

On the Success of the Third Principle with Respect to the Contradiction Between the First
and Second Principles in Part I of the Wissenschaftslehre

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* aims to provide a complete systematic articulation of the pure a priori principles of objects, as well as a theory on the possibility of this knowledge. In part I of the WL, three principles are introduced as grounds for theoretical knowledge of all objects in general, with effort to ascertain the structure of any possible system of experience. The WL's success entails knowledge of what it is for any object to *be*, as well as a proof for how we have the right to this knowledge. However, there is no dispute at the level of what *kind* of objects exist, but rather what it *is* for any object to exist. If any system of experience is to have determinate content, the principles constituting them must also be self determining. The first principle in the WL is thus *thetic* – it itself is not grounded by anything besides itself, and therefore constitutes the ground of knowledge (111). This first principle is the subject of any consciousness; the starting point that allows for all intelligibility of experience – the *self*. The second principle is the differential object that distinguishes between the self and everything contrary to the subject – in short, the *not-self* as an object. The third principle is the subject of this paper- the divisibility of the self and not-self as *objects*. This paper aims to examine Fichte's third principle with respect to the contradiction it sought to resolve between the first and second principles. Then, an *opinionative* conclusion will be presented, explaining why the effectiveness of the third principle is optimistic, given that the success of the WL is highly contingent on its total completion.

Fichte contends that the first principle will follow from a total abstraction of all empirical states in our consciousness, resulting in the mere *act* of consciousness (93). The starting point will therefore be irreducibly first-personal – this first-personal *self* will then be the subject of any experience whatsoever, just as ‘self’ is analytically contained in ‘consciousness’. Thus, when the *self* thinks of a wall, it is possible to abstract the experience of mental states in the mind, but never the subject that holds the perspective constitute of this experience. Fichte attempts to exhibit the concept of the self in the logical proposition $A = A$, or, if p then p (94). Fichte claims that the self who judges the predicate A is the same self who judges the subject A , and this is necessarily possible since it is the same self who judges either case, as well as the statement as a whole (96). Thus, the coherency of being able to follow any logical statement (e.g. if p then p) is due to the act of the self positing its own consciousness throughout the entire statement (97). The self is the identical subject of the two representational contents (the self that judges ‘if p ’, and the self that judges ‘then p ’).

“The self’s own positing of itself is thus its own pure activity. The self posits itself, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it exists; and conversely, the self exists and posits its own existence by virtue of merely existing. It is at once the agent and the product of action” (97).

This passage expresses the necessary connection between ‘positing’ and the self as such, for neither can exist or subsist without the other (97). So, thinking ‘the wall’ is just an assertion of the self, wherein the wall and every mental state involved in the experience are *objects* for the *subject* (i.e. the self). Furthermore, since the existence of the self is necessarily grounded in its self-positing, the wall would cease to exist if the self did not either posit the representation as such or posit itself, resulting in either case in the annihilation of the self’s existence. Uncovering


the form of any positing of objects in the world will be determined from the first principle (i.e. the nature of the self).

The second principle logically asserts $A \neq \sim A$ to declare the distinctiveness between the self as the subject and the not-self as an object. Fichte contends that the transition of positing to counter-positing is possible only through the self (103). ***“If I am to present anything at all, I must oppose it to the presenting self”*** (105). Here, Fichte expresses the purpose of the second principle: to oppose the reflexive self-positing of the self with a determinate not-self. Therefore, the not-self exists as a reflection in a (non-spatiotemporal) mirror that reflects everything to the primordial representing self. Among the pure acts of self-consciousness is the self’s opposition of itself to what it is not: $\text{self} \neq \text{not-self}$.

However, this separation between the self and not-self presents a contradiction: if in positing the not-self I do not posit the self, **how might the self withhold its identity if there is something of which it cannot be the subject?** Or, how can the self posit something it is not, if everything posited is done so by positing the self? Fichte introduces the third principle to distinguish between the self as the absolute subject of positing and the self as one of the posited objects *for* the self. The logical proposition $\text{self} \neq \text{not-self}$ cannot be carried out unless the predicate-self is made into an object (to be set in opposition to the not-self). In other words, this proposition would only make sense if the ‘self’ shares the same *entity* as the not-self. That is why the self must also be posited as an object.

Fichte writes ***“It can only be opposed insofar as it is presented, not as it is in itself”*** to reinforce that the objective self will only be a *presentation* of the subject self (109). In the array of existing things for the self, its own reflection exists as well, and must be contrasted against the other objects that differ from it. ***“The absolute self of the first principle is not something (it has, and can have, no predicate); it is simply what it is, and this can be explained no further”*** (109). Since it is impossible to divide or further modify the first principle (since we had already abstracted everything possible from it, and it is not a *thing* that can be divided), the self must posit a divisible self among the realm of things that stand in opposition to it. ***“In the self I oppose a divisible not-self to the divisible self”*** (110). Now, the self can properly posit an empirical self (divisible self) among the empirical objects (divisible not-self), in order to source the space of all possible objects without contradicting the grounds of the first principle.

With the resolution of the third principle, it can be validly said that in thinking the wall, the self thinks of the divisible self thinking the wall and other divisible not-selves (e.g. the walls’ shadow, other mental states encompassing the walls’ features). However, the soundness of this sentence is still left uncertain. ***“And in the opposites united by this first synthesis, we again have to find new opposites...and this we must continue so far as we can, until we arrive at opposite which can no longer be altogether combined”*** (113). In this passage it appears that the WL’s success is founded on a completion, that in some sense is non-monotonic (i.e. the meanings of certain theories in the WL are subject to change). This appears to distort the certainty of the second and third principles introduced, since the contradictions might become pressed by later principles. However, with respect to the relationship between the second and third principles, it appears to successfully resolve the contradiction between the two by bringing

both selves  the level of objects. The absolute self remains as the subject for this *action*, meaning that it allows for all activity, judgement and existence to occur. If the later principles pose further contradictions, there needn't be any adjustment to the first principle of the WL. In conclusion, it is difficult to assess the consistency of the non-thetic principles, and the project without its systematicity and completability proven, despite the logical coherency of the third principle with respect to the second principle.

REFERENCE LIST

Fichte, Johann Gottlob. (1970). *The Science of Knowledge*. Trans. & Ed. Peter Heath & John Lachs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.