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FOUNDATIONS OF J. G. FICHTE'S 1794 WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE:
A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF HIS STARTING POINT

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Fichte's second major publication, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794),¹ represents the beginnings of his attempt to establish a foundation for all knowledge. This is intended to be an absolute starting place that, itself, requires no grounding. It is a search for an absolutely unconditioned first principle. In the original edition (1794), Fichte's system arises from an attempt to explain theoretical self-consciousness. This goal is specifically addressed in Part I of the book.² The arguments found in Part I, therefore, are the starting place of Fichte's entire system.

The strategy of Part I is to begin with something, some thought, that is self-evident and universally accepted. After such a thought is located, the conditions for its possibility are to be found and described. The hope is that these will subsequently form the basis for all other first principles thereby establishing a ground for all knowledge. The original "something" from which all else is to be derived is the most basic aspect of self-consciousness. This aspect of consciousness is not to be thought of as if it were a thing, an object. It is, instead, a very special kind of activity. Fichte calls it a "deed-action" (*Tathandlung*).³ As an act rather than a fact, "it" is constantly active and undetermined. It is not explicable in terms of other facts, and it cannot be explained in objective terms. Fichte thinks that this inexplicability makes consciousness absolute rather than dependent and relative. If it could be explained or derived, then it would merely be part of the objective world and this is what Fichte is seeking to avoid.

In order for this deed-action (self-consciousness) to be the ground of all knowledge, without needing to be grounded itself, it must not occupy the same realm of objectivity as the

¹ J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*(1794), eds. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970).

² Frederick Neuhauser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 67.

³ Fichte, 93. See also, Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 63.

things that are known. That is, it must not be an object in the same sense as what it perceives *as* an object. It is not merely an object that takes on self-consciousness and then perceives the world of objects from which it derives. Instead, this self-consciousness is inherently subjective and it requires a subjective origin. Because of this, Fichte concluded that the subject must be self-creating.⁴ As such, it is also free and undetermined.

In order for the free act of the subject to be productive, Fichte relies upon a special activity called self-reflection. This activity allows consciousness to constitute itself, as a first step, and then to constitute objects in a second step. This allows objectivity to arise from subjectivity.

Fichte is describing a subjectivity that is not, in the everyday sense, self-aware. It is an activity that is being presupposed as a condition that makes individual self-consciousness possible. It is the basis for all individual consciousness. This original deed-act also comes before any awareness of the world of objects. As a conception of the conditions of the possibility of self-conscious awareness, it is imagined as an intellectual intuition that comes before and thus excludes all other considerations. It is the self being aware of itself immediately. From this Fichte is deriving all else including the objective world. Thus, this intuition is a self-constituting awareness that is the basis of the remainder of what exists.

Fichte is thus establishing the beginnings of an idealistic system, an explanation of individual subjects and their world. Such a system faces an immediate problem. He is concerned to explain the “resistance of things,” to the individual subject’s will, as well as the relentless appearance of the objective, lawful, and mechanistic world. His solution to this problem is that the subject is divided against itself. Beginning with the absolute self, its first activity is to split

⁴ Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy: From Kant to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 64.

into both a self-conscious “I” and also into something other and foreign, the “not I.” So the absolute self, which is unlimited, divides into the “I” and the “not I,” which in turn limit one another. This self-creating activity both creates and opposes itself. The two aspects of self come against one another. The conscious “I” however, feels the need to be unlimited, since its origin is unlimited. Therefore, the finite self strives to overcome the limitation of what is perceived as a hostile, objective world.

The plausibility of Fichte’s entire system rests on the coherence of these first steps.⁵ The first section of the first part of *Wissenschaftslehre* is the place where these originative steps are established. Below, I will carefully exposit this section and offer some analysis along the way. Then, I will focus a criticism on one of the early steps of the argument.

Exposition of Section 1: The First Absolutely Unconditioned Principle

Fichte is here setting up the first principle for the remainder of this presentation of his entire system (WL 1794).⁶ Fichte will begin with a self-supporting logical principle, in the form of a proposition, and focus upon the subject’s assertion of that principle. He will strip away the layers until he has fully uncovered the act of the self positing itself. What remains will be defined as the subject, the first principle. Fichte will then proceed to demonstrate how subsequent activities, like logical thought, derive from the first principle.

(I,91): The task at hand is to find the absolutely first (primordial), unconditioned (underived) principle of all human knowledge. This principle will not (must not) be proved or defined (*bestimmen*), or it would not be suitable as a first principle. It will be described. The

⁵ Neuhausser, 168.

⁶ All in-text references will use Fichte’s section numbers, (“I,91,” etc.). All footnotes will continue to refer to, Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), by page number in the translation noted above.

principle is intended to express the Act (*Tathandlung*).⁷ The statement of the principle will reveal this fundamental act of consciousness. The Act does not appear “among the empirical states of our consciousness,” but is instead at the foundation of consciousness, as the condition of its possibility. The description of the Act is self evident; it is automatic to the nature of our mind. It is discoverable by abstraction, a “separating what is joined together in experience,” of “mere form from content,” by means of reflection.⁸

There is an issue here with a distinction between representing the self and positing the self. Fichte is saying that it cannot be represented because it is not an object. It must be posited (self-positing). This is intellectual intuition, performing any act of the mind together with the awareness of the self as performing the act.⁹

(I,92): The act is not derived by logical inference. However, the act must presuppose the laws of logic. While Fichte begins with the law of identity (A=A) to establish the original Act, he later derives the laws of logic *from* the original Act. He admits the circularity, but insists that it is unavoidable. Presumably, because he is dealing with the absolute ground, it can be understood only in the light of what it produces. In other words, because he is not proving or deducing the ground, but is merely describing it, he is allowed to use logical laws that are only subsequently validated. To expand on Fichte’s probable meaning, Seidel also cites Fichte in *Naturrecht*, “The grounded is not possible without the ground, the ground without the grounded.”¹⁰ Fichte will begin with one of the many propositions that everyone agrees to. These are the members of the set of absolutely undeniable logical laws. While they remain ever

⁷ George J. Seidel, *Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre of 1794: A Commentary on Part I* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 1993), 19. *Tathandlung* amounts to a proprietary term. It is the “originary synthetic unity of self-consciousness.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Seidel adds that the circle is very wide, encompassing self, world, nature, society, and God. See. *Ibid.*, 21.

unproven, they make rational thought possible. Nonetheless, they can be grounded, which is what Fichte is seeking to accomplish.

The “abstracting reflection” is not yet defined at this point in the text. Shortly, however, it will be revealed as the very act of the self intuiting the performance of the origivative act. Fichte will abstract from this act all superfluous elements until the core relation is revealed. This relation is called a reflection because, as will be shown, it resembles very closely the analogous reflection of one’s own image in a mirror. So, this mention, in I,92, is a foreshadowing of the immense weight Fichte will later be placing on the term “reflection.”

The reflection is “free.” Freedom implies that the act is not conditioned, not necessitated. Thus, the original Act of the self is not caused by anything prior to it. The acceptance of the fundamental logical proposition, the identity relation, carries with it the original Act. As the proposition is granted, the *Tathandlung* is granted with it. Here, Fichte begins to present the relation of the ground to the acts of consciousness that are grounded, and with them his entire system. We, as readers, are made curious at this point. The original Act is granted along with the fundamental logical proposition. Thus it is recognized by us as we follow Fichte in his analysis, but we are not told whether it is recognized by the subject under consideration. It will turn out to be very important that the original subject is not aware in the same sense that finite subjects are aware and self-conscious. The reflective awareness is an intellectual intuition that is being inferred, by theory, as the precondition of our own consciousness.

(I,93): The foreshadowed proposition is now given, one that no one can deny; $A=A$. Fichte presents this proposition, being one of the most basic logical laws, and then quickly jumps

from our inability to deny the proposition to our act of affirming it mentally. Not only is the proposition affirmed by all who encounter it, but it is affirmed as certain:

. . . until all that remains is what cannot any longer be dismissed, from which nothing further can be detached. The proposition A is A . . . is accepted by everyone and that without a moment's thought: it is admitted to be perfectly certain and established.¹¹

From the subsequent act of affirming the proposition as certain, Fichte (merely) describes the human tendency to assume a “*power of asserting something absolutely.*”¹² (Note: my central critique will later focus on this move.) The proposition in question, the principle of identity, is an *a priori* starting place. The existential status of A, at this point, is not important. The formal aspect of the proposition is what is undeniable. This is what is being affirmed as certain by means of this *special power* that subjects are now assumed to possess.

Fichte attaches a symbol (=) to the relation between A and A. While the copula, in many of its uses, provides a positive synthetic statement, the relation of identity is *a priori* and analytic. That is, the identity relation is more than a mere copula. It does more than link some subject with some predicate. Because the subject and predicate are the same (A), the relation between the “two” is a special case. Identity of anything with itself is necessary, thus the relation described by A=A can be posited absolutely, thinks Fichte. He uses a new symbol for this relation, (X). Thus, X is distinct from and stronger than “=”. X incorporates some aspect of the subject and predicate, namely, that they are the same. X is the one species of sameness that can be known *a priori*. What is the condition of the existence of A? Fichte next gives three features of the condition (a-c).

(I,94): (a.) Fichte begins with X. Thus, he does not begin with A, but with our access point to the relation between A as subject and A as predicate. Thus, regarding X, it must be

¹¹ Fichte, 94.

¹² Ibid.

posited by the subject. X is also *in* the subject. X is not grounded, so it comes to the self, presumably, by means of the *special power* to assert something absolutely that the self possesses. Therefore, X is posited by the self and it is given to itself as certain. (b.) X is related intimately with A. While X is posited as certain, and while the existence of A remains unknown, still because X is present in the self without question, so too is A. Thus, even though A is not known to exist (as if outside the self), it does exist within the self as a basis for X. Therefore, Fichte seems to be saying that A must exist in the self for X to exist. In the self, A is posited along with X. The existence of A is not thereby addressed. (c.) Within the caveat that A is asserted (merely) in the subject position, it is by means of X that A is asserted (absolutely) in the predicate position. Fichte is making the claim that asserting A in the predicate position, absolutely, establishes the existence of A *as posited* in the self. A is not merely posited in the self, it exists in the self. The existence of A in the self is guaranteed by the certainty of X that is linked to it. Furthermore, Seidel notes that Fichte elevates activity to being. Since positing is an activity, anything that is posited has being.¹³

Next, Fichte links the above to a new formula, filling in the variable “A,” producing I=I. The argument that produces this is difficult because much of it is implicit within previous context. Seidel clarifies that Fichte is providing a Kantian condition for the possibility of asserting A=A.¹⁴ Within the self, it is asserted that there is something that is “permanently uniform, forever one and the same.” X is therefore expressible in another form, I=I. This move is considerably opaque. One has to add much assistance in order to see this as an argument for I=I as the condition of the possibility of asserting A=A. It is really not an argument at all, in itself. There seems to be a leap from the mental process of positing of A on the basis of X to

¹³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

concluding that $I=I$ must be the case. Yet, the move is intuitively acceptable. It seems that there is something that is identical on both sides of the equation. If, as a consequence of engaging in an instance of thinking the logical law of identity, the self affirms A as subject and then affirms A as predicate, then the self is positing, or at least recognizing, A twice. The act of positing or recognizing necessarily involves the “ I ” as an agent. The identity of A is not a concern; it only matters that A exists in the self on both sides of the X relation. The positing of A places A within a mental package that is in the self. Thus, each side of the equation is an instance of the self thinking a thought, A , within itself. In this way the formula is seen to imply the self on both sides of the X relation. The self’s thought of A as subject is equal to the self’s thought of A as predicate. Then, presumably, A can be dropped in much the same way that identical terms can be crossed off from both sides of an algebraic equation. This leaves us with “ I ” as subject on one side of the X relation and “ I ” as predicate on the other. Thus, (“ I think A ” = “ I think A ”) is reduced to, (“ I ” = “ I ”). Only at this point can we move on to conclude that $I=I$ is a precondition of asserting that $A=A$.

(I, 95): Fichte further clarifies the move from $A=A$ to $I=I$ with reference to the consequences of the move. We can know, by means of the X relation (identity) that *if* A is asserted (contingently), *only then* is A known absolutely. In contrast, the question of the original assertion of the entity in the subject position is not a mystery for the proposition “ I am I ”. The subject is asserted simultaneously with the proposition because the act of assertion involves the very same subject (the self as the subject term). And, the proposition is known by means of X , because the proposition X is equivalent to $I=I$. Therefore, the argument is valid and sound. The premise, the question of the original assertion of the subject term, is known to be true by the self that asserts X . Thus, claims Fichte, the argument possesses a valid form with all true premises.

The proposition “I am I” is reduced to “I am” when the equivalence of subject and predicate is processed. With this, the implication of X as the *identity* relation, over and above the involvement of some generic thought with its thinker, bears its fully-ripened fruit.

In order to have the act of positing, the self must be posited also as the agent who performs the act. The positing of the self is logically prior to other acts of positing. I had clarified Fichte previously by stating that the self is posited simultaneously with positing X, but this is not in conflict with Fichte’s statement here in (I,95). While the temporal relation of the two positings is simultaneity, the logical order is not equivalence, instead, the self is posited logically prior to all other acts of positing as a condition of their possibility. At the time when the logically subsequent positing is performed, the self is also (already) posited. Fichte is concerned to point out that his conclusions rest on the status of “I am” as the most securely known fact. Is Fichte indicating that he must now prove that which he had previously said could not be proven or defined? This cannot be the case. Instead, he is here reiterating the nature of the project as inherently circular. As a proof, it must be circular. However, Fichte claims, self-reference is not a problem for a *description* of the ground of all else because the “all else” must include our most basic tools for rational thought, the logical laws. And, without these no description or proof is possible. Seidel also notes that there is a translational issue at this point; “proving” is a translation of *erweisen*, but not the best possible translation. Seidel prefers “illustrating” or “establishing.”¹⁵ I have preferred “description” in my explanations above.

(I,96): Fichte reiterates his argument up to this point. He clarifies that one particular activity of the human mind (X) is grounded by what is absolutely posited, “I am I,” which is founded on itself. That is, circularly, “I am I” is self grounding. It is the condition of its own activity. Its activity is its existence. Fichte also claims that all other activity of the human mind is

¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

also grounded, like X, on this single, self-grounding activity. Regarding the phrase, “the pure character of activity,” Seidel notes that the word translated as “pure” (*rein*) is Kantian jargon for non-empirical or non-sensory.¹⁶

The activity is “at once the agent and the product of action.” This is the point of Fichte’s larger course of argumentation. It is, in itself, a kind of summary argument, and in such a concentrated form (one sentence) it is easier to see that there is another circularity arising. There are two sides to this argument, which form a self-referential unit. The self is (somehow) able to posit itself resulting in its existence. And, by “merely existing” it is able to posit itself. On the surface, this appears to be *viciously* circular, but Fichte has elsewhere provided an important aspect of this argument that apparently rescues it from this criticism. The self that is posited, is not the same as the finite self; if it were, then this would be reducible to the absurd conclusion that an individual, finite mind is its own cause at the level of the temporal world. Instead, the self being posited is the “absolutely asserted self,” which is, in some sense, real, yet is also distinct from the finite self (the individual human mind).¹⁷ This asserted self is the product of the act that is expressed by the “I am.” The subject posits itself as an object, thus it is “the active, and [also] what the activity brings about.” This particular action is the end result of an agent acting. And, given the way that Fichte defines being (*Sein*), as being posited (*Gesetzsein*), it is fitting that the fundamental positer (being) is the one that posits itself. This involves a subtle distinction between act and agent that allows Fichte to separately consider a self as a substance and a self as a subject. The vicious circle—the positing of the self resulting in existence, and the existence of the self allowing for the positing—can be clarified by substituting the ambiguous term “self” for what each instance of the term represents. Thus, “[The subject is able to posit itself as object

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

resulting in objective existence, and by being able to take itself as existing objectively, the reified subject is able to take action. It is thereby able to posit itself.]” It is possible to add one more insight to our reading of this summary argument. The existence that is being spoken about is not objective existence. Instead, it is the perception of something as an object; it is the intellectual intuition of the self by itself. Given this important expansion, the argument can be stated in the following way, “[The subject is able to posit itself so that it appears to itself to be an objectively real entity, and, by seeing itself as an objectively real entity, the subject can also view itself as acting. This is the condition for the possibility of the self viewing itself as positing itself.]”

(I,97): “. . . the *self* exists *because* it has posited itself.” and, “It *posits* itself by merely existing and *exists* by merely being posited.” Fichte persists in using the language of the realist. But, we have just seen why Fichte must be read as using subjective concepts behind this realist language. We are witnessing the genesis of a new form of idealism distinct from Kant’s transcendental idealism.¹⁸ This is the emergence of the subject’s own self-awareness of the subject as, both, an object and as a subject. That which is essentially an activity of self-awareness exists as a result of that activity. This is the *core* activity of the self, to be aware of itself. As the one and only sufficient and necessary activity of what *is* only an activity, it is appropriate to call it “absolute.” It has been purified by attrition to its bare essence. The self is never without this sort of self-reflection. To lose this self-reflection is to cease being a self.

If one were to ask, “What is the substrate of consciousness?” Fichte would respond that the question is inappropriate. The mistake being made by those who ask this question is that they are looking for a persisting object that can exist before it begins to function. Or, because beginning to be conscious is an event marking a transition, the questioner is asking what

¹⁸ Neuhausser, 4. Neuhausser calls Fichte an epistemological idealist wherein the self creates its world. He thinks that this may be the purest form of such an idealism in all of western thought.

underlies the transition and allows for the persistence of the same entity before and after. Fichte clarifies that the self that is being inferred by this process of abstraction is an activity, if we add back a persisting object, then we return to what has been left behind. The objective nature of the self is merely an appearance, it is not a reality, corporeal or formal.

(I,98): There is no self without this activity, the self being for itself. To be conscious is to be conscious as and for “myself.” This is necessary (inferred as the necessary condition of the possibility of individual consciousness) because it could not be otherwise. Other alternatives are ruled out. It is difficult to imagine what alternatives would look like. It is not possible to have objective, general, multi-centered, or uncentered consciousness. To be is to posit oneself. Fichte seems to be attempting to draw the two poles of subject and object as close as possible. Given I=I, the subject sees itself as object in the reflection. The subject reifies its activity. Because the self arises and persists as a self-aware entity, and, more to the point, as an activity of self awareness, it must be the case that its view of itself be the same as itself, as its own activity. It is the act of perceiving itself, thus the act and that which is perceived are the same.

Nonetheless, objectivity introduces a disruption. The self perceives its self-perception as if that self-perception is an object. Thus, it does not see itself aright. It misperceives. It deceives itself when it perceives itself *as* an object. While this aspect of Fichte’s theory is not being made explicit here, it is clearly the difficulty that he is wrestling with at this point. The reader, he anticipates, is struggling to see the identity between the self and that which it posits itself to be. If his own thoughts are clear, it should thus be concluded that the identity in question is not available to the self as such. That is, the self does not understand what it happening. Instead, by taking the self as an object, the self is deceived.

(I,99): Fichte has been laying the groundwork for a shocking claim. He can now demonstrate a basic proposition of logic, tying it to the free act of the self as its ground. Seidel indicates that this is not being deduced, since this is impossible. But, the verbs demonstrate (*erweisen*) and determine (*bestimmen*) are being used instead to indicate something other than proof. How is it *demonstrated*? The positing of A (as subject) is enacted by the same self in which it has been posited. How is it *determined*? This is an even more shocking claim, that the very existence of this basic proposition of logic depends upon, i.e., is determined by, its being posited by the self. Within the proposition of logic, the A is also dependent upon its being posited by and in the self. This calls back into question the relationship between logic and *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). Clearly, this new science of knowledge is not being presented as a *product* of logic. Instead, it is being given as a *ground* of basic logical propositions. Yet, it does not result in their proofs, but it is capable of demonstrating (*erweisen*) and determining (*bestimmen*) them. How are these meant to differ from another meaning for the word *erweisen*, which is “proof”? Seidel notes that, elsewhere, Fichte calls logic “‘an artificial product of the human spirit in its freedom’ (SW 1:66-69; AA 1:2/139).”¹⁹ I take this, given the present context, to be a very clear distinction between explaining what is happening as opposed to revealing a relation of dependency. That is, the laws of logic do not depend upon the self, but the self is necessary to reveal them. Thus, they are known only insofar as they are in use. This is the demonstration of the principles in their activity, much like the self itself. Would Fichte deny logical laws their very existence, their objective truth, without selves to think by them? This is another question altogether, but it seems, at this point that he is heading toward this conclusion.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39. SW = *Fichte's sämtliche Werke*, the edition prepared by Fichte's son, I. H. Fichte, 8 vols. (Berlin: Veit, 1845). AA = *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, eds. Lauth, Jacob, Gliwitsky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1964-).

His statement in this section seems to be absolute: “everything that exists does so only insofar as it is posited in the self, and apart from the self there is nothing.”

After *demonstrating* logic, Fichte moves on to *demonstrate* the citizens of his ontology. He writes, “Everything to which the proposition ‘A=A’ is applicable has reality.” This is a “further abstraction” (*abstrahiert*) regarding only a mode of action of the human mind. But, as Fichte points out at the end of I,99, it is not merely the categories of reality that are being revealed as a mode of cognition, intuition. Instead, the real itself, as a category of the mind, is being demonstrated. In other words, things are what they are by virtue of being posited by the self. The essence of things that are categorized as real is the very fact of their being posited. “Reality,” then, is a highly qualified term. Reality is subsequent to the activity of the self.

(I,100): Here Fichte explores the history of the development of this and similar concepts. Others before him have given attention to the activity and existence of the self. He lists Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Reinhold. Fichte begins with Descartes who had suggested *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Fichte thinks that Descartes uses *cogito* only as a minor premise in a larger argument. Fichte thinks this is unnecessary. This minor premise can stand as a given of consciousness where it would be better formulated as *cogitans sum, ergo sum* (I am thinking, therefore I am), which Fichte further reduces to *sum, ergo sum* (I am, therefore I am). This makes “I am thinking” superfluous. Thinking is derivative of existence for the subject. And, other things are derivative besides thinking. So, concludes Fichte, thinking is not the essence of existence for Descartes. Seidel clarifies Fichte’s analysis; Descartes mistakenly thinks that consciousness is fact rather than act.²⁰ Fichte is critical of this characterization of the self as if it were, metaphysically, an object.

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

Fichte next considers Reinhold who had suggested representation as the key principle in his work *The Foundation of Philosophical Knowledge*. Fichte summarizes Reinhold's conclusions as *repraesento, ergo sum* (I represent, therefore I am). Fichte criticizes this. It does not give the essence of existence either. Representation is derivative of existence for the subject even though it is necessary for empirical consciousness.

Fichte considers Spinoza next. Apparently, Spinozism rejects pure consciousness in the (human) self and separates it from empirical consciousness. Empirical consciousness is what appears, as representations. The representation of consciousness itself, which is given to empirical consciousness, is merely one more in a series of representations. Thus, the sense of self is nothing more than a representation among many others. Spinoza, therefore, according to Fichte, requires something besides the self in order to account for the self. This something else is the *pure consciousness*, which is not an individual human consciousness, but is actually God, the higher consciousness within Spinoza's pantheistic system.

Throughout this historical tour, Fichte is showing how his system differs from what has come before him. Descartes made the subject into a thing when he should have allowed the subject to remain an activity. Reinhold was looking for an activity, but stopped too soon; representation is subsequent to an activity that is presupposed by representation. Spinoza looks beyond the self of empirical consciousness, thus he goes too far and ends up with a "pure consciousness" beyond the self, never being conscious itself, who he called God.

(I,101): Fichte doubts that Spinoza's move is legitimate. In Spinoza's attempt to unify human cognition, he has moved beyond what can be demonstrated. His move may have been practical, but it was not theoretical, i.e., it was *ad hoc* and dogmatic.²¹ For Fichte, this absolute is nothing more than an ideal (in the sense of a perfection) toward which individual human

²¹ Seidel, 44.

consciousnesses ought to strive. While this ideal is our goal, it is unachievable. This results in two systems, and only two: one that recognizes a boundary that this ideal represents, and one that tries to go beyond it unaware. The latter is Spinozistic and cannot be correct, the former is Kantian.²² Kant derived the true essence of existence, thinks Fichte, but did not call it out as such. Seidel adds that Fichte does depart from Kant on this point to a small degree.²³ Fichte is referring to the “I think” from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, but this, contra Fichte, does not accompany all representations. It is merely the fact that it “must be able to do so” that is being indicated by Kant.²⁴ Here ends Section 1 of Part I.

Discussion

Fichte has had several original thoughts up to this point. In sum, Fichte has claimed to uncover some primordial and unconditioned principle of human consciousness as activity. And, he has provided the beginnings of the first system of freedom. Using the conclusions of Section 1, he will go on to derive all that remains of human experience. He has already derived logic and existence, the theoretical aspects of consciousness. What he has not yet done is derive practical aspects. Yet, he has already laid the required groundwork to unify the various parts of consciousness; he has already shown that an activity underlies the most basic element of subjectivity. However, if there is an error in what lies before, Fichte’s argument will be stopped before it can go on to achieve these goals.

Based on my own reading, there appears to be a problem at an extremely early stage of the argument in Section 1. I wish to take issue with what seems to be an unjustified leap from an inability to deny some proposition to its appearance as correct, and from this to that *special*

²² Fichte, 100-101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴ Neuhausser, 74.

power of asserting absolutely. What is really behind Fichte's attempt to attribute this power to the subject in the very first step in I, 93? The following is the only explanation that Fichte gives:

Let any fact of empirical consciousness be proposed; and let one empirical feature after another be detached from it, until all that remains is what cannot any longer be dismissed, and from which nothing further can be detached.

I. The proposition A is A . . . is accepted by everyone and that without a moment's thought: it is admitted to be perfectly certain and established . . . it is *absolutely* certain, that is, *without any other ground*: and in so saying—doubtless with general approval—we should be ascribing to ourselves the power of *asserting something absolutely*.”²⁵

But this attribution of a power to the subject is problematic. It appears that Fichte is making an implicit assumption that the universal inability to doubt the proposition entails certainty of the proposition's truth. The power in question, explicitly, is the ability to assert a proposition as true on the basis of its undeniability and its seeming to be true.

This is not explicitly what Fichte argues, but it seems to be implicit in the above quotation. By unpacking these statements, the underlying argument can be revealed. One is to begin with the logical law of identity, i.e., begin with the act of thinking the proposition, and then strip away everything that can be subtracted from this mental activity. Whatever remains is that which cannot be dismissed or detached. I take this to be that which cannot be denied in addition to what cannot be abstracted away from the essence of the proposition. In other words, after the process of abstraction (or detachment, or dismissal), what remains is *both* the formal content of the proposition *and* our inability to deny it. The abstractive process is not simply productive of the underlying form, but it is also, implicitly, a removal of what *can* be removed. What remains cannot be removed by abstraction. It is irremovable. As such, it is undeniable. If it were deniable, it would have been removed, leaving us with nothing.

²⁵ Fichte, 94. Italics in original. Underlining added by me.

It is, therefore, undeniability that remains as part of the facts of empirical experience rather than certainty. Logically, the inability to deny a proposition does not entail its truth. Thus, undeniability does not entail certainty. Nonetheless, Fichte appears to leap from our awareness of a fundamental mental act, with its features of appearing true and being undeniable, to our ability to assert the proposition as absolutely certain.

Where does the certainty come from? Is it an *intuition*? It seems that this is Fichte's intention. Fichte has presumed the power to assert certainty on the basis of an intuition. Try as we might, we cannot see the law of identity as false. We cannot doubt it. Fichte thinks that this just is the intuition of a certain truth. Yet, he has not given us reason to think that this intuition is able to produce the power to assert absolutely. After all, the intuition is not necessarily correct. The basis of the intuition is really an inability to see the proposition as false. It cannot be reduced or doubted. There is no logical connection between these facts of consciousness to the conclusion that the proposition is, in fact, true.

Yet, if we recall that Fichte is establishing the condition of the possibility of logic, and also of reality, making everything subsequent to this initial reflective awareness, it may be the case that Fichte intends for this first step in his argument to be inferred as a necessary condition of the possibility. If this is his intention, then it may not matter that the very first step in his argument is being made intuitively. But, in response to this anticipated counterargument, it is still problematic to suggest that this intuition, as an access point to the original reflection of the subject, is to be accepted as it stands. Fichte's intention is to show a logical and rational means of accessing the starting point, and then to use the starting point to provide a basis for logic and rationality. Thus, it is not acceptable that his opening argument involves an inexplicable intuition. In addition, as has been argued above, there is reason to think that the intuition in

question may even be unwarranted. The power that Fichte finds, therefore, is not a positive power. It is, instead, an impotence, the lack of a power. Fichte is employing the power as positive, the ability to assert absolutely. Fichte thinks that we can assert our certainty based on an intuition, but this inference is not warranted. The intuition is an assumption with no rational connection.

Since the positive power in question is essential to Fichte's most fundamental step, I take it that it is the most critical step, and thus, that it needs far more support than it is being given in this text. Fichte may claim that he is starting here because it is permissible to begin with a universal experience as a given. But, the claim being made in *this* text, in isolation from his other texts and strategies, is an ascription to all subjects a positive power to assert absolutely based only upon the common experience of being indubitable and seeming true. An intuition carries us from the one to the other, but this intuition is receiving no discussion.

Conclusion

The most fundamental concept in Fichte's system is the self-positing "I." This is agreed to almost universally. However, beyond this point, agreement in understanding Fichte's system among scholars immediately dissolves. There is no generally accepted reading of Fichte's system.²⁶ In addition, there are multiple critiques of the system that challenge it at every step, both at the time of its publication and now. What I have attempted to do here is locate the earliest possible stage of the theory's internal development that contains a problem.

If the system falters in this very first step, then the whole project is threatened. Even Fichte, after his early Jena period, may have soon begun to doubt that it was actually possible to derive so much from his system's first principles alone. Thus, as Neuhouser writes, "There is

²⁶ Neuhouser, 66.

some doubt about the extent of Fichte's commitment to this project in later versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (including the system of 1797-9), but also because it belongs to that class of German Idealism's ambitious aims that, although philosophically provocative, are almost certainly incapable of actually being carried out."²⁷

Yet, I do not conclude that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is a failure. It falters at several points, especially insofar as it promises certainty, but it also delivers a rich source of philosophical concepts that can be taken separately and used in other, later strategies and systems. The work faces difficulties with regard to certainty that have never been resolved. As such, it has been too ambitious. These problems with certainty, as has been shown in this paper, occur at the outset, being inherent in the very first step of the argument. But, this does not mean that the entire system is a failure. Fichte stands at the head of an enduring philosophical tradition that has yet to be fully abandoned. Thus, the utility of Fichte's work has not depended upon its success as a whole, that is, on its ability to deliver a secure and absolutely certain foundation for all knowledge.

²⁷ Neuhausser, 68.

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