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STRIVING AS A FORM OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLE
IN FICHTE'S WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE OF 1794

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In the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 (*WL*), Fichte produces an argument for striving (alternatively, a doctrine of striving or a system of drives.)¹ The conclusion of Fichte's argument is that "The pure self-reverting activity of the self is a striving . . . an infinite striving at that. This boundless striving, carried to infinity, is the condition of the possibility of any object whatsoever: no striving, no object."² There seem to be two ways to understand how Fichte reaches this conclusion and how this conclusion works within his larger argument and system. I will label these two ways the "standard view" and the "new view."

The standard view situates striving within a dialectical argument, which is a common method of argumentation in the *WL*.³ According to this interpretation, Fichte starts with a contradiction, a "major antithesis"⁴ that he is working to resolve. The contradiction is between the "self as intelligence, and to that extent restricted, and the self as an absolutely posited and thus unrestricted entity."⁵ That is, between the intelligent self and the absolute self. In section 5 of the *WL*, Fichte introduces a system of strivings (or drives) as a new way to resolve this contradiction. So, the argument given in section 5 is part of a dialectical argument that begins with a contradiction and that is resolved by a complex account of striving.⁶

The new view⁷ argues that the "major antithesis" in question is *not* used as a starting place within a dialectical argument that concludes with the system of striving. Instead, Fichte presents a separate proof for striving, then moves on to resolve the contradiction later. So,

¹ J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre, 1794)*, eds. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). As a guide to these two views, I will be using Wayne M. Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

² *WL*, 231; *sämtliche Werke (SW)* I, 262; Martin, 128.

³ Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51-53. See also, Martin, 128.

⁴ *WL*, 219; *SW*, I, 247. See also, Neuhouser, 50, and Martin, 128.

⁵ *WL*, 219; *SW*, I, 247.

⁶ Neuhouser, 50-51.

⁷ Martin, 131-132.

striving is established separately by means of an argument that is not dialectical. The conclusion of this argument is then subsequently used to resolve the contradiction.

While the dialectical argument begins with the contradiction between the principle of self-positing (the first principle) and the principle of limitation (the third principle), the argument for striving itself is *not* dialectical and begins with premises that are derived, instead, from the principle of counter-positing (an activity of the first principle).⁸ Moreover, according to the new view, even before *WL*, striving was given a preeminent status in the self. It is first and it is what is highest in human beings.⁹ Moreover, striving is the precondition of objects, and striving is at the heart of Fichte's conception of the "primacy of practice," (that practical reason is at the root of all reason).¹⁰ At the point where Fichte introduces striving, he does so with the following claims:

Reason cannot even be theoretical, if it is not practical; that there can be no intelligence in man, if he does not possess a practical capacity; the possibility of all presentation is founded on the latter. And this proof has now just been effected, in showing that, without striving, no object at all is possible.¹¹

Therefore, striving is fundamental to Fichte's system. Striving is not a subsequent conclusion that comes to rescue a contradiction between primary principles, coming out of nowhere. It is, instead, something primary, being an aspect of the first principle itself.

It seems that the new view has much to offer. I will look into the arguments put forward to support this view and will then wade into the text of the 1794 *WL* in order to see if the argument is supported by what is found therein. Though other texts are part of this debate, the main proponent of the new view locates the epicenter of the discussion in the middle of section 5 of the *WL*. So, this will be the locus of my textual analysis in the second half of this paper.

⁸ Martin, 131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 118, citing *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo (Krause Nachschrift)* 1798, 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137-141.

¹¹ *WL*, 233; *SW*, I, 264.

Martin's Case For The New View

A key sentence clues us in to Fichte's strategy. It comes just after his original mention of the striving doctrine: "We may now see how far this conclusion, drawn from other principles, does justice to the problem we undertook, and how far the contradiction we indicated is resolved thereby."¹²

The underlined words and phrases do not have clear referents. Martin decides that "this conclusion" refers to what had just been mentioned in the previous sentence, i.e., the striving doctrine itself. This is the claim that the self strives, and that this striving allows for objects to arise in consciousness.¹³ The "contradiction" refers to the antithesis that is dominant in section 5. The contradiction is between the infinite absolute self and the self as constrained and finite, principles one and three respectively. These connections seem to be correct and without controversy.

It is more difficult to find the referent of the phrase "other principles." If these other principles were extrinsic to the system that Fichte is building, then this would mean that he is not basing everything on his core principle, the first principle, the absolute self-positing. Yet, as he gives us these "other principle" it would be strange if Fichte were introducing, as if new, the same contradiction that has been in play since section 3. Instead, it makes more sense to think that he is providing a new way to solve the contradiction.¹⁴ These two qualifications seem to contradict one another. Somehow, the striving doctrine is drawn from "other principles" that are both new and not new. At this point, the standard view seems to have a legitimate claim, "other

¹² WL, 231; SW, I, 262. See also, Martin, 131. Underlining is added for emphasis.

¹³ Martin, 131.

¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

principles” must not refer to something inside the system if it is to avoid invalidity, *and* this is a problem for the argument since nothing extrinsic can legitimately be brought in.

Martin’s new view provides another perspective. Section 5 began by introducing a problem, and the striving doctrine will resolve the problem. But, the form of the argument is not dialectical. It would be an error, argues Martin, to think that the striving doctrine is proved by direct appeal to the antithesis that is to be solved. As others have pointed out, this would be a clear case of affirming the consequent.¹⁵ So, Martin agrees that the solution based on “other principles,” the striving doctrine, is not simply a restatement of the contradiction it is to solve. Although Fichte will connect the striving doctrine to the major contradiction as a way to show how useful the new doctrine is as a solution, the key sentence, quoted above, actually separates the means of proving the doctrine of striving from the usefulness of having the doctrine after it is proved. The “other principles,” therefore, must be intrinsic in some special way.

Martin finds a match to these requirements in the second principle of Fichte’s system, the principle of counter-positing.¹⁶ This principle is intrinsic in a way that avoids the problems created by bringing in something completely new, but it is extrinsic to the problem that is to be solved in a way that prevents affirming the consequent. Counter-positing is a fundamental activity of the self, thus it is part of the major contradiction in some way. Yet, this way of being part of the contradiction avoids the logical flaw. Fichte is not trying to solve the contradiction by means of some outside principle, he is independently supporting the solution to the contradiction in terms of counter-positing, an element of the contradiction itself. By unfolding the nature of counter-positing as a system of striving, Fichte is showing that the antithesis is not really there at all. That is, he is showing that the contradiction is only apparent in its previous formulation.

¹⁵ Ibid., 129. Martin mentions Werner Hartkopf as the one who made this case.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Martin produces a strong case for this by examining the argument for striving that Fichte provides and by showing that the premises of the argument, which can reasonably be associated with the “other principles” in the key sentence, actually derive from the second principle itself (counter-positing).¹⁷

The argument for striving has three steps:

- 1) The self counter-poses the not-self (an undeniable fact of experience).¹⁸
- 2) The relation between the self and what it counter-poses must be one of opposition, of resistance (following analytically from 1).¹⁹
- 3) The striving doctrine; striving is a prerequisite of experiencing resistance.²⁰

Thus, the first two premises are derived from the principle of counter-positing. These are the “other principles” mentioned in the key sentence quoted above. These premises have nothing to do with the antithesis that striving is meant to resolve.²¹ This argument is not dialectical.

While it is placed within a dialectical strategy in the wider argument, the argument is actually transcendental at *this* level. It reasons to the conditions of the possibility of a given. The conclusion is ultimately reached by means of an analysis of the phenomenological appraisal of objective awareness.²²

Fichte intends for striving not to be a solution from outside, but a reformulation of the starting point itself. Thus, the solution to the conflict is implicit within the starting point. So, both the contradiction and its solution arise from the first principle.²³

Fichte treats his first principles as facts, in the sense that they are the basis for transcendental arguments, but they are also treated as being open to revision. Martin sees this as

¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

¹⁸ WL, 224; SW, I, 253.

¹⁹ WL, 227; SW, I, 256-257.

²⁰ Ibid., 133.

²¹ Ibid., 134.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 135.

a paradox, with the task being to see the two aspects at once.²⁴ However, it seems better to me to see the first principle as inherently rich and complex. This is a familiar challenge, being part of ancient conceptions of God, or the neo-platonic One, as both simple and as the source of multiplicity. Thus, the development of striving uncovers the way that Fichte sees the first principle, having already been exposed as three principles, as now being capable of hiding aspects of itself from immediate view. Fichte may seem to hold these principles up for constant revision and refinement, but he is, instead, digging into their nature more deeply.

One wonders why Fichte did not start with the striving version of his first principles in order to avoid the appearance of contradiction. Despite being a practical aspect of the first principle, the striving doctrine is not revealed at the start because it presupposes the second principle, counter-positing.²⁵ Striving is at the heart of Fichte's conception of the "primacy of practice." That is, Fichte founds everything on the practical, and he establishes the practical by means of striving. The fact that he describes striving late is due merely to the method that Fichte has used to teach the system to us.

In sum, the new view is to see the striving doctrine as a different version or description of the first principle, of self-positing. The old view is to see striving simply as a different view of the major contradiction that needs to be resolved.

How Striving Fits Into Fichte's System

Is Martin's account of Fichte's striving, as a reiteration of the principle of self-positing that can be inferred from the principle of counter-positing, genuinely Fichtean? To determine the answer the system should be summarized so that the striving doctrine can be seen in its context.

²⁴ Ibid., 136.

²⁵ Ibid., 137.

Summarily, Fichte's idealism is founded upon the activities of the self as they are subdivided into three major principles. Fichte's system of drives fits into his account of the three principles of the self in the following manner:

1. First principle, the absolute self, is the goal for action (what is strived for, what the self is being driven toward).
2. Second principle, the not-self, is that which restricts the limited self from attaining the goal (what resists the striving).
3. Third principle, the limited or intelligent self, is the individual conscious self that is striving to become the absolute self.

The self posits itself as unlimited (in one sense) as its first act. The self posits itself as limited (in another sense) as its second act.²⁶ By this second act, the self relates to a not-self. It does not return to itself, but posits an other, an object (*Gegenstand*). This is the objective activity of the self. The not-self is a contrasted counter-positing object.²⁷ These two acts appear to oppose one another; this is the major contradiction mentioned at the opening of section 5 of *WL*. Yet, the first and second activities are unified in their source; they are activities performed by the same self.

The absolute self and the intelligent self are one, but are opposed to one another by means of the not-self. The intelligent self desires to remove the opposition.²⁸ Yet, in some sense, the intelligent self is contending with itself. The not-self is felt (feeling) as if it were an external prime mover. The absolute self determines the not-self; the first act causes the second act.²⁹

However, the intelligent self needs this conflict. The not-self sets the intelligent self in motion.³⁰ The self is only aware of itself by its striving; it must be aware of itself as striving. Thus, striving is integral to this interplay of the self's activities.

²⁶ *WL*, 225-226; *SW*, I, 255.

²⁷ *WL*, 228; *SW*, I, 258.

²⁸ *WL*, 220; *SW*, I, 249.

²⁹ *WL*, 227; *SW*, I, 257.

³⁰ *WL*, 246; *SW*, I, 279.

The doctrine of striving is the interrelation of various feelings and aspects of the acts of the self as they are involved in the overall act of consciousness. The system of drives involves striving/drive, feeling, and longing. Striving is the way that the limited self interacts with the absolute/ideal self.³¹ A drive is a striving that is produced by the self and is posited as the self. The drive is not initially felt as a drive. By reflecting upon a posited drive, the self also posits the drive as itself.³² Thus, these strivings are constitutive of consciousness.

Feeling is the manner in which the drives or strivings are known, not directly as they are, but as resistance.³³ Longing is the way that the limited self experiences the unattainable goal. The longing is a feeling. Seidel uses “push” and “pull” to describe the different aspects of longing: longing is a pull (the self’s centripetal activity) toward the infinite and a push (the self’s centrifugal activity) away from finitude, and it is also the feeling of limitation that is produced from the drive.³⁴

The self finds itself striving toward an ideal, which is a notion it has of itself as unlimited, free, autonomous, and sovereign. The goal is the first principle. The striving toward this goal is the self’s primary moral law. It is the primary drive. The self is first driven to reflect on itself, then, subsequently, it is driven to demand to be autonomous. These are the first and second drives, respectively. Drive 1 comes from the moral law. This drive comes in terms of awareness of an other, of an object. Drive 2 is the self’s need to be aware of itself as free and autonomous, the whole of reality. This produces the longing toward the goal of the ideal. This second drive, the longing, results in striving. This system is the form that consciousness must take.

³¹ George J. Seidel, *Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre of 1794: A Commentary on Part I* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 115. See also, *WL*, 265; *SW*, I, 302.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 116. See also, *WL*, 241; *SW*, I, 274.

Analysis of Martin's Texts

Given this summary of the doctrine of striving within the context of the system, the question now becomes whether or not there is textual and conceptual support for Martin's argument. Is he interpreting Fichte according to a proper understanding of the system? To answer this, I will first show how Martin makes use of the text.

Martin, in the course of his argument, cites six significant passages. These passages make up the core of his case.

Text 1:

We may now see how far this conclusion, drawn from other principles, does justice to the problem we undertook, and how far the contradiction we indicated is resolved thereby.³⁵

This is the key sentence upon which Martin's argument turns. He indicates that, here, Fichte is revealing his plan to us. Unfortunately, the key phrase, "other principles," is unclear. Martin tells us that the referent is the concept of the not-self given earlier in section 2 of *WL*:

Text 2:

The concept of the not-self is commonly taken to be no more than a discursive or general concept, obtained by abstraction from everything presented.³⁶

This is the place where Fichte provides his second principle, counter-positing. It is significant to Martin precisely for being much earlier in the work. In fact, he also finds other sources from before the *WL* that make the same point.³⁷

Text 3:

Here we have reached a point from which we can set out more clearly than we ever could before the true meaning of our second basic principle: *a not-self is opposed to the self*, and by means of this the true significance of our whole Science of Knowledge.³⁸

This text is placed at the start of the argument for striving. Note that it declares the intention to reveal the "true meaning" of the second principle. This is our first direct hint, says Martin, that

³⁵ *WL*, 231; *SW*, I, 262. Underlining is added for emphasis.

³⁶ *WL*, 104-105; *SW*, I, 104. N.B., The page number in my translation of *WL* and the page number in the *sämtliche Werke* are the same; this is not an error.)

³⁷ Martin, 119-128. He refers to the Aenesidemus Review and Fichte's first lecture given at Jena.

³⁸ *WL*, 223; *SW*, I, 252. Italics in original, underlining is added for emphasis.

the argument for striving is connected with the second principle. From this, we infer that the phrase “other principles,” in text 1 above, refers to the second principle.

From this point on, it is significant that the order of the steps in the argument, as Martin gives it, follows the order of the texts themselves. The “first hint” is in I, 252, the first step of the argument is in I, 253, and the second is in I, 256-257. The conclusion, the striving doctrine itself, follows after this and is the subject of the remainder of the book. This makes it more likely that Martin is not producing an argument that is not found in the text. This is the text’s natural progression.

The argument itself begins with Martin’s fourth text:

Text 4:

It is absolutely certain that every positing that is not a positing of the self must be a counterpositing; that there is such a positing, can be demonstrated by anyone only through his own experience.³⁹

This is the first step, or premise, of the argument for the doctrine of striving. In section 2, Fichte had offered an argument, or explanation, for counter-positing, but here he stipulates that it is really just a fact of experience.⁴⁰ Thus, at this point, Fichte is just invoking a previously uncovered fact as his starting premise.

The next text is called out by Martin as the second premise in the argument for striving:

Text 5:

The word *object* (*Gegenstand*) admirably designates what it is meant for. Every object of an activity, so far as it is so, is necessarily something opposed to the activity, which *rejects* or *objects* to the same . . . It is implicit already in the mere concept of objective activity, that resistance is offered to it, and hence that it is restricted.⁴¹

This second premise is a deduction from the first premise. It is necessary that what is counter-positing be in opposition to the limited self.

³⁹ WL, 224; SW, I, 253.

⁴⁰ Martin, 133.

⁴¹ WL, 227; SW, I, 256-257. Italicized prefixes are in original.

For step three in Fichte's argument, the conclusion, Martin does not refer us to a text. He simply states, "The final step is then to argue from the principle of resistance to the striving doctrine: only a striving being, Fichte claims, is capable of finding the resistance required for the act of counterpositing."⁴² Thus, the conclusion of the argument is the doctrine of striving itself. The doctrine is the consequence of premises 1 and 2.

How does this argument for striving fit into the wider, dialectical argument for the resolution of the major contradiction? Martin gives us a further text to consider in answer to this question:

Text 6:

We have expressly maintained that the self opposes some thing to itself absolutely, and without any ground, and only through the unconditional nature of this act could the proposition asserting this be called a basic principle. But we noted at the same time that at least something in this act was conditioned, namely its product—to wit, that the outcome of the act of opposing must necessarily be a not-self, and could be nothing else. We now enter more deeply into the meaning of this observation.⁴³

Here Fichte is noting his failure, up to this point, to resolve the "major contradiction" mentioned at the beginning of section 5 of the *WL*, before giving us the striving doctrine as the solution. In the same text, Fichte also mentions counter-positing, and he clarifies that this will be the way forward.⁴⁴ The implication of this passage, given the content of the passages above, is that the striving doctrine is the solution to the original problem. Thus, the striving doctrine fits into the dialectical argument as a resolution to the tension, but, the striving doctrine itself is the "outcome of the act of opposing itself."

Conclusions

⁴² Martin, 133.

⁴³ *WL*, 227-8; *SW I*, 257-258.

⁴⁴ Martin, 133.

Martin's argument appears to be correct on its major points. It is not the case that Fichte is bringing in the striving doctrine from outside of his system. And, as internal, it is not simply a restatement of the major antithesis that it is invoked to solve. These points make sense in terms of rescuing Fichte's own work, but they also appear to be backed up by specific textual references that appear to be legitimately used. And, the resulting interpretive theory appears to be compatible within the context of the system and the doctrine of striving.

Therefore, I conclude, in agreement with Martin, that Fichte is clearly placing striving at the foundation of his system. Striving is given as an alternative view of, and a more unfolded version of, his primary principle, the self-positing and absolute self.

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