

Fichte's System

PHIL 880

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In these notes I discuss the general features of Fichte's Jena system of philosophy known as the "Wissenschaftslehre" or "Doctrine of Science". I discuss the basic features of Fichte's project as well as his view of the bifurcation of science into dogmatism and idealism.¹

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1 What is a "Wissenschaftslehre"?

The *Wissenschaftslehre* (WL), or Doctrine of Science, is the "science of science, as such" (1:43). It aims to answer the question, "How are the form and content of a science possible at all, that is, how is science possible? (1:43). In the *First Introduction* Fichte puts this slightly differently, instead explaining the project in terms of displaying the "basis or foundation of all experience" (1:423). While these are not obviously the same goals, we can assume that Fichte is taking a cue from Kant in holding that the foundation or basis of experience is that which explains how science is possible.

The notion of "science" to which Fichte refers is similar to that referred to by Reinhold (more so than Kant)—viz. an area of inquiry, the knowledge of whose subject matter is systematically ordered and connected, such that it forms a whole or "unity".

At the base of every science is a fundamental or "first" principle. In what sense "first"? Fichte seems to have several things in mind – (1) *certainty*: the fundamental principle is the most certain element of the science; (2) *systematicity*: the fundamental principle is systematically connected to all other parts (cognitions) of the science; (3) *explanation* (a priority): the fundamental principle is

¹ For further reading see (Henrich 1966; Pippin 1988, 2000; Neuhauser 1990; Martin 1997; Ameriks 2000; Beiser 2002; Franks 2005; Breazeale 2013; Wood 2016, 2021; Kosch 2015, 2018; James and Zöller 2016; Kemp 2017)

the explanatory ground of the other parts of the science. Fichte contends that while every science has a fundamental principle, the WL, as the “science of science”, is the most fundamental principle of all sciences, as that through which science itself is possible.

Fichte also argues that there can be at most *one* first principle.

in each science there can be only one proposition that is certain and established prior to the connection between the propositions. Were there several such propositions, then either they would have no connection at all with the other proposition that is certain and established prior to the connection, or else they would be connected to it. In the first case they would not then be part of the same whole, but would constitute one or more separate wholes. But the only way in which propositions are supposed to be connected to each other is by sharing a common certainty, so that if one is certain then another one must also be certain, and if one is uncertain then the other one must also be uncertain; and all that is supposed to determine the connection between the two propositions is the relation of the certainty of the one to the certainty of the other. But a proposition which possesses its own certainty independently of the other propositions could not be connected with them in this manner. If its certainty is independent then it remains certain even if the others are not. Consequently, such a proposition would not be connected via certainty with the other propositions at all. A proposition of this sort, one which is certain prior to and independently of the association with others, is termed a first principle. ... a science can have no more than one first principle, for if it had more than one it would be several sciences rather than one. (SW 1:41-2)

The argument here might be put as follows:

1. A science is a systematic whole (i.e. a whole whose parts are all connected)
2. The connection of each part (proposition) to another (and thus to the whole) involves the “transmission” of certainty
3. The certainty of any part of the whole ultimately depends on the certainty of the first principle
4. If there was more than one first principle then either (a) its certainty is independent of all the other parts of the science or (b) its certainty is dependent on some other part.
5. If (a) then the proposition cannot be part of the systematic whole that is the science.
6. If (b) then the proposition cannot be a first principle
7. Therefore there can be only one first principle of any science.

The first premise is a definition of science and the third an expression of foundationalism. Perhaps the central premise here is (2). Fichte puts it even more strongly above in saying that “the only way in which propositions are supposed to be connected to each other [in a single science] is by sharing a

common certainty”. It seems that Fichte’s expression of (2) is far too strong. But is even the weaker version plausible? It requires that every proposition in a science be, in some way, logically derivable from either the first principle, or some other set of propositions in the science. Even if we grant this as plausible, it is important to note that it means that Fichte’s conception of a particular science is one that sees its unity in terms of the way one proposition (the first principle) is epistemically prior to the rest, rather than in terms of a shared ground of inquiry or vocabulary (e.g., physics as the science of bodies/particles and their interaction, biology as the science of life). Though Fichte doesn’t say as much in the *Concept* essay, the position seems most plausible if we see the first principle as more than simply an epistemic ground of certainty, but also as an *explanatory* ground. This is hinted at in the above quote by virtue of Fichte’s contention that a first principle is “certain prior to and independently of the association with others.” It is made clearer in his later statement, in the First Introduction, that “the intellect itself is the ultimate ground of aU explanation” (1:441). The ground of certainty of which Fichte speaks is thus one that stands in an asymmetric explanatory relation to its consequent(s). The certainty of a non-fundamental proposition is explained through its connection to the first principle. So the first principle is the ultimate explanatory ground of the certainty of all the others. But since certainty is simply non-defeasible knowledge of truth, the first principle is the explanatory ground of the non-defeasible knowledge of the truth of the other propositions of the science.

What is left open is whether the first principle should be seen merely as the explanatory ground of non-defeasible knowledge (i.e. as an epistemic ground of warrant or justification), or whether it should be seen as including, as well, the ground of the *truth* of the non-fundamental propositions (i.e. as a “material” or metaphysical ground). How one answers this question would seem to depend on how one construes the nature of the “absolute subject” to which Fichte ultimately adverts in his characterization of the first principle of the WL.

2 Critique & Wissenschaftslehre

Fichte distinguishes the project of the WL (how is science possible?) from the project of “critique” (how is a science of science possible?). Unlike the introductions to the WL, the essay *Concerning the Concept of the /Wissenschaftslehre* is not itself part of the WL. Instead Fichte sees it as part of *critique*. As Fichte puts it in an unpublished note of 1794—95:

There can be a doctrine of transcendental philosophy, or *Wissenschaftslehre*. [There can also be] a theory thereof which deals with issues such as how it [viz., the *Wissenschaftslehre*] is to be achieved and with what right, that is, with the sort of validity it has. The former is based upon the latter. My book *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre*. Parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. (GA 4:53).

In the opening of the *Concept* essay he puts it this way:

Critique itself is not metaphysics, but lies beyond metaphysics. It is related to metaphysics in exactly the same way that metaphysics is related to the ordinary point of view of natural understanding. Metaphysics explains the ordinary point of view, and metaphysics is itself explained by critique. (SW 1:32-3)

How does critique (i.e. the content of the *Concept* essay) explain metaphysics (i.e. the WL)? Fichte notes that this is not entirely separate from the activity of articulating the WL itself.

A science and the critique of that science support and explain each other reciprocally. It will not become easy to render a systematic and complete account of the procedure of the *Wissenschaftslehre* until it is possible to provide a pure exposition of this science itself. (SW 1:34)

So, while the *Concept* essay is at least partially successful in its critical task of explaining what the WL is, and what its aims are, the success of the critical task itself seems intertwined with the success of the WL as a whole. And this demonstration of the possibility of the WL is not something that Fichte thinks can precede the science itself. As he puts it, “The possibility of the required science can be demonstrated only by its actuality” (SW 1:44). Until then the project is “preliminary and incomplete” (SW 1:34).

3 Dogmatism & Idealism

In the First Introduction, Fichte presents two opposing philosophies that he terms “dogmatism” (or sometimes “realism” or “materialism”) and “idealism” (or sometimes “criticism”). Each starts from “experience”, or what Fichte equates with it—viz. representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity (SW 1:423). Fichte, following Reinhold, construes experience as a fact of consciousness, and as structured in terms of the relation between subject, object, and representation. Though these are inseparable in experience, the philosopher can separate them in thought via “abstraction”.

by means of a free act of thinking he is able to separate things that are connected with each other within experience. The *thing*, i.e., a determinate something that exists independently of our freedom and to which our cognition is supposed to be directed, and the *intellect*, i.e., the subject that is supposed to be engaged in this activity of cognizing, are inseparably connected with each other within experience. The philosopher is able to abstract from either one of these, and when he does so he has abstracted from experience and has thereby succeeded in elevating himself above experience. If he abstracts from the thing, then he is left with an intellect in itself as the explanatory ground of experience; that is to say, he is left with the intellect in abstraction from its relationship to experience. If he abstracts from the

intellect, then he is left with a thing in itself (that is, in abstraction from the fact that it occurs within experience) as the explanatory ground of experience. The first way of proceeding is called *idealism*, the second is called *dogmatism*. (SW 1:425-6)

Idealism and dogmatism are thus philosophical positions that arise via abstraction from the content of experience.

Idealism: The philosophical system that takes the free, self-positing subject (or 'I') as its starting point

Dogmatism: The philosophical system that takes the object (or thing in itself) as its starting point

Fichte takes this opposition as basic and mutually exhaustive (1:426). All of philosophy is either dogmatic or idealist. This might seem striking given Fichte's Reinholdian background, for Reinhold seems to offer a third position—viz. representationalism, which is the system that takes representation to be its starting point, from which subject and object are derived. However, as we saw already in Fichte's review of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte denies that Reinholdian representationalism is a stable position even if he agrees with Reinhold that the principle of consciousness articulates an important fact about consciousness.

Fichte denies that either of these positions can refute the other, because each starts from a position that is diametrically opposed to the other. Hence they cannot be understood to articulate systems that disagree against a common background. They are simply in *opposition* (1:429).

How are the positions opposed? First, they disagree on how experience is to be characterized. Idealism construes experience (i.e. representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity) as grounded in (and produced by) the intellect, while dogmatism construes experience to be grounded in the object (1:426). Second, their ontological starting points differ. Fichte construes dogmatism as concerned with *being* as its starting point. In contrast, idealism begins from an *activity*, and specifically, the activity of the self-determining, self-conscious subject or 'I'. Moreover, this latter self-consciousness cannot be demonstrated *to* someone, they have to do it.

Such self-consciousness does not impose itself upon anyone, and it does not simply occur without any assistance from us. One must actually act in a free manner, and then one must abstract from the object and attend only to oneself. No one can be forced to do this. And if someone pretends to act in this manner, no one else can ever know whether he is proceeding correctly and in the manner requested. In a word: this type of consciousness cannot be proven to anyone. Everyone must freely generate it within himself. (1:429)

Since idealism and dogmatism have different objects, and thus different first principles, there is a question of how they are to be rationally decided between. Fichte's position is that they *cannot* be

rationally decided between. Instead, the “kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon the kind of person one is” (1:434).

Fichte’s point here isn’t just that there is a kind of arational choice with respect to the system of philosophy one adopts. Moreover, he rejects the position that idealism and dogmatism are equal. Rather he contends that “there are two different levels of human development”, of which dogmatism is the lower and idealism the higher (1:433). So Fichte’s position is that while both are, in a certain sense, “natural” positions for the human being to adopt, the idealist position demonstrates a higher form of human existence, one that realizes its “full feeling” of freedom (1:433). Fichte’s claim is that the dogmatist denies the existence of freedom and consciousness on the basis of other commitments to what they see as the nature of things (as opposed to persons).

It might be helpful here to compare Fichte’s view with that of Kant’s, whose contrasts between price and dignity, on the one hand, and things and persons, on the other are clearly closely connected.

everything has either a price or a dignity. mWhat has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent, what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. ... morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. (G 4:431-5)

Only rational beings have dignity. Only things have price. And what distinguishes a (rational) person from a thing?

The fact that the human being can have the “I” in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a *person*, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person—i.e., through rank and dignity an entirely different being from *things*, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes. (An 7:127)

So self-consciousness, and the ‘I’, distinguish the person, who has dignity, from mere things, which have price, and which are tradeable, fungible, and can be done with as one pleases.

4 Problems for Dogmatism

One of Fichte’s primary objections against dogmatism is that it cannot ultimately explain self-consciousness. As Fichte construes it, self-consciousness is constituted by its own activity in being aware of itself. As he puts it,

The nature of the intellect consists precisely in this immediate unity of being and seeing. Everything included within the intellect exists *for* the intellect, and the intellect is *for itself* everything that it is; only insofar as this is true is the intellect what it is, *qua* intellect. (1:435)

Slightly later he says “observing and being are inseparably united” (1:436). This appears to be an endorsement of the Berkelyian edict concerning the contents of the mind—viz. *esse est percipi*, or to be is to be perceived. Fichte’s objection to dogmatism is that it is unable to account for this aspect of self-consciousness, since it construes all things in terms of causes and their effects. There is nothing that, in the dogmatist view, has the character of being both the cause and effect of itself (what exactly this comes to will be discussed when we address Fichte’s conception of intellectual intuition). According to Fichte, there is no way in which a causal series, as the dogmatist construes causation, can involve a cause that exists “for” its effect and vice versa. Instead all causation involves an opposition between cause and effect.

The force of an efficaciously acting cause is directed at another object lying outside of and in opposition to itself. This force produces a particular being within this other object and this is all it can produce. The being produced in this way is a being that exists for a possible intellect outside of itself; it does not exist for itself. (1:436)

Much of what Fichte says here is perplexing. But perhaps one way to read his argument is that he contends that the dogmatist views all forms of grounding in terms of asymmetry between ground and consequent (including cause and effect). But the idealist, starting from the structure of consciousness, recognizes a different kind of grounding relation, one that is *reflexive* in nature; an efficacious activity that “reverts into itself” (1:436). Here is Fichte’s summation of the problem facing dogmatism:

The dogmatists were supposed to establish the transition from being to representing. They have not done this, nor can they, for their principle contains within itself only the ground of a being. It does not contain within itself the ground of what is directly opposed to being, viz., representing. They make an enormous leap into a world completely alien to their own principle. (1:437)

In rejecting the special sort of ground that is subjectivity, the dogmatist, Fichte contends, is committed to materialism (1:437). And the dogmatist mindset will lead its proponents to reject as illusory even the seemingly most obvious facts about mental life.² Similarly, the rejection of the

² This is not an obviously straw man position since many contemporary proponents of [eliminative materialism](#), and in particular, so-called “[illusionism](#)” about consciousness, would seem to evince the sort of view that Fichte describes as dogmatism.

subject as starting point and the recognition of only one kind of grounding relation leads to what Fichte calls “fatalism”, or what we call today “hard determinism” (1:430). This is the position that freedom is incompatible with determinism and that we are completely determined in all of our actions.

5 Idealism

Idealism concerns the acts of an intellect whose nature is such as to be understood in terms of a set of determinate, systematically related laws (1:441). Fichte contends that there are two forms of idealism, which we could term lower vs. higher, or incomplete vs. complete idealism. The central contrast is that between accepting a categorial system as basic (“lower” or “incomplete” idealism) or as derived (“higher” or “complete” idealism). Though his argument here is obscure, Fichte’s contention seems to be that if we construe categories as basic in our exposition of intellect’s acts (and thus its nature) we will have not sufficiently satisfied the need for a clear and systematic explanation of experience (1:442).³ Fichte sees such a position as having to explain the origin of the categories by means of a “detour through logic” (1:442) and the abstraction of the categories from our experience of objects.

In contrast, Fichte argues that there is a more direct and systematic means of comprehending the intellect’s laws, and thus deriving the categories. Idealism begins with the “summons” (“*auffordern*”) to act—viz., to become conscious of oneself. This is a free act, but it is one with a necessary structure, in accordance with the nature of the intellect. This act, which is within or “immanent to” consciousness, is then explained through a series of regressive arguments concerning the conditions necessary for such an act.

It shows that what is postulated as the first principle and immediately established within consciousness is not possible unless something else occurs as well, and that this second thing is not possible apart from the occurrence of some third thing. It continues in this manner until all of the conditions of the first principle have been completely exhausted and its possibility has become completely comprehensible./ It proceeds in an uninterrupted progression from what is conditioned to the condition of the same. Each condition becomes, in turn, something that is itself conditioned and whose condition has to be discovered. (1:446)

This regressive method presents the set of explanatory grounds that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for experience—i.e. conscious representation accompanied by the feeling of necessity.

³ This seems to be an expression of Fichte’s dissatisfaction with Kant’s derivation of the categories in the *Metaphysical Deduction* of the first *Critique*.

If the presupposition idealism makes is correct [viz., the “I am” as the basis of philosophy], and if it has inferred correctly in the course of its derivations, then, as its final result (i.e., as the sum total of all of the conditions of that with which it began), it must arrive at the system of all necessary representations. In other words, its result must be equivalent to experience as a whole — though this equation is not established within philosophy itself, but only subsequently. (1:446)

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