

FICHTE'S SYSTEM

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1 What is a “Wissenschaftslehre”?

- A “Wissenschaftslehre” (WL), or “Doctrine of Science”, is Fichte’s name for the fundamental science to which all other human knowledge is related

1.1 Fichte on Science

- Features of Science:
 1. Certain
 2. Systematic
 3. Explanatory
- All sciences need a fundamental or “first” principle
- The first principle of the WL, as the science of science, is the most fundamental principle of all, though it is not the first principle of every other science (they each have their own)
- Each science can have one and only one first principle¹

FICHTE'S UNIQUENESS ARGUMENT

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 than 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.
- Q: Is the first principle the ground of knowledge (i.e. an epistemic ground), or is it also a ground of truth (i.e. a metaphysical ground)?

¹ 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)

2 Critique & Wissenschaftslehre

- Critique and WL are distinct elements of Fichte's philosophy
- The WL answers the question "how is science possible?"²
- Critique answers the question "how is a science of science possible?"³
- Critique cannot, however, be carried out separately from the project of the WL⁴

3 Dogmatism & Idealism⁵

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

- Dogmatism & Idealism oppose one another, but each cannot *refute* the other
- Fichte construes dogmatism, as opposed to idealism, as ultimately committed to atheism, materialism, and hard determinism

4 Problems for Dogmatism

1. Denies freedom
2. Can only allow material beings
3. Denies (or cannot explain) the existence of consciousness

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)
- Two forms of idealism
 - "lower" idealism: Categorical acts of intellect are basic
 - "higher" idealism: Categorical acts of intellect are derived
- Fichte contends that the categories are 'derived' directly from the nature of the intellect as activity (i.e. from the self-positing I or "I am") rather than from the nature of judgment or the structure of logic
 - The derivation of the categories is via a "regressive" or "transcendental" argument from a conditioned fact to its conditions until we reach an unconditioned (i.e. the first principle "I am")⁶

References & Further Reading

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² How are the form and content of a science possible at all, that is, how is science possible? (1:43)

³ 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).

⁴ 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)

⁵ 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)

⁶ 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)

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