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The First Principle of Philosophy in Fichte's 1794 *Aenesidemus Review*

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Abstract

In *Aenesidemus*, G.E. Schulze adopts the skeptical voice of Aenesidemus and engages in critical dialogue with Hermias, a Kantian, in the hopes of laying bare what he views as the fundamental issues of K.L. Reinhold's version of critical philosophy. While some attacks reveal a deep misunderstanding of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* on Schulze's part, others hit their mark. In the *Aenesidemus Review* (1794), J.G. Fichte at times agrees with criticisms raised by Aenesidemus and at times defends Reinhold against them. On Fichte's view, Schulze succeeds in proving that the first principle of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, the principle of consciousness (*Satz des Bewußtseins*), is neither self-evident nor self-determining. Therefore, it cannot be the *first* principle of philosophy. However, Schulze fails to dissuade Fichte from viewing Reinhold's principle of consciousness as the pithiest expression of human consciousness of the time. For these reasons, Fichte holds that Reinhold's principle of consciousness must be deduced from an even higher principle. The goal of this paper is to assess whether Fichte puts forth his own candidate for the first principle of philosophy in his *Aenesidemus Review*.

Keywords

Fichte – Reinhold – Schulze – first principle – *Aenesidemus Review*

1 Introduction

In *Aenesidemus*,¹ first published anonymously in 1792, G.E. Schulze adopts the voice of Aenesidemus,² a skeptic, and engages in critical dialogue with Hermias, a Kantian, in the hopes of laying bare what he views as the fundamental issues with K.L. Reinhold's version of critical philosophy.³ While some attacks reveal a deep misunderstanding of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* on Schulze's part, others hit their mark. In his review of Schulze's influential text, which I will refer to as the *Aenesidemus Review* (1794), J.G. Fichte partially agrees with and partially defends Reinhold against the criticisms raised by Aenesidemus.⁴ On Fichte's view (and on mine), Schulze succeeds in proving that the first principle of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, the principle of consciousness (*Satz des Bewußtseins*), is neither self-evident nor self-determining. Therefore, it cannot be the *first* principle of philosophy. However, Schulze fails to dissuade adherents of critical philosophy like Fichte from viewing Reinhold's principle of consciousness as the pithiest expression of human consciousness of the time.

Since Fichte agrees with Reinhold that philosophy is in need of a first principle, and yet holds that Reinhold's principle of consciousness must be deduced from an even higher principle, the goal of this paper is to assess whether Fichte puts forth his own candidate for the first principle of philosophy in his *Aenesidemus Review*. My answer will be a qualified 'Yes'. On my interpretation, Fichte identifies 'I am' as the first principle of his future system of philosophy. However, he also indicates that this principle must be guaranteed in a real cognition. Such a guarantee occurs at a later stage of his future system, one that is only announced but not included in the *Aenesidemus Review*. Thus, I qualify my claim as follows. Although Fichte provides a first principle in the *Aenesidemus Review*, he does not yet carry out what he views as its necessary demonstration.

1 *Aenesidemus, or Concerning the Foundations of the Elementary Philosophy Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold, including a Defense of Skepticism against the Pretensions of the Critique of Reason (Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie. Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaßungen der Vernunftkritik)* (1792) (henceforth: *Aenesidemus*). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 The name derives from the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptic, Aenesidemus of Knossus.

3 While Schulze also attacks Kant's critical philosophy, Reinhold's version is his main target.

4 Fichte's *Aenesidemus Review* first appeared in the 11, 12 February issues of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (reprinted in: GA 1/2: 31–68). All translations of this text are by Daniel Breazeale.

While Daniel Breazeale already puts forth the view that Fichte identifies 'I am' as the first principle in his masterful paper on the *Aenesidemus Review*, he does not rule out the possibility that other principles could be interpreted as the first (1981, 561–563). Yet, the matter is anything but settled in the scholarly debate on a whole. Some view the *I* (*das Ich*) as Fichte's first principle,⁵ others view the *principle of identity* as the first.⁶ Thus, elaborating upon Breazeale's claim, I provide reasons as to why these other principles cannot be viewed as the first for Fichte in the *Aenesidemus Review*.

Any claims Fichte puts forth about his first principle of philosophy in the *Aenesidemus Review* are made against the backdrop of Schulze's criticisms of Reinhold's principle of consciousness. Accordingly, I will begin by discussing Reinhold's first principle, along with his criteria for any first principle of philosophy (section 2). I will then discuss those objections raised by Schulze that were most effective in convincing Fichte that Reinhold's principle cannot be the first (section 3). Finally, I will discuss why I think 'I am' is the principle Fichte identifies as the first out of all other possible options in the *Aenesidemus Review* (section 4). To conclude, I will connect Fichte's 'I am' back to Reinhold's principle of consciousness.

2 Reinhold's Principle of Consciousness

K.L. Reinhold made a name for himself by popularising Kant's critical philosophy in a series of letters published in the *Teutsche Merkur* (1786). However, he began to grow dissatisfied with the method Kant employed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and argued that in order to become a "scientifically certain" philosophical system, the concepts and principles comprising the first *Critique* would have to be deduced from a higher and sounder foundation. In his *Elementarphilosophie* (1789–1794), Reinhold both supplies what he views as this solid foundation, and he deduces the concepts and principles that make up Kant's first *Critique* from it according to the axiomatic-deductive method. The axiomatic-deductive method is comprised of chains of valid syllogisms that are grounded in one or several self-evident principles. Reinhold decides to

⁵ See, for example, Allen Wood (1991, 6).

⁶ Tamás Hankovsky identifies the principle of identity as the first principle of the *Grundlage* (2016, 80). However, he argues that Fichte already provides support for selecting such a principle in the *Aenesidemus Review* (2016, 73–74). Since the principle of identity *might* be interpreted as the first principle in the *Aenesidemus Review*, and since this is an important interpretation with respect to other texts of Fichte, I think it is an option that must be considered.

restructure Kant's critical philosophy in this way based on extensive reflections on the criteria that any first principle of philosophy ought to fulfill.

I will first list the criteria that Reinhold establishes for the first principle of any philosophical system, before discussing them in turn. According to Reinhold, a first principle must be:

- i. self-evident
- ii. *a priori*
- iii. prior to all other *a priori* aspects of first philosophy
- iv. universally accepted

First and foremost, Reinhold argues that the first principle of a philosophical system must be established without any use of philosophical reasoning, otherwise it could not determine the scope and limits of all philosophical reasoning without circularity.⁷ In order to avoid circularity, Reinhold concludes that the first principle of philosophy must be self-evident.

Second, for Reinhold, the first principle of philosophy must express a "fact" that is "evident to all people at all times under any condition" (*Beiträge* 143). This fact cannot be of the outer or inner senses, otherwise it would be tied to the experience of a particular person. Instead it must be prior to any and all experience, that is, it must be *a priori*.

Third, since Reinhold aims at grounding the concepts and principles comprising Kant's critical philosophy without circularity, all of which are *a priori*, the starting point of the *Elementarphilosophie* must be prior to all other *a priori* elements of first philosophy.

Finally, on Reinhold's view, the concepts and principles comprising the *Critique of Pure Reason* are universally valid (*allgemeingültig*), but they are not universally accepted (*allgemeingeltend*).⁸ While 'universal validity' means holding in every case, for him, 'universal acceptance' literally refers to being something that all human knowers accept (*Beiträge*, 131, 150). This criterion has been met with much criticism. Most importantly, it is open to the obvious objection that a fact or a principle could easily obtain without all human beings recognising it as such.⁹ Even Reinhold admits that nothing has been more controversial in

7 *Beiträge*, 143. It is not until his first articulations of rational realism in 1801 that Reinhold, in the wake of Fichte and C.G. Bardili, accepts virtuous circularity in a philosophical system.

8 See, for example, *Beiträge* 264–265, *Fundament* 69–70.

9 Furthermore, many commentators think that this criterion betrays Reinhold's ongoing adherence to Enlightenment ideals. For example, Karl Ameriks claims that he was influenced in this regard by Ernst Platner, who thought that philosophy needed a more scientific and more popular system (2003, 81), and that a popular philosophical system serves the basic aims of the Enlightenment era (2003, 77). Paul Franks simply states that it is misguided to attempt a sys-

the past than appeals to common sense (*Fundament*, 54–55). In my view, this criterion is much more reasonable than is commonly thought. As I interpret Reinhold, it amounts to the claim that anyone who correctly uses their natural capacities cannot deny the principle in question (*Beiträge*, 131, 150). To deny it would be to contradict reason. According to my interpretation, instead of requiring that all thinkers actually accept the principle, this criterion merely asserts that all human knowers *should* accept it.¹⁰

With these criteria for a first principle of philosophy in mind, the initial challenge Reinhold faces is to identify what he views as the correct starting point of the foundation that is to support Kant's critical philosophy:

For this science that I call universal *Elementarphilosophie* [...], the *Critique of Pure Reason* indeed established the material but not even the idea of the actual foundation let alone the actual foundation itself. And if this science should ever come to fruition, philosophising reason must go one step further on the analytic way than it did in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This step is then the last that it can take on the analytic path to higher principles. Through this step and through it alone, the ultimate and proper foundation of philosophy is discovered.

Fundament 71–72

While Reinhold thinks that the principles laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are correct, he seeks a higher ground upon which to support them. To do so, he analyses the principles and concepts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to their common denominator. The result, for Reinhold, is the *representation* (*Vorstellung*).

By identifying the representation as the common denominator of the principles and concepts comprising the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Reinhold takes himself to have discovered the most fundamental line of inquiry proper to critical philosophy: the science of the representation.¹¹

tem that everyone can agree on (2008, 136), and connects it to Reinhold's understanding of Enlightenment as influenced by his Illuminati affiliation (2008, 154–155).

10 Put in this way, this criterion finds precedence in the works of thinkers like Aristotle, Descartes, and Wolff, who appeal to the indubitability of a principle. Aristotle and Wolff, both state that the principle of non-contradiction cannot properly speaking be proved, but that it is indubitable. See Aristotle (*Metaphysics* IV, 1005b17–27) and Wolff (*German Metaphysics* §10). Descartes famously argues that his first principle, *cogito ergo sum*, is indubitable (*Principles* §7).

11 This science investigates the *a priori* characteristics of the representation (*Fundament*, 70). In Reinhold's view, the elements of critical philosophy, such as space and time, and the categories, are nothing but *a priori* marks of representation: "The object of [the *Elementarphilosophie*] [...] is that which can be cognised *a priori* in representations of sensi-

However, since a philosophical system must avoid circularity, on Reinhold's terms, the science of representation must be established on the basis of a self-evident starting point, independently of the principles and concepts it is meant to ground, namely, those comprising the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Accordingly, he argues that its starting point must be a fact.¹² The term 'fact' usually refers to an experienced state of affairs. Accordingly, a fact is of the nature that, all things being equal, if different knowers were in the same position at the same time, then they would affirm the same fact. However, Reinhold's fact to ground critical philosophy cannot be a fact of inner or outer sense because then the criterion, discussed above, could not be met, namely, that the corresponding principle must be available to all knowers at all times under any conditions.

Reinhold identifies the fact of consciousness (*Tatsache des Bewußtseins*) as the best candidate for the highest fact of critical philosophy, and he does so, on my interpretation, by means of an argument from priority. He reasons that consciousness is ontologically prior both to representations and to the faculty that brings them about because both operate within the field of awareness of the human mind. However, employing an argument from priority in order to arrive at the fact of consciousness does not detract from its self-evidence. The fact remains self-evident in the sense that affirming it as a fact does not require argumentation. Since consciousness is, on Reinhold's view, the only necessary condition for having a representation, he declares the starting point of the *Elementarphilosophie* to be the fact of consciousness.¹³

bility, of the understanding, and of reason. This can only be the forms determined in the capacity for representation [...]. The possibility of a universally accepted proof depends on [...] space and time, the twelve categories, and the three forms of the ideas being originally nothing but the characteristics of mere representations [...]" (*Fundament*, 72–73).

- 12 In my view, there are at least two important influences for Reinhold's view that a philosophical system must begin with a fact. First, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant grounds his practical philosophy in the "fact of reason", which is recognition of the fact that a rational agent gives him or herself a law according to which he or she should act, that is, that a rational agent is free (AA 5:31). In this Kantian context, a fact is both a self-evident state of affairs, and the recognition of an act. The latter meaning plays on the Latin *factum*, which denotes a deed or something enacted. Reinhold was likely influenced by this dual meaning since the fact of consciousness is, for Reinhold, indeed both a self-evident state of affairs and the recognition of an act of producing a representation. Second, since he adopts the axiomatic-deductive method of Aristotle, which is later used by the rationalists, in my view, Reinhold was also influenced to begin the *Elementarphilosophie* with a fact because Aristotle states that a premise in a scientific demonstration must be self-evident.
- 13 *Beiträge* 167. In my view, Reinhold uses 'Tatsache-' and 'Faktum des Bewußtseins' interchangeably. See, for example: *Beiträge* 143, 267, 278–279.

Reinhold arrives at the first principle of the *Elementarphilosophie* by reflection upon the fact of consciousness (*Beiträge* 143). To explain what he means by 'reflection', Reinhold contrasts it with abstraction.¹⁴ While the principle gained by means of reflection on the fact of consciousness expresses what can be found within consciousness, a principle gained by abstraction extracts the marks common to different instances of consciousness in order to establish their genus. Reinhold rejects the second option as being a product of induction and, therefore, not apodictically certain.¹⁵

Reinhold gives a positive account of reflection, along with the principle of consciousness, which is the result of reflection on the fact of consciousness, in the following:

Through no syllogism of reason, but through mere reflection on the fact of consciousness, that means, through the comparison of that which precedes in consciousness, we know that in consciousness, the representation is distinguished by the subject from the object and subject and is referred to both.

Fundament 78

Thus, reflection on the fact of consciousness is the process of holding up the object of consciousness, namely, the representation, and considering its origins.¹⁶ The result of this process is, for Reinhold, the principle of consciousness:

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- 14 Reinhold draws this distinction in the following passage: "The mark, by which the representation is established, is received by means of reflection on consciousness, not by means of abstraction from the different kinds of representations. In this way, the representation is thought as representation and not yet in any way as the representation, in general, not yet as genus" (*Beiträge* 169). Although Reinhold addresses how he establishes the concept of the representation in this passage, it contains a helpful contrast between reflection and abstraction.
- 15 Furthermore, Reinhold contrasts reflection with analysis. Although the two are similar, analysis is a technical term, for Reinhold, which means that the components of a concept are separated from one another according to a rule (*Beiträge* 10–11). This rule must be available prior to analysis (*Beiträge* 11) and will eventually be based on the principle of consciousness. Therefore, the principle of consciousness cannot be established by means of analysis.
- 16 On my view, Reinhold's account of reflection was in all likelihood influenced by Kant's concept of transcendental reflection, which Kant explains as follows: "Reflection (*reflexio*) does not have to do with objects themselves, in order to acquire concepts directly from them, but is rather the state of mind in which we first prepare ourselves to find out the subjective conditions under which we can arrive at concepts. It is the consciousness of the relation of given representations to our various sources of cognition, through which alone their relation among themselves can be correctly determined" (A260/B316). While

“in consciousness, the representation is distinguished by the subject from the subject and the object and is referred to both”.¹⁷ How might the process of reflection result in this principle? To my mind, when I reflect on my own consciousness, I alert myself to the fact that I am aware by noticing that I am aware of something, that is, I am aware of consciousness as intentional. Since mental-events were thought to be representational during Reinhold’s time, the object of which I am aware is the object of a representation. In order to represent this object, an agent has to do the representing. This is the subject element of the principle of consciousness. Notice that this subject is not the same as consciousness. Consciousness is the field of awareness within which humans have representations. By contrast, the subject carries out the various activities of representing to produce these representations. Finally, the representation is not the object or the subject, but a product of both. This process of reflection, on my reconstruction, yields the first principle of the *Elementarphilosophie*.¹⁸

According to Reinhold, the resulting principle of consciousness is the *real* and *material* first principle of philosophy:

Not its logical, but its real (*reelle*) truth, not its thinkability, but what is thought in it, makes [the principle of consciousness] the first principle; and indeed, not a logical or formal principle, but a real, material first principle of the science of the capacity for representation, of the *Elementarphilosophie*, and through it, of all philosophy in general.

Fundament, 86

As I understand Reinhold, the principle of consciousness is real because it corresponds to the fact of consciousness. It expresses the structure of us being conscious of any representation. Accordingly, it expresses the ontological form of any subsequent principles comprising the theory of representation and of human cognition in general.

transcendental reflection serves the function of identifying the source of cognition, for example, whether it is an object of pure or empirical understanding, such that it can be treated appropriately, Reinhold employs his version of reflection to identify the most fundamental structure of consciousness. However, the two accounts are the same in the sense that, for Reinhold, by reflecting on consciousness, one identifies the most fundamental sources of the representation per se, namely, the object and the subject.

¹⁷ See further *Beiträge* 167.

¹⁸ For another charitable description of the process of reflection yielding the principle of consciousness see Frederick Beiser (1987, 253–254).

3 Schulze's and Fichte's Arguments against Reinhold's Principle of Consciousness

In the *Aenesidemus Review*, Fichte makes an effort to respond to Schulze on behalf of Reinhold, often even citing works by Reinhold to do so. However, at times, he must grant Schulze's point. As a result, as I will discuss over the course of this section, Fichte is forced to admit that the highest principle of Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, namely, the principle of consciousness, is neither self-evident nor self-determining. Schulze, however, fails to convince Fichte that he needs to relinquish critical philosophy altogether. Fichte only agrees that Reinhold's principle of consciousness cannot be the *first* principle, and argues, against Schulze, that it must be grounded in yet a higher principle.

Schulze argues that Reinhold's principle of consciousness cannot be the only first principle of all philosophy since it must be subordinated to the principle of non-contradiction (1792, 60). In defense of Reinhold, Fichte argues that Schulze misses the point of Kant's epistemological revolution. To do so, Fichte cites Reinhold's *Das Fundament* (SW I, 5), in which Reinhold reiterates the Kantian view that the principle of contradiction is ambiguous and that its application must be determined by a higher principle (*Fundament*, 84–85). Reinhold admits that it would not be possible for the principle of consciousness to go against the principle of non-contradiction; however, he argues that the former is not determined by the latter (*Fundament* 85). By siding with Reinhold on this point, Fichte demonstrates his commitment to Kant's view that the use of traditional principles of formal logic to think about real objects must be guided by principles of real cognition.

However, Fichte agrees with two of the strongest criticisms that Schulze raises against Reinhold's first principle. First, Schulze argues that the principle of consciousness is an abstraction; it is extracted from experiences of various intuitions, concepts, and ideas (1792, 76). On my interpretation, Schulze's argument amounts to the claim that Reinhold is only able to arrive at the structure of a representation by comparing intuitions, concepts, and ideas, and extracting their common structure. Implicit in the argument, as I see it, is the concern that unless Reinhold has abstracted the structure of a representation from intuitions, concepts, and ideas, he could not claim that each of these types of mental events have the same structure.¹⁹

19 Both Schulze and Maimon argue that intuitions do not have the same structure as concepts and ideas. See Schulze (1792, 8–9) as well as Maimon's letter to Reinhold (*Korrespondenz*, vol. 3, 228–229).

Fichte here partly agrees with Schulze and partly defends Reinhold. While Fichte agrees with Reinhold's careful distinction between abstraction from intuitions, concepts, and ideas, and reflection on the fact of consciousness, as discussed in the previous section, he nonetheless also partly concedes Schulze's point, but in a somewhat different sense than Schulze intended:

If everything that can be discovered in the mind is an act of representing, and if every act of representing is undeniably an *empirical* determination of the mind, then the very act of representing, along with all of its conditions, is given to consciousness only through the representation of representing. It is thus *empirically* given, and empirical representations are the objects of all reflection concerning consciousness.

EPW, 63; *SW I*, 7–8

For Fichte, every mental event of which one can be conscious, even a representation in general, is empirical.²⁰ Since Reinhold's principle of consciousness is obtained by reflection on the fact that I am conscious of a representation, as discussed in the previous section, the resulting principle is, on Fichte's characterisation, a generalisation from one or some empirical instances to a general rule, which amounts to induction and cannot yield a necessary rule. For this reason, on Fichte's view, Reinhold's science of the representation is really the science the representation of a representation.²¹ Accordingly, although Fichte does not think that Reinhold abstracts from the same mental events that Schulze has in mind, he nonetheless holds that Reinhold employs a form of abstraction and, therefore, induction.

Second, Schulze convincingly argues that the principle of consciousness is not self-determining because the terms it contains, namely, 'representation', 'subject', 'object', 'to refer', and 'to distinguish', are all indeterminate, that is, they could each have several meanings (1792, 63–65). To prove his point, he gives examples of the multiple ways in which one could interpret these terms. 'To distinguish' alone could be a partial or a complete differentiation, or a distinction

²⁰ See further "The positing of the I is called presentation (*Darstellung*). The positing of the not-I as real is called representation (*Vorstellung*). Everything that enters (*kommen*) into empirical consciousness is representation. Presentation never enters into empirical consciousness, but rather it only constitutes pure consciousness" (Setzung des Ich heißt Darstellung: Setzung des Nicht=Ich als Real, – Vorstellung. – Alles was in's empirische Bewußtseyn kömmt, ist Vorstellung; Darstellung kömmt nie in's empirische Bewußtseyn; sondern sie nur macht das reine Bewußtseyn aus), J.G. Fichte, *Eigene Meditationen*, GA II/3, 90.

²¹ *SW I*, 7–8. See further Franks (2005, 233–234); (2008, 154).

between ground and grounded, such as, between a whole and its parts, or a substance and its accidents (1792, 66–67). 'To refer' could be a connection between cause and effect, substance and accident, whole and parts (1792, 67).

Fichte shows his agreement with Schulze by simply stating that Schulze has adduced several convincing possible meanings of each of these concepts, proving that they are undetermined:

Aenesidemus, in a manner which satisfies this reviewer at least, has demonstrated by enumerating several possible meanings for these concepts and citing the various and even ambiguous expressions which Reinhold has subsequently employed in the attempt to clarify them. But what if it is precisely the indeterminacy and indeterminability of these concepts which point to a higher principle (which remains to be discovered) and to the material validity of the principle of identity and opposition? And what if the concepts of distinguishing and relating can only be determined by means of the concept of identity and its opposite?

EPW, 62; *SW I*, 6

However, on the side of Reinhold, Fichte also suggests that the concepts included in Reinhold's principle of consciousness could be determined by an even higher principle.

4 Fichte's Alternative: 'I Am'

Despite his agreement with two of Schulze's strongest arguments against Reinhold's principle of consciousness, Fichte holds that these arguments only successfully show that this principle cannot be a first principle:

From what has been said so far it follows that insofar as Aenesidemus's objections are aimed at the Principle of Consciousness *in itself* they are groundless. They are, however, appropriate objections to the Principle of Consciousness considered as the *first* principle of all philosophy and as a mere fact, and they make it necessary to establish a new foundation for this principle.

EPW, 65; *SW I*, 10

Fichte, thus, does to the *Elementarphilosophie* what Reinhold did to Kant's critical philosophy: he argues that its main principles must be deduced from a higher first principle. Just as Reinhold did with respect to the principles com-

prising Kant's critical philosophy, Fichte seeks a higher foundation in which to ground Reinhold's principle of consciousness.

In the following famous passage, Fichte specifies what he thinks the higher foundation capable of grounding Reinhold's principle of consciousness, and, therewith, critical philosophy, looks like:

This reviewer [Fichte, referring to himself] anyway is convinced that the principle of consciousness is a theorem which is based upon another first principle, from which, however, the principle of consciousness can be strictly derived, *a priori* and independently of all experience. The initial incorrect presupposition, and the one which caused the principle of consciousness to be proposed as the first principle of all philosophy, was precisely the presupposition that one must begin with a fact (*Thatsache*). We certainly do require a first principle which is material and not merely formal. But such a principle does not have to express a fact; it can also express an act (*Thathandlung*).

EPW, 64; SW I, 8

Fichte introduces the discussion of his first principle, as he conducts it in the *Aenesidemus Review*, by *suggesting* that the first principle of philosophy need not express a fact, but that it could instead express an act. The context of this suggestion makes clear that Fichte seeks a first principle that is independent of experience. Recall that one of his objections to Reinhold's principle of consciousness was that it is obtained by induction from experience, namely, the experience of a representation. By seeking a principle that does not make this same mistake, but one from which Reinhold's principle can nonetheless be deduced, I interpret Fichte to pare away what he views as the empirical aspects of Reinhold's principle of consciousness and hone in on its *a priori* and most prior ground, namely, the activity of the thinking subject.

Fichte further specifies his vision in the following passage, in which he presents the principle that expresses the highest act of his version of critical philosophy, namely, '*I am*':

Following Kant, Reinhold performed an immortal service by calling the attention of philosophizing reason to the fact that philosophy in its entirety has to be traced back to one single first principle, and that one will not discover the system of the human mind's permanent modes of acting until one has discovered the keystone to this system. [...] Suppose that further advances along the path which Reinhold, to his credit, has cleared for

us should reveal the following: that the most immediately certain thing of all, "I am," is also valid only *for* the I; that all that is not-I *is* for the I only; it is only through its relation to an I that the not-I obtains all of the determinations of this a priori being; that, however, all of these determinations, in so far as they can be known a priori, become absolutely necessary upon the mere condition of a relation between the not-I and any I at all.

EPW, 73–74; *SW I*, 20

Fichte again lauds Reinhold for clearing the path upon which he views himself as making further advances. He first praises Reinhold for arguing that philosophy requires a first principle. Second, he shows his agreement with Reinhold that one needs to discover the keystone to the system of critical philosophy in order to establish said system. For Reinhold, that keystone was the fact of consciousness, namely, the fact that consciousness is of representations. While Fichte agrees that this is a fact,²² he holds that it is not the keystone of critical philosophy. For Fichte, that keystone is the act of the I, which in this passage, he further expresses in the proposition 'I am'.

But what about other contenders for first principle in the *Aenesidemus Review*, for example, the principle of identity, the 'I' alone, or the I and not-I taken together? I will now rule out these options in turn. First, on my interpretation of the following passage, which follows directly upon the previously-cited passage, Fichte subordinates the principle of identity to the intellectual activity of the I:

From this it would follow that the notion of a thing in itself, to the extent that this is supposed to be a not-I which is not opposed to any I, is self-contradictory, and that the thing is actually constituted in itself in just that way in which it must be thought to be constituted by any conceivable intelligence (i.e., by any being which thinks in accordance with the principle of identity and contradiction). It would also follow that what is logically true for any intellect which is conceivable by a finite intellect is at the same time true in reality and that there is no other truth than this.

EPW, 74; *SW I*, 20

Here Fichte explains that all cognition thought by any conceivable intelligence is determined by the principle of identity and contradiction. For him, this

22 For arguments on behalf of the view that Fichte thinks that consciousness is representational, a view that I agree with, see Messina (2011).

means that the intelligence applies these principles to whatever it thinks, and their use is dependent upon the intelligence. What is the difference between placing the principle of identity above and subordinating it to the intellectual activity of the I? If the principle of identity were higher than the intellectual activity of the I in the philosophical system, then it could be used to determine the reality of objects external to any relation to the I. By contrast, when subsumed under the I, the principle of identity can only reign over whatever can come in relation to the I. The difference is thus one of scope and limits.

If we consider the scope of philosophy in light of the earlier-cited passage, in which Fichte discusses the keystone of philosophy, we notice that the 'I am' and not-I are only valid in relation to the I. Now let us tie this idea of the scope of philosophy to Fichte's suggestion, which I cited earlier, that the concepts comprising Reinhold's principle of consciousness be determined by the *material validity* of the principles of identity and contradiction. On my interpretation, this means that the concepts Reinhold adduces to explain how a representation is brought forth indeed need to be determined by the principles of identity and contradiction. However, on this view, these principles are *not* considered as they may be applied to an object external to any relation to the I. Rather, they are considered as they must be applied to anything that is in relation to the I.²³

Furthermore, the I alone cannot be the first principle, as I see it, because it is not coherent with Fichte's suggestion that the first principle of philosophy express an act. While the 'I' refers to the intellectual subject, 'I am' includes a verb, and therefore, denotes the *activity* of the intellectual subject. Therefore, 'I' alone cannot be the first principle if we are to take seriously Fichte's suggestion that this principle express an act.

Finally, if we were to say that Fichte's first principle is the I together with the not-I, then we would be claiming that the two are interdependent. However, on my interpretation, Fichte denies this to be the case. First, the pure act of positing stands above the not-I. This is the case because this act does not depend upon the not-I, but the not-I can only be brought about by this act. As I interpret Fichte, the pure act of the I is only dependent on the not-I when we begin to talk about a real cognition of this act, that is, when the act becomes an object of cognition for the I. For example, when I cognise myself as the thinking subject in

23 In other words, the concepts comprising Reinhold's principle of consciousness do not need to be determined by the *formal validity* of the principles of identity and contradiction. With this, I view Fichte as following Kant's distinction between formal and material logical principles. See, for example, Kant's distinction between types of logical principles within the context of his discussion of formal and material truth (A59/B84).

'I think that the leaf is green and yellow'. In this example, the I is a conscious object for itself: it is a not-I. However, when Fichte first proposes that his first principle could express an act, he is referring to a pre-conscious act. Second, Fichte relates everything to the I; he relates the not-I, as well as the proposition 'I am' to the I. Thus, on my interpretation, Fichte establishes a clear hierarchy between the I and the not-I.

How do Fichte's claims in the *Aenesidemus Review* about his first principle, as I have identified it in this paper, relate to Reinhold's criteria for the starting point of philosophy? Along with being *a priori*, and prior to all other *a priori* elements of the human mind, following Reinhold, Fichte holds that the first principle of philosophy must be a material first principle.²⁴

However, Fichte also deviates from Reinhold's most cherished criterion, namely, that in order to avoid circularity, the first principle of philosophy must be self-evident. Although Fichte holds that the 'I am' is that which is most immediate to the thinking subject, he does not think that this principle is self-evident:

The mind is a noumenon insofar as it is the ultimate foundation for any particular forms of thought at all. It is a transcendental idea insofar as these forms of thought are considered to be unconditionally necessary laws. But it is a transcendental idea which is distinguished from all other transcendental ideas by the fact that it is realized through intellectual intuition, through the I am, and indeed, through the I simply am, because I am.

EPW 70; SW I, 16

On my interpretation, Fichte here admits that in order to guarantee the truth of 'I am' in a real cognition and, therewith, to justify this proposition as the first *real* principle of philosophy, we need intellectual intuition. Accordingly, on my understanding, the act of the I, which is expressed in this principle, must

24 Fichte also seems to support Reinhold's criterion that a first principle be universally accepted because he asserts: "that philosophy has until now lacked a highest, universally valid (*allgemeingeltend*) principle (*Grundsatz*), and that it can only be raised to the rank of a science after establishing such a principle" (daß es der Philosophie bisher an einem obersten allgemeingeltenden Grundsatz gemangelt habe, und daß sie nur nach Aufstellung eines solchen zum Range einer Wissenschaft sich werde erheben können), J.G. Fichte, *Eigene Meditationen*, GA 11/3, 27. Furthermore, as David W. Wood explains, in the *Eigene Meditationen*, all of Fichte's attempts at a first principle revolve around students consciously intuiting their own I (2012, 136). To my mind, this performative aspect of Fichte's first principle recalls Reinhold's universal acceptance criterion.

become an object for the I. In so doing, on Fichte's view, it becomes empirical.²⁵ However, since the 'I am' is initially understood in a pre-conscious sense, such that Fichte does not make what he views as the same mistake that Reinhold made by abstracting his first principle from consciousness of a representation, this principle must be justified in a later stage of the deduction.²⁶ Therefore, on my interpretation, against Reinhold, Fichte's first principle is grounded by a virtuous circle.

This brings me back to the claim of this paper; on my view, in the *Aenesidemus Review*, while Fichte puts forth a first principle of philosophy, he does not yet provide its requisite proof. As I have explained, Fichte only suggests that the proposition 'I am', which expresses a *Tathandlung*, is the first principle of philosophy. On my interpretation, this suggestion does not indicate an uncertainty on Fichte's part regarding which principle is the first in his system of philosophy, but rather it indicates an awareness of the fact that he has not yet demonstrated it in real cognition. In this sense, I view Fichte as outlining a clear plan for the *Wissenschaftslehre* in his *Aenesidemus Review*, one that he only completes in the 1794 *Grundlage*.

5 Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have argued that Fichte asserts a first principle in the *Aenesidemus Review*, but that he does not yet provide its requisite demonstration. By way of conclusion, I would like to add a speculative connection between Reinhold's principle of consciousness and Fichte's *Tathandlung*.

When Fichte suggests that the first principle could be a *Tathandlung* instead of a *Tatsache*, on my interpretation, he proposes to simplify the principle of consciousness by paring away the cumbersome elements that involve its being a fact. With this, he gives precedence to the activities of identifying and opposing, as announced at the beginning of his *Review* when he muses that those

25 See further "I am – does it reach (*gelangen*) consciousness? Yes. However, it does not reach empirical but rather pure consciousness. Furthermore, it is itself pure consciousness. As soon as one wants to prove (*beweisen*) it in some way, one forces it down (*herabnötigen*) to empirical consciousness" (ich bin – gelangt es zum Bewußtseyn? Ja; aber nicht zum empirischen; sondern zum reinen: und es ist selbst das reine Bewußtseyn. Sobald man es auf irgend eine Art beweisen will, so nöthigt man es zum empirischen herab), J.G. Fichte, *Eigene Meditationen*, GA 11/3, 144.

26 See further: "The first and highest facts do not themselves reach (*gelangen*) consciousness. The highest fact that reaches consciousness is indeed the Reinholdian" (Die ersten u. höchsten Facta selbst gelangen nicht zum Bewußtseyn; das höchste, was zum Bewußtseyn gelangt, ist wohl das Reinholdsche), J.G. Fichte, *Eigene Meditationen*, GA 11/3, 25.

elements of the principle of consciousness, namely, 'distinguishing' and 'relating', might need to be determined "by the material validity of the principle of identity and opposition" (EPW, 62; SW I, 6). On my somewhat speculative interpretation, Fichte's I replaces the subject element, the not-I replaces the 'object', and the activity of the I will determine the relating and distinguishing activity that eventually brings forth a representation of which the thinking subject can be conscious.²⁷

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27 See further: "1) I and not-I are opposed. 2) Opposed things are unified (are facts) in a third thing and are differentiated from the third thing" (1) Ich u. Nicht-Ich werden entgegengesetzt. 2.) Entgegengesetzte Dinge vereinigt (sey Thatsache,) in einem 3ten. u. das dritte unterschieden), J.G. Fichte, *Eigene Meditationen*, GA II/3, 48.

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