst* than anything philosophically valuable. Poor Schmid realized only too late that his critique of Fichte would lead to his annihilation. A brief sketch of the main lines of the philosophical confrontation between Fichte and Schmid will help to bring some details of the fraught relation between the early German Romantic philosophers and Fichte into sharper view.

The Annihilation Act and Fichte's *unendliche Dichtung*

The clash between Fichte and Schmid was occasioned by Schmid's *Bruchstücke aus einer Schrift über die Philosophie und ihre Prinzipien*.²⁰ Fichte's response to Schmid was published in the *Philosophisches Journal* in an article entitled 'A Comparison of Prof. Schmid's System with the *Wissenschaftslehre*', and the article is an excellent place to get an overview not only of Fichte's philosophy but also of the sort of person he was (or at least the sort of person he became when his philosophy was under attack). In 1796 Fichte became the co-editor of the *Philosophisches Journal*, and, when he began to publish his introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, he did so in a series of instalments for this journal. This was not because the journal was sympathetic to Fichte's philosophy. Fichte's co-editorship was a clever manoeuvre on the part of F. I. Niethammer (1766–1848), who did not want to alienate one of the most influential (and temperamental) thinkers of the period. Many of the contributions to the journal were attacks on Fichte's philosophy, attacks to which Fichte was compelled to respond.²¹ By making Fichte co-editor, Niethammer could safely publish articles which expressed strong arguments against Fichte's breed of idealism and then invite Fichte to respond. Looking at some of Schmid's criticisms of Fichte's thought reveals some of the lines that Schlegel and Novalis developed in their critiques of Fichte.

Both Schlegel and Novalis were familiar with the heated exchange between Schmid and Fichte. Indeed, the scepticism regarding first principles as the proper foundation for all of philosophy that Schmid developed in his *Bruchstücke* text would be developed by both Schlegel and Novalis in their reception of Fichte's work. The very title of Schmid's article, *Bruchstücke aus einer Schrift über die Philosophie und ihre Prinzipien*, alerts us to the fact that Schmid does not intend to offer a systematic treatment of the problem of philosophy's starting point, but rather an exploratory set of questions regarding the relations between philosophy and its principles. Schmid begins with a series of questions. A first principle is searched for: if we do not yet know where to find it, is it unknown? What is the status of philosophy if we cannot locate a first principle for it? Is philosophy determined by the first principle or is the first principle determined by philosophy? If the first principle determines philosophy, then, when we look for the principle of philosophy,

are we looking for philosophy? One of the primary issues embedded in Schmid's line of questioning is a quest for a definition of philosophy itself, a question that both Schlegel and Novalis took most seriously and to which they dedicated much attention.

After posing a series of questions related to the definition of philosophy, Schmid presents his view of where we begin when we philosophize. Schmid's philosophical primitives are representation, will and object. He writes as follows: '[T]hat we represent something, that we have a will, that there are objects: all of this can be known immediately and does not lend itself to philosophical proof'.²² Philosophers, according to Schmid, must not attempt to go beyond these primitives. For Schmid, the proposition 'I am' or 'the I exists' (*Ich bin* or *Das Ich ist*) is the foundation from which all philosophizing begins. All principles of philosophy presuppose a thinking subject who represents and wills *and* an empirical world of objects. Pure philosophy, if pure philosophy is to be defined as having no dependence upon the physical world, is an 'empty and foundationless philosophy' (*leere und grundlose Philosophie*), a 'lazy creature of the mind' (*müßiges Hirngespinnst*).²³ In his reply to Schmid, Fichte claims that the method of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is simply the method of abstracting from all contingent parts of the I and thereby uncovering it as a pure activity. He describes it thus (and in not-so-subtle parenthetical remarks reminds his readers of Schmid's deficiencies as a thinker – most of Fichte's critics turned out to be unfit for philosophy, at least from Fichte's perspective):

The *Wissenschaftslehre* proceeds in the following manner: It asks [*fordert*] everyone to attend to himself, to what he does when he says to himself, 'I' – namely, to what he does *as such and with absolute necessity*. (Everything depends upon this last point, but very few persons are able to lift themselves to this absolute, with its total abstraction from all individuality.) What the *Wissenschaftslehre* postulates is that anyone who actually accomplishes the act requested will find *that he posits himself* or (to express this in another way, which many persons find clearer) *that he is at once subject and object*. I-hood [*Ichheit*] consists in this absolute identity of subject and object.

(GA I/3: 253; EPW, 322–323)

The I is that which cannot be a subject without at the same time being an object and vice versa. This identity is the starting point of Fichte's philosophy. As he presses the point that all philosophy comes from the identity of the I, which is the bond between subject and object, Fichte claims that

Right from the start this identity serves to establish *Critical idealism*, that is, *the identity of ideality and reality*. This is not the sort of idealism which considers the I only as a subject nor is it the sort of dogmatism which considers the I only as an object.

(GA I/3: 253; EPW, 323)

Fichte presents his idealism as critical rather than absolute (in which case the I would be only a subject) or dogmatic (in which case the I would be only an object). Fichte's claim is that he has discovered an identity which gives unity to knowledge (hence the title of his work, *Science of Knowledge*) and to philosophy. This is why he claims that

With its first proposition [*erster Satz*] the *Wissenschaftslehre* succeeds in establishing not just philosophy in its entirety, but also the conditions for all philosophizing. This proposition serves to reject not only everything which, but also everyone who does not belong within the domain of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

(GA I/3: 254; EPW, 323).²⁴

According to Fichte, all of philosophy begins with and is determined by reflection upon the I:

‘What is one really thinking when one thinks this proposition?’ asks the philosopher, and philosophy in its entirety is an exhaustive answer to this question.

(GA I/3: 255; EPW, 324)

Schmid had claimed that any attempt to go beyond the primitives – will, understanding and the givenness of objects – was bound to lead to confusion, to empty, unjustified claims. To this Fichte replies that the goal of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not to justify a system of things (*Dinge*) but to describe a series of acts (*Handlungen*).²⁵ Fichte does not

deny that he must address the problem of the status which representations have, but this, he claims, is something quite different from giving an account of things as facts. According to Fichte, every general concept presupposes not a thing, but rather an abstraction which the mind performs because it is free.²⁶ The ‘I’ is not a fact, for a fact is, in Fichte’s account, something found – and the I is never found – it is the finder, the very condition necessary in order for anything to be found at all. Hence the I must be pure activity, a *Tathandlung* rather than a *Tatsache*. According to Fichte the objects of consciousness are the result of our freedom to abstract (*Freiheit der Abstraction*) and the formative powers of our imagination (*Bildung durch die Einbildungskraft*).²⁷ The process of abstracting from a particular tree that I see to the concept of tree in general is the product of the imagination in its freedom (*Produkt meiner Einbildungskraft in ihrer Freiheit*). Fichte goes on to argue that the same process which guides our formation of concepts of things guides our formation of our concept of ourselves, that is, of our faculties of understanding and will.²⁸ Fichte’s use of ‘imagination’ comes from Kant. It is a formative capacity of the mind (not a synonym for ‘fantasy’ or anything of the kind). When he speaks of the formative power of the imagination, he is referring to the schematism, which is that process which allows us to subsume a particular under a general category. According to Schmid, Fichte’s philosophy is an *unendliche Dichtung*, in which reality becomes the product of the creative powers of the mind, with the upshot that the connection to the objective realm becomes tenuous. In response to this charge, Fichte insisted that ‘the *Wissenschaftslehre* is ... a *thoroughly real philosophy*’ (GA I/3: 261; EPW, 330). Schmid’s critique was dismissed in the strongest terms by Fichte: ‘I hereby declare [whatever Professor Schmid says] *to be something which does not exist at all as far as I am concerned*. And I declare Professor Schmid himself to be *nonexistent as a philosopher* so far as I am concerned’ (GA I/3: 266; EPW, 335). Fichte’s act of annihilation notwithstanding, Schmid continued to exist, as did a current of criticism that continued to develop. While Schmid accused Fichte of generating idle figments of the imagination, rather than a science of knowledge, the early German Romantic philosophers found fault with Fichte’s forgetfulness.

Fichte's Forgetfulness: An *Anstoß*

The leading current of Novalis and Schlegel's dissatisfaction with Fichte's thought can be found in what Fichte leaves out as he begins to rebuild philosophy from the ground up. According to Schlegel, any attempt to begin with a pure point of certainty is impossible:

To abstract entirely from all previous systems and throw all of this away as Descartes attempted to do is absolutely impossible. Such an entirely new creation from one's own mind, a complete forgetting of all which has been thought before, was also attempted by Fichte and he too failed in this.²⁹

For Schlegel and the early German Romantic philosophers in general, philosophy is more than a deductive science and cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of the rules of logic (even if it cannot violate these laws). Knowledge of what came before is necessary, because any given philosophical system is just one among many, and, in order to fully understand each part, some view of the whole must be present.³⁰ Philosophy is historical, but is not thereby reduced to history, because it concerns the analysis and investigation of ideas, opinions and thoughts: philosophy is best understood via a historical critique of these ideas, opinions and thoughts.³¹

Schlegel displayed a high degree of characteristic impudence in his claims regarding the limitations of Fichte's philosophy, but this should not overshadow the great respect he had for both the work and the person. We can invoke once again *Athenäum Fragment* Nr. 216, which nicely captures Schlegel's admiration for Fichte. Yet Schlegel had far from unconditional approbation for Fichte: even a cursory look at the key term 'tendency' in *Fragment* Nr. 216 cited above already leads us to the root of a tension that would inevitably arise between the philosophical approaches of these two thinkers. Despite Fichte's insistence to the contrary, his philosophy was 'merely' a tendency, a 'temporary venture' (as Schlegel puts it), but could not offer anything like 'the secure path of a science'. A tendency does not stand in isolation from that which came before it or from that which will inevitably come after it. A tendency is much like a tradition; it is formative, but not in any absolute sense, and its boundaries towards the past and the future are open. In the wake of a departure from first principles, tendencies are an important part of what we have to guide us in our search for truth.

Tendencies are far too provisional for Fichte's taste; a tendency could never support the architecture of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Yet it was precisely tendencies, with their share of uncertainty, which were the very fabric of Schlegel's critical philosophy. This is, I believe, a fruitful point of comparison between Fichte and romantic philosophy: Fichte's critical philosophy was a kind of pure foundationalist idealism – Fichte, after all, stressed that any attempt to fuse idealism with realism was doomed to be an 'inconsistent enterprise' (GA I/4: 189; IWL, 12), whereas early German romantic philosophy was not a pure form of idealism at all; it was, rather, a unique anti-foundationalist hybrid of idealism (*à la* Fichte) with realism (*à la* Spinoza) that was coherentist (and coherent) through and through.

Consider Novalis' claim in the *Fichte-Studien*:

Philosophizing must be a unique kind of thinking. What do I do when I philosophize? I reflect upon a ground. The ground of philosophizing is thus a striving after the thought of a ground. Ground is not, however, a cause in the literal sense – but rather a constitution – a connection with the whole. All philosophizing must therefore end in an absolute ground. Now if this were not given, if this concept contained an impossibility – then the drive to philosophize would be an unending activity – and without end because there would be an eternal urge for an absolute ground that can be satisfied only relatively – and that would therefore never cease.³²

Novalis begins by calling into question the ground that Fichte believes he has located, and he goes on to develop a set of suggestions for how philosophy should proceed in the absence of such a ground – we strive, endlessly, for the ground, but never grasp it. According to Novalis, we cannot begin with an absolute ground, for, as he famously claimed, we seek everywhere the unconditioned (*das Unbedingte*) and find only things (*Dinge*). In a fragment from 1796, Schlegel, while taking direct aim at Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, echoes the anti-foundationalist stance that characterizes so much of Novalis' work in the *Fichte-Studien*:

Philosophy in its proper sense has neither a first principle, nor an object, nor a definite task. The *Wissenschaftslehre* has a definite object (I and not-I and their relationships), a definite principle [*Wechselgrund*] and therefore a definite task.³³

Neither Novalis nor Schlegel was interested in a critique of Fichte carried out as an attempt to finish something started, but not completed, by Fichte (as Fichte was allegedly carrying out the revolution Kant had begun but had not finished). The early German Romantics were interested in a reform of the very conception of philosophy that was shaping the post-Kantian period – they sought to move philosophy away from its moorings in science and the concomitant deductive method that had taken hold, and to bring it into the company of art and history. The early German Romantics thus endorsed a progressive and never-ending method for philosophy, based on the view that our knowledge claims would never be endowed with the certainty granted by absolute foundations, but rather would only ever have increasing degrees of probability; they would, as it were, tend towards truth. An infinite search or longing for the infinite (the totality of all truths) replaces any model (not just Fichte's) that departs from an absolute first principle.

Though this never-ending story of our longing for the infinite might superficially appear to be a fairy-tale-like approach to philosophical problems, it was, in fact, a much more sober alternative than the one Fichte offered. 'Sober' is intended here in more than one of its connotations; for Schlegel likened Fichte's attempts to explain the foundations of our knowledge to those of a drunk who never tires of the futile activity of mounting and then promptly falling from the horse that is supposed to take him to his destination, and so is always left just where he began without having moved any closer to where he wants to go.³⁴

From the view of philosophy offered by the early German Romantics, the philosopher emerges as a figure who can point to tendencies, to probable states of affairs and to beliefs that cohere with one another, but she cannot uncover the absolute foundation of all knowledge. But, according to Schlegel and Novalis, Fichte held that in order to be a 'science of knowledge', philosophy must be based upon an absolute first principle and the *Wissenschaftslehre* is his attempt to secure this principle and thereby solve the problem of philosophy's starting point.

Schlegel faults Fichte for his attempt to deduce all of reality from the self-positing act of consciousness. This, says Schlegel, is based upon a flawed view of the nature of philosophy:

If one postulates a system of knowledge [*Wissenschaft*] and searches for the conditions of its possibility, one falls into mysticism and the most consequential solution – the only possible one – from this point of view, is *the positing of an absolute I* – through which the form and content of an absolute theory of knowledge are given at once.³⁵

Novalis asked ‘What do we mean by “I”? Has not Fichte too arbitrarily packed everything into the I? With what warrant?’³⁶ Contrary to Fichte’s own claim that the only truly critical philosophy had to be his version of idealism, Schlegel and Novalis find in Fichte’s approach to philosophy heavy traces of dogmatism and mysticism and very little critical philosophy at all. Schlegel, in fact, likens Fichte to the Pope, who arbitrarily posits what he wills, and so can easily explain everything; he, after all, has ‘infallible power to open heaven and hell’.³⁷ Fichte’s act of annihilation banished Schmid from the gates of philosophy, and Schlegel would not have been welcome either, especially for uttering claims like the following:

Philosophy in its proper sense has neither a first principle, nor an object, nor a definite task. The *Wissenschaftslehre* has a definite object (I and not-I and their relationships), a definite principle [*Wechselgrund*] and therefore a definite task.³⁸

According to Schlegel, Fichte’s deductions work, as any deductive system must work, only if one accepts his absolute starting point, the axiom from which all else follows. Yet, according to Schlegel, no one is convinced by this, and, instead of argument, Fichte resorts to what Schlegel calls papal-like declarations of the truth of his claims.³⁹ Fichte claims that the task of philosophy is to indicate the basis of experience, yet, much to the Romantics’ (and, as we have seen, Schmid’s) disdain, this does not entail any commitment to experience. Further, Fichte claims that those who disagree with him do not understand him, probably because they are not engaged in philosophy at all.

For the early German Romantics, Fichte’s philosophy is a tendency of the age; that is, Fichte’s influence is undeniable, and his emphasis on the importance of human freedom in coming to an understanding of philosophy itself is to be lauded. Yet, given the early German Romantics’ reservations about a philosophy based on first principles, that is, given romantic anti-foundationalism, what are we to make of Fichte’s foundationalist

project? Fichte's emphasis on freedom is a tendency we should follow, whereas his misguided, mystical quest for absolute foundations is a tendency best avoided, for it is, in the end, just one more version of the foundationalist philosophy that the early German Romantics rebuke. The anti-foundationalist philosophy developed by the early German Romantics is at odds with Fichte's science of knowledge, for in place of conquest, domination and certainty, we find the mess of uncertainty, and a push to fuse philosophy and poetry. Born of such messiness and such fusion is a new space for a freedom that the early German Romantics did not believe Fichte developed in his philosophy, a kind of *unendliche Dichtung* that is no mere figment of the imagination, but rather a source of cultural inspiration, indeed, the sort of creative philosophy referenced by Schlegel in *Athenäum Fragment* Nr. 168, namely one that 'originates in freedom and belief in freedom, and shows how the human spirit impresses its law on all things and how the world is its work of art'. Fichte helped prepare the ground for such a world, but the world of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, while certainly not the *unendliche Dichtung* Schmid diagnosed it to be, never delivers space for the poetry which Schlegel and his romantic circle felt to be necessary for the development of philosophy itself. Nonetheless, Fichte's attempt to establish the first principle of all philosophy in an act of the I was a most productive *Anstoß* for the early German Romantics, one that ushered in an innovative chapter of post-Fichtean philosophy.

Notes

[1](#) It is important to note that this was *not* the title given to the writings by Novalis, but rather by editors of the critical edition of his work. As Manfred Frank has pointed out, this title disrupted the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the *Frühromantik*, and it continues to confuse readers, suggesting that Novalis was dedicated to the same sort of foundationalist philosophy as had been put forth by Fichte. See Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004), 40–41. Hereafter *PF*. The critical edition of Novalis' work is *Novalis. Schriften*, 3 vols., ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965). Hereafter *NS*.

[2](#) All references to Schlegel's work are to Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, 35 vols., ed. Ernst Behler (in collaboration with Jean-Jacques Anstett, Jakob Baxa, Ursula Behler, Liselotte Dieckmann, Hans Eichner, Raymond Immerwahr, Robert L. Kahn, Eugene Susini, Bertold Sutter, A. Leslie Wilson and others) (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958ff.). Hereafter *KFSA*. *KFSA* 18, 3–14, Nrs. 1–125. Some of Schlegel's fragments have been translated in *Friedrich Schlegel: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Hereafter Firchow.

[3](#) *KFSA* 18, 31–39, Nrs. 126–227.

[4](#) See Frank, *PF*, 157ff.

[5](#) *KFSA* 2, 198/Firchow, 46.

[6](#) For more on the call to unify the disciplines, see *KFSA* 2, 161, Nr. 115/Firchow, 14 and *KFSA* 2, 262, Nr. 108/Firchow, 104.

[7](#) Whether the lack of a developed aesthetic theory in Fichte's work is a matter of historical contingency (that is, Fichte, had he lived longer, would have developed the aesthetic theory latent in his work) or the result of deeper systematic commitments that excluded the development of aesthetic theory is not a matter I can settle here. French scholars Alexis Philonenko and Alain Renaut argue for the latter position, while thinkers such as Claude Piché, Faustino Oncina Coves and Ives Radrizzani argue for

the former. See Alexis Philonenko, *La liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte* (Paris: Vrin, 1966); Alain Renaut, *Le système du droit. Philosophie et droit dans la pensée de Fichte* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986); Ives Radrizzani, ‘Von der Kritik der Urteilskraft zur Ästhetik der Einbildungskraft, oder von der kopernikanischen Revolution der Ästhetik bei Fichte’, in Erich Fuchs, Marco Ivaldo and Giovanni Moretto (eds.), *Der transzendentalphilosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit: Beiträge aus der aktuellen Fichte-Forschung* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 341–359; Faustino Oncina Coves, ‘Rechte oder Ästhetik als Vermittlung zwischen Natur und Freiheit: Ein Dilemma bei Fichte?’ in Fuchs, Ivaldo and Moretto (eds.), *Der transzendentalphilosophische Zugang zu Wirklichkeit*, 361–379; and Claude Piché, ‘The Place of Aesthetics in Fichte’s Early System’, in Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds.), *New Essays on Fichte’s Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 299–316. Howard Pollack-Millgate offers an insightful account of some lines of influence from Fichte to Novalis in his ‘Fichte and Novalis on the Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics’, in *Fichte’s System of Ethics: Papers from the Ninth Biennial Meeting of the North American Fichte Society, Philosophy Today* **52**(3–4) (2008): 335–347. For a beautifully detailed analysis of Fichte’s aesthetic views and a history of their reception, see Daniel Breazeale, ‘Against Art? Fichte on Aesthetic Experience and Fine Art’, *Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo*, Vol. **38** (2013): 25–42.

⁸ Quoted by Frank in *PF*, 114. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke. Großer Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, 15 vols., ed. Frederick Beißner (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1943–85). One of the most important and valuable sources of analysis on Hölderlin and his contribution to the philosophical constellation of the period is Dieter Henrich’s monumental *Der Grund im Bewußtsein. Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992). Violetta Waibel’s *Hölderlin und Fichte, 1794–1800* (Paderborn: Schöningh: 2000), is invaluable for a full understanding of Hölderlin’s critique of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. Manfred Frank provides an excellent analysis of Hölderlin’s role in the development of early German Romantic philosophy in his *Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), see especially Part III.

⁹ Frank, *PF*, 125.

[10](#) ‘Letter to Hegel, 26 January 1795’, in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 188–190, at 189.

[11](#) Frank, *PF*, 107.

[12](#) In my article ‘Borderline Philosophy? Incompleteness, Incomprehension, and the Romantic Transformation of Philosophy’ (*International Yearbook of German Idealism: Romanticism*, Vol. 6 (2008), 123–144), I have argued that one way to distinguish early German Romantic philosophy from classical German Idealism is just through the stance each group takes on Being: while Idealists such as Fichte and Hegel work from a view that Being is transparent to reason, the early German Romantics accept the opacity of Being, turning to aesthetic experience to illuminate it for us. Fred Beiser does not agree, as he states that ‘[Millán’s claim regarding the opacity of being] seems simplistic to me, too black and white, because knowledge of being can be a matter of degree. While the romantics certainly did not hold that we can have perfect knowledge of being, they did think that we can know it a little, through a glass darkly’. Frederick Beiser, ‘Romanticism and Idealism’, in Dalia Nassar (ed.), *The Relevance of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30–43, at 37. I do not argue that there is no view of Being, only that the crystal-clear view, the one that would grant certainty and completeness to the philosophical project, is denied. And I would happily grant that knowledge of being can be a matter of degree, but precisely this is not something that Fichte and other leading German Idealists of the period would grant, which is what distinguishes German Idealism from early German Romanticism. One of the most provocative and clearest accounts of the romantic reception of Fichte’s thought is Charles Larmore’s ‘Hölderlin and Novalis’, in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141–160. Larmore argues that Hölderlin’s critique of Fichte cuts more deeply than either Novalis’ or Schlegel’s, because Hölderlin ‘appealed to an Absolute that precedes any sense of subjectivity’ (157).

[13](#) Breazeale and Rockmore, *New Essays on Fichte’s Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, xiv. For more on the role of *The Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s corpus, see Ives Radrizzani, ‘The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s Work’, in Breazeale and Rockmore, *New Essays on Fichte’s Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, 317–344. Also see Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds.), *Fichte’s Vocation of Man: New Interpretative and Critical Essays* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013).

[14](#) The title to the fragment found in Hegel's handwriting, but whose authorship has never been decisively established (Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling are viable candidates), was given to the text by Franz Rosenzweig, who published it in 1917, and is not really descriptive of the contents. It has been translated into English, see *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. Jochen Schulte-Sassed, Haynes Horne, Elizabeth Mittman, Lisa C. Roetzel, Andreas Michel, Assenka Oksiloff and Mary R. Strand and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sassed (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 72–73.

[15](#) *On Goethe's Meister* in Bernstein, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, 269–286, at 271/KFSA 2, 126–146, at 128.

[16](#) KFSA 2, 191–192/Firchow, 39.

[17](#) KFSA 2, 191–192/Firchow, 39.

[18](#) Letter to Goethe.

[19](#) 'Vergleichung des vom Hrn. Prof. Schmid aufgestellten Systems mit der Wissenschaftslehre' (*Philosophisches Journal* 3(4) (1796) (GA I/3: 235–271; EPW, 316–335).

[20](#) *Philosophisches Journal* 3(2) (1795): 95–132.

[21](#) See the 'Editor's Introduction' to IWL, xiii.

[22](#) Schmid, *Bruchstücke*, *op. cit.*, 109.

[23](#) Schmid, *Bruchstücke*, *op. cit.*, 101.

[24](#) 'Die Wissenschaftslehre stellt mit ihrem ersten Satze nicht nur alle Philosophie, sondern auch die Bedingungen alles Philosophierens auf; sie weist durch ihn ab, nicht nur Alles, sondern auch Alle, die nicht in ihren Umkreis gehören.'

[25](#) 'Der Zweck der [Wissenschaftslehre] ist nicht der, ein System von Dingen zu rechtfertigen, sondern eine Reihe von Handlungen zu beschreiben' (GA I/3: 256; EPW, 325).

[26](#) ‘Es ist auch nicht Factum des Bewußtseins, daß Dinge sind; nicht Factum desselben, daß Menschen sind, Thiere, Bäume, u.s.f., sondern nur, daß dieser bestimmte einzelne Mensch, dieses bestimmte Thier, dieser bestimmte Baum ist, die vor meinem Auge schweben. Jeder Gemeinbegriff setzt eine Abstraktion durch Freiheit voraus’ (GA I/3: 258–259; EPW, 328).

[27](#) GA I/3: 259; EPW, 329.

[28](#) ‘Ich abstrahire von dem Besondern in jedem Erkennen, und setze mich als das Erkennende überhaupt, gerade so wie ich vorher einen Baum überhaupt setzte; sondere diese Vorstellung von den übrigen Prädicaten, die ich mir zuschreibe, ab, und fixire sie in dem Begriffe eines Erkenntnisvermögens, oder eines Verstandes, gebe diesem Begriffe ein Bild, und sage: siehe, das ist mein Verstand’ (GA I/3: 259; EPW, 329).

[29](#) *KFSA* 12, 111.

[30](#) *KFSA* 12, 111.

[31](#) *KFSA* 12, 112.

[32](#) *NS* 2, 269–270, Nr. 566 in Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, ed. and trans. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 167. Hereafter *FS*.

[33](#) *KFSA* 18, 7, Nr. 36.

[34](#) *KFSA* 18, 32, Nr. 138.

[35](#) *KFSA* 18, 7, Nr. 32.

[36](#) *NS* 1, 107, Nr. 5/*FS*, 7.

[37](#) *KFSA* 18, 3, Nr. 2.

[38](#) *KFSA* 18, 7, Nr. 36.

[39](#) *KFSA* 18, 3, Nr. 2.

Fichte and Schelling: The Limitations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*?



Sebastian Gardner

In 1800 Fichte and Schelling began a correspondence in which they frankly addressed their philosophical differences,¹ each alleging irreparable defects in the other's system and misunderstandings of their own. Their closing exchange in 1802, after which all direct communication between the two men ceased and mutual criticism became a feature of their published writings, brought to an end what had been originally and officially, ever since 1794, a relationship of philosophical cooperation, a common radical progressive front in the Kantian aftermath, confronting a single set of critics.

Concerning one thing at least, they remained in agreement: the doctrine which defines in bold their philosophical opposition is that of the reality of Nature, denied by Fichte and affirmed by Schelling. The disagreement is, however, by no means self-explanatory, for what it means to grant or deny Nature's reality is not, after Kant, a straightforward matter – Fichte is no Berkeleyan idealist and Schelling no Lockean realist – and a lengthy route needs to be taken in order to understand how it evolved from what had been, to all appearances, a common post-Kantian starting point. The first two parts of my discussion trace accordingly the history of their philosophical relationship, with close attention to Schelling's earliest published works, often referred to as comprising the 'Fichtean' period in his development. The third reviews the systematic ground of their disagreement.

The Original Alignment, 1794–95

Fichte's *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*, and Schelling's *Of the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy (Form-Schrift)*, both published in 1794, form a natural pair. Both assert, following Reinhold, that philosophy must become a system in the strongest sense, and the necessity, to that end, of its being grounded on a single principle, not furnished by Kant. Reinhold's own reconstruction, his 'Philosophy of Elements', they regard as a proven failure after the sceptical battering received by Kantianism at the hands of 'Aenesidemus' (Gottlob Ernst Schulze) and Salomon Maimon. What Reinhold has shown, they consider, is that Kant's philosophy cannot be saved by mere supplementation: systematicity can be achieved only by positing an I to which absoluteness, including absolute freedom, is ascribed. The *Form-Schrift* was written shortly after Schelling's exposure to the first published parts of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–95), and in it Fichte is hailed as having alone put philosophy on the path to completion.² Yet, placing the two essays alongside one another, it is possible to detect differences of approach which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be seen to contain the seeds of the substantive disagreements that would eventually set them in flat opposition.

A clue lies in the title of Schelling's piece: to give primacy to the question of the 'form of philosophy', as Schelling understands it, is to take it that there is an *idea* of philosophy from which extrapolations can be made. This is done by attending to the pure concept of unity, since it is that concept which defines systematicity, whereby we isolate what Schelling calls the *Urform*, 'universal form' of all knowledge, and 'principle of the form of all form [*Grundsatz der Form aller Form*]'.³ And to grasp this 'original form' is *itself* to possess contentful philosophical knowledge.

Schelling's candid platonism,⁴ wholly absent from Fichte, is not yet, at this earliest stage, the full-fledged doctrine of eternal types that it later becomes, but of an original sort, mediated by his reading of Kant. Schelling assimilates Plato's ideas to Kant's ideas of reason, yet envisages no reduction of the former to the latter, of the sort that Kant himself recommends.⁵ Instead, taking Plato's side, and apparently disregarding Kant's thesis of the necessary involvement of reason's ideas with dialectical illusion, Schelling's claim is that enquiry into ideas must take precedence in the order of philosophical

reflection. His Kantianism, too, is therefore of a radically original kind: if ideas must be grasped at the outset, then what Kant designates as reason, *Vernunft*, the faculty of which generates ideas, has priority over the understanding, *Verstand*, and philosophy properly begins not with the analysis of experience – transcendental proof and explanation, the labour of articulating the ‘conditions of possibility’ of objects – but with reason’s self-reflection. The intention of turning Kant on his head is reflected in Schelling’s oft-quoted statement, in a letter to Hegel in 1795, that ‘Kant has provided the results. The premises are still missing. And who can understand results without premises?’⁶

Now Fichte of course also believes that Kant’s philosophy is lacking the metaphilosophy it badly needs, and that Kant has not formulated satisfactorily the method of transcendental proof, but his argument in *Concerning the Concept* for strong systematicity is independent of the sorts of considerations that move Schelling. Fichte aims to explain the concept not of *philosophy* but of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and considers the bare notion of philosophy on which Schelling dwells settled and unproblematic: the question which launches philosophical reflection is simply that of the possibility of ordinary first-order human knowledge of the basic empirical kind that also provides Kant’s starting point. In Fichte’s terms, the ‘form of all philosophy’ is simply whatever form renders natural consciousness self-transparent, and there is nothing at the level of total abstraction, where Schelling wants to operate, that could provide a purchase for philosophical thought. The contrast sharpens when Schelling says that it cannot be assumed at the outset that philosophical knowledge is foundational for knowledge as such.⁷ The required argument is in fact extremely simple, and is completed in a couple of sentences, but the vital point is that, for Schelling, philosophical knowledge is strictly autonomous in relation to worldly cognition, not answerable to empirical consciousness. Each may therefore be said to take their initial stand in natural consciousness, but in different sectors thereof: Fichte starts with Kant’s *Erfahrung*, empirical cognition, and Schelling with the natural metaphysical need of human reason, the part of ordinary thought that is already recognizably philosophical.

Further differences flow from this. For both, scepticism is of vital importance for philosophy in general, and the recent sceptical attacks on Kant’s philosophy are highly instructive, but there is an appreciable difference in what each makes of the sceptical

challenge. For Fichte, following the pattern of Descartes' First Meditation, scepticism constitutes simply a challenge to the certainty accompanying our ordinary claims to knowledge of an objective world. Its immediate import is not to engender first-order doubt – in Fichte's Kantian eyes, Descartes fails to make the vertical ascent of reflection which defines the transcendental turn – but to impress on us the need for a vindictory explanation of the possibility of objective experience, our doxastic commitment to which does not need to be revoked in order for philosophy to begin, since it has become its *explanandum*.⁸

If, on the other hand, philosophy begins with an inalienable possession – self-cognition of its idea – then it also begins at a level *above* that at which the sceptic operates, neither needing the provocation of scepticism nor fearing anything from it, and as such is already in a position to *make use* of scepticism. Schelling's take on scepticism is consequently much closer to Spinoza's: in the instant that we absorb the full force of radical sceptical doubt, we also and thereby recognize the existence of a ground of knowledge – the indeterminately conceived non-objectual *unconditioned*, heterogeneous with all objects of knowledge and known in an utterly different way. In Spinoza's image, the darkness that the sceptic seeks to cast over human knowledge merely reveals the light without which nothing could be put in the shadows.⁹

What allows Schelling to treat scepticism in this unconventionally platonistic fashion – to interpret it as directly revealing the non-emptiness of Kant's idea of the unconditioned, thus as giving more than it threatened to take away – he owes to Jacobi.¹⁰ The moral that Jacobi extracted from his consideration of Spinoza, developed in his *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism* (1787), is that philosophical reflection demands, but discovers that it cannot supply, knowledge of the unconditioned, its ideas of which are empty; and this confession of inadequacy forces it to relinquish its authority and cede to immediate feeling, *Glaube*, as the true condition for all knowledge. Schelling takes Jacobi's argument but subverts his anti-intellectualist conclusion: what the discovery of the unconditioned shows is not that philosophy must dissolve its systematic ambition but that its forms of reflection must be of an appropriately innovative, non-ordinary kind. Scepticism delivers this forward-looking result because it *proves* the insufficiency of chains of connection between conditioneds, i.e. causal and inferential relations, to sustain the realm which they collectively compose, and since this realm *must*

subsist – every move we make in the web of the conditioned, including the sceptic’s own inferences, shows it to do so – the unconditioned must have reality *qua* its ground.¹¹

Secondly, in consequence of its platonic orientation, Schelling’s project naturally attaches itself to an element in Kant’s system that, though it can be accommodated in some form by the *Wissenschaftslehre*, has no urgent importance for Fichte: the so-called Transcendental Ideal, reason’s idea of the sum-total of realities (*Realitäten*).¹² This specific idea of the unconditioned, Kant argues, is formed when we reflect on the possibility of thought of determinate existents – when we ask out of what metaphysical materials our thoughts of determinate objects are constructed – and theoretical reason fashions its idea of God around it. What allows it to be taken up immediately by Schelling are two points that have already been made, which naturally conjoin: since philosophy by virtue of its very idea is committed to an *Ur-Form* of all forms, and scepticism has revealed, as antecedently given, the reality of the unconditioned, what we may legitimately suppose is that the form which gives reality to the idea of philosophy doubles as the real metaphysical ground of the objects of cognition. Hence Schelling’s declaration, immediately after announcing the necessity of the unconditioned, that the ‘form’ which the *Form-Schrift* aims to lay bare will also be sufficient for all content – rendering it indistinguishable from Kant’s Transcendental Ideal. This claim is mirrored in Fichte, but again it is maintained for different reasons and in an importantly different sense: the sufficiency of the foundational principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* for all content derives directly from consideration of what is *necessary for cognition*, i.e., for X *qua* object or content of cognition, a qualification not made by Schelling, for whom the (again platonistic) possibility that ‘form’ is directly productive, ontologically creative of content, is left open, even if it is not yet fully developed.

A contrast of epistemological strategies has emerged: Fichte adheres to the binary subject–object structure of cognition, whereas Schelling retains a *third* term, which underwrites ordinary cognition but is not *exhausted* by that role, hence not *reducible* to a ‘transcendental condition’; Fichte holds to the unequivocally idealistic thesis of Kant’s Fourth Paralogism – that all of the being with which (theoretical) philosophy is concerned must be treated exclusively in terms of its candidacy for being cognized – while residues of Leibniz are detectable in Schelling, who is drawn to the notion that structures within reality which obtain independently of our cognition provide its correct explanation.¹³

These differences become lost from sight, however, as soon as, in the next step of their common argument, the I enters the picture as fulfilling the conditions laid down.

Schelling's second 'Fichtean' text, *Of the I as Principle of Philosophy, or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge (Ich-Schrift)*, argues that properties of the I uncovered in Kant's account of transcendental apperception, but not spelled out by Kant, equip it for the role of highest principle: unconditionability, pure unity, identity, reflexivity, self-realizability, equivalence of thought and being, and (most importantly) non-objectifiability. The line of thought is familiar from the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but there is a difference in the order of argumentation. As we have seen, *Concerning the Concept* extracts the unconditioned from the needs of cognition, whereas the *Form-Schrift* grants it a primordial independent existence. For Fichte, then, the necessity of the unconditioned designates a mere role which remains unoccupied until filled by the I, which is supplied (more clearly in the later Jena presentation than in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*) by the intuited actuality of the philosopher's self-consciousness, wherewith ontological commitment begins. The *Form-Schrift* argues quite differently: Because the unconditioned is self-realizing, it must *posit itself*, and as self-positing, it must *be* 'I', absolute I.¹⁴

Schelling's argument raises a question, with repercussions which will emerge. It is not fully obvious that the self-positing unconditioned should be identified as an I, however much it fits the bill. Could there not be another, perhaps higher, fundamental kind of unconditioned reflexive entity than the I? Indeed, the identification is open to an objection: if we arrive at our understanding of the I via self-consciousness, and if self-consciousness is a one-in-many, how can 'I' justifiably be transferred to what is merely one logical moment of the complex configuration which composes I-hood? Considered as absolute, 'I' is a part, and it may be asked what entitles it to bear the title of the whole. Now this issue does not arise, or at least it does not do so in the same way, for Fichte, since he begins with the self-consciousness that is given to us, and, if pressed to justify his identification of the absolute I *as* an I, Fichte has an argument: the designation is justified in view of the fact that it is only *qua* and by way of its role *within* self-consciousness that we have any concept of it at all; we are concerned with the absolute I only insofar as it provides the moment of identity in self-consciousness, and whatever it might be apart from that (if indeed that supposition has meaning) is irrelevant.¹⁵ This

answer is effective so long as no competing designation – no other angle, independent of the I, from which the absolute ground of its self-identity might be conceived – is in the offing, and in the *Form-Schrift* and *Ich-Schrift*, where no wedge is driven between I-hood and the reflexivity of the absolute, it is endorsed implicitly by Schelling.

Gradual Divergence and Eventual Opposition, 1795–1802

But it is retracted as soon as Schelling comes to think that there is indeed an alternative. This realization is expressed in Schelling's formulation of the possibility of a new kind of philosophy of nature, *Naturphilosophie*. But first to be considered is the new position articulated in the third of his early texts, *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795).¹⁶

The *Philosophical Letters*, though composed only shortly after the *Ich-Schrift*, picture the philosophical options quite differently. Schelling begins with the claim that the prized Kantian distinction between dogmatism and criticism has been badly drawn. His intention, however, is not to re-establish Kant's understanding of the distinction but to contest it, by showing that it fails to demarcate legitimate from illegitimate philosophical enquiry. Two strong claims are made. First, that contemporary Kantianism has been misappropriated to retrograde ends and infected by dogmatic elements that have no place in a system of freedom.¹⁷ This is of course Fichte's view too. The second is that what Kantians call dogmatism, and set in opposition to criticism, in fact contains elements that are shared with Kantianism, or that Kantianism needs in order to achieve the adequacy it at present lacks (as will become clearer, Schelling tells his readers, when the 'new dogmatic system' now under construction is made public¹⁸). This second claim is, of course, not Fichte's: though he agrees that Kant's philosophy is incomplete, Fichte does not consider that early modern rationalism contains what is needed in order to make it complete; on the contrary, this is to be achieved by accentuating its distinctively Kantian, anti-dogmatic characteristics.

In relation to Fichte, the burning question raised by the *Philosophical Letters* is whether the main argument that Schelling gives in support of his central contentions disagrees with the *Wissenschaftslehre*, even if nothing of the sort is intimated in the text. The mark of 'dogmatic' Kantianism, according to Schelling, is its endorsement of the two-part strategy exemplified in Kant's moral theology, what Kant calls his 'practico-dogmatic metaphysics': first the competence of theoretical reason is weakened (Kant's Transcendental Dialectic), then the items identified as exceeding its grasp are restored to reason in the form of 'practical cognitions' (Kant's postulates of pure practical reason).

The strategy, Schelling insists, in agreement with Jacobi and many other contemporary critics, is on Kant's own terms incoherent: since Kant's postulates of God and immortality, though supposedly only fit topics of 'practical faith', are theoretical in form, they must be accepted as true; but if practical reason can cognize noumenal objects, either it at that point itself becomes theoretical, or it must hand over its discovery to theoretical reason, and if this is not possible, then no genuine cognition can have taken place. The basis for Schelling's second claim is now clear: if non-empirical cognition is not to be sacrificed, then theoretical reason must be re-strengthened, which will involve retrieving for it at least some of the cognitive power affirmed by the ('dogmatic') early modern rationalists – and this is entirely possible, Schelling argues, because the *Critique of Pure Reason* did not in fact refute dogmatism. The implication is that appeal to practical reason is either ill-conceived or redundant, and this is where the potential rub with Fichte lies.

There are, it is true, grounds for denying that Schelling's attack on practico-dogmatic Kantianism has application to Fichte, who does not assert the weakness as such of theoretical reason, and whose thesis of the primacy of the practical, as articulated in Part Three of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*, is quite different from Kant's principle bearing that name. However, it is also true (first) that Fichte motivates his practicalism by affirming not merely a limitation on the object-grasping scope of theoretical reason, but an actual contradiction within it, and (second) that he identifies the supremacy of practical reason with the categoricity of moral demands – an alignment which in Schelling's eyes disqualifies it, by subordinating the unconditioned to the inherent conditionedness of morality.¹⁹ Again we see Fichte and Schelling silently diverging: Schelling endorses the primacy of the practical only in the sense of the primacy of *freedom*, by which he understands the metaphysical priority of the unconditioned and its expression in finite consciousness (the act with which philosophy begins); Fichte's intricate argument for subordinating our conception of what *is* the case to that of what *ought* to be the case is not even addressed in the *Philosophical Letters*, because Schelling sees no need for it. Again, the importance of this will emerge later.

The *Philosophical Letters* conclude with a hint in the direction of the *Naturphilosophie* that Schelling began to develop in 1797,²⁰ but the foundations of this large-scale project – which defined an entire research programme for the *Goethezeit*, and

earned for Schelling a renown among his contemporaries never enjoyed by Fichte – lie in a nexus of assumptions alien to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. At one level, Schelling is merely re-posing Kant's question of the metaphysical foundations of natural science, and offering different solutions, allegedly superior to Kant's, to the problems of physics, chemistry and the life sciences. This establishes a limited contrast with Fichte, who of course accepts that this enquiry is legitimate, but whose discussions of natural science are relatively schematic and stick close to Kant.²¹ Schelling's new agenda is in fact, however, profoundly radical, for his central claim is that the results of natural scientific enquiry – when liberated from empiricism – show Nature to be *infinite productive activity*. The activity is Nature's own – it constitutes *natura naturans* – and not the I's act of positing. In ascribing to natural science a metaphysical significance independent of transcendental sources, Schelling grants the *a posteriori* privileges which Kant and Fichte reserve for the *a priori*: his claim is that natural science and speculative metaphysics can be joined in a *spekulative Physik* yielding cognitions of Nature which do not derive from Kantian principles of experience or Fichtean self-consciousness but which nonetheless share the necessity of the *a priori*. And, since the ground of these cognitions is not subjective, they afford knowledge of Nature as something which is, like Kant's thing in itself, 'actual for itself'.²²

How exactly Schelling's project of *Naturphilosophie* might relate to the *Wissenschaftslehre* is an issue pending, but clearly it contradicts Fichte's claim for its philosophical exhaustiveness. At one point in their late correspondence, noteworthy for what seems Schelling's abrupt appeal to ordinary understanding, Schelling pinpoints what seems to him absurd in Fichte's exclusively transcendental approach to Nature:

It is sufficiently known to me in what small region of consciousness nature might fall according to your idea of it. It has for you absolutely no speculative significance, only a teleological one. But ought you really to be of the opinion, e.g., that there is light only so that rational beings when they talk to one another can also see each other, and there is air solely so that when they hear each other they can also speak to one another?²³

Schelling may be interpreted as countering Fichte's strategy in his *First Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797) for concluding in favour of idealism and against dogmatism – Schelling's claim being that Nature possesses the same kind of absolutely primitive authority for philosophical reflection as Fichte claims for self-consciousness. If Nature in all of its immeasurable might and infinite richness gives itself to us as existing in its own right and thus beyond mere transcendental warrant,²⁴ then the asymmetry Fichte asserts is unjustified: *pace* Fichte, the not-I must be regarded as existing *for itself*,²⁵ and the foundation of dogmatism validates itself in the same way as that of idealism; if an idealistically overhauled Spinozism installs reflexive activity at the very basis of Nature, then Fichte's assertion that dogmatism is necessarily blind to the reality of I-hood is rebutted. Though one and the same structure is exhibited by *Naturphilosophie* and the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the arguments on each side run in a curious parallel, the disagreement of Fichte and Schelling concerning the reality of Nature involves no misunderstanding, and when Fichte asserts that Nature exists only in order to be subjugated and made transparent, and that *moral* meaning is the only kind it can have,²⁶ no reconciliation is possible.

Naturphilosophie opens up the possibility that the *Wissenschaftslehre* might be supplanted or superseded. All that is required, it would seem, is for some account to be given of the genesis of the individual finite I within Nature; a system of philosophy constructed around *Naturphilosophie* might then be held to answer the same questions, and to satisfy the same formal requirements, as the *Wissenschaftslehre*, while doing less violence to common-sense realism. Schelling is certainly tempted by this option, and for a brief period goes so far as to assert the priority of *Naturphilosophie* over idealism,²⁷ but ultimately decides against it. The final eclipsing of Fichtean idealism is the work of the Identity Philosophy that Schelling presents in 1801, and it is not a direct development of *Naturphilosophie* of the sort just described. To simply substitute Nature for the I would be to identify the absolute with a single conceptual form, and hence to reproduce, by a simple reversal, the structure of Fichte's system, thereby failing to grasp what Schelling now understands, more clearly than before, as the essentially *indifferent* character of the absolute, its transcendence of *both* subjectivity and objectivity. If to fix the absolute is to make it determinate and thus to destroy it, the problem is now that of finding some way of articulating it in a system. Schelling's initial solution, in the *System*

of *Transcendental Idealism* (1800), was to develop the dual-standpoint structure sketched in the *Philosophical Letters*, by allowing transcendentalism and *Naturphilosophie* to parallel one another.²⁸ That Schelling became rapidly dissatisfied with this bipartite arrangement, or at any rate came to think that it could be superseded, is clear from the opening axioms of his 1801 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*.²⁹ Reason, now identified with the ‘total indifference of the subjective and objective’ outside which there is nothing, is declared absolute, and, since the standpoint of philosophy is that of reason, it follows that there ‘is no philosophy except from the standpoint of the absolute’.³⁰ This disposes of Kant and Fichte’s perspectivism: if philosophical reason can grasp Reason immediately, by abstracting from the subjective element in intellectual intuition,³¹ then it can access directly, independently of the self-reflection of finite self-consciousness, the structures that compose reality and ground cognition. To the extent that residues of transcendentalism remain, they consist in the ascription of a certain relative spontaneity to our cognition (transcendental *explanation*), without any implication of a corresponding dependence of objects on our finite subjectivity (transcendental *idealism*). The Identity Philosophy represents the belated consummation of the programme laid out in the *Form-Schrift*, and it inaugurates absolute idealism.

The conception of philosophy with which Schelling began was richer than Fichte’s in the sense of containing more elements, or at least of being answerable to stronger demands, and at the same time much less definite: in the *Form-Schrift* and *Ich-Schrift*, programmatic insights into the requirements of a complete system of philosophy exceed Schelling’s suggestions of ways to satisfy them. This indefiniteness allowed Schelling to co-opt the *Wissenschaftslehre* at the outset, insofar as he found Fichte to have already worked out thoroughly one of the major lines of thought that he wanted to accommodate, concerning the unconditioned character of subjectivity. In those first two works, Fichtean idealism occupies almost all of the space available; subsequently, as Schelling found ways to develop the elements in his conception that exceeded the *Wissenschaftslehre* and that for him had greater importance, its portion shrank continuously, to the point of its eventual vanishing.

That Fichte’s philosophy was indispensable for Schelling to reach this point – even if the ladder was discarded at the summit – is clear. If we ask whether, reciprocally,

Schelling contributed in any way to Fichte's thought, what we find is extremely limited. Schelling's sustained reference to intellectual intuition in his *Ich-Schrift* may have alerted Fichte to its full potential, but Fichte had already drawn the connection,³² and its prominence in the later Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* is entirely explicable as due to his change of method from the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*. There are places where Fichte may seem momentarily to find a role for *Naturphilosophie*,³³ but a succinct statement in a short unpublished piece from 1799–1800 confirms his determination to keep Nature within essentially Kantian bounds.³⁴

Nor did Schelling succeed in leading Fichte to revise his original interpretation in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* of Spinoza as sensitive to the same monistic considerations that motivate the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but miscarrying due to his failure to grasp the philosophical significance of the I.³⁵ If Fichte ever agreed to relax the all-encompassing hold of the I, it is in the versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804 onwards that he does so. Here Fichte seems to want to demonstrate that, with suitable elaboration, but consistently with its founding principles, the *Wissenschaftslehre* can be shown to equal absolute idealism in philosophical import. It has been said that Fichte in the late *Wissenschaftslehre* betrays his earliest and best insights, misguidedly seeking to meet Schelling on his own terms. The question of the extent to which the late *Wissenschaftslehre* narrows Fichte's distance from Schelling cannot be pursued here, but one major consideration counts against the estimate of it as capitulating to absolute idealism: in all of its many versions in the late *Wissenschaftslehre* texts, the crux of the argument given for the postulation of the absolute consists in reflective attention to our *very act of thinking of the absolute* and thence to the *reflection-transcending preconditions* of that act. These preconditions are now held to include an element that, *contra* the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, does not itself reside within intuition, but no abstraction from the very act of thinking, of the sort demanded by Schelling, is involved. The absolute that emerges from the late *Wissenschaftslehre* is anterior to self-consciousness, and qualifies as no less genuinely speculative and *Verstand-transcendent* than the Schellingian–Hegelian absolute, but it continues to be reached by Fichte's method of reflexive introversion; and, because it remains fixed by the 'absolute knowing' of individual subjectivity, Fichte remains open to the charge of subjectivism that, we will

shortly see, Schelling and Hegel level against him – Fichte's own position being, all the way to the end, that no other absoluteness is intelligible.

Being and Knowing, and Is and Ought

Aside from its historical importance, the opposition of Fichte and Schelling holds major systematic interest: it tells us something about the deep structure of the Kantian idealist project, just as Locke and Berkeley reveal something fundamental about the nature of empiricism. And insofar as they present us with a kind of antinomy – that is, insofar as their rival forms of post-Kantianism seem equally warranted – some insight into their systematic opposition is needed. The issues here are of course highly intricate, and merit extended investigation; what follows picks out only one thread.

We may begin by asking to what extent Schelling can legitimately claim, in virtue of his development of an alternative form of post-Kantian idealism, to have exposed weaknesses in Fichte's position. If Schelling's criticisms of Fichte³⁶ are compared with those of other contemporaries – for example, Kant's associate Jakob Sigismund Beck, in an early and highly critical review of the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*³⁷ – it is striking how they have nothing to do with allegations of emptiness and unintelligibility, or of arbitrary departure from Kantian orthodoxy, the usual complaints, nor does Schelling impugn the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s derivation of objectivity from subjectivity. Schelling's misgivings concern the overarching design of Fichte's philosophy: the problem lies not *within* the derivation but in what Fichte claims *on its behalf*, that is, in his conception of what counts as fulfilling his stated aim of absolutizing Kant's philosophy. In making this criticism, and in all of his substantive divergences from Fichte, Schelling relies ultimately, as we have seen, on high-level assumptions – elements of platonism and rationalism, a Romantic conviction of the metaphysical significance of Nature – that Fichte does not share, and while Schelling may suppose that Fichte is bound to recognize the superiority of his own view of the philosophical possibilities available in the wake of Kant, whether this is so must remain moot. As such, Schelling's criticisms are neither straightforwardly internal nor external, and their effectiveness depends in good part on his success in developing an alternative to the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Several themes occupy Fichte and Schelling in their 1800–1802 correspondence, but the most important – the one that appears potentially decisive – is also, as might be expected, the most abstract: the relation of being and cognition.³⁸ According to Schelling, Fichte's prioritization of cognition over being is fatal:

I might say that, *in order to maintain your system*, one must first *decide* to start from seeing [*Sehen*] and end with the absolute ... The necessity to proceed from seeing confines you and your philosophy in a thoroughly conditioned series in which no trace of the absolute can be encountered.³⁹

You are consequently compelled, Schelling tells Fichte, to ‘transfer the speculative domain into the sphere of faith [in *The Vocation of Man*], since you simply cannot find it in your *knowing*’.⁴⁰ The inferior knowing of Fichte’s merely ‘reflective’ philosophy reduces being – which in truth ‘has no opposite’ – to reality in the sense of mere actuality, *Wirklichkeit*.⁴¹

This contrast goes right back to the beginning. One pervasive theme in all three of the early ‘Fichtean’ texts discussed above, we saw, is Schelling’s explicit ontological commitment: at every relevant point, Schelling emphasizes that the unconditioned, though we talk of it as ‘posited’, ‘postulated’ and so forth, as if its reality were still undecided, must be not merely *thought* as having being, but must *have* being; indeed, Schelling adopts the key Spinozistic locution, saying that the unconditioned must be *thinkable through* its being.⁴² Of particular interest to Schelling in those essays is the traditional ontological argument, which he rejects as an *argument* purporting to move from a concept to an *object* by way of pure inference, and interprets as groping towards the important truth that the unconditioned is *realized through itself* (it misrepresents this truth in the form of, so to speak, an ‘argument’ composing God’s own *cogito*).⁴³ Fichte’s Jena texts, on the whole, downplay ontological idioms, and in places Fichte entertains the notion that the *Wissenschaftslehre* might be some sort of fiction or mere ‘model’ of mental acts, validated by its results – its derivation and validation of the facts of experience as we know them – and not in need of truth in any more realistic, correspondence-style sense. There are in addition striking passages where Fichte draws a sharp distinction between ‘activity’, which defines thought and intuition, and ‘being’, which defines its objects.⁴⁴

Schelling’s ontological emphasis is sometimes glossed as a preference for Kant’s ‘constitutive’ as against Fichte’s attachment to the ‘regulative’, but this by itself explains little, nor is much gained by describing Fichte as assuming the priority, which Schelling reverses, of epistemology over ontology. What is needed is some account of *why*

Schelling elevates and Fichte subordinates ontological commitment. With this end in view, we may turn to a long-standing issue in the interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: does the absolute I *exist*?

On the one hand it would seem that it must do so, because it corresponds to an essential component of the ‘one-in-many’ of self-consciousness: it is what supplies the pole of identity which unifies its ‘many’, the subject-I and object-I of the I, as an *Intelligenz*; and, since the reality of self-consciousness is beyond question, so too must be that of the absolute I. The commitment to existence cannot be evaded, arguably, since the *Wissenschaftslehre* requires us to take as *true* the principles with which it begins, and even if (*contra* Fichte) ‘X = X’ and other truths of general as opposed to transcendental logic could do so, the truth of a proposition with *content* – here, the I – cannot subsist without being *made true* by something that exists; what is taken as true in the first principle is, after all, not the *necessity of our believing* that the I posits itself absolutely, but simply the *I’s positing itself absolutely*.⁴⁵

Yet the opposite view also appears compelling. Though the *Wissenschaftslehre* begins with the I’s self-positing, its Theoretical Part concludes with an aporia, consequent upon the realization that the contradiction formed by its first and second principles, and reproduced within the second principle, cannot be dissolved in thought, whereupon the task of practical reason is defined, and the priority of practical over theoretical reason is disclosed. Hence the absolute I is only what merely *ought* to exist: if it had actual existence, then it could not function as the idea that constitutes and determines practical reason, for it could not exert the pressure – the necessity of *giving being* to what does *not yet have being* – that makes the I a striving. To accord real existence to the I, it may be added, would be to assimilate the *Wissenschaftslehre* to a pre-Critical metaphysics and thereby miss what is most revolutionary in it, namely Fichte’s application of a practical turn to Kant’s Copernican revolution in theoretical philosophy.

Suggestions have been made for how to finesse this seeming contradiction, but whatever solution might be available is not gleaned easily from Fichte’s texts, and the fact that a charge of unresolved confusion concerning the absolute I stands at the centre of Hegel’s extended critique of Fichte (and correlative defence of Schelling) in his early *Kritisches Journal* writings testifies to the difficulty.⁴⁶ And, once it has been identified, it

is not hard to see how it can be developed into a more fundamental critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in the following way.

A contrast may be drawn between Fichte and Schelling's respective appropriations of Kant, which may seem strongly favourable to Schelling. If Fichte's philosophy can be glossed as the subsumption of Kant's First *Critique* under his Second, Schelling's can be regarded as born from the Third. This is true in the obvious sense that issues concerning art and the aesthetic, and natural teleology, are to the fore in Schelling but of limited significance for Fichte. However, it is not these themes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, enormously important as they are for Schelling, but rather its famous sections §§ 76–77, in which Kant presents his theory of the intuitive intellect, that represent for him pure gold.⁴⁷ Here Kant argues that the distinctions of the actual from the merely possible, and of what *is* the case from what *ought* to be the case, have no application to reality as given to an intuitive intellect. And, because Kant not only identifies the features which differentiate our cognition from God's, but also explains the systematic interrelation of the two modes of cognition, he at the same time instructs us as to how we might extrapolate from our own finite cognition to divine cognition, meaning that our cognition can, in a certain sense, *become infinite*: by cognizing itself in the terms made available in §§ 76–77, it inverts its own finitude. Following this construal of Kant's true (but arrested) trajectory in the Third *Critique*, Schelling undertakes to unify Freedom and Nature by means of a speculative theory of their common subject-transcendent supersensible ground, in contrast with Fichte's more faithfully Kantian construal of the task as directed towards the *intra*-subjective unification of our *ways of thinking* about Freedom and about Nature: Fichte's position is that Freedom and Nature *are* unified, so long as we can grasp the original point of differentiation of *our reason* into its theoretical and practical forms; Schelling's is that it requires the postulation of a point which is *in itself*, in abstraction from our reason, equidistant – 'indifferent' – between, and yet that also grounds, Freedom and Nature.

With all this in place, it is easy to understand Schelling's conviction, co-formed with Hegel in their years of cooperation at Jena, that Fichte's philosophy is 'one-sidedly subjective', hence incapable of grasping the absolute, or true being: Fichte may be charged with failing to grasp the significance of Kant's demonstration in §§ 76–77, as Schelling and Hegel understand it, that, in order to get beyond a transcendental idealism

of ‘mere appearances’ correlated with unknowable things in themselves, it is necessary to posit an absolute that fully transcends finite self-consciousness.⁴⁸ Fichte’s project thus appears a compromise, its confusions concentrated in a supposedly final ‘absolute I’, which incoherently superimposes differentiation, the structure and relationality of self-consciousness, on an identity that, for the sake of its absoluteness, precludes such features. And because §§ 76–77 belong to the Kantian legacy, Schelling can claim that his criticism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is genuinely internal.

Now that we have a clear idea of the charge facing Fichte, it is equally clear that much may be said in reply. In the first place, Fichte agrees that the validation of a philosophical system involves its agreement with the standpoint of divinity: God would recognize, Fichte claims, the ‘formal correctness’ of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, though not its content.⁴⁹ This formal correctness consists in the parallelism of Is and Ought which provides its overarching structure: the absolute I that *has* being at one end *is* the absolute I that *ought* to have being at the other. Fichte *has* therefore incorporated, albeit in a different way from Schelling, the insight of §§ 76–77 that, for an intuitive intellect, Is and Ought co-refer. It is this, furthermore, that dissolves the seeming contradiction in the *Wissenschaftslehre* concerning the existence of the absolute I, and demonstrates its coherence: the unconditioned ‘X’ which is needed to render Kant’s philosophy absolute can be determined *both* as posited absolutely by theoretical reason *and* as an idea to be realized by practical reason, and as *both* ‘absolute’ *and* ‘I’, because §§ 76–77 license us to overlay these distinct conceptions at the extreme limit of philosophical reflection, placing them at the beginning and the end-point of our *Wissenschaft*. To the extent that this structure invokes something akin to an indifference point, it is one validated by intuition. Fichte may accordingly claim to have shown that Freedom and Nature can be unified in an absolute without resort to aesthetics or teleology, by developing and fusing central doctrines of the First and Second *Critiques*. The charge of failing to take the lesson of the Third *Critique* then misses the mark.

What remains true is just that Fichte, though making an appeal to intellectual intuition, does not incorporate the full theory of the intuitive intellect as Schelling understands it into his methodology, which remains Kantianly circumscribed by self-consciousness. But this too has a justification, which lies in (again faithfully Kantian) considerations concerning the necessary conditions of discursive meaningfulness – which,

Fichte may point out, are no less *prima facie* implications of §§ 76–77 than the positive doctrines that Schelling wants to extract from those sections. According to Fichte, the incomprehensible may figure in philosophical reflection in two different ways. Legitimate reference to what eludes comprehension occurs when on reaching the boundaries of thought we are redirected to the intuitional foundations of conceptualization – as when it is grasped that the I cannot be grasped by purely discursive means. Here intuition steps in to certify the reality of the incomprehensible and render intelligible its resistance to discursive articulation. Where intuition is unavailable, the incomprehensible reduces to sheer meaninglessness – as when the concept of the thing in itself is discarded as nonsensical. On Fichte’s diagnosis, Schelling’s position results from a failure to see that the resources of meaning available to a finite intellect are not infinite, leading him to misconceive boundaries as mere limitations of the understanding which the higher power of reason can overcome; whence his key moves of positing absolute indifference and of detaching intellectual intuition from I-hood, which in Fichte’s eyes lapse into empty incomprehensibility.⁵⁰ On Fichte’s account, then, what Schelling and Hegel allege to be limitations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, to be overcome, are in fact boundaries, to be respected, and their complaint that Fichte fails to sublimate the subject–object opposition, and that his choice of (idealist) subjectivity over (‘dogmatic’) objectivity remains ultimately arbitrary, results from their failure to recognize the way in which the *Wissenschaftslehre* subordinates the subject–object polarity to that of Is–Ought. In fact there is nothing more to the intuitive intellect than the arc of thought that spans the separation of Is and Ought and prescribes our movement from the former to the latter: Schelling’s claim to occupy its standpoint rests on a misreading of §§ 76–77, which expands the self-understanding of the finite intellect, but does not license its self-assimilation to an infinite intellect – a move which, if it comes to appear necessary, does so only because practical reason has been denied its proper role.⁵¹ Such, in brief reconstruction, is Fichte’s reply to Schelling.⁵²

Finally we may return to the contrasting positions of Fichte and Schelling regarding ontological commitment. What allows Schelling to subsume all under the concept of being – and then to declare, following Spinoza, that all reason is essentially theoretical and that all ethics must emerge from ontology⁵³ – is his concept of the indifference point, from which all possible distinctions derive and in which they vanish. The reason for

Fichte's abstention from global ontological commitment lies in an earlier point, concerning the grounds for thinking that the absolute I must lack existence: because philosophical reflection cannot transcend the opposition of Is and Ought, it cannot pretend to a perspective like Spinoza's from which all things are spread out in full and equal ontological positivity; consequently the I must be conceived as activity *prior* to being, and the Ought as an irreducible feature of reality posited *outside* being.⁵⁴

There are elements in Schelling's later development that Fichte, had he lived longer, might well have taken as bearing out his negative assessment of the absolute idealist project. In his writings from 1809 to 1815, the period of his *Freiheitsschrift* and *Weltalter* texts, Schelling appears to lose confidence in, indeed to turn against, the assumption – vital for his critique of Fichte – that being, identity and ground are fundamentally transparent notions that can be employed to define a subjectivity-transcending standpoint. This does not of course lead Schelling to reopen the case against the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but Fichte would be right to ask why he does not – especially when it is noted how close to sheer paradox Schelling appears to come in his philosophical writings after 1815. In his very late *Grounding of Positive Philosophy* (1842–43), Schelling writes the following:

We can produce everything that occurs in our experience *a priori* in mere thought, but as such it exists, of course, *only* in thought. If we wanted to transform this into an objective proposition – say, that everything in itself likewise exists only in thought, then we would have to return to the standpoint of a Fichtean idealism. If we want anything that exists outside of thought, then we *must* proceed from a being that is absolutely independent of all thought, which precedes all thought.⁵⁵

The retort available to Fichte is clear: if the only way to avoid Fichtean idealism is to 'proceed from' a being that is absolutely independent from and precedes all thought, then the *Wissenschaftslehre* has all the proof it could ever need, for we cannot take as our starting point a place that we cannot even conceive of occupying.⁵⁶

Notes

¹ Translated in Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood (eds.), *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, [2012](#)). This invaluable edition collects a number of relevant texts.

² *Form-Schrift*, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays 1794–1796*, ed. Fritz Marti (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 39 [I, 88–89]. References to Schelling in square brackets are to *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61). See also Schelling’s letter to Hegel, 5 January 1795 (*Aus Schellings Leben*, in *Briefen*, vol. 1, 1775–1803, ed. G. L. Plitt (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1868), 73).

³ *Form-Schrift*, 41n, 43 [I, 92n, 94]. Translation modified.

⁴ In the same year as the *Form-Schrift*, Schelling composed a study of the *Timaeus*.

⁵ CPR, A313–318/B370–375.

⁶ Letter to Hegel, 5 January 1795, *Aus Schellings Leben*, 73. Schelling’s thinking here is closely intertwined with that of Hölderlin, who writes in a letter to Schiller, in August 1797, that ‘reason is the beginning of understanding’ (*Essays and Letters*, trans. and ed. Jeremy Adler and Charlie Routh (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009), 92).

⁷ *Form-Schrift*, 41 [I, 91].

⁸ The attitude to scepticism described here is held aside in *The Vocation of Man*, which (exceptionally) follows the design of the *Meditations*.

⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIP43s; Schelling, *Ich-Schrift*, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, 66 [I, 155].

¹⁰ See *Ich-Schrift*, 67 [I, 156].

¹¹ Fichte’s own reception of Jacobi has a different character, and addresses a quite distinct aspect of Jacobi’s critique of philosophy: he repeatedly returns to, seeking to

rebut, Jacobi's claim that *Wissenschaft* entails alienation from *Leben*: see, e.g., Fichte's last letter to Jacobi, 3 May 1810 (GA III/6: 321–330).

[12](#) CPR, A571–577/B599–605.

[13](#) Schelling thinks that something must be salvaged from the 'middle way' of the 'preformation system' described (and rejected) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B167).

[14](#) *Form-Schrift*, 45 [I, 96–97].

[15](#) The German Romantic alternative, dissatisfied with Fichte's answer, branches off at exactly this point. That the ground of the self's unity cannot be designated *I*, for the sorts of reasons indicated, is the argument of Hölderlin's fragment on judgement and being (1795) (*Essays and Letters*, 231–232), and of Novalis' *Fichte Studies* (1795–96), trans. and ed. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[16](#) Which Schelling refers back to, in his late correspondence with Fichte, as evidence of the *ab initio* independence of his standpoint from Fichte's (3 October 1801, *Rupture*, 61). The claim is repeated in *Grounding of Positive Philosophy* (1842–43), trans. and ed. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 146 [XIII, 82].

[17](#) See again Schelling's 5 January 1795 letter to Hegel, *Aus Schellings Leben*, 71–72.

[18](#) *Philosophical Letters*, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge*, 156 [I, 283].

[19](#) *Ich-Schrift*, 98 [I, 199]. The moral law concerns not the *I* as such but as *subject*, 'conditioned by mutability and multiplicity'.

[20](#) The way is now open for 'exploration of nature' (*Philosophical Letters*, 195 [I, 341]). The concept of *Naturphilosophie* is introduced in *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797, 2nd and revised edn 1803), trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[21](#) See, as indicative, the brief discussion of organisms in *Foundations of Natural Right*, (GA I/3: 378–379; FNR, 72–74), which follows the pattern of Kant's moral teleology of nature in the Third *Critique*.

[22](#) CPR, Bxx.

[23](#) Letter of 3 October 1801, *Rupture*, 64 (translation modified). Schelling of course also views light ‘teleologically’, but Schelling’s telos is not fulfilment of our rational need. Schelling is referring to claims of Fichte’s in *Foundations of Natural Right* (GA I/3: 371, 376–377; FNR, 65, 71). The fourth and fifth theorems (§§ 5–6) of this work comprise a deduction of the human body under the rubric ‘applicability of the concept of right’.

[24](#) For Schelling, sharing Goethe’s scientific sensibility and influenced by Hölderlin, this notion approaches self-evidence. It stands in close connection with the ethico-aesthetic vision described in the *Philosophical Letters* as a corrective to the Kantian ethic of autonomy (159–160, 183–184, 187–188 [I, 288–289, 322–323, 328–329]).

[25](#) GA I/4: 196; IWL, 21.

[26](#) *Vocation of Man* (GA I/6: 266–269; VM₂, 82–83), and *Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1801–02) (GA II/6: 296–297).

[27](#) ‘Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses oder der Kategorien der Physik’ (1800), § 63 [IV, 75–78]; and ‘Über den wahren Begriff der Naturphilosophie’ (1801) [IV, 298–303]. Such a system would in fact have borne a high degree of similarity, as regards its basic structure, to Herder’s Spinozism.

[28](#) Schelling’s *Treatises Explicatory of the Idealism of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797–98), in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), re-exposit (and defend against criticism) Fichtean transcendental philosophy in a way that anticipates the *System*.

[29](#) Though not asserted as such in the Preface, where Schelling may be thought to pull his punches: *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (1801), trans. Michael Vater, in *Rupture*, 141–145 [IV, 107–114].

[30](#) *Presentation*, §§ 1–2, 145–146 [IV, 114–116].

[31](#) *Presentation*, in *Rupture*, 146 [IV, 114]: ‘to come to the standpoint I require, one must abstract from what does the thinking’.

[32](#) Though not mentioned in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*, it is affirmed in the earlier ‘Review of *Aenesidemus*’ (1794) (GA I/2: 48–57; EPW, 65, 70).

[33](#) E.g. GA I/4: 95–97; FNR, 264–266.

[34](#) ‘Concerning the Nature of Animals’ (1799–1800) (GA II/5: 421–430), in Fichte, *The Science of Right*, trans. A. E. Kroeger (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1869), 495–505. Here Fichte argues that even organic nature can be grasped in terms of types of *motion*, as if adding a further chapter to Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*.

[35](#) GA I/2: 262–264, 279–282; SK, 101–102, 117–119.

[36](#) In addition to the 1801–2 letters, important texts include ‘On the Relationship of the Philosophy of Nature to Philosophy in General’ (1802), Section 1, in George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (eds), *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, revised edn (Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2000), 368–373 [V, 108–115]; *Darlegung des wahren Verhältnisses der Naturphilosophie zur verbesserten Fichteschen Lehre* (1806) [VII, 1–181], especially 21–39; *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (1833–34/1836–37[?]), trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 106–113 [X, 90–98]; and *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 124–128 [XIII, 51–57].

[37](#) *Annalen der Philosophie und des philosophischen Geistes*, vol. I, St. 16 (6 February 1795): 121–124, and St. 17 (9 February 1795): 129–144. Other landmark criticisms of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – additional to those (already mentioned) of the German Romantics, which remained unpublished, and Hegel’s early texts (cited below) – include Jacobi’s open letter to Fichte in 1799 (*The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1994), 497–536), Kant’s open letter of the same year (which contains no real criticism but simply repudiates Fichte’s project) and the novelist Jean Paul’s Jacobi-aligned polemic, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana* (1800).

[38](#) Fichte defines his difference from Schelling in just these terms in his notes on Schelling’s *System* – ‘I say all *being* is only in relation to *knowing*. He replies to me:

no, all knowing is only a kind of *being* – and interprets Schelling’s prioritization of being as an illusion generated by second-order reflection (GA II/5: 414; *Rupture*, 120).

[39](#) Letter of 3 October 1801, *Rupture*, 61.

[40](#) Letter of 3 October 1801, *Rupture*, 61.

[41](#) *Rupture*, 60.

[42](#) See *Ich-Schrift*, 72, 89–92, 100 [I, 163, 186–192, 202]: the *Urform* of the I is ‘*that of the pure eternal being*’; the connection with Jacobi is indicated at 67 [I, 156].

[43](#) *Ich-Schrift*, 76n [I, 168n].

[44](#) See the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/4: 225; IWL, 56 and GA IV/2: 39; FTP, 131).

[45](#) ‘[W]hat does not *exist*, cannot posit’ (GA I/2: 389; SK, 222).

[46](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (1801), trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), 129–135, 155–161, and *Faith and Knowledge* (1802), trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), Part C. See Wayne Martin, ‘In Defense of Bad Infinity: A Fichtean Response to Hegel’s *Differenzschrift*’, *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 55/56 (2007): 168–187.

[47](#) The role of this concept in German Idealism receives its fullest treatment in Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[48](#) Schelling puts his criticism this way in his letter of 3 October 1801 (*Rupture*, 60); Schelling refers to ‘§ 74, Remark’, but must have § 76 in mind.

[49](#) GA I/2: 390–391; SK, 224.

[50](#) ‘Announcement’ (1800[01]), in *Rupture*, 87–88 (GA I/7: 157–160), ‘Preparatory Work contra Schelling’ (1801), in *Rupture*, 120–122 (GA II/5: 483–485), and *Darstellung* (1801–02) (GA II/6: 198–199).

[51](#) This has, Fichte may propose, a definite locale in the *Ich-Schrift* (97–98 [I, 199]), where Schelling in effect reduces the Ought to a mere representation of the ‘natural law for the non-finite I’.

[52](#) Key texts for Fichte’s critique of Schelling include also the second 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* (*The Science of Knowing: J. G. Fichte’s 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. and ed. Walter W. Wright (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005)), Lecture 14, and *Bericht über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre und die bisherigen Schicksale derselben* (1806) (trans. by A. E. Kroeger as ‘Fichte’s Criticism of Schelling’, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12 (1878): 160–170; and 13 (1879): 225–244), especially Ch. 2, Pt. 2.

[53](#) E.g., *Ich-Schrift*, 67–68 [I, 157].

[54](#) In the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 148–149, Fichte identifies the *Sollen* as what distinguishes his system from all predecessors (GA II/8: 302–305).

[55](#) *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 204 [XIII, 164].

[56](#) For further discussion of the Fichte–Schelling relation, see Rolf-Peter Horstmann, ‘The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling’, in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [2002](#)), Pt. IV, Chs. 1–3; and Jörg Jantzen, Thomas Kisser and Hartmut Traub (eds.), *Grundlegung und Kritik. Der Briefwechsel zwischen Schelling und Fichte 1794–1802* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

Fichte and Hegel on Recognition and Slavery



David James

In Hegel's Jena-period writings are to be found some extended critical discussions of Fichte's philosophy. These writings include his *Differenzschrift* from 1801, in which the foundation of Fichte's system is said to be the identity of subject and object achieved in the 'pure thinking of itself' of self-consciousness that finds expression in the statement of identity $I = I$ (*Ich = Ich*).¹ This identity of self-consciousness is contrasted with the moment of non-identity encountered in the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness. Fichte uses the term the 'not-I' (*Nicht-Ich*) to designate the object which the I posits in opposition to itself and which must be introduced to explain the possibility of consciousness of the world. According to Hegel, Fichte's philosophical system ultimately fails to overcome the opposition between the identity of the 'pure' or 'transcendental' consciousness of the first principle of his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* that the I posits itself absolutely and the non-identity of its second principle that the I posits absolutely something opposed to itself.

According to Hegel, although Fichte tries to bring about a synthesis of these two principles by means of the third principle that in the I a divisible I is opposed to a divisible not-I, his failure to explain this synthesis results in pure self-consciousness and its pure self-knowledge standing opposed to an infinite objective world and knowledge of this world. For Hegel, this unresolved opposition between the 'subjective I' and the 'objective I' is not a purely cognitive matter, for he implies that this separation of subject and object together with their opposition to each other are unnatural, in the sense that the subject and object are ultimately identical with each other and thus belong together at the same time as they are non-identical. Yet Fichte is unable to comprehend this non-identity in such a way that the self-conscious subject is able to know itself in the object and

thereby identify itself with it. The subjective I must, therefore, experience a sense of alienation through its being confronted by something that it takes to be entirely other than itself.

Hegel speaks of a need for philosophy generated by the type of division or ‘diremption’ (*Entzweiung*) typical of modern culture, and which manifests itself in forms of opposition that include this one between absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity – indeed, this opposition is the most fundamental one – and he identifies the unique interest of reason with the attempt to suspend or ‘sublate’ (*aufzuheben*) such oppositions.² This cannot be achieved, however, by means of a purely theoretical relation to the object. Rather, a practical relation to the object must also be established, as Fichte himself maintains in his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* when he claims that there is a necessary transition from the theoretical standpoint in which the I posits itself as determined by the not-I to the practical standpoint in which the I posits itself as determining the not-I. This practical need helps explain Hegel’s claim that, in Fichte’s system, ‘The I does not find itself in its appearance [*Erscheinung*], or in its positing; it must annul [*zernichten*] its appearance in order to find itself as I. The essence of the I and its positing do not coincide: *I does not become objective to itself*’.³

As well as forming part of Hegel’s critique of Fichte’s philosophy, we shall see that this idea of a practical need and the relation between subject and object that explains the existence of this need also play a central role in Hegel’s account of the attempt made by self-consciousness to posit itself as identical with the object of its consciousness in the struggle for recognition provided in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel develops the idea of a practical need to overcome the opposition between subject and object by showing how this need results in an attempt on the part of the subjective I to destroy the object confronting it. This attempt to overcome the opposition between subject and object fails, however, and Hegel introduces the concept of recognition to explain how this opposition can be genuinely overcome. This appeal to the concept of recognition is another sign of the importance of Fichte’s influence on Hegel, because this concept plays a central role in Fichte’s deduction of the concept of right (*Recht*), which forms the first main division of his *Foundations of Natural Right* (§§ 1–4). It is arguably in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, then, and especially in Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition and how the opposition

between subject and object can be overcome, that we encounter his most productive engagement with Fichte's philosophy.⁴

In the first section of this essay I show how Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition can be explained in terms of the role that Fichte accords to recognition in his deduction of the concept of right and, in particular, in terms of a problem to which this deduction gives rise. In the second section, I show how Hegel seeks to resolve this problem by means of his account of the struggle for recognition. Finally, in the third section, I show how Fichte's and Hegel's claims concerning the necessity of *mutual* recognition do not prevent them from regarding slavery as justified in certain circumstances, or at least as being as much the fault of the person enslaved as of the person who has enslaved him or her, despite the fact that slavery represents one of the clearest possible examples of a situation in which mutual recognition is absent. One may therefore question the extent to which they regard mutual recognition as an absolutely fundamental norm of social relations. There is the difference, however, that Hegel's position appears to be that mutual recognition becomes such a norm in the course of history, whereas Fichte implies that the absence of mutual recognition may be justified simply whenever an individual has failed to raise him- or herself to the level of a being whose attitude towards him- or herself as demonstrated through his or her actions is proof of a status that demands recognition from others.

Recognition

The struggle for recognition forms part of Hegel's account of self-consciousness. This account begins with the pure identity of subject and object in which 'there is indeed an otherness; that is to say, consciousness makes a distinction, but one which at the same time is for consciousness *not* a distinction'.⁵ Rather, the object (or content) of consciousness is simply the I which is conscious of itself and has become conscious of itself through its own act of thinking itself. In other words, the I *qua* subject of consciousness *produces* itself *qua* object of its own consciousness through the act of thinking itself. As Hegel puts it, 'the "I" is the *content* of the connection and the connecting itself. Opposed to an other, the "I" is its own self, and at the same time it overarches this other which, for the "I", is equally only the "I" itself'.⁶ The active terms in which Hegel describes this unity of subject and object within self-consciousness ('the "I" is ... the connecting itself Opposed to an other, the "I" ... at the same time ... overarches this other') seek to draw attention to the essential nature of the act of self-positing as already described by Fichte.

For Fichte, the act of self-positing performed by the I is an act that is more fundamental than any other conscious act, because each and every other such act must be thought to be conditioned by this prior act, in the sense that every conscious act presupposes a subject or agent that performs it. Fichte identifies this 'original' act of the I with the concept of the I (GA I/6: 214–216; IWL, 44–46). The I is, in fact, to be understood as identical with the act by means of which it constitutes or 'posits' itself, and it does not, therefore, exist prior to and independently of this act. Rather, the I's existence cannot be separated from the act of self-constitution performed by the I itself, which means that the I 'is at once the agent [*das Handelnde*] and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action [*Handlung*] and deed [*That*] are one and the same' (GA I/2: 259; SK, 97).

The idea that the I posits itself is meant to highlight, then, the way in which its own existence is immediately given through its act of thinking itself, so that '*To posit oneself* and *to be* are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical' (GA I/2: 260; SK, 99). The I that posits itself in this way is only a subjective I, however, since it is confronted with something other than itself, a not-I, which it itself necessarily posits through an act of

counter-positing. This not-I is therefore not completely independent of the I. Rather, each and every object of consciousness *qua* representation exists only in virtue of the unity of self-consciousness which is the condition of any act of representing whatsoever, and in this respect the I itself posits the not-I. Thus, although such an object of consciousness must be posited in order to explain the possibility of consciousness, the object of consciousness lacks genuine independence and reality. This helps explain why Hegel speaks of it as a matter of appearance.⁷

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* this moment of non-identity represents a problem precisely because it reduces knowledge to knowledge of appearances only and this knowledge therefore lacks the status of true knowledge. This cognitive failure assumes a practical form, in that the absence of the unity of subject and object, a unity in which both the identity and the non-identity of these moments of knowledge are somehow maintained, generates the need, and thereby the drive or urge (*Trieb*),⁸ to overcome the opposition between subject and object so as to reach the stage of true knowledge. In particular, self-consciousness seeks to satisfy this desire to overcome the opposition between itself and the object of its consciousness by means of a particular type of action, namely, that of removing the object's independence by means of the act of consuming it. This way of establishing its identity with the object is, however, predicated on the existence of an independent object that can be destroyed in such a way as to establish the subject's identity with it, whereas if the independence of the object were denied altogether, there would only be the immediate unity of self-consciousness. The object together with the desire to consume it must therefore be constantly reproduced. This is, in effect, to grant the necessity of the object's independence in the face of self-consciousness, and thus to acknowledge the absolute non-identity of subject and object.⁹ This process, through which the subject must repeatedly overcome the independence of the object, relates to a general criticism that Hegel makes of Fichte's philosophy, which is that it generates a demand in the form of a moral postulate (*ein Sollen*) whose fulfilment must be perennially postponed simply because its goal, by its very nature, can never be fully realized.¹⁰

According to Hegel, this problem can be solved only if the independence of the object is removed by means of an act of self-negation on the part of the object. Self-consciousness can, in short, 'achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the

negation within itself'.¹¹ Yet what would represent such an act of self-negation? In attempting to answer this question, one might point to an essential difference between this act and desire. In the case of desire, self-consciousness stands in a purely causal relation to the object, whereas in the case of this act of self-negation there is no direct causal relation. Rather, the other or object of self-consciousness freely performs the act of negation as opposed to simply being acted upon by the subject confronting it. It must, therefore, be a special kind of object, that is to say, one that is capable of performing this act of self-negation.

Hegel identifies the essential characteristics of this act of self-negation when he states that 'Consciousness has for its object one which, of its own self, posits its otherness or difference as a nothingness, and in so doing is independent'.¹² This statement tells us that the act of self-negation performed by the object involves freely treating all differences between itself and the self-consciousness of which it is the object as somehow irrelevant or non-existent, and that doing so is a sign of the object's independence. This act of abstracting from all particular differences establishes an identity of the subject and the object of consciousness, in the sense that the former can regard the latter as being essentially the same as itself and, consequently, as not entirely other than itself. This identity must be achieved, however, in such a way that the object of consciousness retains its independence, for otherwise the identity in question would collapse into a mere self-identity of the subjective I, in which the moment of opposition between the subjective I and the objective I that is essential to explaining consciousness would be lost.

Fichte's account of mutual recognition as a necessary condition of self-consciousness in the *Foundations of Natural Right* helps explain this act of self-negation in such a way as to incorporate the essential characteristics of this act described by Hegel. This leaves us with the question, however, as to why Hegel situates the act of self-negation on which mutual recognition depends within an account of a struggle for recognition, instead of arguing that this act of self-negation is by itself sufficient to establish the type of relation of mutual recognition that he himself describes as follows: 'this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence'.¹³

This question becomes more pressing because Hegel describes the immediate outcome of this struggle for recognition in terms of a relation in which domination is clearly present. Fichte's account of recognition also provides the key to explaining this feature of Hegel's account of recognition. This time, however, it is because Hegel is seeking to resolve a problem that arises in connection with Fichte's deduction of the concept of right insofar as this deduction treats recognition as a necessary condition of a certain type of self-consciousness.

Fichte's deduction of the concept of right consists in an attempt to explain the possibility of self-consciousness in the form of the consciousness of oneself as a free and rational agent capable of realizing one's ends by effecting changes in the material world with which one is immediately confronted. In other words, the I posits itself by means of its world-directed purposive activity. The I in question is a finite one whose activity is necessarily constrained by the object upon which it acts ('a world') because it is able to reflect only upon something limited (GA I/3: 329; FNR, 18–19). This particular act of self-positing is therefore one that underlies the I's everyday conscious experience of itself as a rational being that wills in accordance with its representations of objects that limit its activity at the same time as it purposively acts upon them. By achieving this consciousness of itself as free and rational in relation to an independent object confronting it, a rational being overcomes the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness at the same time as the independence of the object confronting it is acknowledged. In the first main division of the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte goes further than this, however, by setting out an argument which purports to demonstrate that self-consciousness requires an object that *qua* object is independent of the subject but *qua* object of *self*-consciousness is not purely external to the subject. It is, in fact, identical with self-consciousness in the sense that it reflects what the subject itself essentially is, that is to say, self-determining. What we have is, in effect, a practical expression of the identity of subject and object presupposed by any conscious experience whatsoever, but which, as the condition of any such experience, can itself never become a direct object of experience.

In the course of his deduction of the concept of right, Fichte comes to identify the object of consciousness with a 'summons' (or 'request', 'demand', 'invitation' as the German word *Aufforderung* can also be translated), by means of which the subject is

determined to be self-determining (GA I/3: 342; FNR, 31). Here the subject's activity is constrained by an independent object at the very same time as it remains self-determining. The second aspect of the summons is essential to Fichte's account of how the following challenge can be met: given that the object of consciousness must be thought to be independent of the I, how can one reconcile the idea of a self-determining act on the part of a rational being that finds external confirmation of itself in the object of its consciousness with the idea of an independent object which stands opposed to this rational being and limits its activity?

Fichte attempts to deal with this question by claiming that the summons presupposes both the capacity to act freely in accordance with ends on the part of the subject to which it is addressed and an understanding of what it means to act in such a way on the part of the subject that summons another subject to engage in free activity. Consequently, not only the subject to which the summons is addressed but also the subject that summons another subject to act freely must be assumed to be free and rational (GA I/3: 345; FNR, 35). Here we begin to see why the recognition in question must be *mutual*. Fichte goes on to determine the precise nature of the relation between finite rational beings that this type of recognition entails. This relation is held to be one in which the freedom of each person is limited by the freedom of other persons in such a way that each person is left free to act within the limits granted to him or to her by others. This form of mutual limitation demands that each person is both a subject that summons others by means of an act of self-limitation and the object of a summons in the sense that others limit their activity in relation to it. Only by summoning others can each person demonstrate that he or she is a free and rational being to which a summons can be directed, and conversely it is only by being the object of such a summons that consciousness of oneself as a free and rational being becomes possible.

Here the mutual nature of recognition becomes explicit: if I am to 'posit' myself as free and rational I must 'summon' others, and I can do this only by recognizing their identity with me in the sense of acknowledging that they are free and rational beings, just as I conceive of myself as such a being. It is not, however, a matter of exercising a purely causal influence on others with the aim of producing certain effects. Rather, 'the relation of free beings to one another is a relation of reciprocal interaction through intelligence and freedom. One cannot recognize the other if both do not mutually

recognize each other; and one cannot treat the other as a free being, if both do not mutually treat each other as free' (GA I/3: 351; FNR, 42). The freedom in question is therefore not equivalent to the freedom that consists in abstracting from any natural, given determinations, even if it depends on such an act of abstraction which makes it possible to recognize others as being of the same general type as oneself. It is something more than this because it also consists in an act of self-limitation (*Selbstbeschränkung*), whereby each person freely imposes limits on him- or herself by restricting the sphere of his or her activity with a view to granting others the possibility of exercising *their* capacity for free choice (GA I/3: 350–351; FNR, 41). Nevertheless, the act of abstraction mentioned above together with the capacity to perform such an act remain conditions of this act of self-limitation, in that this second act is directed at a being that one already recognizes as free and rational like oneself. The first act, the one in which one abstracts from all differences, is, then, a condition of the possibility of mutual recognition.

Fichte's deduction of the concept of right can be seen to explain the essential features of Hegel's notion of mutual recognition as a state of affairs in which '[e]ach sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only insofar as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both'.¹⁴ To begin with, each person performs an act of *self*-negation by limiting his or her own activity for the sake of another person's freedom. In limiting his or her activity in relation to others, each person respects the independence of others.¹⁵ The logical and the practical impossibility of overcoming the independence of the object that becomes evident in the case of desire is thus accommodated within an account of how self-consciousness nevertheless overcomes the opposition between itself and the object of consciousness. At the same time, each person limits his or her activity in relation to others only insofar as they limit their activity in relation to him or to her, so that this overcoming of the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness is possible only if the recognition is mutual. Finally, the act of self-negation represented by the summons involves treating all differences as irrelevant. It is, in short, in virtue of what persons have in common, as opposed to that which makes them into the particular individuals they happen to be, that mutual recognition is possible at all. Why, then, does Hegel introduce a struggle for recognition, whereas Fichte does not? I want now to argue

that this major difference can be explained with reference to a problem generated by the essential role that mutual recognition plays in Fichte's deduction of the concept of right.

The Struggle for Recognition

As we have seen, it is only by summoning another person that each person demonstrates that he or she is a free and rational being to which a summons can be directed, and it is only by being the object of such a summons that consciousness of oneself as a free and rational being becomes possible. Clearly, the second requirement is more fundamental than the first one because the wish to demonstrate that one is a free and rational being presupposes that one is conscious of oneself as such a being, and this form of consciousness presupposes that one has at some point already been the recipient of a summons of the relevant kind. Fichte's idea of a community of free and rational beings that reciprocally recognize each other as beings of the same general type in this way generates the following puzzle: how did such a community of free and rational beings come about when the first member of this community could not have achieved a consciousness of him- or herself as free and rational because he or she would not have been able to achieve a determinate representation of him- or herself as such a being by means of a summons of the relevant kind? In the absence of a convincing answer to this question, one is left asking why the first human beings – none of whom was in a position to issue such a summons to others – did not instead remain merely natural beings driven by desire and instinct in such a way as to render them incapable of freely limiting their activity in relation to others. In short, Fichte's account of recognition presupposes certain capacities whose existence has not been sufficiently explained in the case of the first human beings.

Fichte demonstrates that he himself is aware of this problem when he identifies the summons to engage in free activity addressed to others not with any single action but with a whole series of actions, which he associates with the notion of upbringing or education (*Erziehung*) (GA I/3: 347; FNR, 38). This shows that for him freedom and rationality are the result of a process. Yet the idea of a process simply reproduces the problem mentioned above, in that it invites the question as to the origin of the kind of community in which the right type of educational process – that is to say, one that aims to produce in others a consciousness of themselves as essentially free and rational beings – first became possible. In other words, the question arises as to how the first members of this community were themselves educated to think of themselves in the required way

and were thereby able to educate others with the aim of developing in them the same capacities and the same self-conception. This leads Fichte to ask who brought up or educated the first human couple. He himself refers to the wisdom of the Genesis account of the care that God took of Adam and Eve, in which a rational being, though not a human one but a 'spirit', is described as having taken care of the first human couple (GA I/3: 347–348; FNR, 38). Fichte recognizes, then, that his account of recognition within the framework of a transcendental deduction of the conditions of self-consciousness ultimately needs to be supplemented by a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition. Hegel can be seen to replace Fichte's appeal to Biblical narrative with a genetic account which begins with a struggle for recognition, making mutual recognition into something that must first be achieved through an antagonistic social and historical process that performs an educational function.

At the beginning of the struggle for recognition portrayed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, each self-consciousness confronts another self-consciousness as a purely natural being, and as something whose independence is of essentially the same kind as the independence of the object of desire, that is to say, a purely physical form of independence:

Appearing thus immediately on the scene, they are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being of *Life* ... They are, *for each other*, shapes of consciousness which have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction, of rooting-out all immediate being, and of being merely the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness.¹⁶

What, though, is the act or 'movement' of 'absolute abstraction' mentioned in this passage?

The reference to 'rooting-out all immediate being' suggests that this act corresponds to the act of abstraction that is a condition of recognizing others as beings of the same general type as oneself and that is in this respect also a condition of the act of freely limiting one's activity in relation to them – an act that one performs in order to be recognized in turn by others as a free and rational being – at least insofar as it consists in abstracting from all natural features (e.g. physical and racial characteristics, given desires

and their objects) that differentiate one human being from other human beings or have the potential to do so. The act of abstracting from all such features would leave us with the identity of a self-consciousness or 'I' which unifies all such determinate features within itself ('the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness'). In the first stage of the struggle for recognition, however, the object of consciousness is viewed as a being that has not performed this act of abstraction. In the case of one of the participants in this struggle, the object of consciousness shows itself instead to be ultimately incapable of performing such an act.

By risking their lives in the struggle for recognition, individuals attempt to demonstrate both to themselves and to others that they enjoy the independence which Fichte associates with the self-identity of self-consciousness, on the grounds that in positing itself the I does not depend on anything external to itself. Rather, it is entirely self-constituting and self-determining. In the case of the individual self-consciousness which engages in the struggle for recognition, this independence assumes the specific form of the ability to act independently of any given desire or any other natural feature that might determine its actions. Moreover, at this stage of human consciousness and development it is only by entering this struggle that individuals can, according to Hegel, demonstrate their independence in this sense both to themselves and to others:

it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*.¹⁷

This practical demonstration of one's independence is thereby meant to provide a determinate representation of the same independence in the form of another person's recognition of one's independence, making this independence into an object of consciousness which is not, however, other than the subject of consciousness. In this way, a unity of the moments of identity (self-consciousness) and non-identity (consciousness) is achieved. Each self-consciousness can here be understood to be

motivated to enter the struggle for recognition by a practical need which generates ‘the drive to *show* itself as a free self, and to be *there* as a free self for the other’.¹⁸

The act of abstraction on which the achievement of such a representation of oneself ultimately depends finds immediate expression in the willingness to risk one’s own life by entering into deadly conflict with another human being in an attempt to gain recognition of what one takes oneself essentially to be (i.e. an independent being). This willingness to risk one’s own life demonstrates that one is independent of all the particular natural features that together constitute life, including one’s own life, understood as a whole. Yet one of the participants in the struggle for recognition ultimately fails to perform this act of abstraction because the fear of death proves to be stronger in the end. This individual allows him- or herself thereby to be treated by the other participant as merely a thing and as nothing more than the means to the ends of another individual’s desires. This outcome generates a problem, however, in that the one who exercises domination cannot recognize him- or herself in the object of his or her consciousness, namely, in the human being whom he or she dominates. Rather, ‘the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one’.¹⁹

Given this apparent dead end, there arises not only the question as to how genuine recognition of oneself as an independent being, and thus a representation of what one takes oneself essentially to be, can be achieved, but also the question as to whether the struggle for recognition can, after all, provide a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition in such a way as to solve the problem identified above in connection with Fichte’s deduction of the concept of right. In relation to the second issue in particular, Hegel introduces a type of reversal in which the one who is dominated turns out to achieve the capacity for self-determination, that is, not only the capacity for independence but also the capacity to constrain one’s own activity through an act of free choice. As we have seen, the latter is, in the form of the capacity to limit one’s own activity in relation to others, a condition of the act of self-negation expressed by means of a summons described by Fichte. This capacity is developed by means of the discipline required of an individual who must labour in accordance with the demands of a master, as opposed to doing something simply because he or she happens to desire to do it. Hegel

accordingly describes work as ‘desire held in check’.²⁰ In an addition to the corresponding paragraph of his *Encyclopaedia* he is recorded as saying that the discipline imposed by relations of domination constitutes ‘the *beginning* of genuine human freedom’, because the human being who is dominated learns not to act according to his or her immediate desires; and if such self-discipline is a necessary condition of the development of the capacity for self-determination – and with it the possibility of an act of self-limitation – it follows that, without ‘having experienced the discipline that breaks self-will, no one becomes free, rational, and capable of command’.²¹

From this type of claim it can be seen that the reversal in question is meant to demonstrate that, although risking one’s life by engaging in the struggle for recognition satisfies a necessary condition of mutual recognition, namely, the consciousness of oneself as an independent being which is not immediately determined by its natural desires or drives, it cannot be a sufficient condition of such recognition. Indeed, the way in which it generates relations of domination already shows this. In any case, even the necessary condition is only partially satisfied, because the independence in question does not become an object of consciousness in the form of the recognition accorded to oneself by another human being in whom one’s own sense of independence is adequately mirrored. As we have just seen, another necessary condition is the development of the capacity to limit one’s drive for independence in relation to others, and this is something that is unlikely to be achieved by someone who possesses absolute power in relation to others and is therefore free to treat and to use them in accordance with his or her immediately given desires or drives.

The possibility of alternative ways of becoming the type of being to which a summons can be addressed and that is capable of summoning others by limiting its own activity in relation to them may be thought to undermine the following claim that Hegel makes: ‘The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness’.²² We should not, however, lose sight of the specific problem inherited from Fichte with which Hegel is attempting to deal. In the light of this problem, the struggle for recognition can be thought to be necessary on account of the discipline to which it subjects individuals and thereby makes them capable of limiting their own

activity in relation to others. Only then can there be alternative ways of becoming the type of being to which a summons can be addressed and that is capable of summoning others by limiting its own activity in relation to them. Moreover, the experience of having risked one's own life is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of the formation of the type of consciousness with which Hegel associates the beginning of human freedom. In the case of the bondsman, this experience is preserved even though the fear of death proved stronger in the end, for 'this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations'.²³

Under different historical and social conditions, the educative process which human beings must undergo could take another form, such as that of socialization within a community in which relations of mutual recognition already generally obtain in the form of the legal recognition that both Fichte and Hegel associate with right. Indeed, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel maintains that the struggle for recognition and the relations of domination associated with it concern only the 'immediate consciousness of freedom' characteristic of a condition in which 'the human being exists as a natural being and as a concept which has being only in itself', whereas 'the Idea of freedom is truly present only as *the state*'.²⁴ The reasoning behind this set of claims becomes clearer if one recalls what I have already said concerning what motivated Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition, namely, the need to provide a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition which explains how it was possible for human beings to establish such relations among themselves when the first human beings, who are assumed to be originally purely natural beings, must be thought to have lacked the relevant capacities and self-conception. Yet once the required capacities and self-conception have been sufficiently developed in at least some human beings, they can educate others in such a way that they develop the same capacities and self-conception, making the struggle for recognition unnecessary and, moreover, unjust, in that it violates legal, social and political norms and their institutional embodiments that have come to be generally recognized as valid.

In relation to the last point, it is significant that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Hegel claims that the individual who has not risked his life may nevertheless be recognized as a person and thereby appears to treat the term ‘person’ as signifying something that falls short of what is required of a truly independent self-consciousness. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the person forms the subject of the first moment of right, which Hegel calls ‘abstract right’. The concept of the person here broadly corresponds to the legal subject of Fichte’s doctrine or theory of right (*Rechtslehre*). For Fichte, the person exercises freedom of choice within a legally recognized sphere that must ultimately be guaranteed by the state (GA I/3: 361; FNR, 53). Given that the person exercises freedom of choice and recognizes the right of others to exercise it, personality by its very nature presupposes the capacity for self-determination and self-limitation. In this respect, it also presupposes that each and every person has been the object of a summons and, insofar as a genetic account of a community in which human beings can be the object of a summons is concerned, that the type of struggle for recognition described by Hegel is already over. Persons can conceive of themselves as independent of any purely natural, given features that distinguish them from others and they can therefore adopt a reflective stance towards such features; indeed, it is the possibility of doing so that makes them independent of these features. Legal recognition requires in addition that persons exercise self-determination not only through the ends that they adopt and act upon but also by limiting their freedom in relation to others, thereby recognizing the right of others to act in accordance with their own ends.

For Hegel, personality begins with the subject’s ‘consciousness of itself as a completely abstract “I” in which all concrete limitation and validity are negated and invalidated’, and when ‘there is knowledge of the *self* as an *object*, but as an object raised by thought to simple infinity and hence purely identical with itself’.²⁵ Yet personality is also ‘that which acts to overcome [*aufzuheben*] this limitation and to give itself reality – or, what amounts to the same thing, to posit that existence [*Dasein*] as its own’.²⁶ The limitation in question is that of being something merely subjective, and the existence that the person seeks to posit as its own is therefore one that can be taken to involve a change in, or appropriation of, parts of the external, material world confronting it. Thus, the person is not only abstractly free but also seeks to realize its freedom in the world through the exercise of free choice, the initial objects of which are external things that it makes into its property.

If personality is an achievement – as both Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition and the role of the summons in Fichte’s deduction of the concept of right imply it is – the question arises as to how ages in which relations of mutual recognition were either completely or in large part absent are to be judged from the standpoint of an age in which such relations obtain or in which the general need for them has at least been acknowledged. Since slavery represents a clear example of the absence of recognition,^{[27](#)} I shall now turn to some things that Fichte and Hegel have to say about it so as to determine how they must be thought to answer this question. Although their commitment to the idea of the necessity of mutual recognition, either as a condition of self-consciousness or as a condition of overcoming the alienation that accompanies an unresolved opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, suggests that they must condemn slavery unconditionally, we shall see that the matter is, in fact, less clear-cut than this.

Fichte and Hegel on Slavery

In his account of abstract right, Hegel draws a distinction between persons and things. A thing lacks personality and cannot, therefore, be a bearer of rights.²⁸ This is because a thing *by its very nature* lacks the capacities (freedom and rationality) that Hegel associates with personality. Slavery, by reducing a person to the status of a thing which is the property of a person who has the right to dispose of it as he or she pleases, is inherently unjust because it treats persons as things. Hegel describes the slave as someone whose ‘entire scope of ... activity had been alienated to his master’.²⁹ In other words, the slave is in no position at all to exercise self-determination through the free use of his or her powers, unlike the person who has alienated these powers through an act of free choice and only for a limited period of time by means of a contract. Thus slavery represents a radical example of the alienation of personality.³⁰

Hegel rejects all justifications of slavery that are based on contingent factors or events (e.g. surrendering in battle, being the child of a slave). Rather, he seeks to comprehend the institution of slavery in terms of what a human being essentially is. Slavery depends on conceiving of a human being ‘simply as a *natural being* whose *existence* ... is not in conformity with his concept’.³¹ I take Hegel to mean ‘natural’ in the sense of being motivated by considerations such as the fear of death or in the sense of being born with a certain character or particular social status (e.g. being by nature fearful or cowardly, being born the son or daughter of someone who is already a slave). The claim that slavery is wrong, in contrast, is based on ‘the *concept* of the human being as spirit, as something free *in itself*’.³² Given his accounts of recognition and personality, one may well expect the last claim to represent Hegel’s own viewpoint. He criticizes this viewpoint, however, on the grounds that it regards the human being ‘as *by nature* free, or (and this amounts to the same thing) takes the concept as such in its immediacy’.³³ This criticism can be related to a feature of his account of the struggle for recognition, namely that freedom (and therefore personality) is an achievement (at both an individual and collective level), as opposed to something merely given. This brings me to a further point.

Hegel associates general recognition of personality specifically with a certain historical epoch. This epoch marks the transition from the ancient to the modern world

and it begins with the rise of Christianity: ‘It must be nearly one and a half millennia since the *freedom of personality* began to flourish under Christianity and became a universal principle for part – if only a small part – of the human race’.³⁴ Hegel could be interpreted as saying both of the following two things: (1) that in other ages, cultures or societies consciousness of personality was (or is) lacking; and (2) that slavery in such ages, cultures or societies cannot therefore be condemned in absolute moral terms. Clearly, (2) is not entailed by (1), since a description of the absence of something in another age, culture and society does not exclude moral condemnation of that age, culture and society on account of its failure to recognize the rights or value of something. Hegel’s acceptance of (2) is nevertheless suggested by his claim that criticism of slavery becomes possible only at the higher stage of consciousness and development presupposed by his own *Philosophy of Right*, for only then can the limitations of this institution be properly comprehended. This idea can be detected in the following statement: ‘Slavery occurs in the transitional phase between natural human existence and the truly ethical condition; it occurs in a world where a wrong is still right. Here, the wrong *is valid*, so that the position it occupies is a necessary one’.³⁵

This viewpoint is compatible with the idea of the necessity of the struggle for recognition at a certain point in social history. Yet it also raises a problem: if individuals lacked personality at a certain point in time, how could they have ever come to alienate their personality by becoming slaves, given that any act of alienation presupposes the freedom to dispose of what is one’s own, and in this way presupposes in turn that one already has a consciousness of oneself as a person? In other words, the essential connection that Hegel, following Fichte, makes between personality and the exercise of free choice implies that alienating one’s personality must itself be an act that is freely performed, for otherwise it would simply not be a case of the alienation of personality itself. If we view this problem in relation to Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition and its immediate outcome, however, one can view personality itself as a by-product of this struggle together with the domination and discipline suffered by human beings as a result of preferring life to independence. As the consciousness of personality develops and spreads, the institution of slavery must gradually come to appear more and more unjust and the incentive to abolish it will become correspondingly greater and more widespread.

Although Hegel appears to identify the wish to demonstrate one's independence of anything naturally given as that which immediately motivates the struggle for recognition, we have seen that this way of demonstrating one's independence is not the only way of securing recognition, even if it was so at a certain point in social history. Another way of gaining recognition is by means of legal relations which apply to all and are guaranteed by a state which recognizes all its citizens as equals. Thus, the notion of being a 'person' is regarded with contempt at the stage of the consciousness of freedom represented by the struggle for recognition only because freedom is here identified with independence alone and not with the legally guaranteed status of personhood that, once achieved, means that the willingness to risk one's own life in a life-or-death struggle for recognition is no longer a condition of recognition. The problem remains, nevertheless, that, if a human being who engaged in the struggle for recognition but ultimately preferred life to independence must be thought to lack the consciousness of personality as well as legal recognition, it is not clear how this individual can be held responsible for his or her slavery, in the sense that he or she has freely alienated his or her personality. Yet when Hegel claims that 'if someone is a slave, his own will is responsible',³⁶ he must be taken to mean that this human being had a consciousness of his independence and personality in the sense of an awareness of him- or herself as a being that is not immediately determined by natural desires and drives, but failed to demonstrate the reality of this self-conception through his or her actions, including the act of asserting his or her independence by risking his or her own life. This is itself a harsh conclusion, however, when applied to ages in which the struggle to preserve or first gain one's independence would not have been facilitated by existing forms of legal recognition, and when individuals would have had a hard time developing the relevant self-conception in the absence of this form of recognition and on account of the condition of servitude in which they found themselves.

Some of Fichte's remarks on slavery also point in the direction of the claim that the slave is personally responsible for his or her servitude without, however, it being possible to make clear sense of such a claim. In his *System of Ethics*, Fichte claims that cowardice, understood as the '*laziness* that prevents us from asserting *our freedom* and *self-sufficiency* [*Selbstständigkeit*] in our interaction [*Wechselwirkung*] with others', provides 'the only explanation for slavery among human beings, both physical and moral' (GA I/5: 185; SE, 192). Physical slavery, which is closest to the historical forms of

slavery that concern us here, is said to have its source in a willingness to yield to the greater force of others simply because resistance would require too much effort and pain.

The fact that Fichte regards the failure to resist superior physical force as morally reprehensible even when resistance is likely to result in one's own death is shown by how he compares the person who commits suicide unfavourably with the virtuous person who endures the evils he or she suffers, but nevertheless regards the former person as a hero 'in comparison with the abject person who subjects himself to shame and slavery simply in order to prolong for a few more years the miserable feeling of his own existence' (GA I/5: 240; SE, 257). Fichte appears to assume, then, that slaves are morally responsible for the domination to which they are subject because it was, and remains, possible for them to resist it and thereby to assert their independence, whereas they did not (or do not) choose to do so through cowardice and the fear of death. This argument is problematic in at least two respects, beyond the fact that it places what are arguably unduly rigorous demands on human beings, demands to which some human beings have found themselves subject in virtue of such factors as race and their inability to defend themselves in the face of overwhelming physical force, whereas others have simply had the good fortune never to be subject to the same demands.

The first problem is that the laziness in terms of which Fichte explains the cowardice which allegedly accounts for the possibility of slavery forms part of his account of the condition of radical evil in which the natural human being finds him- or herself. Given that the natural condition is one in which human beings lack a clear consciousness of their freedom, it is difficult to explain, as Fichte himself recognizes, how they could ever escape this condition, when doing so would itself require an act of freedom on the part of beings that are held to be unaware of their capacity for freedom.³⁷ This in turn invites the question as to how a human being who had never left the natural condition, or had somehow returned to it, could be held morally responsible for the laziness which prevents him or her from resisting others in an attempt to avoid physical or moral slavery.

The second problem more directly concerns Fichte's account of recognition. As we have seen, the consciousness of oneself as free ultimately depends on being the object of a summons, which can take the form of an educative process or the form of legal recognition. Thus, if someone has not been subject to the right kind of educative process

or is not accorded legal recognition, he or she would not, it seems, be in the position to become conscious of his or her freedom in the sense of the capacity to exercise self-determination, even if the desire for natural freedom in the sense of the absence of external constraints might nevertheless explain why a slave would be motivated to seek to escape the servitude to which he or she is subject. A slave could not, therefore, be held morally responsible for his or her failure as a person, as opposed to a purely natural being, to resist others in an attempt to avoid physical or moral slavery.

Notes

[1](#) G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Differenz des Fichte’schen und Schelling’schen Systems der Philosophie’, in *Jenaer kritische Schriften*, ed. Hartmut Buchner and Otto Pöggeler, *Hegel. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 4 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968) (hereafter JS), 34. English translation: *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977) (hereafter D), 119. Other relevant texts from the same period are ‘Glauben und Wissen oder die Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjectivität, in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen, als Kantische, Jacobische, und Fichtesche Philosophie’, in JS, 313–414 (English translation: *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), 153–187) and ‘Ueber die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie, und sein Verhältniß zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften’, in JS, 415–485 (English translation: ‘On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Practical Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right (1802–1803)’, in *Political Writings*, ed. Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132–139).

[2](#) JS, 12–16/D, 89–94.

[3](#) JS, 37/D, 123; translation modified.

[4](#) On the importance of Fichte’s concept of recognition for Hegel’s account of recognition, see Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, [1992](#)); Ludwig Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1979); Allen W. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Ch. 4; and Allen W. Wood, ‘Fichtean Themes in Hegel’s Dialectic of Recognition’, in Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2014](#)).

[5](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede, *Hegel. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1980) (hereafter PhG), 103. English translation: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) (hereafter PS), 104.

[6](#) PhG, 103/PS, 104.

[7](#) See PhG, 104/PS, 105.

[8](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III 1830; Dritter Teil: Die Philosophie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, ed. E. Moldauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), Vol. 10, (hereafter EG), § 325. Cited according to paragraph (§) numbers. A indicates a remark (*Anmerkung*) which Hegel himself added to the paragraph, while Z (*Zusatz*) indicates an addition deriving from student lecture notes. English translation: *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9](#) PhG, 107/PS, 109.

[10](#) See, for example, JS, 45–47/D, 132–35.

[11](#) PhG, 108/PS, 109.

[12](#) PhG 108/PS 110.

[13](#) PhG 108/PS 110.

[14](#) PhG 110/PS, 112.

[15](#) This does not mean that the relation thus established is a moral one, in the sense that one party recognizes that the other party has an absolute value which imposes moral limitations that apply irrespective of whatever one happens to desire. Rather, at the level of right recognition is ultimately motivated by what are, for Fichte, non-moral considerations, whose ultimate source is self-interest, as opposed to being motivated by a direct concern for the freedom of others. See David James, ‘Fichte on Personal Freedom and the Freedom of Others’, in Gabriel Gottlieb (ed.), *Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2016](#)).

[16](#) PhG, 111/PS, 113.

[17](#) PhG, 111/PS, 114.

[18](#) EG § 430; translation modified.

[19](#) PhG, 114/PS, 116–117.

[20](#) PhG, 115/PS, 118.

[21](#) EG § 435Z.

[22](#) PhG, 111/PS, 114.

[23](#) PhG, 114/PS, 117.

[24](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, in *Werke*, ed. E. Moldauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), Vol. 7 (hereafter PR), § 57A. Cited according to paragraph (§) numbers. A indicates a remark (*Anmerkung*) which Hegel himself added to the paragraph, while Z (*Zusatz*) indicates an addition deriving from student lecture notes. English translation: *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also EG § 432Z.

[25](#) PR § 35A.

[26](#) PR § 39.

[27](#) In Hegel's case the fact that relations of domination are the immediate outcome of the struggle for recognition makes it especially tempting to see him as in some way alluding to accounts of slavery, as when this outcome is said to combine two forms of slavery mentioned by Aristotle: slavery through battle and slavery by nature. See Ludwig Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Daniel Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 93. In the first case the battle in question can be identified with the struggle for recognition, and in the second case the outcome of this struggle reduces one party to it to an enemy who offers his services in exchange for his life and thereby shows that he is by nature incapable of independence.

[28](#) See PR § 42.

[29](#) PR § 67Z.

[30](#) See PR § 66A.

[31](#) PR § 57A.

[32](#) PR § 57A.

[33](#) PR § 57A.

[34](#) PR § 62A.

[35](#) PR § 57Z.

[36](#) PR § 57Z.

[37](#) For more on this particular problem, see David James, *Fichte's Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2015](#)), 52–53.

Fichte's Position: Anti-Subjectivism, Self-Awareness and Self-Location in the Space of Reasons



Paul Franks

Introduction

For all their differences, both Anglo-American and continental traditions of twentieth-century philosophy have shared a common enemy: subjectivism.¹ By subjectivism, I think it is fair to say, both traditions have meant the extension of the Cartesian view of the mind to the whole of reality. That is to say, a philosophy is subjectivist if it regards every possible thing as capable of existence only within a mental realm, to which philosophy has a privileged access akin to the privileged access we are said to have to our own minds.² Early twentieth-century realists, whether Anglo-American or European, found it easy to blame Kant for taking a step from Cartesianism to subjectivism, because of the Kantian doctrine that we can only know appearances, not things in themselves. And they could easily blame post-Kantian idealists for taking the final disastrous step by rejecting Kant's things in themselves. On this view of the history of philosophy, Fichte, the first great post-Kantian idealist, is perfectly suited for the part of villain.

Thus, according to Russell, 'Kant's immediate successor, Fichte, abandoned "things in themselves" and carried subjectivism to a point which seems almost to involve a kind of insanity. He holds that the Ego is the only ultimate reality, and that it exists because it posits itself; the non-Ego, which has a subordinate reality, also exists only because the Ego posits it ... The Ego as a metaphysical concept easily became confused with the empirical Fichte'.³ Heidegger, like Russell, sees the development of philosophy since Descartes as the ascent of subjectivism, and, again like Russell, Heidegger regards Fichte's philosophy as a high-point of a regrettable journey.⁴ However, since the middle of the 1960s, some Anglo-American philosophers have revised the subjectivist interpretation of Kant's idealism, finding that idealism, differently construed, to be of persisting significance. More recently, the subjectivist interpretations of various post-Kantian idealists have been revised. And most recently, interest has revived in Fichte himself, not only as a crucial figure in the historical transition from Kant to Hegel, but as a philosopher in his own right. While Robert Nozick asks whether the self might 'really be a Fichtetious object',⁵ Allen Wood takes Fichte to provide the key to unlock the mysteries of contemporary continental philosophy,⁶ Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank find a Fichtean bridge from classical German philosophy to analytic philosophy of mind,⁷

and Stephen Darwall finds an important complement to Kantian ethics in Fichte's account of the role of the second person in the origin of self-consciousness.⁸

This Fichte revival is obviously a bad idea if Fichte is indeed a subjectivist. To be sure, there have been many contributions, both scholarly and philosophical, to the development of non-subjectivist readings of Fichte. Yet these contributions tend to leave intact the temptation to a subjectivist reading of the sort given by Russell. This is because Fichte says some very misleading things, and also because the sources of the subjectivist temptation have not been adequately diagnosed and addressed. In this essay, I will develop a non-subjectivist reading of the three main bases for this temptation. This will enable me to present a sketch of Fichte's project that makes sense of his contemporary appeal.⁹

Positing: Is Fichte a Creativist?

There are three pillars on which subjectivist interpretations of Fichte rest. The first I will call *creativism*: it is the view that the mind creates the objects of its awareness. The second is *conflationism*: the view that consciousness is always *self*-consciousness. The third has in recent debates been called *internalism*: it is the view that mental contents can be determined independently of the determination of any extra-mental reality. If Fichte is a creativist, then he holds that all objects of awareness are inhabitants of a subjective realm. Alternatively, if Fichte is *both* a conflationist *and* an internalist, then he holds that all objects of awareness are aspects or modes of the self and can be determined solely *as* aspects or modes of the self. In either case, Fichte would be a subjectivist. And there is apparently explicit textual evidence for attributing all three views to Fichte. Yet I will try to show, nevertheless, that he does not hold any of them.¹⁰

I will begin with creativism. Clearly, if Fichte believes that the mind creates the objects of its awareness, then he is *ipso facto* a subjectivist. And if he believes that *his* mind is the creative agent, then he is certainly arrogant and possibly mad. I suspect that Russell is ascribing both beliefs to Fichte in the passage I cited earlier, because I suspect that Russell takes Fichte to be talking about *creative activity* when he says that the I *posits* itself and *posits* objects. If my suspicion is correct, then Russell is not the first to understand Fichte in this way. Here is an extract from an 1803 work by Jean Paul, in which the insane character Leibgeber comments on Fichte's philosophy:

‘I astonish myself’, said I, casting a cursory eye over my System, while my feet were being bathed, and looking significantly at my toes while their nails were being cut, ‘to think that I am the universe and the sum of all things ... Oh what a being, who creates all but himself (for it only *becomes* and never *is*) ...’

At this point my feet refused to remain in the tub, and I paced up and down, barefoot and dripping: ‘Make thee a rough estimate’, said I, ‘of thy creations – Space – Time (now well into the eighteenth century) – what is contained in those two – the worlds – what is within those – the three realms of Nature – the paltry realms of royalty – the realm of Truth – that of the Critical [i.e., the Kantian] school – and all the libraries! – And consequently the few volumes written by Fichte,

because it will only be after I shall have posited or made him first that he will be able to dip his pen ...’¹¹

In this passage, positing is explicitly equated with creating or making. And it is of no small importance how one understands Fichte’s talk of positing or *setzen*. As Peter Heath and John Lachs tell us, ‘At certain points ... Fichte writes almost as if *setzen* and its compounds were the only verbs in the German language’.¹² They go on to suggest that ‘By *setzen* Fichte refers to a nontemporal, causal activity that can be performed only by minds’.¹³ As it stands, this explanation is not terribly helpful, because it leaves unspecified what sort of causal activity is intended. Heath and Lachs later ascribe to Fichte the view that ‘through the creative power of reason whatever is posited is made real’ and that ‘in [positing,] an undivided self is totally engaged in a single creative, all-encompassing enterprise’.¹⁴ While they do not explicitly say that positing is creating, they strongly suggest it, and thereby encourage a subjectivist interpretation of Fichte.¹⁵

However, Fichte explicitly rejects creativism: ‘We cannot absolutely “think up” [*Erdenken*] anything, or create [*Erschaffen*] through thinking’ (GA I/4: 245). In roughly contemporaneous lectures, he tries to guard against the creativist misunderstanding of his thesis that ‘the *representing subject* is whatever it is only by means of *self-activity*’ by saying ‘This proposition should not be taken to suggest any creation of representations [*kein erschaffen der Vorstellungen*] ...’ (GA IV/2: 24; FTP, 96).

Fichte’s rejection of creativism blocks one short road to a subjectivist interpretation. But of course this is insufficient. We need to understand what Fichte means by ‘positing’ if we are to develop an alternative to the subjectivist reading. Indeed, we surely need an account of positing if we are to give *any* satisfying interpretation of Fichte. Yet commentators have been remarkably happy either to leave the term as a primitive¹⁶ or to make vague gestures in the direction of an explanation.¹⁷

A more promising tradition seeks to explain Fichtean positing against the background of the term’s use in logic. Thus Charles Everett, in 1892, suggested that ‘The word “posit” means to find or recognize, and thus to assume as given’¹⁸ since, in traditional logic, positing or immediate affirmation is opposed to inferentially mediated affirmation. Unfortunately, this cannot be what Fichte has in mind. It is uncontroversial that he is attempting, among other things, to construct an argument from the self-positing of the I,

whatever that is, to the positing of the external world, whatever that should be. Most of Fichte's acts of positing are achieved through inferences, so he cannot take positing to be immediate affirmation. Günter Zöller has modified Everett's suggestion by removing the immediacy requirement. According to Zöller, the term originates 'in logic, where it means affirmation in judgment'.¹⁹ However, the modification is of limited help: *setzen* cannot mean judgemental affirmation for Fichte, because what he posits is the self and various entities, none of which are judgements. Perhaps because he realizes this, Zöller goes on to define 'positing' implicitly in terms of its role, saying that 'there is ... no direct precedent for the specific use of the term in transcendental philosophy before Fichte'.²⁰

The history of logic is, I think, the right place to look. But Everett and Zöller have not found what they are looking for. Everett may have been led astray by the species of medieval disputation known as *positio*. In such disputations, a disputant could be obligated to argue as if a certain proposition were true, even if the proposition were known to be false, or heretical, or self-contradictory, or even nonsensical!²¹ This use of the term 'to posit', though genuine enough, is not likely to contribute to a charitable reading of Fichte. These disputations were long gone by the eighteenth century, but Zöller correctly says that 'to posit' could mean 'to affirm in judgment'. Baumgarten uses '*ponere*' for 'to affirm in judgment', and he gives the German '*setzen*' as equivalent to the Latin.²²

Much more promising, I believe, is the use of the term by *Kant* and his German scholastic predecessors. As Béatrice Longuenesse has pointed out, the term '*ponere*' or '*setzen*' played a crucial role in Kant's developing criticism of the rationalist tradition.²³ Contrary to Zöller, there is a fairly direct precedent in transcendental philosophy, and in its close relative, rationalist ontology, for the use of 'positing'.

If post-Leibnizian German rationalism deserves to be called *rationalism*, then it should strike us as important that the term '*ponere*' features centrally in what the rationalists say about *reason* in their metaphysics and about *reasoning* in their logic. Thus, for Wolff, the ontologically crucial Principle of Sufficient Reason states that 'nothing is without a sufficient reason why it is rather than not being, that is, if something is posited as being, then something is posited whereby it can be understood why the former is, rather than not being'.²⁴ One may also say that reasons *determine* things, for to posit the reason for a thing is to posit the determinations of that thing.²⁵ For the post-

Leibnizians, metaphysics and logic are deeply intertwined, so it is no surprise that Wolff defines the rule of inference known as *modus ponens* in almost exactly the same terms: ‘If, in a hypothetical syllogism, the antecedent is posited, the consequent must also be posited’.²⁶ From these passages, we may conclude that to posit is to determine a thing for a reason, and to reason is to recognize that some act of positing also commits one to another.

During his development towards his mature critical philosophy, Kant gradually disentangled ontology from logic. Against Leibniz and Wolff, he argued that even a complete grasp of a concept and its logical relations could never be sufficient for knowledge that the object corresponding to that concept actually exists. However, while distancing himself from rationalism, he retained the term ‘*ponere*’ or ‘*setzen*’ in his account of reasoning, and gave it even greater emphasis.

For example, as is well known, Kant criticized the ontological proof of the existence of God,²⁷ because it failed to distinguish between a *logical* predicate and a *real* predicate.²⁸ A term is a logical predicate if its concatenation with a subject-term yields a proposition. But only those terms that determine what a thing is, either essentially or accidentally, are real predicates. Now, the verb ‘to be’ may be used, in its various forms, as a logical predicate. One may say, to modify slightly one of Kant’s examples, ‘The sea-unicorn or narwal is existent, but the land-unicorn is nonexistent’. But, in such cases, one is actually saying whether a certain concept is instantiated or not; one is not saying whether a certain object has the distinguishing feature of existence or not. Thus, ‘existence’ is never a real predicate that articulates the determinacy, reality or thinghood of a thing. So ‘existence’ cannot be one of God’s real predicates and cannot be part of God’s essence. Kant gives an alternative account of ‘being’:

The concept of position or positing [*Position oder setzen*] is perfectly simple: it is identical with the concept of being in general. Now, something can be thought as posited merely relatively, or, to express the matter better, it can be thought merely as the relation (*respectus logicus*) of something as a characteristic mark of a thing. In this case, being, that is to say, the positing of this relation, is nothing other than the copula in a judgment. If what is considered is not merely this relation but the thing posited in and for itself, then this being is the same as existence.

Here two senses of ‘being’ are explained in terms of positing. First, there is the copulative or predicative use of ‘being’ in, say, ‘The narwal is a mammal.’ To predicate is to posit a characteristic mark in relation to a thing. Predication is relative positing.²⁹ Secondly, there is the existential use of ‘being’. Kant says that existence is not a real predicate, but is rather ‘the absolute positing of a thing’.³⁰ Thus Kant uses the same terminology as the rationalists in order to articulate his difference from them.

In another attempt to disentangle ontology from logic, Kant distinguished between a *logical* ground or reason and a *real* ground or reason.³¹ A logical ground has an analytic relation to that for which it is the reason. For example, ‘If a being is an animal, then it is mortal’ expresses logical reasoning, because to deny that an animal is mortal is to entail a contradiction. But the relationship between a real ground and that for which it is the reason cannot be comprehended in terms of the principle of contradiction. I may believe that I am coming down with the flu because I have been exposed to the cold, but no contradiction is entailed by the assertion that someone has been exposed to the cold but is not coming down with the flu. The Wolffians had neglected this distinction, in Kant’s view. But, once again, he continued to use the scholastic language of positing to explain what reasons, both logical and real, are. So it should come as no surprise that, when he was struck by Hume’s problem about causation, he formulated it as follows: Hume had challenged reason ‘to give him an account of by what right she thinks that: something could be so constituted that, if it is posited, something else necessarily must thereby be posited as well; for that is what the concept of cause says’ (AA 4: 257; P, 7).

We may unify Kant’s account of grounding with his account of predication, by suggesting that *logical* grounding is a necessary connection between *relative* positions, whereas *real* grounding is a necessary connection between *absolute* positions. Thus we may attribute to Kant an account of positing and reasoning that is clearly descended from Wolff’s, although it differs from Wolff’s in crucial respects: to posit is either to commit oneself to the existence of a thing, or to determine some characteristic of a thing; and to reason is to recognize either that some act of absolute positing commits one to another, or that some act of relative positing commits one to another.

Although Kant uses the term ‘positing’ to make crucial distinctions between the role of reason in logic and the role of reason in ontology, he nevertheless has little or nothing to say about positing itself. From his point of view, the *distinctions* he is able to draw with the term are significant, but the fact that he uses *the same term* to designate what lies on both sides of those distinctions may not be important. However, I suggest that this *was* of great importance to Fichte. Like Kant, Fichte speaks of positing (not judgements, but) things and their determinations. Like Kant again, Fichte gives an account of both logical and real inference in terms of positing. However, unlike Kant, Fichte seems to have been impressed by the idea that, by employing a single term denoting *a single, articulated activity*, one might construct a unified – yet variegated – account of the role of reason in logic and ontology. Starting with an account of positing, one might develop an account of every kind of reason, and of every use of the verb ‘to be’, whether predicative or existential, whether logical or real.

This background enables us to understand what Fichte means when he makes apparently creativist statements. For example, when he says that the acting subject ‘contains within itself the ground of all being’ (GA I/4: 212; IWL, 40), he does *not* mean that the subject creates everything that is. Rather, he means that, if we are to understand both predicative and existential uses of the verb ‘to be’, along with our inferential transitions from one such use to another, then we must examine the activity of positing in terms of which those uses are explained. As he says a page earlier, his guiding question is ‘... “how is a being for us possible?”... This question inquires after the ground of the predicate of being as such, whether this predicate is attributed or denied in any particular case’ (GA I/4: 211; IWL, 39).³²

The idea of such a unified account of reason and being must have seemed particularly attractive in the light of the lack of unity perceived in Kant’s philosophy by Fichte and some of his contemporaries. On this post-Kantian view, Kant had given a brilliant account of the basic laws of the metaphysics of experience, and he had given a brilliant account of the basic laws of the metaphysics of morals. But (and this is obviously contestable) Kant’s procedure had been haphazard and inductive, rather than systematic and deductive.³³ Consequently, the theoretical laws discovered by Kant needed grounding in a unifying account, as did the practical laws. Furthermore, it would be insufficient to give two entirely distinct unifying accounts, one of theoretical reason

and one of practical reason. What was desired was a single unifying account that showed how theoretical reason and practical reason could be distinct, yet could be *one and the same faculty of reason*. This was an especially challenging project because theoretical and practical reason seemed not merely to differ from one another, but actually to be in tension. Fichte assumes that Kant is correct to think that a fully adequate account of practical reason must culminate in the articulation of absolute or categorical norms – that is, norms whose binding force is entirely independent of the obligated subject's possession of any particular desire or project. The norms of theoretical reason are not categorical in this way. In fact, they guide us towards entirely naturalistic explanations, which makes it extremely hard to understand how we could be subject to the categorical norms of practical reason. The theoretical explanation of an action, it seems, will always appeal to some desire or project of the agent, apparently excluding the possibility that the agent is being guided by a categorical norm of practical reason. Fichte aspires to reconceive rational agency in general – *including theoretical reasoning* – as activity constrained by categorical normativity. If he succeeds, then he can remove the apparent tension between theoretical and practical reason, grounding their basic principles within a single unifying account. To do this, he needs a fundamental notion of rational agency as such. Positing is the notion he employs.

I believe this gives us a proper starting-point for an interpretation of Fichte. Positing is neither a creative activity nor an affirmation of judgements. Rather, positing is the fundamental activity of rational agency in general. It is an activity articulated into existential commitment, predication and inference. And it is an activity which forms the basis both of the ontological or transcendental forms of existential commitment and real inference, and of the logical forms of judgement and analytic inference. Furthermore, since Fichte rejects any radical distinction between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning, positing is an activity that is capable of both theoretical and practical inflections.

So far I have blocked only *one* route to the interpretation of Fichte as subjectivist, by showing that positing is not creating. But I want to make a further suggestion about positing, that will play a central role in the remainder of my argument against the subjectivist reading. My suggestion is that Fichte places great weight on the literal meaning of *setzen* or positing – that is, *placing*. For Fichte, to commit oneself to the

existence of a thing, and to determine a thing through predication, is to place or locate that thing within a determinate place in the space of reasons.³⁴ Admittedly, Fichte does not explicitly speak of ‘logical space’, like Wittgenstein, or of ‘the space of reasons’, like Sellars, Lewis, McDowell and Brandom. However he does use spatial terminology at crucial moments in his account of reason. For example, he talks about the complete determination of a thing as the total filling of a conceptual ‘sphere’, from which distinct realities are thereby excluded.³⁵ He also insists, against Kant, that the method of philosophy is closely akin to the method of geometry.³⁶ Moreover, as we shall see, the spatial character of reasoning is, for Fichte, not merely metaphorical. There are systematic relations between the ontological or transcendental space of reasons, the logical space of reasons and the three-dimensional framework that we ordinarily call space. I will return to this later.

Self-awareness: Is Fichte a Conflationist?

Now, I want to undermine the second pillar that supports subjectivist interpretations of Fichte. Does Fichte conflate consciousness (of objects) with *self*-consciousness?

There seems to be explicit textual evidence that Fichte is a conflationist. He says that ‘Without self-consciousness there is no consciousness whatever’ (GA I/4: 219; IWL, 50). In numerous papers, Castañeda states as an obvious fact – apparently on the basis of this statement – that ‘For Fichte ... all consciousness is self-consciousness’.³⁷ Now, if Fichte is indeed a conflationist in this sense, then he is also a subjectivist, because he regards every object of consciousness as the self under another guise. But, besides the general problems of subjectivism, this conflationist view seems obviously false. Surely there *is* a distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness, and any philosophy that denies that distinction is in serious trouble. Furthermore, it is hard to understand what might *motivate* Fichte to conflate consciousness with self-consciousness. Kant famously says that ‘The *I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations’ (CPR, B131). One way to understand this thesis is to say that, if any thought is to count as *my* thought, I must be able to ascribe that thought to myself. Setting aside for the moment controversial questions about the exact import of this thesis, it seems plain that only a *capacity* for self-ascription is required, not an *actual* self-consciousness that accompanies each of my thoughts.

There are two elements of the conflationist charge. First, Fichte is said to confuse consciousness with *explicit* or *reflective* self-consciousness. Secondly, Fichte is said to confuse the *capacity* for reflective self-consciousness with an *actual* self-consciousness.

The first element is easily dealt with. Even in the passages that seem most damning, Fichte says only that consciousness must be *conditioned* by self-consciousness, not that consciousness *just is* self-consciousness. He says, for example, that ‘I can be conscious of any object only on the condition that I am also conscious of myself, that is, of the conscious subject’ (GA I/4: 276; IWL, 112). Furthermore, there are numerous passages in which Fichte explicitly distinguishes the conditioning self-consciousness with which he is concerned from reflective self-consciousness. For instance, Fichte says that ‘In thinking about an object, one disappears into the object; one thinks about the object, but one does not think about oneself as the subject who is doing this thinking’ (GA IV/2: 29;

FTP, 110–111).³⁸ Whatever we are to say about the self-consciousness that Fichte believes to condition consciousness, it is evidently not reflective self-consciousness. Fichte is as cognizant as anyone of the obvious distinction between moments when one is absorbed in the external objects of one's consciousness and moments when one becomes explicitly self-aware.

It is harder to deal with the second element of the conflationist interpretation: the charge that Fichte conflates the capacity for self-consciousness with the actuality of self-consciousness. For it seems incontrovertible that Fichte *does* insist on an actual – albeit pre-reflective – self-consciousness conditioning every act of consciousness. He emphatically paraphrases Kant's thesis thus: 'as Kant puts it: All of my representations must be capable of being accompanied by the "I think" and must be thought of as accompanied thereby' (GA I/4: 253; IWL, 86).³⁹ Why this insistence? Why would the capacity for reflective self-consciousness be insufficient?

Various answers to this question have been offered. Suffice it to say here that I find none of them satisfying.⁴⁰ Instead I want to give an answer that brings out certain affinities between Fichte and some recent analytic philosophy.⁴¹

First, I need to say more about the capacity for reflective self-consciousness that is required, according to Kant, if any representation is to count as mine. I set aside questions about what this thesis means *for Kant*, which I believe is quite different from what it means *for Fichte*.

Now, Fichte speaks not about what is required for any representation to count as mine, but about what is required *for consciousness*. However, 'consciousness' is a notoriously slippery term. It can contrast with 'not being conscious' in the sense of carelessness or negligence; or with 'unconscious' in the psychoanalyst's sense, or in the anaesthetist's, and so on. Rather than assuming that we know in advance what the term 'consciousness' means, we should look at how it is used in particular contexts. For example, we should look at how Fichte uses the term in the context of his philosophical project. Since Fichte aspires to account for rational agency in general, I think that the most charitable interpretation of Fichtean consciousness is the following: an act or state is conscious, in Fichte's sense, if it is accessible to the rational agency and the deliberation of the agent performing that act or in that state. Like Kant, Fichte thinks that some acts

or states are *bewußtlos* or unconscious. Those acts or states may in some sense have representational content, but their content is nevertheless inaccessible to me as a rational agent.⁴²

If Fichtean consciousness is construed thus, then the Kantian thesis may be interpreted as follows: if any representational content is to be employable by me in my rational deliberation and agency, that content must be capable of being reflexively ascribed to me. For example, if I am to make use of the perceived fact that there is an obstacle obstructing my path of motion, then it is insufficient that I be in an informational state representing that fact. I must also be able to access that information and to relate it to my actual motion and to my desire to reach a certain destination. I must be able to think of *my* course of action, *my* desire, as obstructed – I must be able to think of the obstacle as an obstacle *for me* – if I am to respond rationally to the situation.

So far, I have said only that a *capacity* for reflexive self-ascription is required. But let us think more carefully about that capacity. It is crucial that this is a capacity for *reflexive* self-ascription. It would not be sufficient for me to be capable of *non-reflexive* self-ascription. Suppose, for example, that Fichte's path of motion is obstructed by a carelessly abandoned pile of books – say, Kant's collected works. If Fichte is to respond rationally to the situation, it is not sufficient that he be able to think of J. G. Fichte, or of 'the first great post-Kantian', or even of 'this person here', as obstructed, even if those designations do in fact refer to him. He must also be able to think of J. G. Fichte, or of 'the first great post-Kantian', or even of 'this person here', as *himself*.⁴³

This point is related to some influential arguments made by Castañeda and Anscombe.⁴⁴ An explicit reflexive self-ascription would involve a reflexive self-reference, the sort of reference typically achieved by a use of the first-person pronoun, 'I'. As Castañeda and Anscombe have argued, reflexive self-reference is not reducible to any other variety of reference whatsoever. Reflexive self-reference is completely unmediated by any other conception of oneself or information about oneself. Consequently, reflexive self-reference alone is guaranteed to refer to the appropriate referent. In contrast, self-reference by means of one's name is mediated by the information that, say, 'J. G. Fichte', *is* one's name; self-reference by means of a description is mediated by a certain conception of oneself as, say, 'the first great post-Kantian'; even self-reference by means of demonstratives is mediated by conceptions of, or information about, their referents.

Each of these non-reflexive self-references can therefore fail to refer, or can fail to refer to the appropriate referent. Since reflexive self-reference is irreducible to any other variety of reference,⁴⁵ it follows that reflexive self-ascription is irreducible to any other variety of ascription. If any content is to be employable by me in my rational deliberation and agency, then that content must be capable of being reflexively ascribed to me. If I were *only* capable of ascribing some content *non-reflexively* to myself, *that* would not render the content accessible to me as a rational agent.⁴⁶

Now, Fichte is primarily concerned with thoughts, not with their linguistic expressions.⁴⁷ But one of his central and frequently repeated points is the absolute and unparalleled *immediacy* of thinking of myself as myself, or as ‘I’. That is the point of his insistence that the self-awareness with which he is concerned is *intuitive*. In Kant’s terminology, an intuition is an immediate awareness of a singular actuality. There is good reason to say that, on Fichte’s view, the immediate or intuitive character of *thinking* of myself *as* myself is precisely what underlies the unmediated character of the *linguistic* reflexive self-reference achieved by appropriate use of the first-person pronoun.⁴⁸

Suppose we construe in this way the Kantian thesis that the ‘I think’ must be capable of being attached to each of my representations. Why should Fichte think that the capacity for reflexive self-ascription requires some sort of self-consciousness that actually conditions my representations? A further step is required in order to answer this question. Namely, Fichte holds – along with many contemporary analytic philosophers – that capacities and, more generally, *possibilities* cannot be metaphysically basic, and must be grounded in *actualities*. As Nelson Goodman has put it, ‘the peculiarity of dispositional predicates is that they seem to be applied to things in virtue of possible rather than actual occurrences – and possible occurrences are ... no more admissible as unexplained elements than are occult capacities’.⁴⁹ Fichte formulates the point as a claim about our capacity to posit things modally: ‘A merely possible efficacy, or an efficacy in general, is only posited through abstraction from a certain [efficacy], or from all *actual* [efficacies]; but, before something can be abstracted from, it must be posited ...’ (GA I/3: 341). It follows that the capacity for reflexive self-ascription cannot be basic. It must be grounded in some posited actuality.

Let us now put this claim together with the claim, explored earlier, that reflexive self-ascription is irreducible to any non-reflexive self-ascription. What we need, then, is

an actual ground for the capacity to reflexively self-ascribe. We might attribute to Fichte the following line of thought. If the capacity for reflexive self-ascription is irreducibly a capacity for *reflexivity*, then the actual ground for that capacity must *already* involve reflexivity. Otherwise, how could the actual ground *be* the ground of *that* capacity? On this view, I can produce thoughts of this irreducibly peculiar kind, because I am merely making explicit an implicit actuality that is *already* of this irreducibly peculiar kind. Any other explanation of the capacity for reflexive self-ascription will have to explain where the irreducible reflexivity comes from.⁵⁰

Now, there are various objections to this argument. First, one might respond that capacities *can* be metaphysically basic.⁵¹ A second objection is that the explanation offered is a pseudo-explanation. To say that I am capable of reflexive self-ascription because there is always already some reflexive actuality is like saying that opium can make you sleepy because it has dormitive virtue. Fichte himself raised and responded to this objection.⁵²

My point, however, has not been to defend Fichte's view, but to show that he is not a conflationist and that he adopts his position in response to intelligible philosophical problems. He does not conflate consciousness of objects with reflective consciousness of oneself, and he does not conflate possible self-consciousness with actual self-consciousness. Instead, he believes that a content can be accessible to my rational agency only if I am capable of reflexively self-ascribing it, and he further believes that I can be capable of reflexive self-ascription only if there is some reflexive actuality that is distinct from explicit self-consciousness, but that is made explicit by explicit self-consciousness and that renders explicit self-consciousness and rational agency possible.

Fichte describes this reflexive actuality by saying that it is 'an *act of self-positing as positing*' (GA I/4: 528; IWL, 113). We should now be prepared to make some sense of this enigmatic locution. What Fichte means is that the reflexive actuality is an existential commitment with respect to oneself as the agent engaged in making existential commitments, predications or inferences. Unlike other existential commitments, *this* one is necessarily presupposed by the capacity for rational agency. Indeed, any other existential commitment is an exercise of rational agency, and must necessarily presuppose existential commitment by the rational agent to herself as the positing agent. In this sense, the act of self-positing has an *absoluteness* surpassing that of any other existential

commitment. The act of positing myself as positing is the condition of any other act of positing, but it is itself *unconditioned* by any other act of positing. I said earlier that Fichte aspires to make room for the categorical norms of morality by reconceiving rational agency in general as responsiveness to categorical normativity. Now I note that, in Fichte's view, the basic form of categorical normativity is to be found in the self-positing act of which I just spoke. Rational agency in general, whether theoretical or practical, always involves an unconditional commitment. Of course, Fichte does not think that this unconditional commitment to one's own agency is identical with unconditional commitment to morality. But he thinks he can show that unconditional commitment to one's own agency provides the conceptual resources for the development of an appropriate conception of morality. How he seeks to show that, and whether he succeeds, are matters into which I cannot go here.

Now I want to return to my earlier suggestion that we understand Fichtean positing as *placing within the space of reasons*. How does this help make sense of the claim that rational agency presupposes 'an act of self-positing as positing'?

In order to explain this, I need to rehearse some ideas associated with John Perry and David Lewis. Perry noticed that the immediacy and irreducibility of reflexive self-reference create a problem for a prevalent view of belief and desire.⁵³ On that prevalent view, belief and desire are attitudes *de dicto*, or attitudes towards propositions, while propositions are universally accessible objects or states-of-affairs, with absolute truth-values, expressible by that-clauses. (We need not discuss any particular answer to the thorny question about how these objects are to be individuated.) Perry explains why this view is in trouble by elaborating a series of two-stage examples. At stage one, the subject knows all the facts (or true propositions) there are to know about his situation, but cannot locate himself, in some sense, with respect to those facts. For instance, an amnesiac is lost in a library, despite having read the map of the library and his own up-to-date biography; since he does not know that *he himself* is the person described in the biography as wandering in the library whose map he has read, the knowledge is of no use. Or, the author of a guidebook to a certain wilderness is lost in that wilderness; we may suppose that he knows the wilderness better than anyone else in the world, but that knowledge is of no use unless he can locate himself in it. At stage two, the subject succeeds in locating himself with respect to the facts. The amnesiac realizes that he

himself is the person described in the biography as wandering on the eighth floor of the library; the author of the guidebook locates himself at a particular point in the wilderness; the knowledge already possessed now becomes available for deliberation and action-guidance. Perry asks how to characterize the evident change in the subjects' beliefs that occurs in the transition from stage one to stage two. The beliefs acquired, which Perry calls 'locating beliefs',⁵⁴ are what he calls 'essentially indexical'. In other words, those beliefs have the irreducible and immediate reflexivity of first-personal beliefs. But such beliefs cannot easily be accommodated by the doctrine that belief is an attitude towards propositions, as prevalently understood. As Perry puts it, any attempt to specify a locating belief in first-personal terms – for instance, by saying 'I am the amnesiac wandering on the eighth floor of the library' – seems, from the viewpoint of the traditional doctrine of propositions, to have 'a *missing conceptual ingredient*: a sense for which I alone am the reference, or a complex of properties I alone have, or a singular term that refers to no one but me'. Alternatively, we might say that, from a Fichtean viewpoint, any attempt to specify a locating belief in *non*-first-personal terms will have a *surplus conceptual ingredient*.

Now, there are many ways of responding to Perry's problem. Each has its own virtues and vices. Here, I am interested only in David Lewis' solution, because of the light it sheds on Fichte. Lewis' radical suggestion is to do away with propositions as the objects of belief and desire altogether. Turn the troublesome exceptions into the norm, and they cease to be troublesome. In Lewis' words, 'I say that *all* belief is "self-locating belief". Belief *de dicto* is self-locating belief with respect to logical space; belief irreducibly *de se* [that is, the kind of belief whose manifest irreducible reflexivity creates trouble for propositional attitude theory] is self-locating belief at least partly with respect to ordinary time and space, or with respect to the population. I propose that any kind of self-locating belief should be understood as self-ascription of properties'.⁵⁵ On Lewis' view, *every* belief, and for that matter every desire, involves reflexive self-ascription. Every belief is a self-location in logical space; some beliefs are also self-locations in empirical space.

Castañeda calls Lewis' view, along with a similar but distinct proposal of Chisholm's, moderately Fichtean.⁵⁶ What is *Fichtean* about the view is the idea that every belief involves reflexivity. What is *moderate* about the view is that it is not

conflationist, unlike – so Castañeda thinks – Fichte’s *own* view. But I have argued that Fichte *himself* is only ‘moderately Fichtean’.

Now, Fichte is not responding to Perry’s problem about propositional attitudes. He is responding to the following problem: what is the actual ground of the capacity for reflexive self-ascription, hence the actual ground of rational agency? But Fichte’s solution has an affinity with Lewis’ proposal. Namely, the ground in question is the activity of self-positing or self-locating in the space of reasons, an activity that *need not* be made explicit in every act of positing, but which is there *to be made explicit* when appropriate. Of course, this activity of self-positing is not a locating of myself in the space of reasons *as a particular individual*, conceived in a determinate way, on the basis of certain information. We are concerned only with that activity of self-positing that is presupposed by any act of positing whatsoever – namely ‘the act of self-positing as positing’, the location of myself *as a locater in logical space*, as a thinker of determinate objects in general, perhaps myself as an individual, perhaps another. For reasons quite different from those of Lewis,⁵⁷ then, Fichte reaches an apparently similar conclusion: every act of positing involves immediate self-positing, every act of consciousness is conditioned by an actual self-consciousness.

I say ‘apparently similar’. But of course there are enormous differences. What entitles Lewis to his spatial terminology is his distinctive brand of *modal realism*. By a ‘proposition’, Lewis means ‘a set of possible worlds, a region of logical space’.⁵⁸ By a ‘property’, he means ‘the set of exactly those possible beings that have the property in question’.⁵⁹ Given these meanings, each proposition corresponds to exactly one property: namely, ‘the property of inhabiting some world where that proposition holds’.⁶⁰ So, to believe a proposition is to reflexively self-ascribe the property of inhabiting some world where that proposition holds, which is to locate oneself within a particular set of possible worlds or ‘region of logical space’. What underwrites the spatial terminology is the idea that, just as an inhabitant is situated among other inhabitants in the realm of some actual world, so is the actual world situated among other worlds in the realm of possible worlds. The possible worlds provide a sort of prior structure in which the actual world may be situated, just as the actual world provides a prior structure in which an inhabitant may be situated.

Modal realism of this sort does not underwrite Fichte’s use of spatial terminology.

His idea is that there are systematic relations between the general activity of self-positing and the specific activity of self-locating in empirical space. In particular, he argues that the activity of self-positing can occur only insofar as the self-positing agent also locates herself in empirical space. Moreover, he seeks to derive the necessary structure of empirical space from the necessary conditions of self-positing. For Fichte, it makes sense to think of rational agency in general in spatial terms, because we *must* think of any particular instance of rational agency in literally spatial terms. In fact, literal spatial terms, such as self-location, may be systematically derived from abstract features of rational agency in general, such as self-positing. Obviously, this derivation of empirical space from the space of reasons is an ambitious project fraught with difficulties – difficulties whose discussion belongs elsewhere.^{[61](#)}

The Space of Reasons: Is Fichte an Internalist?

I now turn to the third pillar supporting the subjectivist reading of Fichte: internalism. Of course, there has been much discussion of internalism versus externalism in the philosophy of mind since 1975, and those terms have been taken in many ways. By ‘internalism’, I shall mean what I think Putnam meant in ‘The Meaning of “Meaning”’ (although he called it ‘methodological solipsism’): namely, any view is *internalist* if it maintains that beliefs and desires – acts or states of the kind that enter into rational agency – can be individuated with only one existential commitment, commitment to the existence of the agent to whom those acts or states are ascribed. In contrast, any view is *externalist* if it maintains that the individuation of beliefs and desires involves existential commitment to something else outside the subject to whom they are ascribed.

To be an internalist is certainly not *ipso facto* to be a sceptic about the external world. Still less is it *ipso facto* to be a subjectivist. But many people regard internalism as the thin end of a sceptical or even subjectivist wedge. One could give a version of the history of modern philosophy that goes something like this: Descartes developed internalism and, despite his intentions, could not avoid scepticism; Kant avoided scepticism by locating the objects of knowledge in the internal realm of phenomena, leaving the genuinely external things in themselves forever unknowable; Fichte rejected those things in themselves altogether, thereby plunging himself into subjectivism. I am certainly not endorsing this story, but it seems close to the spirit of the Russell quotation with which I began, and something like it may in fact be widely believed.

Now one can easily form the impression that Fichte is an internalist. One of his characteristic idioms involves speaking of that which is posited as ‘posited in the I’ (GA I/2: 258; SK, 95). This suggests that the I is some sort of mental, inner space. Furthermore, one can hardly avoid the impression that, in Russell’s words, ‘Fichte abandoned “things in themselves”’. If the I is a mental inner space, and if things in themselves are external objects, then surely Fichte *is* a subjectivist. And this reading seems compulsory when Fichte says, for example, ‘The spirit of our philosophy is this: {nothing outside of me,} no alleged “thing in itself”, can be an object of {my} consciousness; the object for me is I myself’ (GA IV/2: 163; FTP, 332).

However, I maintain, first, that the I is *not* a mental inner space and, secondly, that things in themselves are *not*, for Fichte, external objects. First, Fichte's use of spatial terminology should be understood in the light of his conception of positing as locating within the space of reasons. When he calls the space of reasons 'the I', this is misleading. What he *means* is that thinking of myself as myself in a very general way, simply as a rational agent, plays a central role in the activity of positing and so in rational agency itself. And the first-person pronoun 'I' is the characteristic linguistic expression of that very general way of thinking of myself, of what Fichte calls 'the act of self-positing as positing'. Still, it *is* misleading to call the space of reasons 'the I', especially since one may be misled into taking Fichte to be talking about an individual agent. Remember Russell: 'The Ego as a metaphysical concept easily became confused with the empirical Fichte ...' But this is a confusion that Fichte himself explicitly condemns. By 'the I', he means 'reason in general' (GA IV/2: 240; FTP, 437).⁶²

To render intelligible Fichte's rejection of things in themselves, I must say something about Fichte's conception of philosophy. Like Kant, Fichte understands himself to be engaged in *transcendental* philosophy. He does not take the approach to ontology and reason taken by traditional metaphysics, but rather approaches ontology and reason via the study of the necessary conditions for the possibility of human reasoning – or, more precisely, of human positing. Also like Kant, Fichte distinguishes between the *empirical* standpoint from which one ordinarily experiences and the *transcendental* standpoint from which one examines the necessary conditions of the possibility of one's ordinary experiences. The difference between those standpoints is such that certain terms will have one meaning when employed within discourse about ordinary experience, but will have another meaning when employed within the discourse of transcendental philosophy. Among the ambiguous terms are 'in us' or 'ideal', along with their contrasting terms, 'outside us' and 'real'.⁶³

So far, so Kantian. But Fichte's account of the two standpoints, and thus his account of the ambiguity, differs significantly from Kant's. Given Fichte's project, 'in us' – or, in his idiom, 'in the I' – will mean, from the transcendental standpoint, 'in the space of reasons'. In that sense, the content of *any* possible act of existential commitment, predication or inference is, transcendently speaking, 'internal'. But of course this does not mean that any entity whatsoever is, empirically speaking, 'in me' as an idea in my

individual mind! On the other hand, a thing in itself, *transcendentally speaking*, would be something to whose existence we could not commit ourselves, something of which we could predicate nothing, and about which we could not reason. In short, it would be a thing about which we could not say anything whatsoever. But we would be forgetting the special character of transcendental discourse if we concluded that, in Fichte's view, we cannot say anything about objects that are external, *empirically speaking*.

In fact, one of Fichte's main philosophical aspirations is to demonstrate that the space of reasons *must* be such that we cannot help but posit objects that are external, empirically speaking. Indeed, his method of demonstration makes him an externalist. For he argues that there could not be any *determinate* acts of consciousness whatsoever, unless there is a material spatio-temporal world of objects in which a plurality of rational agents exercise their agency. Thus, we could not individuate beliefs and desires if we did not make existential commitments to other things, as well as the subject to whom they are ascribed.⁶⁴

I cannot go into the details of Fichte's argument here. Instead I want to address his transcendental method, casting a new light on everything I have said so far. Each of Fichte's mature Jena works is divided into two parts, an *ascending* part and a *descending* part. In the ascending part, Fichte explores necessary conditions of the possibility of rational agency that he readily acknowledges as merely notional abstractions. For example, when Fichte says that an immediate self-awareness conditions every act of consciousness, he does not mean that such a self-awareness can, on its own, be an act or object of consciousness. It is merely a notional abstraction – 'a hollow self-positing that produces nothing, an intuition in which nothing is intuited' (GA IV/2: 45; FTP, 142) – an abstraction inferred solely for the sake of the transcendental project. In the descending part of his argument, Fichte exploits the fact that the conditions he has given are notional abstractions.⁶⁵ Thus, he argues that the immediate self-awareness required for rational agency can occur only if the subject of the self-awareness is an embodied agent within a material world also inhabited by other agents. So, for all his initial, immaterialist-sounding talk about the absolute I, Fichte can reach conclusions like these: 'all objects necessarily occupy space, that is, they are material' (GA IV/2: 107; FTP, 247); and 'I and my body are absolutely one, simply looked at in different ways ... The distinction that appears to us is based entirely upon the difference between these

ways of looking at [the same thing]' (GA IV/2: 256; FTP, 458). Fichte thinks that the first person pronoun *can* express an abstract way of thinking of myself that plays a central role in enabling our rational discourse. But he roundly rejects the idea that there is any abstract or immaterial entity to which the first-person pronoun refers when it is used this way. His inventory of the furniture of the universe is thoroughly materialist.

Conclusion

Despite rather compelling appearances, Fichte is not a subjectivist. In what sense, then, is he an *idealist*. How does Fichte's idealism relate to Kant's? And how does his idealism relate to the *realism* of many contemporary philosophers?

Karl Ameriks has rightly pointed out that some post-Kantian arguments for idealism differ radically from Kantian arguments.⁶⁶ Fichte gives what Ameriks, following Reinhold, calls a 'short argument' for the thesis that we cannot know things in themselves. Kant – responding to the questions about the foundations of physics dividing Leibniz and Newton – argues that the spatio-temporal form of the objects of our knowledge cannot be the form of things in themselves, although we must assume that things in themselves are the ground of the objects of our knowledge. In contrast, Fichte – bypassing Leibniz and Newton altogether – argues simply that we cannot say anything whatsoever about things in themselves, because to speak of them would be to posit entities that are supposed to be posited independently of any act of positing on our part, and that is plainly incoherent.

To Ameriks' observation I want to add the following. When a Kantian says that we cannot know things in themselves, although we must think them, while a Fichtean says that we cannot say anything about things in themselves whatsoever, the Kantian and the Fichtean are talking past one another. By 'thing in itself' and, for that matter, by 'idealism', Kant and Fichte simply do not mean the same things. Kant's main target is the traditional metaphysician's conception of a substance as a thing that is what it is in virtue of some form, independently of the forms of *our* cognitive faculty. As an account of wholly mind-independent reality, Kant thinks, the traditional metaphysician's picture must be along the right lines. But we can only *know* reality in another sense, as subject to the forms of our cognitive faculty. And this very fact vindicates the strong knowledge-claims made, say, by Newtonian physics.

In contrast, Fichte is not concerned with the traditional metaphysician's conception of substance, or with the vindication of Newtonian physics. By 'thing in itself', Fichte means 'a posited entity whose positing is wholly independent of any act of positing'. What he wants to vindicate is our conception of ourselves as material, embodied, social agents, who are nevertheless guided by categorical norms that abstract entirely from any

fact about material entities. In the service of that project, Fichte makes the unconditioned activity of positing into the foundation of his account of the way the material, social world must be.

You may say that Fichte's short argument for idealism still seems trivial and uninteresting. Since nobody has ever cared to claim that there are things in themselves in his rather peculiar and incoherent sense, why should we care that Fichte rejects them?

Fichte's rejection of things in themselves is a methodological thesis disguised as a metaphysical truism. His real point is that, if we want to make sense of ourselves as rational agents, we should make the philosophy of rational agency into the foundation of our ontology and our logic. Whether or not anybody has ever claimed in so many words that there are things in themselves in Fichte's sense, plenty of people have thought that we should first develop ontology and logic, and then attempt to account for rational agency. From Fichte's standpoint, such people are engaging in the rational activity of philosophizing, while developing philosophies that pretend not to presuppose rational activity, and they will ultimately find that they have left no room for it. Put in this form, Fichte's idealism is no longer trivial. It is a substantive proposal about the order in which we should philosophize if we want to make ourselves intelligible to ourselves. Of course, it is also no longer a truism.

I hope to have shown not only that Fichte is not a subjectivist, but also why he is attracting contemporary interest. Both Anglo-American and continental philosophy have spent much of the last century trying to escape Descartes. But there is a nagging sense that we will not have rendered ourselves intelligible until we have accommodated those peculiar features of the rational agent's first-person perspective that exercised Descartes. One reason for the revival of certain Fichtean ideas within analytic philosophy is that Fichte exemplifies the attempt to fully accommodate those peculiar features while avoiding immaterialism of either the Cartesian or the subjectivist kind.^{[67](#)}

Notes

¹ See *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm (Glencoe, NY: Free Press, 1960), especially 155–185, where the ‘New Realists’ give an account close to Russell’s of subjectivism and its rise.

² For the related charge by Schelling and Hegel that Fichte is a subjective idealist, see Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 354–371.

³ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 718. Hegel promulgated the idea that Fichte’s ‘subjective idealism’ was a necessary stage on the path to Hegel’s own idealism. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977).

⁴ Responding to the suggestion that his own philosophy has affinities with Fichte’s, Heidegger cites Schiller’s remark in a letter to Goethe on 28 October 1794: ‘According to Fichte’s oral expression – for in his book there is not yet any mention of this – the ego is creative through its representations, too, and all reality is only in the ego. The world is for him only a ball which the ego has thrown and which it catches again in reflection. Thus he would have truly declared his godhead as we were recently expecting’. Heidegger adds that ‘According to Fichte the ego throws forth the world, and according to *Being and Time* it is not the ego that first throws forth the world, but it is *Da-sein* (human being), presencing before all humanity, which is thrown’. See Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), 187–188. For Heidegger’s view of modern philosophy as a development from Cartesianism to subjectivism, see *Nietzsche* Vol. 4, trans. F. A. Capuzzo, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1982), 96–138. On Heidegger’s debt to Fichte, see Paul W. Franks, ‘Ontology and Ethics: Questioning First Philosophy in Levinas, Fichte, and Heidegger’, in *Heidegger’s Jewish Followers*, ed. Samuel Fleischacker (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 2008), 178–186.

[5](#) Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 89, 547. See Stefan Lang, ‘Fichte in der analytischen Philosophie. Robert Nozicks Rezeption von Fichtes intellektueller Anschauung’, *Fichte-Studien* **35** (2010): 495–509.

[6](#) Allen Wood, ‘Fichte’s Philosophical Revolution’, *Philosophical Topics* **19** (1992): 1–28.

[7](#) Dieter Henrich, ‘Fichte’s Original Insight’, trans. D. Lachterman in *Contemporary German Philosophy* Vol. I (College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, [1982](#)), 15–53; and ‘Self-Consciousness: A Critical Introduction to a Theory’, *Man and World* 4(1) (1971): 3–28; Manfred Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991).

[8](#) Stephen Darwall, ‘Fichte and the Second-Person Standpoint’, *International Yearbook for German Idealism* **3**, eds. Karl Ameriks, Jürgen Stolzenberg, Paul W. Franks and Dieter Schönecker (2005), 91–113; reprinted in Darwall, *Honor, History and Relationship* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 222–246.

[9](#) For a more general account of the analytic revival of post-Kantian idealism, see Paul W. Franks, ‘From Quine to Hegel: Naturalism, Anti-Realism, and Maimon’s Question *Quid Facti*’, in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer (London: Routledge, 2007), 50–69.

[10](#) I will be concerned here with the work of Fichte’s Jena period, 1794–99, to which contemporary interest has primarily been attracted. For reasons given elsewhere, I regard the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* of 1797–99 as the best expression of Fichte’s Jena project. See Paul W. Franks, ‘Freedom, *Tatsache*, and *Tathandlung* in the Development of Fichte’s Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*’, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* **79**(3) (1997): 331–344; and my review of Wayne Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte’s Jena Project* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2) (2000): 213–218.

[11](#) Jean Paul, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana*, in *Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. T. J. Casey, trans. E. Casey (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1992), 227–228.

[12](#) Peter Heath and John Lachs, ‘Preface’, in Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), xiii.

[13](#) Heath and Lachs, ‘Preface’, xiv.

[14](#) Heath and Lachs, ‘Preface’, xiv.

[15](#) Elsewhere Lachs writes that ‘The German word “*setzen*” is ordinarily translated as “to set”, “to place”, or “to establish.” Its root significance is creative activity, an activity that can show itself in various modalities. It may be the simple physical act of placing an object in some location, the biological activity of bringing children into the world (*Kinder in die Welt zu setzen*), or the exceptionally complex socio-political action of raising some person to the throne (*auf den Thron setzen*). What we have in each case is practical activity that is productive or creative; it is always purposive and often voluntary’. See ‘Fichte’s Idealism’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1972): 311–318, especially 312–313.

[16](#) Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1990](#)), says much that is helpful about *self*-positing, but nothing about positing more generally.

[17](#) Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte’s Jena Project*, is helpful in characterizing the function served by the notion of positing. But his suggestion that positing is pre-representationally treating something in a certain manner remains largely undeveloped.

[18](#) Charles Carroll Everett, *Fichte’s Science of Knowledge: A Critical Exposition* (Chicago, IL: S. C. Griggs, 1892), 71.

[19](#) Günter Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29–30.

[20](#) Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy*, 46.

[21](#) See Paul Spade, ‘Roger Swyneshed’s *Obligationes*: Edition and Comments’, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 44 (1977): 242–285; ‘Three Theories of *Obligationes*: Burley, Kilvington and Swyneshed on Counterfactual

Reasoning’, *History and Philosophy of Logic* 3 (1982): 1–32; and ‘If Obligations Were Counterfactuals’, *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1992): 171–194.

[22](#) Alexander Baumgarten, *Acroasis Logica in Christianum L. B. de Wolff* (Halle: C. H. Hemmerde, 1761; reprinted Heidelberg: G. Olms, 1983), § 51.

[23](#) Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 346–358.

[24](#) Christian Freiherr von Wolff, *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1736), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964–), § 70.

[25](#) Wolff, *Philosophia Prima*, § 118.

[26](#) Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis sive Logica* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1740), reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964–), § 407.

[27](#) Kant first gives the argument in 1763, in ‘The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God’. See AA 2: 65–75; TP, 117–119. He repeats it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, CPR, A592–602, B620–630.

[28](#) This is the terminology of 1781. In 1763, Kant had distinguished between ‘a determination of a thing’ (a real predicate) and that which ‘occurs as a predicate in common speech’. Perhaps he had not yet arrived at his mature conception of logic as the formal consideration of judgements in complete abstraction from their content (i.e., from the possible application of their component concepts to objects).

[29](#) This account is unchanged in 1781. See CPR, A598–599, B626–627: ‘[T]he little word “is” [when serving as the copula of a judgement, PF] is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate *in relation* to the subject’.

[30](#) See CPR, A598, B626: ‘*Being* ... is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves’. Obviously Kant cannot intend things in themselves in his technical sense, i.e., things conceived independently of the necessary conditions of our cognitive faculty. I think that ‘positing something in itself’ is identical with, in his earlier terminology, ‘positing something absolutely’. To posit something in itself or absolutely is, first, to posit it unconditionally, as opposed to positing it hypothetically,

under some condition, and, secondly, to posit it with all its predicates, so that one's existential commitment also incurs further commitments.

[31](#) See 'Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy', also published in 1763 (AA 2: 165–204; TP, 206–241). See also Kant, *Metaphysik Volckmann*, AA 28–1: 404.

[32](#) This also explains what Fichte means when he says that '*All being* signifies is a *limitation of free activity*' (GA I/4: 249n; IWL, 81n). He wants to give an account of our understanding of being – and hence of reason – in terms of the free activity of positing. In the service of such an account, he takes positing to be an activity that can be designated without already presupposing an understanding of being, on pain of circularity. As we shall see, however, he also takes that designation of positing to be a merely notional abstraction, necessary for philosophy, but incapable of complete determinacy. Determinate positing can only be the activity of an embodied human being.

[33](#) See Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Kollegnachschrift Chr. Fr. Krause 1798/99* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982), 5–6, translated in FTP, 80.

[34](#) Robert Pippin uses this notion to explicate Fichte's idealism as opposition to the myth of the given in 'Fichte's Alleged Subjective, Psychological, One-Sided Idealism', in *The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy*, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 147–170.

[35](#) See Fichte's useful account of coming to understand the effects of magnetism on a piece of iron (GA I/2: 340–350; SK, 175–185).

[36](#) See Franks, *All or Nothing*, 338–354.

[37](#) Castañeda uses the adjective 'Fichtean' to mean 'conflationist' in 'On Knowing (or Believing) that One Knows (or Believes)', *Synthese* 21 (1970): 187–203, especially 193, 195, 202. In *Thinking, Language, and Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 65, he says that 'Fichte erred in holding that all (episodes of) consciousness are (episodes of) self-consciousness', citing the entire *Science of Knowledge* as evidence! Finally, in 'The Role of Apperception in Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories', *Noûs* 24 (1990), 156 n. 5, he cites as

evidence for his conflationist interpretation the text cited in my previous footnote, which I assume he had in mind all along.

[38](#) See Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 82, n. 24 for other passages; and Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 82.

[39](#) Fichte is well aware that Kant says only that the 'I think' must be capable of accompanying all of my representations. He cites the text verbatim earlier. See GA I/4: 228; IWL, 60. Henrich suggests that the text of B132 may support Fichte's reading, since Kant speaks of pure apperception as 'generating the representation "*I think*"', suggesting that some actual self-awareness is expressed by the explicit 'I think'. See Henrich, 'The Origins of the Theory of the Subject', trans. William Rehg, in *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, eds. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe and Albrecht Wellmer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 29–87, especially 50.

[40](#) Neuhouser makes a helpful attempt to answer this question in *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 92–102. He draws the conclusion that Fichte's transcendental claim is neither compatible with the strategy of Kant's transcendental deduction nor supportable by an independent transcendental argument which differs from the argument explored here.

[41](#) For more on Fichte on self-consciousness, see Franks, *All or Nothing*, 301–313.

[42](#) See, e.g., GA I/4: 226–227; IWL, 58, where Fichte distinguishes between conceptualized intuitions, which are conscious representations, and unconceptualized intuitions, which are not conscious states in his sense because we are aware of them only through philosophical inference. See also GA IV/1: 196: 'Our opinion on the matter is this: to be sure, there are representations which one can call obscure or without consciousness. One only arrives at conceptions of them insofar as one infers their presence from something that is actually present. These obscure representations are called intuitions'.

[43](#) Thus the unconceptualized intuitions of which Fichte speaks are unconscious, not because I cannot self-ascribe them at all, but because I can only self-ascribe them inferentially, in my philosophical reflections.

[44](#) See Héctor-Neri Castañeda, *The Phenomeno-Logic of the I*, eds. J. Hart and T. Kapitan (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); and G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘The First Person’, in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 21–36.

[45](#) In fact, Anscombe does not wish to say that the first-person pronoun refers at all, because she thinks that if one concedes an irreducible variety of reference, one is forced to acknowledge the Cartesian ego as an irreducible referent. I do not find this compelling. As we shall see, Fichte accepts an irreducible variety of reference while refusing to acknowledge any immaterial entities. For him, the first-person pronoun expresses the form of rational agency, and one may consider that form either as a notional abstraction that is not an entity, or as realized in a human individual, in which case it is the human being who is the (material) entity.

[46](#) David Kaplan, ‘Demonstratives’, in *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 533: ‘If I see, reflected in a window, the image of a man whose pants appear to be on fire, my behavior is sensitive to whether I think, “His pants are on fire” or “My pants are on fire”, though the object of thoughts may be the same’.

[47](#) See GA I/4: 273; IWL, 108: ‘Linguistic signs have passed through the hands of thoughtlessness and have acquired some of its indeterminacy; one is therefore unable to make oneself sufficiently well understood simply by employing such signs. The only way in which a concept can be completely specified or determined is by indicating the act through which it comes into being. If you do what I say then you will think what I am thinking’.

[48](#) See, e.g., GA I/4: 217–219, 276–278; IWL, 46–49, 112–115. From this context the supposed evidence for Castañeda’s conflationist reading was torn. Fichte’s point is that every act of consciousness involves an immediate, reflexive awareness of oneself as the agent performing that act. Reflective expressions of reflexive self-ascription merely make the immediate self-awareness explicit.

[49](#) Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 42.

[50](#) Fichte thinks that he cannot *prove* that no other account is possible, but that the onus of proof placed on his opponents is in fact unbearable.

[51](#) See, e.g., Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 267: 'But self *is* only as ability, as the *I can*'. For a related debate about dispositions, see D. M. Armstrong, C. B. Martin and U. T. Place, *Dispositions: A Debate*, ed. T. Crane (London: Routledge, 1996).

[52](#) See GA IV/2: 135–136 and 168; FTP, 293–294 and 338.

[53](#) John Perry, 'Frege on Demonstratives' and 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical', in *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Peter Geach had already anticipated the problem. See 'On Beliefs about Oneself', reprinted in Geach, *Logic Matters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 128–129.

[54](#) Perry, 'Frege on Demonstratives', 35: 'I shall use the term "locating beliefs" to refer to one's beliefs about where one is, when it is, and who one is'.

[55](#) David Lewis, 'Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*', in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 140.

[56](#) Héctor-Neri Castañeda, 'Reference, Self-Ascription and Believing', *Philosophical Perspectives* 1 (1987): 426: 'The [Self-Ascription] View is nicely Fichtean in a moderate sense: all consciousness is diffusely self-consciousness, and all reference is tacit self-reference'. See 440 for Chisholm's 'subdued Fichteanism', based on Chisholm, *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981).

[57](#) Fichte and Lewis share at least one motivation: systematicity. See Lewis, 'Attitudes', 134: 'Our attitudes fit into a causal network ... Uniform propositional objects ... facilitate systematic common-sense psychology'.

[58](#) Lewis, 'Attitudes', 134.

[59](#) Lewis, 'Attitudes', 135.

[60](#) Lewis, ‘Attitudes’, 135.

[61](#) Crucial transitions occur in sections 10–11 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where ‘positing’ begins to mean determining an object’s spatial location. See GA IV/2: 98–112: FTP, 234–257.

[62](#) ‘The “pure I” of the published *Wissenschaftslehre* [i.e., the 1794–95 *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*] is to be understood as reason as such or in general, which is something quite different from personal I-hood’.

[63](#) See the A version of Kant’s Fourth Paralogism.

[64](#) Note, however, that Fichte’s externalism is *transcendental*, not *empirical*. He holds that there is a philosophical demonstration that positing external objects is a necessary condition for the determinacy of acts of consciousness. He has no view, so far as I can tell, about how we ordinarily individuate those acts, which is the question addressed by contemporary (empirical) externalisms.

[65](#) See, e.g., GA I/4: 214: IWL, 43: ‘It is precisely because no consciousness is produced by this act [i.e. the act of self-positing as self-positing], considered purely on its own, that we may proceed to infer the occurrence of another act, by means of which a Not-I comes into being for us’.

[66](#) Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163–186.

[67](#) I gratefully acknowledge helpful conversations with Karl Ameriks, James Conant, Timothy O’Connor and Paul Spade, and the comments of Daniel Moerner.

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