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FICHTE'S ORIGINAL INSIGHT*

Dieter Henrich

Translated by David R. Lachterman

"Self-consciousness" is the basic <theme and guiding> principle of Fichte's thought. This alone explains why the present age has turned a deaf ear to him. Contemporary philosophy, like contemporary art, arose from a mistrust of impassioned and dramatic talk about the self; it replaced such talk with the concrete notion of "*Existenz*" and the objective analysis of language. Consequently, only the fading memory of a tradition sustains Fichte's fame; it often requires an effort to summon up admiration for that tradition itself.

For this reason it is difficult to present Fichte's thought not only as a historical document, but also as a genuine contribution to philosophical insight. However, this is what is intended in this essay. I want to show that at the start of his philosophical career Fichte made a discovery. In the first place, what he discovered was not so much a fact, but rather a difficulty, a

*This essay is the first of a series of undertakings in which Henrich has discussed philosophical problems in connection with a theory of self-consciousness. First published under the title "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik, Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer*, ed. Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Frankfurt am main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1966) pp. 188-232, the following year it appeared as a separate pamphlet from the same publisher. An abbreviated and modified version, "La decouverte de Fichte," appeared in *Revue de la metaphysique et de morale* 72 (1967): 154-169.

Quotations from Fichte have been rendered in approximate conformity with the glossary in Heath and Lach's translation *Fichte; The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970). In particular, their decision to translate *setzen* and *Setzung* as *posit* and *positing* has been followed, despite some unwarranted connotations. *Das Ich* is translated as *the Self*. Several of Henrich's references have been expanded or identified.

problem: He saw that "self-consciousness," which philosophy long before him had claimed to be the basis of knowledge, can only be conceived under conditions that had not been considered previously. This problem furnished the clue that guided his reflections even before he could formulate it explicitly. He came closer and closer to the solution as he advanced along the tortuous path of his Doctrine of Science. Even when he did not succeed in reaching a solution, he did advance the question; indeed, he advanced it to such an extent that even today to follow his route is still to learn something from him. Anyone seeking a suitable concept of "self-consciousness" must go back to Fichte and to the knowledge he achieved. Even today this knowledge is still not understood since his achievement was eclipsed too soon and quite unjustly by the condensed and even hermetic character of his rhetoric and by Hegel's overpowering shadow.

In the course of supporting this thesis I also want to contribute to a more sophisticated and accurate view of the relation of contemporary philosophy to Fichte and to Idealism in general. It is still widely believed that Fichte's thinking is historically linked with the excess and exorbitance of modern consciousness as it approached an imminent crisis. His theory of the "I" is taken to amount to an equation identifying the being of the self and its power. The growing pretension and presumption of subjectivity seem to be the sources of this theory. This process is thought to have started with Descartes and to have reached its climax in Fichte. Apart from this historical role, Fichte is taken to be important only for his contribution to the development of Hegel's dialectic.

An assessment of this sort throws no light on the actual content of his doctrines or on the motives that stimulated him. However, if both of these are illuminated, then people will no longer be under the impression that something important is being said when the alleged hubris of the modern mind is imputed to Fichte. This imputation itself is the fruit of a self-deceptive present age continually and ardently needing to define itself by way of opposition to its origins. In doing so, it fails to recognize what paved the way for it, and to whom it is permanently indebted for any self-understanding it might achieve. Anyone who makes his way into the real issue that occupied Fichte will no longer be convinced by this sweeping diagnosis of his philosophy or by a more general diagnosis, which sees in Nietzsche's equation of nihilism with the Will-to-Power, the supreme philosophical expression of the modern world and regards Fichte's doctrine of the absolute Self as preparing the way toward it. Fichte's original insight, therefore, is interesting and valuable because of its bearing on an important theme of philosophical theory; but more important, what is at stake here is whether a philosophy can be worked out in harmony with the basic aspects of contemporary consciousness.

In what follows, this latter concern will nonetheless retreat into the background. The difficulties in broaching the main issue of Fichte's thought

are great enough. In large part these are the result of the condition of his texts. Fichte himself released only a few of these to the public. In only one of them *The Doctrine of Science* of 1794, does he develop the foundation of his philosophy in detail. Nonetheless, what we are justified in saying about all Fichte's lecture-courses also holds true of this one text, namely, that he modified his conception in the course of writing it down. Accordingly, Fichte met every attempt to pin him down to the letter of his works by advising the reader to view them from the viewpoint of the whole, since the detailed exposition is almost always faulty. Even in his final years he thought that he could grasp and expound on the idea of the Doctrine of Science far more clearly than he ever had. In such circumstances it is easy to understand why there has not yet been a discussion dealing in a genuinely philosophical way with the issues Fichte raises; we might surmise that even if fate had been kinder to his posthumous influence, it would have been difficult for such a discussion to take place earlier. The scene was dominated by general expositions, interpretations focused on Hegel, and learned biographies dealing with the agitated ambience of Fichte's own age. Analyses such as those presented by Gueroult and Gurwitsch scarcely met with any response and found no followers.¹

The most that can be achieved at present is no more than a preparation for future understanding. Perhaps half of Fichte's written work is still undeciphered literary remains. The edition on which we have to rely mainly furnishes versions of the Doctrine of Science that were worked over by Fichte's son. For this reason no interpretation can rely on editorially secure

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1. G. Gurwitsch, *Fichtes System der konkreten Ethik* (Tübingen, 1924); M. Guerolt, *L'évolution et la structure de la Doctrine de la Science* (Paris, 1930). <Since the original publication of this essay a series of new works have appeared that are interpretations of Fichte and also works of philosophy; for example Wolfgang Janke, *Fichte: Sein und Reflexion. Grundlagen der kritischen Vernunft* (Berlin, 1970), and Hans Rademacher, *Fichtes Begriff des Absoluten* (Frankfort, 1970).>
<In the meantime many volumes of the Johann Gottlieb Fichte-Gesamtausgabe of the Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften have appeared, edited by Reinhard Lauth and others. These volumes, however, constitute at present only a small portion of Fichte's collected works. In addition, the volumes of this Academy-edition print the volume and page numbers of the Immanuel Hermann Fichte edition in the margins. Thus it is possible and, for the time being, even necessary to rely on this old edition. Study-editions of a few important versions of the Doctrine of Science which have not yet appeared in the Academy-edition have been published in the *Philosophische Bibliothek* of the Felix Meiner Verlag: *Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre, Aus der Jahren 1801/02*, ed. R. Lauth (Munich, 1977) and *Die Wissenschaftslehre. Zweiter Vortrag in Jahre 1804*, ed. R. Lauth and Joachim Widmann (Munich, 1975). See also *Erste Wissenschaftslehre von 1804*, ed. H. Gliwitzky (Stuttgart. 1969).>

texts. This is another reason for heeding Fichte's recommendation to proceed from the idea of the whole.

Thus, for several reasons, the following analysis takes its bearings more from the issue than from the texts. I shall try to interpret and discuss Fichte's original insight as a contribution to the theory of self-consciousness. In the course of this it will also emerge that the development of the Doctrine of Science can and must be interpreted as the progressive analysis of a concept of the Self. If an interpreter fails to understand this progress, he can do little to further historical interpretations of Fichte's work and life. In particular, he will not be able to take a firm position on the notorious question of whether, and in what sense, a fundamental change occurs in the course of his thinking. However, historical interpretation and explanation of texts are important tasks in their own right. After having begun by disregarding them, I want at the end to contribute something toward resolving them.

I

We can divide the formation of a theory of self-consciousness into several historical stages. Fichte comes at the beginning of the third stage. After a prehistory stretching from late antiquity into the early modern age, Descartes was the first to make the Self the basic principle and theme of philosophy. He found in the Self the evidentiary basis of all possible knowledge. Leibniz went further and saw in self-consciousness the model for the basic metaphysical concepts of force and substance. In this way it became the basis, not only of the certainty, but also of the content of ontology. Afterward Locke taught that the term "I" signifies only an act of self-identification. This blocked the possibility of taking ontological concepts obtained from self-consciousness and applying them retroactively to the definition of self-consciousness. Leibniz's Self "which is so full of meaning" had become a riddle without place; Hume proclaimed his doubts about its very existence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was still following Locke when he asserted that self-consciousness is the presupposition behind the connection we produce in making judgments. Thanks to Rousseau the Self became the basis of logic. Kant was following Rousseau's lead when he made the Self the "highest point" of transcendental philosophy to which "the whole of logic and, conformably therewith," the theory of the knowledge of objects "must be affixed" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 134, note).

Self-consciousness is the common and distinctive theme of all these theories. Furthermore, in most of them self-consciousness is understood as a principle that allows us to ground and establish other knowledge. Because those who held such theories were predominantly interested in its grounding-function, they did not investigate what self-consciousness is in its own right or ask how its own nature can be conceived. They investigated instead its relations to other items, relations in virtue of which it is a

grounding-principle; thus, in Descartes' case, self-consciousness was the basis of evidence, in Leibniz, of categories, in Rousseau and Kant, of judgments.

Despite this restricted field of investigation and the diversity among their theses, all of these theories are guided by the very same idea of the structure of the Self. Kant articulated this idea and occasionally discussed it: he conceives the Self as that act in which the knowing subject, abstracting from all particular objects, turns back into itself and in this way becomes aware of its constant unity with itself. Self-consciousness is unique inasmuch as there is no distinction, here, between the one who thinks and the object of his thought, between the one who possesses something and what he possesses. Where the Self is, both the subject and this subject as its own object are present. Also, we can never grasp the Self as subject in isolation in the way we can any other thing, whatever it might be. When we are thinking of it we have already presupposed the consciousness of it in our own thought and thus have turned the subject-self of which we are thinking into an object. Thus we can only revolve around it in a perpetual circle. This means that self-consciousness, considered on its own, does not amplify or extend our knowledge of reality. The knower already contains what he grasps when he turns back into himself.²

That self-consciousness does perform this act of turning back can easily be inferred, Kant thinks, from its structure. "The expression 'I think (this object)' already shows that I, in respect to the representation [of 'I'], am not passive."³ The word "I" refers to someone who is performing an act. Now, if this subject is itself the object of its own knowledge, then it is so precisely in virtue of its active subjectivity.

All Kant's predecessors would have seen propositions such as these as explications of their own ideas of self-consciousness. To reduce their theory to a short formula, they held that the essence of the Self is reflection. This theory begins by assuming a subject of thinking and emphasizes that this subject stands in a constant relationship to itself. It then goes on to assert that this relationship is a result of the subject's making itself into its own object; in other words, the activity of representing, which is originally related to objects, is turned back upon itself and in this way produces the unique case of an identity between the activity and the result of the activity.⁴

Although this idea seems intuitively clear it is in fact just the opposite. It is not the Self but the theory of the Self as reflection that continually turns in a

2. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*; A 364/ B 404; A 355.

3. *Reflexion* 4220. <See Benno Erdman, *Reflexionen Kants zur kritischen Philosophie. Aus Kants handschriftlichen Aufzeichnungen*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Fries Verlag, 1884).>

4. To be sure, two other elements of a more comprehensive theory of self-consciousness were before Kant's eyes in addition to the reflection theory. On the one hand, he posed the question: What kind of knowledge is it that the Self

circle. This is brought home by the perplexity into which the theory falls as soon as we pose some simple questions. We want to raise two such questions; the first is one Fichte himself raised, thereby inaugurating a new stage in the history of theories of self-consciousness, a stage in which the structure of the Self becomes the essential theme.

Our first question, then, is this: The theory that the Self is reflection talks about a Subject-Self that knows itself by entering into relation to itself, that is, by turning itself back into itself. How can this subject be conceived? If we assume that it is really the Self when it functions as the subject, then it is obvious that we are turning in a circle and are presupposing what we want to explain. For we can only speak of an "I" where a subject has apprehended itself, where an ego says "I" to itself. Self-consciousness is distinguished from all other forms of knowledge precisely by the fact that one and the same item presents itself in self-consciousness in a double guise. Whatever act might bring this consciousness about, only the total result, in which the "I" gains possession and knowledge of itself, can be called "I." However, *this* act can by no means be described as reflection. For reflection can only mean that an item of knowledge which is already at hand is properly apprehended and thereby made explicit! However, the reflection-theory of the self wants to explain the origin, not the clarity, of self-consciousness. Because this is what it claims to do, it is circular. It can only ignore this circle; it can never escape from it: I am meant to be the one who recollects himself by reflecting on himself. Thus anyone who sets reflection into motion must himself already be both the knower and the known. The subject of reflection on its own thereby satisfies the whole equation "I = I." Yet, reflection alone was supposed to bring about this equation.

We cannot avoid this result by assuming that the Subject-Self is really not to be thought of as Self, in other words, that self-consciousness first comes

obtains by reverting to itself? The immediacy of its self-possession suggests taking it as a mode of *intuition*, while activity, rationality, and reflexivity speak in favor of taking it as *conceptual* knowledge. Yet, reflexivity excludes the idea of the Self as intuition just as decisively as the immediacy with which it possesses itself excludes giving it a conceptual character. Since, according to Kant, there can only be two types of knowledge, either intuitive or conceptual, in the end he <simply expressed his own predicament> by saying that the "I" is a "transcendental consciousness" (Reflection 5661). (On the other hand, Kant also distinguishes between the Self as consciousness and the experience we have of the Self. The difference between them is the basis of his distinction between pure and empirical apperception. It leads, furthermore, to the problem of connecting consciousness of the *existence* of the "I" with the self-awareness of a cognitive subject. These two elements are peculiar to Kant's doctrine and cannot be separated from it. If we enter into them in greater detail, then difficulties quickly arise, especially if we try to make them compatible with the reflection theory of the Self. In any event, that theory remains the dominant idea of the Self, even in the Critical Philosophy. It formulates the idea of the essence of self-consciousness shared by an entire epoch.

about as the *product* of reflection. Such an attempt to escape the circle soon creates problems for if the Subject-Self is really something other than the Self, then it can never achieve the unity of consciousness, namely, the identity "I = I," by means of reflection. Self-consciousness is the identity of its *relata*. If their relation is interpreted via reflection and thus as an achievement through which the act of reflection becomes conscious of itself, then the subject of the act must either already be the Self, or the equation "I = I" will never hold. If the Subject-Self is not the Self, then neither can the Self, of which we come to have knowledge, that is, the Object-Self, ever be identical with it. Thus, the reflection theory of self-consciousness either presupposes the phenomenon of Self without clarifying it, or totally invalidates it.

A second question will disclose the same defect in this theory.⁵ The reflection-theory assumes that the Self obtains knowledge of itself by turning back and entering into a relation to itself. Now, if we are to explain consciousness of the identity "I-I," it is not enough that any subject whatsoever gain an explicit consciousness of any object whatsoever. This subject must also *know* that its object is identical with itself. It cannot appeal to some third term for knowledge of this identity; the phenomenon of self-consciousness exhibits an immediate relation to itself, a self-relation, as I shall call it. The theory that the Self is reflection confirms, conforming with this phenomenon, that the Self grasps itself *only* through its return back into itself. Reflection means self-relation, not relation to a third term that informs us: "Here someone has grasped himself." Thus Mephistopheles is delighted when the drunkards in Auerbach's Cellar place their knives on their noses, which they mistake for sweet grapes.⁶ The Self, however, is its own devil from whom Mephistopheles can keep nothing back. It knows itself in an original way, not through exhortations or clever inferences. But how can self-consciousness know that it has grasped itself, if an Object-Self has come about only via the Self's act of reflection? Obviously it can know this only if it already knew itself before. For only on the basis of previous knowledge is it possible for self-consciousness to say: "What I am grasping is I myself." But, if it already knows itself, then it already knows that "I = I." And thus the theory of reflection begs the question once again. It presupposes that the problem which it has been faced with has been completely solved at the start.

Fichte was the first philosopher to recognize this circle and to draw consequences from it. In his opinion everyone who falls victim to it makes the mistake of representing the Self merely as one object among others. Fichte's view can be elucidated in the following way: The reflection theory does indeed begin with a Subject-Self; but it then proceeds to think of it only as a force capable of acting upon itself. With this the theory gives up the distinctive sense of subjectivity that belongs to self-consciousness. The latter is in-

5. Compare H. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. 1 (Bonn, 1964), pp. 249. f.

terpreted instead in terms of a matter-of-fact activity that really belongs in the sphere of objects.ⁱⁱⁱ Someone who thinks of this activity is thus presupposing all along a thinking subject (namely, his own), for which this activity is an object. Hence, he forgets consider the Subject-Self in its own right and actually to bring into focus a self-relation that entails self-knowledge. He speaks about it instead from the standpoint of knowledge that has not yet become its own theme and focus. For just this reason he does not find it strange that he is interpreting the Self as the kind of reflexive relation characteristic of the activity of objects, but not of the act of knowing. This blindness is what first makes it possible to use the model of reflection. It hides from view the fact that this model is circular, and that this circularity is inescapable within this model.

"We become . . . conscious of the consciousness of our consciousness only by making the latter a second time into an object, thereby obtaining consciousness of our consciousness, and so on *ad infinitum*. In this way, however, our consciousness is not explained, or there is consequently no consciousness at all, if one assumes it to be a state of mind or an object and thus always presupposes a subject, but never finds it. This sophistry lies at the heart of all systems hitherto, including the Kantian."⁶

Needless to say, the reflection-theory does not merely rest upon an inappropriate style of thought; it has some basis in the actual phenomenon of the Self. It does fix its sights on a feature of the Self that really does manifest itself: Knowledge, imprisoned in its experiences and beliefs concerning what it encounters in the world, breaks out of this seemingly all-embracing worldliness and becomes a theme and a question to itself. When it does so, it knows that it alone can make itself sure of itself, and consequently, that it is the subject of its own consciousness of being a Self. We can very well describe this act as reflection. It also makes good sense to look for what makes any other sort of reflection possible. Nonetheless, it still presupposes selfhood in a more primordial sense. This primordial selfhood first allows a Self to work itself free from its connection with the world and to grasp itself explicitly as what it must have been previously, namely, knowledge that what it is, is knowing subjectivity. The possibility of reflection must be understood on the basis of this primordial essence of the Self. The theory of reflection proceeds in the opposite direction and explains the Self as an instance of the reflective act. Consequently, it interprets the primordial, but obscure essence of the Self with the help of the manifest, but secondary phenomenon of reflection.

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6. *Nachlass*, 356. Fichte's works, (ed. I. H. Fichte) hereafter will be cited as *WW*, followed by volume number. J. G. Fichte, *Schriften aus den Jahren 1790-1800*, ed. Hans Jacob (Berlin, 1937), will be cited hereafter as *Nl.* (for *Nachgelassene Schriften*).
 7. *Opus Postumum*, Akademieausgabe, Vol. 20, p. 270.

Fichte's insight has far-reaching consequences. When we watch how Descartes goes about obtaining the foundation of metaphysics from the *ego cogito*, we can sense his astonishment over this unique mode of knowledge. The expressive and univocal nature of "*ce Moi*" provoked Leibniz' astonishment at the incomparable nature of philosophical certainty. Kant spoke of the Self in the same tone. He sees in it the index of a "a sublime faculty, elevated far above all sensory intuition," a faculty that "looks out onto an infinity of representations and concepts it has itself fashioned."⁷ "Sublimity" means for him an experience that goes beyond the limits of comprehensibility.

Nonetheless, Kant did not infer from his own astonishment that the Self is enigmatic or hides some secret. From the viewpoint of finite, worldly knowledge the Self does indeed seem purely and simply astonishing. In itself, however, it is completely clear and the most familiar thing of all, once the nature of knowledge has been clarified. The Self alone makes it possible for us to become familiar with any other item. For this reason, Kant did not see it as philosophy's task to interpret the structure of the Self, any more than Descartes and Leibniz did, nor does he perceive the problems encountered in a way of thinking that *does* understand why this is philosophy's task.

Fichte gave the theory of self-consciousness an entirely new status. A gap, perhaps even an abyss, opens up between the "Self" and what makes the Self intelligible. From now on philosophy's task is to traverse this gap. The reflection theory, which expects the phenomenon of the Self to furnish its own explanation, far from bringing this gap fully into view, ends up making it disappear. We must, therefore, look for another theory that can arrive at the basis of the phenomenon of selfhood. We cannot find it until self-consciousness has been more completely described and we have experienced the perplexity produced by any attempt to interpret it.

Fichte did experience this perplexity. In a certain sense it can be said that he never freed himself from it. The stages in the development of the Doctrine of Science are so many attempts to work out a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon, the problematic character of which he had come to understand; in other words, his chief aim was to grasp the possibility and the inner coherence of this phenomenon.

He articulated the key ideas of such a theory in three formulas: his effort to establish these governs the central part of his work. Each formula marks a stage in the history of his basic idea; moreover, each in turn revises its predecessors. At the same time they all result from his opposition to the reflection theory of self-consciousness. Fichte's language steadfastly resists the implications of this model and therefore has to make use of many metaphors that are very difficult to understand. What he says seems to show that our language favors the secondary or derivative interpretation of the Self. Language hides both the true state of affairs and the difficulties we

have in understanding it behind the facade of allegedly transparent turns of speech. Philosophy must work out a theory of self-consciousness in opposition to the language we quite naturally use in speaking about the Self, while nonetheless continuing to use language. This explains why Fichte's task was so difficult and why he never succeeded in elaborating his theory with complete clarity, even though this was his goal. Consequently, rather than communicating his discovery, he hid it in texts that are among the most opaque and refractory in the entire tradition. The interpreter has to expend the same effort Fichte applied to the issue itself if he wants to free this discovery from the thicket of incomplete manuscripts.

II

The basic notion of the *Doctrine of Science* in 1794 occurs in the form of the thesis: "The Self posits itself absolutely and unconditionally."⁸ With this thesis Fichte gave extreme expression to the pathos of freedom. His contemporaries took the thesis to be justifying the ideals of the French Revolution, to be expressing the decision to bring the world under the control of reason, or, finally, as the Jacobins' principle, to tolerate nothing other than one's own work. Human liberation and the triumph of philosophical theory seemed to them to have been one and the same event.

It is true that Fichte's life was made up of such experiences and also that his thinking arose from them. What made him into a philosopher was the desire to understand freedom. However, it was not simply by an act of will that he became a thinker to whom we too can still listen. The Revolution did not become theory thanks to the trumpet-blast of Fichte's talk about the absolute Self, but through the idea proclaimed in it. This idea must, and can, speak for itself.

If we hear only the pathos in the formula "the Self posits itself," then Fichte's insight is distorted. If we pay attention to the latter, then the pathos is eliminated and the formula takes on the look of a dilemma. Fichte's formula does not refer to some matter-of-fact that is as clear as daylight, a fact to which one would have only to point in order to be on firm ground. Rather, the formula comes to hand when we consider that we cannot avoid assuming a ground or basis that vanishes when we try to grasp what all of us see when we come to know ourselves by means of the tiny word "I."

The formula "the Self posits itself" is the negative image of the reflection model whose defects Fichte had recognized.⁹ The reflection-theory began

8. WW 1, p. 98; or *Fichte, Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, with the *First and Second Introductions*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 99, hereafter cited as Heath and Lachs.

9. Fichte and Wolfgang Cramer share a concern about the transition from a cri-

with a Subject-Self and was therefore compelled to presuppose its existence. However, it became evident that no self-consciousness becomes intelligible when the subject turns its intentional focus back upon itself. This suggests that we should replace the presupposition of this defective theory with its opposite. Accordingly, there would not be any Subject-Self prior to self-consciousness; rather, the subject, too, first emerges at the same time as the whole consciousness expressed in the identity "I=I." The whole of self-consciousness cannot be derived from the subject-factor. Hence, it will not emerge from any one of its factors, but simultaneously with them all, in a trice, as it were, or, ἐξαίφνης; as Plato had already taught in the case of the highest knowledge.^{iv}

When Fichte says that the Self posits itself, he has in mind this immediacy, the fact that the entire Self emerges all at once. "It is only through this act and exclusively by means of it, that is, by acting upon another act, with no other act of any kind preceding this latter act, that the Self originally comes to be for itself."¹⁰ Thus we have no basis for objecting that *something* which does the positing must precede the act of positing. The Self *is* the positing, it *is* the act through which it comes to be for itself, through which a Subject-Self becomes aware of itself as Object-Self.

The Self's act of positing is a positing pure and simple. Consequently, it does not take place by means of something already posited beforehand or with reference to anything of that sort. "The Self posits itself absolutely, that is, without any mediation."¹¹ Some other mode of positing might merely cause an act of knowing to become self-conscious; in that case, it would yield the same result as reflection and would leave the Self equally unintelligible. Hence, the Self must be thought of as a distinctive and unique instance of absolute positing. Fichte's term "positing," which he never defined, is well suited to formulate both these points at once: First, something emerges absolutely without having previously existed and, second, in emerging it enters into a relation with knowledge. What posits *itself* absolutely comes to be for itself without requiring any further basis.

This shows that there is more to be seen in the thesis that the self posits itself absolutely than hubris and presumption; otherwise, we could not even begin to credit Fichte with a serious concern for truth. It can be read as the intelligible attempt to explain something whose existence no one can doubt—the reality of self-consciousness. Even in his later philosophy, in which he abandoned the high pathos of his earlier works, Fichte never had occasion to doubt that the considerations which led to the early version of

tique of theories that consider knowledge as a relation to a theory of knowledge as production. See Cramer, *Die Monade* (Stuttgart, 1960), p. 56, 60, and *Das Grundproblem der philosophie. Beilage zu "Diskus,"* (Frankfurt am main, s.d.), p. 59, fn.

10. *WW* 1, p. 459; or Heath and Lachs, p. 34.

11. *Nl*, p. 357.

the *Doctrine of Science* were legitimate. Nonetheless, he thoroughly revised this theory. We should look for the reasons behind this revision in the defects attached to the theory itself, not in the external motives. We shall find them by investigating more closely the structure of a Self that is nothing other than the act of positing itself.

We must first of all take note of a formal distinction between the theory of "positing" and the reflection theory of the Self: The act of positing also implies a relation, that is, the relation between an act of production and its product; however, while the *relata* of reflection are of equal value, as regards their content, the opposite is true in the case of "positing." The Subject-Self is identical with the Object-Self. The reflection-theory is not obliged to assign any significance to these terms over and above the distinct positions they hold in the cognitive relation. To be sure, it also fails to make intelligible how this relation comes about. Each of the two terms already presupposes the relation. It is quite different in the case of positing. The act of production is here taken to be a real activity^(e), while the product is taken to be the knowledge of this act. Fichte does assert that both become actual simultaneously. The activity does not exist unless its product emerges at the same time. The activity is related to the product not as an impetus to the movement it causes, but as an electrical current to its magnetic field. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the activity must be distinguished from its product. This product alone is henceforth counted as knowledge; on the other hand, the activity can be interpreted as the basis of knowledge only if this basis is also included in the knowledge, that is, if the activity is posited "for itself."

This is one of the assumptions behind Fichte's subsequent transformation of his theory. The fact that knowledge and the basis of knowledge within self-consciousness are distinct from one another at all is what makes it possible for us to separate them radically from one another, so that the basis of knowledge within the Self is no longer the object that is known. Fichte took this radical step only after making several intermediate attempts. In the 1794 version of the doctrine he still draws no consequences from the difference between the *relata* in the concept of the Self. This suggests that "Self" is present wherever an active impulse turns back upon itself and in this way becomes an "action performed upon itself." In this case we are in fact considering the knowledge involved in self-consciousness as the encounter between the act turned back upon itself and its own activity. We can see that elements of the reflection theory are now insinuating themselves into Fichte's counter-proposal. The reflexive relation is not taken to be the product of positing, even though the concept of the positing actually requires this; instead, it appears as the actual performance of the act of positing. In proposing this Fichte is still loyal to his counter-model to the reflection theory, inasmuch as he does not start by bringing the agent as knower into the picture. Knowing is still meant to emerge only from the act of production. However, we do not yet see how we can use the productive act's encounter with itself to make this knowledge intelligible. Were we to try to in-

interpret the selfhood of the Self in terms of this act of production, however, we would have to do this.

Fichte has serious reasons for asserting that the action which leads to consciousness of the Self is the real object of this consciousness. The experience we have when achieving self-consciousness suggests these reasons. We can be required to achieve this.

This means, however, that we presume that this achievement is in our power absolutely and at all times. Insofar as we actually attain it, we know that the achievement has to be attributed to ourselves alone. No one else can ever say "I" to us and make any sense whatever. Self-consciousness is consciousness of an act. The formula, "the self posits itself," tries to accommodate this circumstance as thoroughly as possible. If what we are aware of when we act were not the actual reality of this act, then how could such consciousness be called self-consciousness?

This argument has considerable persuasive force; nonetheless it is spurious. A consciousness that can be summoned or entreated cannot become actual solely by virtue of this summons. Its entire structure must already be present, implicitly or potentially. Whom would the summons reach if the case stood differently? What is already present surely has to be such as to allow that act of appropriation which the summons tries to initiate. It might also be the case that an activity is already inherent in the very person who is summoned. This activity might explain why the appropriation has the character of an act. However, even in that case the act of appropriation remains a result made possible by that other, prior, activity. The selfhood of the Self is prior to any appropriation. If the experience of being a Self^{vi} implies an activity, this does not mean that selfhood and activity are identical. We reached a similar result in the case of reflection. The possibility of reflection, although it is based on the Self, does not explain the Self.

There is another argument that lends greater support to the assertion that to be a Self is to perform an act. In the preceding discussion the Self's activity showed up as one of its essential *possibilities*. We cannot speak this way if it should turn out that the demand for an act, that is, for active self-appropriation, is inherent in every instance of being a Self. If the Self is essentially subject to a demand, then its relationship to the act is rooted in its own primordial nature and is more than a mere possibility. Fichte was convinced that this is how matters stand. This conviction did not immediately find a well-defined place within his theory of self-consciousness.

III

We have seen that Fichte's earlier theory that the Self posits itself successfully avoids the circularity of the reflection-theory. His theory does not presuppose the whole Self, while trying to explain the whole in terms of one of its factors. Nonetheless, it points to what lies behind self-knowledge,

without leading us back to it. This defect did not remain hidden from Fichte for very long. He corrected it by expanding the first basic formula of the Doctrine of Science. Starting in 1797 it reads: "The Self posits itself absolutely *as* positing itself."¹²

Anyone who is aware of the difficulties in the first formula sees right away that the new addition emphasizes that the result of the act of positing is an instance of knowledge. The "as" here means the same as the Greek $\hat{\eta}$, the particle of representation < as in Aristotle's phrase $\tau\acute{o}\ \acute{o}\nu\ \hat{\eta}\ \acute{o}\nu$ (being *qua* being). > All intentional meaning means something in a definite way; every instance of explicit knowledge knows something about a specific item and therefore recognizes it "as" this. When Fichte stresses that only the new formula in its entirety fits the essence of the Self, he is saying that this essence can only be understood as a mode of knowing. "The intuition of which we are speaking here, is a self-positing *as* positing . . . in no way, however, a mere positing."¹³ Self-determination is a universal phenomenon of Nature. Life even displays an activity that reverts into itself;¹⁴ but, neither Nature nor Life is the same as the Self. Thus, the specific difference between Nature and Freedom hinges on this one property, namely, that the positing of the Self posits itself "as" positing and is thereby knowledge of itself.

In order to show that his formula must be expanded, Fichte uses the same argument he had used against the circularity in the reflection theory: If the Self were not for itself, then it would have to be for an Other. Then this Other would actually be the Self. We would never arrive at a self-determination that possesses knowledge of the Self.

This line of argument is compelling; the expansion of the basic formula was indeed unavoidable. However, the expanded formula leads to a new problem. The particle of representation "as" designates a three-term relation: Something (1) represents something (2) as something (3). We shall have to ask what roles these three factors are meant to play in the Self that posits itself.

The old formula already left ample room for questions of this sort, although it did not force them upon us. Our best procedure would be to begin by posing these new questions in terms of the old formula. According to the latter, the Self is supposed to posit itself. Let us assume that the familiar difficulty did not arise and, therefore, that what results from the Self's active production could count as knowledge. What sort of knowledge would this be? Would it be the intuitive presence of the agent of production

12. WW /, p. 528. <As far as the actual wording is concerned, this formula already appears in the 1794 *Doctrine of Science*. The reason for asserting that it is to be assigned to the 1797 *Doctrine of Science* is discussed on pp. ff. below. This formula already appears in the 1794–1795 *Doctrine of Science*.>

13. Ibid.

14. WW 1, p. 274; or Heath and Lachs, p. 241.

or an idea of the Self that is actively producing? The second case is obviously excluded. For the mere idea of the Self lacks what every self-consciousness possesses, namely, the certainty of its own existence. If the Self were to posit itself only as the concept of itself, then it would be essentially incapable of gaining any certainty of its *own* existence. Every Self would find its realization in the notion of selfhood in general, without ever being sure in any one case that a Self, to say nothing of its own Self, actually exists. F. H. Jacobi suspected that Fichte's Self is a phantom.¹⁵ The idea that the product of the Self is a mere concept would turn the Self into the absolute phantom, so to speak. This suggests that we should take the positing of the Self to be an intuition of itself. Nonetheless, this option faces difficulties of its own. Intuitions without concepts are blind. The present case shows once again how widely this Kantian principle can be applied. Were we to interpret self-knowledge only as a matter of the Self's looking in upon itself, we would be locking it up in Auerbach's cellar. How can it ever come to understand that it catches sight of itself, if it cannot also have an understanding that it is a Self and, thus, possess a concept of itself? The second variant of the circularity in the reflection theory prohibits us from interpreting the Self solely as an intuition of itself.

If we were forced to choose between these two possibilities, namely, that the Self posits itself either as a concept or an intuition, then we would without hesitation decide in favor of the lesser paradox and hold that the Self is an intuition of itself. However, the expanded formula releases us from this necessity: "The Self posits itself absolutely *as* positing itself." This formula implies that the Self possesses knowledge of what it is. The Self recognizes the act of positing; moreover, what it posits is precisely this knowledge. Hence we must assume that the Self includes a conceptual factor and an intuitive factor. Thanks to the first, it recognizes itself in terms of its *essence*; thanks to the second it can know that it is *actual* as something positing. Thus, self-consciousness is intuition and concept at the same time. "This is the characteristic feature of this system in comparison even with the Kantian system."¹⁶

Fichte's first formula was based on the insight that we cannot derive self-consciousness from one of its factors or moments alone.^{vii} The product of positing must emerge at the same time that the act of producing is performed. The expanded formula gives special emphasis to the immediacy implied in the phrase "at the same time," for it asserts that the Self has no knowledge of itself unless the intuition and the concept of the Self are inextricably bound

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15. Jacobi to Fichte, in *Die Schriften zu J.G. Fichte's Atheismusstreit*, ed. H. Lindau (Munich, 1912), p. 189; or in Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe*, Series 3, Vol. 3, pp. 224-55.
 16. *Nl*, p. 365.

together with one another. They are "equiprimordial."¹⁷ When Fichte says that the Self is "Subject-Object."¹⁸ he wants to stress the intensity and immediacy of the Self's internal unity.

It looks as though Fichte has now succeeded in making his counter-proposal to the reflection theory of the Self both complete and unassailable. The Self's activity results in a self-contained item of knowledge, not merely in a rebounding against itself. Nonetheless, Fichte's growing awareness of the problem which led him to the new formula forced him to revise the theory further. This second revision goes even further than the first. Two arguments make it clear why it was necessary:

1. The productive force of the positing Self must accomplish more on the new formula than on the old. It must generate in a single instant both self-possession and self-knowledge. We cannot explain *how* it can do this, since every instance of knowledge already exhibits the very duality of concept and intuition that we are trying to explain. Now, however, the Self is supposed to posit itself "as" itself. If the Self is that productive force, then it would have *to be able* to see *how* the twofold character of its self-knowledge arises from it. In light of Fichte's own reflections, this raises the surprising and, in many ways, decisive question of whether the Self, in the final account, *is* defined in terms of "positing itself."

2. What has just become evident on the side of knowledge can be shown equally well on the side of production. The product here is knowledge as the union of an intuition and a concept of the relevant activity. If knowledge is completely determined by these two factors, and if they are the product of an act of production, must this act also be what is known in that product? The formula "the self posits itself" requires that this be the case. Once the second variant of this formula has been developed, however, it turns out that it too must be brought under scrutiny.

In this way, we form an idea of an active ground existing prior to the active Self, a ground that explains the equiprimordial unity of the factors in the Self, but is not itself present in the Self. The term "Self" refers not to this ground, but only to its result. For "Self" means to be for oneself. However, the Self does not focus explicitly on what makes its unity possible, even though this latter is its source. Such an idea would be in harmony with the two arguments that force us to establish a distinction between the Self as product and the Self as activity, a distinction that Fichte had not foreseen up to this time. This idea would have still another advantage: if we interpret a

17. *WW* 2, p. 442. This term was introduced into contemporary thought by Husserl. In his work, as in Heidegger's, it has a polemical accent addressed against the deductive claims of Idealism. This makes it all the more remarkable that it was first used by Fichte and, indeed in his explanation of the structure of the self.

18. The expression occurs in this form for the first time in *WW* 2, pp. 444, 448.

Self in this way, we can establish an equivalence between the conceptual and the intuitive factors. That is, if the Object-Self *is* the primordially productive activity, priority in the knowing Self rightly belongs to intuition, since the productive force would be given in intuition. The sole contribution of the concept is to permit us to know this force for what it is. In the case of a Self, in which the concept and the intuition of the Self are equivalent representations of a single activity, we could determine the intuitive activity itself by means of the concept, not only as an idea, but also in its mode of activity. This possibility, moreover, is quite encouraging as far as the foundations of practical philosophy are concerned, since moral consciousness is the experience of an idea that results in an activity and is therefore something quite different from conceptual knowledge of that activity.

IV

For these reasons, in the *Doctrine of Science* of 1801, Fichte substituted a new formula for the original one. From now on self-consciousness is: "an activity in which an eye is inserted."^{viii} This formula uses a metaphor when it speaks of the "eye" of the Self. This does not mean that in using it Fichte retreats into speculative poetry. He is simply trying to communicate a sophisticated insight that cannot be formulated in traditional language, whether philosophical or popular.

Fichte's first formula was a rejoinder to the theory that the Self consists in reflection. The new formula, the third in this sequence, must also be understood as a rejoinder to Fichte's own philosophical past. It expressly contradicts the interpretation Fichte gave his basic idea in his early doctrine.

To see this, we need only notice that knowledge of the Self, according to the first formula, was "posited", where now this knowledge is "*inserted*" or "*installed*." The passive voice has taken over from the active. This indicates that we have to assume yet another activity which is prior to the activity that has become insightful by virtue of the eye; it is through this prior activity that the latter becomes an activity endowed with sight. However, we have not yet fully characterized the nature of the contrast between this and the earlier doctrine. The use of the passive voice would at first merely imply that an eye *comes to be* inserted into the activity. Yet, starting in 1801, Fichte typically forms the passive with "be" and not with "become." An eye *is* inserted into the activity. This nuance sharpens the sense of his new formula. It emphasizes that the activity can never be found unless the eye is also present: If the eye *comes to be* inserted, then the activity takes place before it contains the eye. If the eye *is* inserted, then activity and eye together form a single essence. The eye is related to the act not as an ornament is to a body, but as the heart is to life. Fichte's motives are still those originally in play in the first form of his insight, the same motives that became especially prominent in the second formula: The factors of the self cannot be separated from

one another. Every mediation in the Self presupposes the unity of its factors; thus, the theory must make sure that this unity does not break apart as a result of the definitions and deductions it furnishes.

In the later *Doctrine of Science* this unity of the factors in the Self forms the basis for a process that Fichte had already described as "reciprocal activity" quite some time before. On the one hand, it is through the eye that we gain knowledge of the act that is apprehended and interpreted. As such it is the basis of cognition. On the other hand, the eye has "taken root" in the act itself, but not in the form of a hindrance, inserted like a filling in a tooth or even like a thorn in the flesh. In that case, the act would be hindered by its vision. On the contrary, the act is a clear-sighted act that is positively determined by its eye; the eye conducts and steers the act by means of the concept. In this way the Self becomes the basis of ethical conduct. The formula for the activity of the eye can therefore also be put this way: "Force, in to which an eye is inserted, which is indissociable from it; force of an eye, this is the character of the Self and of intellectual activity."^{19 ix}

Until now I have been presenting the formula for the activity of the eye as a counter-sketch to the first formula. It was in fact fashioned in an attempt to eliminate the defects in the latter. However, these defects first became evident once Fichte had developed the second formula, which had already removed certain weaknesses in the first. Thus the gain achieved in the second formula must be conserved in the third. We must now consider whether this does occur, and, if so, in what way.

The first formula of 1794 had two parts. One part referred to an activity; the other, to its product. The third formula as well only mentioned two terms: "activity" and "eye." Nonetheless, these are interpreted in such a way that the greater richness of the second formula is immediately entailed. The "as" of representation, the peculiar feature of the 1797 formula, can easily be obtained from these two terms. All we need to do is to determine the sense of the phrase "being inserted" a bit more precisely. We might think that this eye is inserted in the act just as an ivory eye is inserted in the marble head of a statue. In this case, the look of the eye would proceed outward from the act into the distance. Fichte, however, wants to say that the eye is inserted in the act in such a way that its look is directed upon the act itself. "Inserted" in this context also means "submerged within." Thus act and eye become a world unto themselves. The activity is clear and bright in virtue of the eye's look. This light which illumines the activity does not break into it from outside, nor does it stream forth from it. The activity of the eye is a world-of-light with impermeable boundaries. Because of this, every spatial

19. *WW* 11, p. 18. The passages containing the eye formula in the 1801 *Doctrine of Science* (*WW* 2, pp. 19, 37) occur in a somewhat different context. This difference corresponds to an alteration in the system of the *Doctrine of Science* from which we can abstract in the present connection.

model fails, together with any language fashioned to describe the spatial world.

It is only by thinking of the activity of the eye in this way that we can acquire an idea of the Self and its being for itself. It then becomes clear that the eye which catches sight of the activity must at the same time see itself. For the activity is essentially an activity of the eye; thus, the activity can only be seen at the same time as the eye is seen. The idea of a look that sees itself constantly fascinated Fichte from 1801 until his death in 1814. He wanted to express it in increasingly clear terms as *the* problem of philosophy and to develop its far-reaching consequences. Evidence for this comes from the following still-unpublished passage in a manuscript that was probably written in the summer of 1812.²⁰ "August 18. Holidays. In a dream a task shone forth quite brightly to me. Seeing is an eye seeing itself . . . Self-seeing eye = reflection of a life, of self-manifestation^x which remains confined in itself and its facticity." In other words, the relationship the Self has to itselfⁱ amounts to knowledge existing for itself and manifest to itself; at the same time, however, this knowledge remains a matter of fact which can be used to explain everything else except its own existence. It continues to exist without being able to penetrate its existence with its own light. If the eye is going to be able to recognize itself, to be truly "for itself," then its look must also include the same factors as "positing" did according to the second formula: The eye must have in its sight the activity-of-the-eye *as* such. Thus an intuitive factor and a conceptual factor must be distinguishable within its look. This look is (a) the activity, insofar as (b) it is experienced as being intuitively present and thus as actual. It is, furthermore (c) the activity conceived (d) according to its specific concept. It is a matter of controversy as to whether this last distinction is indispensable or whether it is sufficient to specify three factors. Fichte constantly brings up four factors. In any event, it is only after we have expanded the interpretation of the third formula in this way that we can think of a reciprocal determination taking place in the Self, as a result of which it is primordially both theoretical and practical self-consciousness.

Accordingly, the eye inserted in the activity includes intuition and concept at the same time. Only then can it be wholly inward to the act and, at the same time, to its cognitive relation to itself; only then can it be understood as self-consciousness. Fichte's third formula, combined with the four factors involved in positing *as* positing, now seems to be free of errors.

Nevertheless, just this combination conceals a new problem. To speak of the look that sees itself and in each case is already this act of seeing does in-

20. In the Berlin Fichte-manuscripts, Kapsel 4, 7. I am very much obliged to Dr. Hans Jacob of the Fichte-Archiv of the *Bayerische Akadem der Wissenschaften* for his abundant help. We still have not reached sufficient clarity concerning the deciphering of the words in parentheses in the text.

deed preserve the original unity of the factors of the Self. The new formula stresses the Self's relation to itself and, like the first formula, makes this the crucial feature of the Self.

Can it, however, elucidate this self-relation? It would have to do so by using the four elements contained in the consciousness of the look *as* look. Now, these moments are certainly indispensable; but do they also sufficiently explain the relation consciousness has to itself? This in no way seems to be the case. A concept that determines an intuitive datum can naturally refer explicitly to what is intuitively given. However, this in no way yields a *self*-relation of the intuition. Rather, the concept presupposes its subject, that is, the subject that thinks it and uses it to understand the intuition. The concept by itself will never suffice to make this subject the very datum given in the intuition. Furthermore, a concept clearly does not become self-referring by means of the corresponding intuition. This is a trivial point. The distinction between givenness and consciousness of the given "as" such and such was no more than the presupposition behind the Self's relation to itself; in no way did it already define the Self. Self-consciousness exists by means of this distinction, but not as an arbitrary instance of it.

We might now think that it is sufficient to call the look of the eye, a look directed upon itself, a special case in which the relation of intuition and concept becomes a self-relation. This is not enough, however. We must also show how the self-relation of the eye's activity in this case is at work both in the intuition and in the concept. The relationship itself, and not only the content, must exhibit the peculiar character of this self-relation. If this were not the case, then it would remain quite arbitrary as to how the eye's activity knows itself; the means by which it achieves knowledge of itself would not be in its possession or included within its unified and coherent structure. The result would be a situation that, more than any other, Fichte seeks to avoid: The Self would not be for itself, but only for a higher Self. But, in that case, self-consciousness would not be possible at all. Fichte thinks that he is doing justice to this necessity when he adds a fifth factor to the four mentioned previously: (e) the immediately reciprocal relation between intuition and concept. If the knower gains insight into any state of affairs whatsoever, then he elucidates the intuition of this through a concept or he gives content to the concept of it through an intuition. The concept is never related to the intuition in virtue of itself, or vice versa. This *is* what happens, however, in the case of self-consciousness: A concept is always actualized from the start and grasps itself as such; intuition is insightful recognition which does not require any mediation by a concept. This decisive peculiarity intrinsically characterizes the intuition and the concept of the Self. However, since intuition and concept have been introduced as separate features of self-consciousness, the character of selfhood peculiar to them must also be

counted as a separate factor. Consequently, self-consciousness is henceforth thought of as the synthesis of five factors.²¹

In articulating this notion, Fichte once again employs *via negationis*, the method of definition by exclusion of the opposite: The relation between concept and intuition is meant to be the opposite of what it ordinarily is. The essence of the Self should be interpreted in this way. Also, in this way we really do make reference to the unmistakable uniqueness of the essence of the Self. However, is the latter so defined that its inner constitution becomes completely intelligible?

The answer to this question has to be "No." If we did understand the essence of the Self, then we would have to be able to reconstruct the whole starting from any one of its factors. For example, we would have to be able to see how the "I" develops a knowledge of itself by becoming conscious of the concept. However, this is impossible. Let us assume that a particular concept is well known. Furthermore, let it be granted that this concept determines an intuition and also that this intuition is given. In this case, our conceptual knowledge would remain incapable of confirming that it grasps *itself* in the given intuition, unless it was previously familiar with itself in some other way. Since this alternative must be excluded in the case of self-consciousness, the expectation that the Self is to be understood in terms of its conceptual character is not fulfilled. The second sort of circularity we found in the reflection theory of the Self reappears here on an entirely different ground: If the Self does not already know itself, then it can never achieve knowledge of itself.

Fichte did not pay the same attention to this objection that he gave to the first. The earlier objection had shown that the reflection-theory of the Self wrongly presupposes that the whole Self is present before that act of reflection, by virtue of which the Self is supposed to come about, is performed. Fichte put his own theory beyond the reach of this objection. Nonetheless, the second objection is not charging that every time we speak of the Self a self-relation is already present. Its point is rather that the Self must be able to know itself, in every self-relation, *as* the Self. It seems that such cognition can in every case only be a re-cognition, so that the argument continually turns in a circle. It is altogether possible that this circularity counts as an objection even to those theories which have eliminated the other defects of the reflection theory.

21. Fichte also calls this pentadic structure the "synthetic period" (*Nl*, p. 529). It first appears in the *Doctrine of Science* of 1798. The following are important passages for the synthetic pentad: *WW* 2, p. 35; *WW* 10, pp. 48, 121, 296-297, 350 ff.

The traps set by this circle cannot be avoided unless the path Fichte took with his second formula is followed. His attention, however, was not focused upon these traps. His attention was occupied, instead, by the task of conceiving the Self without having to presuppose another, higher subject. This remains the case. We never find discussions in his work that try to do complete justice to the second objection and to the first. This sets a limit to Fichte's contribution to the theory of self-consciousness.

Nevertheless we can formulate a solution to this problem with means supplied by Fichte. The solution at the same time opens up interesting theoretical prospects. We already took the first step toward the solution when we showed that the reciprocal relation between the concept and the intuition of the Self must be attributed to self-consciousness without any mediation. If we begin by trying to build up this relationship from one of its members, its reflexive character can never be attained and we can never understand how self-consciousness exists for itself. We can easily infer from this that the relation between intuition and concept must have a special cognitive character of its own. Indeed, this relation seems to be the factor thanks to which self-consciousness is a form of knowledge at all. If it did not play this role, that of the cognitive core of the Self, how could self-consciousness be conceived as knowledge and indeed as immediate knowledge? We would then have to say that our knowledge of ourselves is inferred; hence the Self would not be given to itself, but would only have an indirect acquaintance with itself. This, of course, is logically possible; but, this conclusion is patently contrary to the phenomenon of the Self, which is the immediate and certain presupposition of all inferred knowledge.

Now it is certainly paradoxical to assume a state of knowledge in which there is no knowing subject. It seems clear that we can only speak of knowledge if we can also designate the agent who has knowledge. However, if the Self of the subject already has knowledge, then this allegedly self-evident principle cannot hold true without restriction. That is, if every item of knowledge really had a subject, the subject itself could not be an item of knowledge. Otherwise we would have to assume a subject of this subject and thus surrender to the infinite regress that Fichte so much feared. The idea of the Self would sink into the abyss. The paradox of subject-less knowing is preferable to that. If we take this paradox seriously, it is not astonishing that when we reach the central point, perhaps even the ground, of all knowing, we can no longer find the structures familiar to us from the way we describe cognition of individual states of affairs or derivative insights. People who try to work out a philosophical theory of the Self must consider the possibility that forms of explication germane to the world must be given up when we make our way back to the basic principles. If we regard such an idea as meaningless, then we will never reach the phenomenon "Self" and will never be able to advance the problems that the phenomenon poses. We will have

to chart our course by our prejudices, rather than by these problems themselves.

Needless to say, this is not meant as a defense of each and every assertion, including Fichte's, which ascribes some paradoxical knowledge to the Self. We have to specify the particular status of this mode of knowing. In Fichte's theory, it is the immediate reciprocal relation between concept and intuition in activity that by its essence possesses self-knowledge. He has three ways of designating this knowledge: He calls it the "as," the "self," or the "through" of knowledge.^{xii} Thus, the Self's immediate knowledge first makes possible the "as" of the concept. For by virtue of this immediate self-knowledge, intuition and concept stand immediately in relation to one another *within* the Self; they do not merely refer indirectly to a Self.²² This relation can also be designated as the "self" of Selfhood, because by virtue of it the Self is related to itself in a self-sufficient way and has no need of any external standpoint.²³ We can also say that in knowledge of this kind the experience that the Self exists (intuition) and the consciousness of the Self "as" the Self (concept) depend mutually on one another, so that each *is* through or by means of the other; this knowledge, however, is "the absolute 'through' of both, the image of their absolute, living connection."²⁴ In any case this knowledge is for Fichte "Unity, Light," a knowledge that is "qualitatively absolute, something that can only be accomplished, but can in no way be grasped conceptually."²⁵ In using expressions such as these Fichte is still maintaining that the Self is "intellectual intuition." This thesis already occupied an important position in the first *Doctrine of Science*. It had excited much opposition and disagreement. Now its sense has become much less ambiguous: It was previously unclear as to whether intellectual intuition is simply our knowledge of the Self or is identical with the Self. Both propositions can be asserted at the same time and an objective connection between both must obviously be presumed. However, there can be no doubt that the phrase "intellectual intuition" refers primarily to the inner constitution of the Self and its mode of knowing.

Before we begin raising critical questions about Fichte's position, we have to grant that the position itself is quite different from an arbitrary thesis that covers over an unsolved difficulty. The thesis emerged over several stages of reflection, each in turn constituting a revision of its predecessors. Each stage corrected current ideas about the essence of the Self and made more profound conceptions which are nonetheless still insufficient. Step by step the peculiar, incomparable constitution of self-consciousness was brought into

22. *WW* 10, p. 357.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

view. However, an obscurity enters the scene along with this clarification: Although the constitution of self-knowledge came to be more and more distinctly apprehended, it also proved to be more and more difficult to grasp conceptually. We were forced to reject one image of the Self after another; this process ended by becoming an essential part of our knowledge of the Self. The propositions Fichte ultimately uses when he discusses the Self merely express in a paradoxical way his recognition that the Self eludes our attempts to construe its nature by means of concepts. This does not yet give us a sufficient criterion for an appropriate way of talking about the Self. We could even begin to suspect that this series of paradoxical expressions, each in turn outstripping the other, has not yet been exhausted. Indeed, the series could be infinite. In that case the phenomenon "Self" would make a laughingstock of all our efforts to define it. We could then ask ourselves whether the phenomenon itself has an infinite number of meanings or whether it is only the disproportion between the subject of knowledge and knowledge that is infinite. Fichte nevertheless has a second criterion at his disposal: Self-consciousness is properly defined by these paradoxical expressions if they allow us to interpret the system of knowledge derived from the Self. The Self is the subject of knowledge; hence, it must contain conditions that establish the inner connectedness of all knowledge. Anyone who can successfully develop this connection must have said something suitable about the Self, even though he cannot give his discourse either deductive form or make it into the description of an univocal fact. Thus the system of the Doctrine of Science is simultaneously an attempt to justify its own foundation.

Nonetheless, Fichte had good grounds for holding that this theory is inadequate. The unity of the Self would not be possible if the factors comprising its essence were not "inwardly" and indissolubly fitted together with one another and determined by one another. However, Fichte never succeeded in making it theoretically clear and unambiguous how they fit together. Even his later presentations of the *Doctrine of Science* are full of uncertainties. His plan to publish a new presentation of the *Doctrine of Science*, a plan he first announced in 1801, had to be postponed again and again, until it finally fell into oblivion.

Apart from the defects of which Fichte himself was aware, we should note that his doctrine of the Self makes use of certain terminological distinctions as though they were obvious, although they are in fact simply taken over from Kantian philosophy. For instance, we very much miss any analyses of the meaning of "intuition" and "concept," even though this is the fundamental antithesis, which, in 1796, becomes part of the formula for self-consciousness. Whether we use the methods developed by Hegel, by Husserlian phenomenology or by logical analysis, we can look forward to having an explanation of the conditions under which concepts such as these can be legitimately applied; Fichte was not in a position to furnish this sort

of explanation. In this way more light would be thrown on the structure that Fichte, to his permanent credit, discovered and developed.

Fichte persisted in the belief that at bottom only a single insight needs to be attributed to the Doctrine of Science. He wanted his doctrine, which was often presented in apodictic, harsh, and even violent terms, to force us to adopt the viewpoint made possible by this insight, and to show us that we can remain loyal to this insight when we set about constructing the system of philosophical knowledge. Furthermore, Fichte was greatly concerned in making this basic idea as clear as possible, just as clear as it had become for him. It seemed to him that once someone has grasped it he will devote all his efforts to reflecting upon it; he was also convinced that the insight will convey to him an unshakable certainty of the preeminence and dignity of a freedom accompanied by knowledge. Certainty of this kind does not, however, bring the serenity we get from indubitable knowledge. It only awakens a more intense desire to get to the root of this certainty in a theory that itself always remains open to amendment. What is closest to us, we ourselves, our self-knowledge, is the most obscure thing of all when we try to achieve discursive knowledge of ourselves. Fichte recorded this vital experience in a short manuscript. Even though many of the statements he makes in his lectures might be suspected of dissemblance, what he says here is immune to such suspicions. This manuscript is a series of three sonnets, written perhaps in 1812 and not destined for publication. They are the equivalent of a philosophical biography written in the language of the *Doctrine of Science*. In the second sonnet Fichte asks what gave him the power to pursue his philosophy of freedom without being diverted by the world's confused course, or by the crises in his personal life. The answer reads:

This it is. Since my look calmly projected into
 Urania's eye
 the deep, self-clear, blue, calm, pure flame of light;
 Since then this eye rests in my depths
 and *is* my being—the eternal One
lives in my life, *sees* in my seeing.²⁶

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26. Two of the three sonnets were twice published in Fichte's works (*WW* 8, pp. 461–62; *WW* 11, pp. 347–48), together with the correct argument that Fichte "almost never expressed the essence of his philosophy more clearly." The version of the third sonnet in volume 11 is different from that in volume 8. The latter is, however, a verbatim rendition of the original, as is shown by a comparison with the manuscript of the third sonnet, the only manuscript at present accessible to us. The dating results from the paper, which stems from the Ebart paper factory. Fichte used this kind of paper in 1812 for the manuscripts of his lectures and, in all probability, had it at his disposal only a little before or later. The report of his dream (see p. 000, *supra*) is also written on this paper (according to the friendly information of Dr. Jacob).

Insight into the essence of Selfhood guides the Doctrine of Science. The essence of Selfhood is the eye's activity. Comprehending this activity was the task that "shone forth quite brightly" to the dreaming Fichte in the same year. When he speaks of this experience, he once again introduces obscure metaphors, this time in a poem whose stock of metaphors is quite paltry and conventional and thus easy to fathom. The eye of Urania, the Muse of astronomy and hence of the natural knowledge of the world, is the subject that possesses finite knowledge. Fichte became aware within this subject of that other kind of seeing which does not proceed out into the world, but diffuses a light in the eye itself, a light that lights up nothing, but is clear and bright to itself. We cannot kindle this light. For wherever we are, it is already burning. Thus we must be calm when it is shining: Nevertheless, we cannot catch sight of it if we are inactive. This light is not to be found in the absence of our vision. It is not caused by us, yet it is to be found only in the enactment of the "I." Thus we can say that the "flame of light" was "calmly projected" into the knowing subject.^{xiii}

The sonnet talks about the insight that set Fichte on his path, using the language of the later versions of the *Doctrine of Science*. We know that Fichte first spoke of this insight in a quite different way. However, this does not exclude the possibility that even at that time he had the same issue before him, although his interpretation did not yet do it justice. "The unconditioned element in the Self," to which Fichte's earliest texts in theoretical philosophy lead,²⁷ becomes, twenty years later, nothing other than the "force in which an eye is inserted," the key concept of the later *Doctrine of Science*.

Fichte thought at first that the self-sufficiency of this active knowledge could only be interpreted as the act of freedom; however, he subsequently convinced himself that it is an act that is always, all along, in possession of knowledge. It cannot become knowledge through its own efforts. It follows that this act is the ultimate state of affairs which we can come to know as we make our way back to the fundamental principles; it is not the ultimate theme or topic of our inquiry. The "I" is not its own ground, nor is it free of the need for any further grounding. We must distinguish within it factors which, although distinct, are nonetheless indissolubly connected. We must, therefore, be allowed to search for the origin of this connection.

V

In the later version of his *Doctrine of Science*, Fichte had the idea of grounding the Self in an Absolute; we cannot reach such a ground if we start from any other conception and try to make our way toward it. It might

27. *WW* 8, p. 425.

readily seem that this notion contradicts the crucial content of the early theory, namely, to be a call to freedom and the source of the conviction that man can depend on himself alone. The merit of Kant's critical philosophy, according to Fichte, was that it disclosed the reality of freedom. He was grateful until his death to his teacher Kant for having freed him from the determinism that dominated his youthful thinking. The ground of freedom—is that not a self-contradiction?

Many have thought so. They have interpreted the path Fichte took as one of accommodation, representing a falling-off from his great period. In fact, Fichte would hardly have decided to interpret freedom itself as the result of something other than freedom, if a new experience had not made him open to this conclusion. A controversy over the charge of atheism and, especially, a letter he received from Jacobi while he was in the midst of a difficult situation, set in motion a process that accelerated the transformation of his doctrine. We do not know if and when it would have been transformed had circumstances been different. A philosophy meant to convince others is dependent on the experiences of the person to whom it is evident and on the effect and the echo it finds in others. Nonetheless, Fichte did not deceive either himself or his audience when he later asserted, as often as possible, that the *Doctrine of Science* always remained the same at bottom. All the transformations it underwent simply brought greater clarity to the distinctive character and logical consistency of his original insight.

The thesis that freedom has a ground must not be confused with the assertion that freedom is illusory and that all action is guided only by drives and prejudices. The ground of freedom, for Fichte, is different from any external cause of actions, which is then only putatively free. In the *Doctrine of Science* freedom *itself* is understood in terms of a possibility that it does not itself control. Accordingly, this ground is, in turn, the condition that makes possible the autonomy of freedom. Moreover, this ground is not a goal that hovers before consciousness, inviting its free service. In the latter case, no matter how subtle our arguments might be, we would be thinking of freedom as a means to this end. For Fichte, freedom remains self-determination and does not occur for the sake of something else. Furthermore, the unity of the Self is not to be interpreted either causally or teleologically, any more than freedom is. Our rational existence is not based on something natural in us, or on something spiritual outside of us. Our own essence, the simple and still puzzling knowledge expressed in the word "I," arises from a ground that does not hinder freedom, but rather, makes it possible. It institutes a self-relation, by allowing a force to exist whose essence consists in vision. It is possible, indeed it is necessary, for us to interrogate freedom, without assigning philosophy a standpoint outside of freedom. In asserting this thesis Fichte was defending himself against Jacobi's philosophy of feeling and Schelling's philosophy of nature, his two

most important opponents. His later theory is no more a surrender of freedom than his early doctrine was testimony to man's hubris and vanity.

Kant had taught that such a ground of freedom is inconceivable, that the very question as to whether it exists is extravagant. Of course, he had his own ideas about such a ground, ideas incompatible with Fichte's. When he prohibited questions about the ground of freedom, he was thinking of a class of particular substances with the unusual property of being able to themselves *initiate* causal sequences. The ontology at work here is concerned more with finding confirmation in Newton's *Philosophia Naturalis* than in the inner constitution of the Self; it has not yet succeeded in making the Self its central theme. For Fichte "substance" is not a suitable name for the reality designated by "I," any more than it is for that condition on which the self rests and which we must take to be the source of its self-relation. Nonetheless, it makes good sense to think that when we try to get behind the power of vision^{xiv} belonging to the Self, our ideas are simply extended into a void. This power of vision itself already strains against the expressive limits of our cognitive language. This version of Fichte's doctrine would match very closely an experience characteristic of the modern world.

Fichte, however, was convinced that his theory can yield insight into the ground of the Self; according to him, the Self is the manifestation of God. It looks as though Fichte is now furnishing a cause for freedom in just the way Kant viewed it and which cannot really be brought into harmony with Fichte's basic insight. Yet he was not suffering a mental lapse when he offered this explanation. Fichte wants to make the essence of the Self precise and intelligible with the help of the concept of God. This takes place as follows: Self-consciousness is an intimate unity arising from an inconceivable ground which the Self does not control. At the same time, the Self makes itself manifest to itself.^{xv} It possesses itself *as* Self, and must acquire additional knowledge of itself in the course of performing its characteristic activity. Even the Doctrine of Science belongs, in the end, to the enactment of the Self. The result of this science which the Self has concerning itself is that to be a self is to be a unity emerging from a ground that the Self does not control. We must say, therefore, that this knowledge as well stems from the essence of the Self and that it appears on the scene when the Self completes itself. In this case we can interpret the Self as a *manifestation*. Even earlier it was a manifestation, but a manifestation of itself; now it makes manifest what grounds its *possibility* in advance of all knowledge. It has become clear that we cannot see directly into this grounding One. Now, however, we can understand it in terms of its effects. It allows selfhood, the essence of which is manifestation, to come into being, in order that it might become manifest *as* what cannot be grounded. Thus, this One manifests itself finally in the Self in the form of what manifests itself.²⁸ This is just what we mean when we

28. We should take note that, in this way, those characteristics are ascribed to the 'Absolute' which in 1797 were those of the Self.

speak of a living God.²⁹

We can see that God and the Self are not externally linked together in this theory. The *Doctrine of Science* of 1804, more than any other work, tries to mediate them in a *docta ignorantia* of God's essence. Even a reader who is not inclined to accept this doctrine can still marvel at its profundity and its consistency. It deserves a comprehensive interpretation.

VI

We have been reflecting on and elaborating Fichte's concept of the Self without considering either his total system or the philological problems of Fichte research. Nonetheless, one historical thesis ought to have been established in the course of the discussion, namely, that the path he took in moving from one version of the *Doctrine of Science* to the next is unified and that the sequence of the three formulas for self-consciousness is consistent. It makes sense for me to substantiate this thesis by referring to at least some aspects of the history of Fichte's development. These references are meant to show that this thesis would be confirmed, rather than refuted, by a detailed history of the motives behind the transformations of his work. They will also give us the opportunity to make the historical significance of this reconstruction more precise.

1. In the 1812 sonnet Fichte interpreted his own philosophical path as having begun with an original insight. Yet even here he did not say that he grasped the distinctive character, the importance, and the consequences of this insight from the first. Both of these facts correspond to what actually did take place. It was only later that Fichte succeeded in explicating his insight in a suitable way. Furthermore, he became aware of its genuine significance only a few years after it first appeared in his works. He came to it in the year 1797, at the latest, when he was writing the "Second Introduction" and the "Search for a New Presentation of the *Doctrine of Science*." However, these are probably simply a version of the improved presentation

29. This shows that Fichte's later theory leads to the idea of a ground that cannot be eliminated, while, on the other hand, it is totally different from a "necessary Concept of Reason" (Kant). Fichte shares this element of his theory with the ontological proof of God's existence. Fichte's *docta ignorantia*, however, unlike the ontological proof, does not allow us to describe our knowledge of God as knowledge of the real instantiation of a concept. This is to the advantage of Fichte's position since he can take one of the intentions of the ontological proof more seriously than even Schelling could; that is, Fichte can describe God as what is genuinely real in our knowledge and, prior to that, in our consciousness of ourselves as moral beings. This yields a connection between the traditional onto-theology and the doctrine of the primacy of practical reason. It can also bring to light the presuppositions common to these two positions, presuppositions that were influential early on, but remain obscure. See Dieter Henrich, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis* (Tübingen, 1960) and the comments on p. 266.

of the Doctrine of Science that Fichte had been giving in his lectures from 1796 on; we do not have either the manuscript or the student transcripts of this presentation. In these texts Fichte's awareness of the circular character of the reflection-theory and of his own counter-theory clearly emerges.³⁰ Next come the classical arguments in the introduction to the *Doctrine of Science* of 1798.³¹ Although they are preserved only in a transcript, they nonetheless contain a highly sophisticated and conscious critique of all prior philosophical accounts of self-consciousness.

The *Doctrine of Science* of 1794 does not have the same degree of clarity. According to it, the Self posits itself absolutely. This implies that we can assert the immediate unity of its factors. However, Fichte did not initially place any emphasis on this unity. Instead, the system of 1794 used a duality to explain how the Self is for itself, where this feature is still understood as a direct consequence of its self-positing; the duality in question is the opposition between an activity that proceeds *ad infinitum* and another activity opposed to it. This theory fell victim to Hegel's unremitting polemic. It was, however, the most evanescent element in Fichte's attempt to explain his position. It has already disappeared from the 1797 presentation. From then on Fichte defined the act of absolute positing precisely in terms of its consequences. To posit oneself means to be, without further mediation, object and subject at the same time.³² In this sense the act of positing can be called "Positing or Subject-Object," a term that Fichte first used in 1795.³³ It was only a little while later that this became the expression or a unity within the Self, a unity that does not require any mediation.

It can be shown that Fichte himself clearly recognized how unclear the 1794 *Doctrine of Science* was on just this issue. In 1802 he published a new edition of his first main work, expanding it only by a few additions and footnotes. The most important of these is added to Number 10 of the first section of part 1.³⁴ In this passage Fichte had originally discussed how the Self is essentially for itself. As the Doctrine of Science advanced further, it became clear to him that the genesis of this feature is not immediate; the activity of positing produces it only with the help of something opposed to it. The note abstracts from this and simply comments that the Self is *immediately* Subject-Object. By making this statement Fichte gives one chapter of his work an importance that it had not had in the original context. However, he had good reason to think that this was necessary.

3. Thus, Fichte's insight first emerged under conditions that are not identical with the arguments he later used to support it. The light in Urania's eye

30. *WW* 1, pp. 458-59; or Heath and Lachs, pp. 33-34).

31. *Nl*, p. 355.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

33. *WW* 2, p. 444.

34. *WW* 1, p. 98; or Heath and Lachs, p. 99, fn. 4).

does not appear as a result of his critique of the reflection-theory. Hence, we have not yet clarified the genesis of his insight. In fact we have not yet even touched upon this history. Concerning this important theme we will simply note here that the idea of the Doctrine of Science probably arose from a combination of the following three ideas: After the success of his *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (published in 1792) Fichte received a prestigious invitation to write reviews for the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*. This task forced him to come abreast of the current level of theoretical discussion and to spell out his own, unequivocal position. He worked out this position during the next half year and tried to substantiate it through the following arguments: (1) We can escape skeptical objections to Kantian philosophy if we pay attention to the fact that self-consciousness is not a substance and thus not an unknowable substance, but is knowledge and, indeed, unconditional knowledge.³⁵ (2) Moral philosophy, which must supply a proof of the reality of pure practical reason, can provide this proof only if it presupposes something unconditioned in consciousness. The refutation of theoretical skepticism must, therefore, employ the same means as the refutation of moral skepticism.³⁶ (3) The most authoritative contemporary attempt to construe Kant's doctrine as a system, that is, Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*,^{xvi} is merely a set of sophisms. It cannot be anything else, since Reinhold understands consciousness only as a relationship among distinct factors. His attempt to construct a theory of the categories of pure thought shows us that a fundamental philosophy is possible only if everything in our mind "hangs together on a single chain." The deduction of the categories has to rest upon this supreme unity. This suggests that we should look for this unity in the Self's unconditioned nature. The latter, however, is not this unity, if even it merely furnishes the final, insuperable evidence of a relationship. Consequently, the Self must be thought of as the opposite of a relationship among factors that are *already in existence*. The Self is an unconditioned act.

A manuscript is extant in which we can follow the genesis of Fichte's original insight more closely than we can that of any of his other basic philosophical ideas. Kabitz published short extracts from it;³⁷ it will soon be published in the critical edition, under the title "Some Meditations concerning Elementary Philosophy."

The early form of Fichte's Doctrine of Science is thus the result of his critical appropriation of Reinhold. Anyone acquainted with the 1793-94 *Meditations* will see the structure of Reinhold's work still shining through

35. WW 1, pp. 11, 16.

36. WW 8, p. 425.

37. See W. Kabitz, *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fichteschen Wissenschaftslehre* (Berlin, 1902), now published in full in *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. R. Lauth et al., series II, Vol. 3.

the pages of Fichte's *Grundlage*, written in the early summer of 1794. By criticizing the weaknesses of Reinhold's work and by exploring the question of how to found a system true to the spirit of Kant, Fichte was led to the idea of a Self that posits itself absolutely. Consequently, this idea did not begin as a stroke of genius, but was the result of an attempt to solve certain theoretical difficulties. Nonetheless, in that period this idea remained totally subordinate to the task of getting beyond Reinhold, in the hope of defending Kant against the skepticism of Schulze^{xvii} and thus insuring the primacy of practical reason at the same time. All the features attributed to the "absolute Self" can be understood if we keep this goal in mind. Fichte was not yet able to fix his sight, freely and independently of all contemporary questions, on the content of the insight he reached in this way. His students and the colleagues with whom he philosophized daily in Jena saw to it that he was soon able to do so. People were expecting him to spread the light of Kant's critical philosophy; at the same time he became the premier philosopher of the most cosmopolitan university of the day. He was surrounded by lively interest and passionate criticism. These would have stimulated even a man who was less bent on consistency and clarity than Fichte. Thus, Fichte's conception of his system was soon completely liberated from the models that Reinhold had originally furnished. He retained only the concept of the Self, the method for developing his system (not the method of its presentation), and many insights into subjective life. These became elements in Fichte's new presentation of his idea of a system, transmitted to us in the 1798 version of the *Doctrine of Science*.

We see that Fichte's original insight ushers in a new stage of reflection on the phenomenon of self-consciousness. Its genesis agrees quite nicely with this: Fichte achieved his insight by thinking through what Kant and Reinhold had done at the frontier of theoretical discussion of the Self as the principle of knowledge. However, he went on to push this insight beyond this frontier and to give it validity in its own right.

3. His new presentation of the Doctrine of Science expanded the formula of the Self: The Self posits itself absolutely *as* self-positing. We can quite readily survey the history leading up to this expansion. This addition of "as" follows objectively from an idea expressed in Fichte's review of Schulze's *Aenesidemus*: The faculty of representation exists *for* the faculty of representation.³⁸ The Self exists essentially for itself. It was only in 1798 that Fichte came to see that we can conclude from this that the Self possesses a twofold knowledge. His essays in the *Philosophische Journal* from the year 1797 still contain no hint of this. Fichte, however, did not straightaway draw even the weaker inference, namely, that each and every Self is explicitly in possession of itself.^{xviii} Had he done so, he would never have been able to talk

38. *WW* 1, p. 11.

about the Self striking against an obstacle or check that is supposed to put Self-consciousness into effect.

Nonetheless, the formula "The Self posits itself as positing" evolves logically out of the *Grundlage* of 1794. In this work Fichte teaches that since the Self is limited by a counter-positing, its own act of positing must take place in a twofold manner. The not-Self must be posited as limited by the Self; the Self, as determined by the not-Self.³⁹ The formula "positing as . . ." turns up here for the first time at the center of his thought. At first it means simply that the Self posits itself in a *determinate* and *particular* way, that is, not as Self in general. Moreover, the formula does not assert that this act of positing must lead to explicit consciousness of its peculiar nature. However, in the course of the work the formula does acquire this sense.⁴⁰ The act of positing, as it progresses, follows a course that corresponds to this sense; Fichte also calls this course "the law of reflection."⁴¹ The original act of positing is elucidated through a sequence of new acts of positing and is hereby brought to self-consciousness. In the practical part of the Doctrine of Science this law of reflection is in fact defined as the direct result of the concept of Self. Fichte writes: "The Self is not meant to posit itself merely for some intelligence outside of it; rather, it should posit itself for itself, it should posit itself as posited through itself."⁴² With this statement he reaches the 1797 formula. Nonetheless, this still does not become the basic formula for the whole Doctrine of Science. What it says is that the Self "should" posit itself as Self. This means that the Self *is* not already posited for itself all along.

4. "Force in which an eye is inserted,"—this third Fichtean formula also has its prehistory. We find the metaphor of the eye for the first time in the

39. *WW* 1, pp. 125, 127; or Heath and Lachs, pp. 122–23.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 223, 227; or Heath and Lachs, pp. 199; 202.

41. Attention should be called to Fichte's use of the term "reflection." According to the *Grundlage* of 1794 it is a law of the Self to reflect upon itself, that is, to make its positings conscious to itself. This law follows from the essence of the Self, namely, to posit itself as determined, but it does not hold good for the first act of positing in the absolute Self. It is principally Reinhold's 'Theory of Representation' and Fichte's *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre* (1795) that have the law of reflection as their methodological presupposition. From 1801 onward, the Self is also conceived of on the basis of reflection, but now in terms of a concept of reflection that is directly opposed to the model of the theory that we have called "The Theory of the Self as Reflection." The basic form of knowing "reflects itself in itself . . . it does not, properly speaking *do* this, rather, it *is* this." (*WW* 2, p. 41). Fichte also speaks of the "basic reflex" in contrast to the achievement of reflection; this occurs in a particularly emphatic way in his letter to Schelling, sent on 15 January, 1802. (Fichte, *Briefwechsel*, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. H. Schulz, vol. 2 [Leipzig, 1925], p. 350).

42. *WW* 1, p. 274; or Heath and Lachs, p. 241.

1798 *Doctrine of Science*. This text does rest on Fichte's new insight that each and every Self exists essentially "for itself." This is exactly what Fichte first means when he speaks of the Self as an eye. The context makes it clear that this eye is the antithesis of a mirror.⁴³ The image in the mirror is an image only for one who sees it. In the Self, however, the mirror itself sees, it has become an eye. Thus, the images in this mirror are not images of something else for someone else. Its images are images of its own act of vision and it is these that the viewer also perceives. They are of and for himself. "The Self of the Doctrine of Science is . . . a self-mirroring mirror, is an image of itself."

This metaphor is still quite different from what it becomes in 1801. What is missing is the idea that the eye is "inserted" into an act. This idea is at first still quite distant from Fichte. He still derives the eye from the act of the positing Self. Two passages from the *System der Sittenlehre* (1798) and *The Vocation of Man* (1800) show us how he came to the new formula.⁴⁴ In these passages Fichte does say that the eye is inserted. The context in which this occurs is clearest in the text of the *Sittenlehre*. There the Self, as soon as it has an experience of itself, discovers in itself a drive to self-activity. This drive is blind; nonetheless, since it is a drive belonging to the Self, it must be appropriated to the Self that perceives it. This occurs when the Self brings this drive under the dominion of the concept and thereby makes it depend on the idea it has itself engendered. The *Sittenlehre* expresses this as follows: The forceful, conscious Self "tears itself away" from what is unconsciously given to it and so submits itself to the "sway of the concept."⁴⁵

In *The Vocation of Man* Fichte makes use of the metaphor of the eye in the same context: "I . . . insert, as it were, eyes into the blind drive." Here again, it is still the Self that is responsible for the drive's having eyes. This corresponds to the idea expressed in the *Sittenlehre*. However, the Self brings about a situation in which eye and drive are intimately bound together with one another; it can easily be forgotten that this situation derives from an act performed by the Self. Drive and eye make up an active world complete in itself.^{xix} We cannot claim that Fichte intended to teach this in *The Vocation of Man*. Nonetheless, this is the direction in which his metaphor points.

Fichte later added an (undated) marginal note to the passage of the *Sittenlehre* on which the passage in *The Vocation of Man* is based. It reads: "Eyes were inserted into the One."⁴⁶ The marginal note was meant to give a new formulation for what occurs, according to the 1798 text, when the Self "tears loose" from the drive it discovers in itself. However, this addition completely changes the original tenor of this text. Eyes are now inserted in "the

43. *Nl*, p. 377.

44. *WW* 4, p. 33; fn.; *WW* 2, p. 249.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

One." This phrase can no longer refer to the drive itself. That drive had its specific place in the system of the applied Doctrine of Science, which investigates how we come to have the experience of active self-consciousness. The "One," however, is minimally the pure active power of the Self; perhaps it already refers to the divine life discussed in the 1801 doctrine. It belongs, therefore, to the foundation of the entire Doctrine of Science. Fichte now says that eyes are inserted in *it*.

Accordingly, what we have to establish is that Fichte proceeded in the following way: He formed the metaphor of the eye in order to designate the essence of the Self which is closed up in itself. He first spoke about the "inserted" eye in the special context of the *Sittenlehre*. Here the metaphor, along with the idea that it implies, has become complete; however, it was still subordinate to the absolute act of the Self. Once this latter doctrine had been transformed, Fichte brought the metaphor back into the center of his Doctrine of Science. From then on it became the appropriate formula for his theory, since Fichte conceived the Doctrine of Science as a form of "learned ignorance" and therefore needed metaphors.

5. One of the most interesting tasks facing the interpreter of Fichte is to discover the reasons behind this transformation. We have seen that there were enough objective reasons for altering his interpretation of self-consciousness. These reasons could become effective only when other motives also pointed in this same direction. We cannot enumerate all of them here, but only give one indication that is immediately relevant to the theory of self-consciousness. Most interpreters will scarcely have anything to do with Fichte's assertion that the atheism controversy took him by surprise just when he was on the verge of completing the highest synthesis of philosophy, the synthesis of the intelligible and the sensible world. If people had known about this, they could not have denounced him for "Atheism!"⁴⁷ This self-interpretation is distrusted and taken for a justification after the fact. We should reexamine this opinion, for the following reasons: In *The Doctrine of Science* of 1798 Fichte did not alter only the formula for self-consciousness; he also gave the theory an entirely different structure. The system of the *Sittenlehre* was taken up into the foundation itself, so that ethical consciousness became basic to the real and fundamental structure of the Self. When this happened Fichte had to change his description of ethical consciousness as well, for in the *Grundlage* of 1794 ethical consciousness was subordinate to the concept of the Self. This concept yields first of all the concept of knowledge; the ethical task was its nobler complement. The new description also starts with the theory of knowledge. Now, however, this theory serves only to introduce the definition of ethical knowledge. Once this definition is achieved, we can retrospectively obtain the stages of cognition

47. *Briefe*, ed. Schulz, vol. 2, p. 323.

from it and in this way actually deduce them for the first time.⁴⁸ The concept of ethical life, however, was taken to be the synthesis of the two worlds.⁴⁹ Fichte is thoroughly aware that this description is more profound and better suited to Kant's idea than the description he had offered earlier.

With this theorem, which we have simply sketched here, Fichte has already brought the concept of self-consciousness into a position comparable to the one it occupies in 1801. Self-consciousness is manifestation; but its self-manifestation is simply the appearance of a ground to which knowledge cannot penetrate. According to the doctrine of 1798 self-consciousness manifests the law of an intelligible world; according to that of 1801, it manifests the Divine life. Fichte could therefore start from the ideas of 1798 when new experiences and additional reasons induced him to refashion the entire Doctrine of Science. Neither the new formula for his basic idea nor the new version of his system should be understood as merely prudential accommodations.

VII

Let us conclude by looking ahead to some further questions. The present essay on Fichte's original insight did not treat all his propositions concerning self-consciousness. For example, we had to omit the important question of the relation between Selfhood and individuality. Whenever any one uses the term "I" he means this particular being who is conscious of himself. Each person can only speak of himself as "I." It makes no sense to call to another "You I there!" The technical philosophical terms "Self" or "Ego" cannot be introduced into ordinary language. To establish this point certainly does not imply that the terms are illegitimate. It means that a problem has to be emphasized. The consciousness expressed by the term "I" individuates; however, it does not do so the way warts on the chin do, or a place on a sports team does. Furthermore, this consciousness at the same time also universalizes, and this feature deserves the most careful consideration. *Each one* is individualized through the "I." Insofar as he says "I," each one knows himself to be this one individual person. And, every person knows himself to be "this particular One," when he says *the very same thing* of himself, namely, "I." This unity of individuality and universality, although it cannot be further specified, can easily be interpreted, if we decide to take it simply as a manner of *speaking*. It can then be understood as an act of referring, an indicator, as, Russell, for example, argues. This merely sets aside the problem. Of course, in this case we are no longer allowed to say that "I" refers to a mode of consciousness and thus to something real. Once it is admitted that we do refer to some such reality, the entire problem returns. And we have to

48. *Nl*, p. 467; see also pp. 493, 516.

49. *Nl*, p. 467; see also *WW* 1, p. 467; or Heath and Lachs, p. 41.

admit this. Otherwise, what binds men together through reason cannot be made intelligible in any way.

Kant discussed this problem in some of his incidental remarks about self-consciousness. The "Self" contains a twofold consciousness, that is, consciousness of logical universality and consciousness of empirically determined personal existence. However, Kant ascribed these to two distinct subjects, namely, pure and empirical apperception; these do indeed belong together, but must nonetheless be kept distinct. Kant thereby fails to consider that the empirical Self *qua* Self is already universal, while the pure Self, for just the same reason, is already an individual. The difficulty here is the same in form as the problem addressed in Fichte's original insight. Individuality and universality in the real Self are two factors primordially united with one another, just as much as Subject and Object in the self-knowing Self are.

Hegel adopted this Kantian position. He searched for the logic of the conditions that must be satisfied if we are to gain an idea of the unity of the Self as both universal and in each case individual. Hegel, too, begins with a problem that Kant had left out of consideration; however, this was a different problem from Fichte's. Consequently, two streams emanating from Kant lead into the idealistic theory of self-consciousness. One leads directly to Hegel; the other, to Fichte. Fichte's standpoint is that of knowledge of the Self. His doctrine of the relationship between the individual Self and Selfhood in general never achieved the profundity of his original insight, no matter how far it went beyond Kant's *obiter dicta*.

If we were attempting a complete stock-taking of the problem of self-consciousness, we would have to point out additional obscurities in Fichte's doctrine. In this essay, however, we wanted only to recall to mind Fichte's original insight. Philosophers have forgotten it; worse still, they have never taken notice of it. Needless to say, we cannot rest satisfied with his insight as though it yielded definitive knowledge. However, no one has surpassed it up until now. Furthermore, it shows us what is required of a theory meant to focus the light of philosophical ideas on that consciousness thanks to which we understand ourselves. If someone uses this light merely to ferret out trivial difficulties, he would do better to stick to other paths.

It would not be overly difficult to show that Fichte's most important successors could still have learned from him when they began working on the theory of self-consciousness. Herbart, for example, wanted to verify Fichte's insights with the help of a more objective method than the one used in the Doctrine of Science. However, he never brought self-consciousness into view as a unitary phenomenon, all his instructive insights notwithstanding. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, despite many fruitful distinctions, succumbs to Fichte's critique of the reflection theory. Heidegger did, indeed, manage to slip past the philosophy of self-consciousness, but only at the price of simply leaving aside the real question with which it is preoccupied.

It also is regrettable that Fichte's insight had no influence within the historical tradition of Idealism. Instead, Hegel's thought became influential. Fichte would have had two objections to raise: Hegel conceives the unity of opposites only dialectically, in terms of what results from their opposition. However, the phenomenon of the Self requires that this unity be interpreted as original and primordial. Furthermore, Hegel treats the unity of actuality and freedom only as the actualization of freedom, not, once again, as the original unity of both. Every unfolding of opposites, according to Fichte, takes place within the scope of their unity, the unity that first makes their movement possible. Freedom, for him, must be conceived of as actual freedom from the first.

Many of Hegel's successors raise objections of this sort, yet their conclusions never reach the level of Fichte's insight. They are all inclined to give some abstract actuality priority over the Self, Reason, and Freedom and to say that we are dependent on this actuality. This simply repeats Hegel's error from the opposite direction, and in a cruder form. They think only about what ties freedom to some fact, not about freedom as fact;^{xx} but, in that case, the question of the essence, unity, and origin of the Self must remain unanswered.

Translation Notes

- i *Ich-Subjekt*, in the original. Its counterpart is *Ich-Objekt*.
- ii I.e. in Goethe's *Ur-Faust*.
- iii *durch eine faktische Aktuosität*, in the original.
- iv "in an instant" or "instantaneously." See Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341 c-d; *Parmenides* 156d; and *Symposium* 210e.
- v *Akt der Tätigkeit*, in the original.
- vi *Selbst*, in the original.
- vii *Moment*, in the original. This is a technical term in German philosophical texts, drawn originally from the science of statics (see Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. Lasson, vol. I, 94), as is the corresponding English phrase "the moments of a balance." It does not have any temporal connotation in this use. The translator has chosen "factor" since its Latin root carries some, if not all, of the force of German "Moment."
- viii *Eine Tätigkeit, der ein Auge eingesetzt ist*. Fichte's key term *setzen* and *einsetzen* are linguistically akin. The literal sense of the phrase is thus: "an activity into which an eye is posited."
- ix *Geistlichkeit*, in the original. As always, *Geist* spans the border between spirit and mind or intellect.
- x *eines sich selbst Offenbarens*, in the original. The verbal noun *Offenbaren* could also mean "revelation."
- xi *Selbstbezug*, in the original.
- xii *das 'Als,' das 'Sich' oder das 'Durch,'* in the original.
- xiii *still hineingesehen*, in the original. *Hineinsehen* often suggests reading something into a situation that is not actually there.
- xiv *Augenkraft*, in the original.
- xv *Sicherscheinen*, in the original.
- xvi Karl Leonard Reinhold (1758-1823) was an influential interpreter and exponent of Kant. The work referred to here is *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisherigen Misverständnisse der Elementarphilosophie betreffend*.
- xvii Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761-1833), an advocate of skepticism in answer to Kant's critical philosophy, in 1792 published anonymously his major work *Aenesidemus*. Fichte's review appeared in 1794 in the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* (Jena).
- xviii *Sichhaben*, in the original.
- xix *Anstoss*, in the original.
- xx "Nur das Faktum der Freiheit wird gedacht, nicht die Freiheit als Faktum," in the original.