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Transcendental Philosophy

The Jena Doctrine of Science

The fundamental motivation of Fichte's entire philosophy is moral and political. But he proposed to erect an entire system of philosophy on a fundamental Doctrine of Science (*Wissenschaftslehre*). The subtitles of Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796) and his *System of Ethics* (1798) both read: "according to the principles of the Doctrine of Science." These two ("practical") parts of Fichte's system, however, are the only parts of it he ever truly completed. The fundamental Doctrine of Science was never finished. Fichte was still in the course of revisiting its foundation in the years 1796–1798, and he rethought it again, even more fundamentally, several times after 1801. Fichte's most influential writings are those of the 1790s, and to many who have appropriated them, including myself, these later developments do not seem like a fulfillment of the earlier promise.

It might therefore seem to make sense to consider Fichte's Jena-period works on right and ethics simply on their own. Fichte himself even avowed in 1800 that it was in them that the foundations of his system had been most successfully presented (GA I/7:153). But these works employ the philosophical method at which Fichte had already arrived in his Doctrine of Science. So it is not only useful but even necessary to say something about the foundations Fichte was presupposing in his works on right and ethics. It is no exaggeration, however, to say that even the most basic issues of interpretation of Fichte's systematic philosophy are subject to scholarly dispute.[1] In this chapter I will try to make it clear on what understanding of Fichte's system I am going to proceed.

Many of the early readers of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* took his project (in the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic) to include a response to radical skepticism.[2] Early critics, such as G.E. Schulze, F.H. Jacobi, and Salomon Maimon,

[1] An older but still useful presentation of these issues is to be found in Gueroult (1930). Important work was also done by Philonenko (1966, 1984) and Janke (1970, 1993). More recent treatments of high quality in English can be found in the following books: Neuhouser (1990), Martin (1997), Zöller (1997), Franks (2005), and Breazeale (2013). See also Wood (1992).

[2] For a thoughtful defense of Kant against the claim that he needed to make such pretensions, see Ameriks (2000). For a wide-ranging discussion of the post-Kantian anti-skeptical systematic project, including Fichte's version of it, see Franks (2005).

found the critical philosophy wanting in these respects. An early defender of it, Karl Leonhard Reinhold, responded with an "elementary philosophy" that was supposed to place the critical standpoint beyond the reach of any possible skeptical objection. Fichte took Reinhold's project seriously. It was the critique of Reinhold presented in Schulze's *Aenesidemus* that led him to construct his own system, the Doctrine of Science. Fichte began this in the 1792 review of *Aenesidemus* and then continued it in *Concept of a Doctrine of Science* (1793) and *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science* (1794).[3] Fichte continued to work on the project of a Doctrine of Science all the way to the end of his life.

During the Jena period itself Fichte abandoned (or at least revised) his first systematic project in favor of a second one. It is found in the two Introductions and the (unfinished) Chapter 1 of *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Doctrine of Science* (1797–1798). This corresponds to the contents of his lectures during this period, which have been given the name "*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*."[4] That second version of the Jena Doctrine of Science apparently does not aspire to being a philosophical system that is proof against radical skepticism. Fichte now admits that the first principle of his system—that of freedom or the self-positing I—does not have the status of a self-evident first principle (like the Cartesian *cogito*). Instead, it is more like a *necessary assumption,* or an unavoidable *presupposition*—of free agency, rational inquiry, even of consciousness. Fichte even describes it as a "faith"—though a faith accepted on rational grounds, to which there is no coherent alternative. It is this version of the Doctrine of Science that roughly corresponds to Fichte's major works of practical philosophy. It is this second version of Fichte's system (together with the earlier Jena writings, where these seem pertinent) that we will treat here as the philosophical background of Fichte's ethical thought.

§1: Philosophy and Common Sense

In many standard histories of philosophy, Fichte is pigeonholed as a "subjective idealist." This is a philosopher who teaches that all reality exists only for an I or "in the mind." This was the reaction that led to F.H. Jacobi's famous *Open Letter* of 1800 attacking Fichte as an exponent of "subjective idealism" and even of "nihilism." It was the same "subjective idealist" reading of Fichte that served both Schelling and Hegel as a foil against which they could contrast their own ("objective idealist") systems. When Fichte is fitted into a standard narrative of the history of modern philosophy in this way, he is quickly placed to one side and the narrative comfortably moves on without him. The distortion involved in this is abysmal in proportions.

[3] There are now a number of good discussions of the course of post-Kantian philosophy surrounding these skeptical criticisms and the response to them. The works cited in the previous note are among them. See also Breazeale (1982), Beiser (1987), especially Chapter 8, Pippin (2012), and Horstmann (2012).

[4] For accounts of this transition, see Radrizanni (1994), Breazeale (2013), pp. 96–124, and Breazeale's introduction to WLnm.

Mind-independent reality. Fichte sees himself as a *transcendental* philosopher. A note from 1794–1795 equates *Wissenschaftslehre* with "transcendental philosophy" (GA II/4:53). For Fichte, transcendental philosophy means first and foremost a certain conception of the relation of the standpoint of properly philosophical science to the standpoint of everyday life, ordinary consciousness, or common sense, which for Fichte is also the standpoint of the special empirical sciences.

Fichte often emphasizes that it is *not* the purpose of philosophy to undermine or discredit the standpoint of common sense—especially its realist commitment to the existence of a sensible world of material objects existing independently of our consciousness of them. On the contrary, it is one important aim of philosophy to *vindicate* this standpoint, to *justify* it philosophically, and also to *explain* it transcendentally, by deriving the conceptions it uses and the positions it takes from a fundamental first principle in accordance with a rational method. Fichte explains his position early in the *Foundations of Natural Right*:

> The transcendental philosopher must assume that everything that exists exists only *for* an I, and that what is supposed to exist for an I, can exist only *through* the I. By contrast, common sense accords an independent existence to both and claims that the world would always exist, even if the understanding did not. Common sense need not take account of the philosopher's claim, and it cannot do so, since it occupies a lower standpoint; but the philosopher certainly must pay attention to common sense. His claim is indeterminate and therefore partly incorrect as long as he has not shown how precisely *common sense follows necessarily* only from his claim *and can be explained only if one presupposes that claim*. Philosophy must deduce our belief in the existence of an external world.
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> (NR 3:24)

Although the standpoint of common sense is said to be a "lower" one than that of transcendental philosophy, the standpoint of philosophy is also said to be *inferior* to that of common sense, because the philosophical standpoint is always "indeterminate and therefore partly incorrect" until the entire project of transcendental philosophy has been completed. In Fichte's works, it always has this inferior status, because his system was never completed.

Fichte does not offer transcendental philosophy as a speculative or metaphysical theory that gets at the real truth of things, exposing the beliefs of common sense as errors or illusions. There are few claims that Fichte asserts more often or more emphatically than that one. Fichte even compares his philosophical constructions to a "skeleton," whose aim is not to replace the living body—which is ordinary experience—but only to justify it and enable us to understand it. Anticipating a thought later made famous by Wittgenstein, Fichte asserts that "our philosophical thinking is no more than the instrument we use to assemble our work. Once the work is finished, then the instrument can be discarded as of no further use" (GA III/No. 440).

To many, however, the starting point of Fichte's transcendental philosophy has always seemed incompatible with common sense. Fichte proposes to begin solely with

the philosophical "I" and its act of "self-positing," and to treat everything real lying outside the I as grounded in its being posited by the I, or even as real only to the extent that it is so posited. To many readers, that seems straightforwardly inconsistent with common sense and could not possibly be a vindication of it. If it is an "explanation" of common sense, then it looks like only what philosophers now call an "error theory": that is, a theory that explains how and why everyday beliefs and ways of talking are systematically *mistaken*. This is the standard "subjective idealist" reading of Fichte.

It was Jacobi's "subjective idealist" interpretation that provoked Fichte's desperate response in the *Sun-Clear Report* (1801) (SB). This was Fichte's panicky "attempt to force the reader to understand." Fichte's attitude seems to verge on paranoia. He claims that his philosophy has been *willfully* misunderstood by people who had a personal animus against him. We have seen in the last chapter how this reflects the self-destructive side of Fichte's personality. But when someone's thought has in fact been so systematically misunderstood for over two hundred years, his seeming paranoia cannot be dismissed as mere delusion.

The aims of philosophy. Fichte attributes these misinterpretations to a fundamental misunderstanding not only of his writings, but even of the proper aims of philosophy itself.[5] The error begins with a misconstrual even of what *philosophical* questions are. This happens when we take for granted the common *representationalist* picture involving an opposition between our thoughts or ideas and a real world they are supposed to be about.[6] Philosophy is then charged with the (metaphysical) task of saying first what this reality in itself is like, and then afterwards explaining (perhaps causally) how our representations of it come about. Fichte consciously breaks with that tradition. He rejects the representationalist picture as "dogmatic"—in a sense we will presently try to explain. In this he was anticipated (in different ways) by both Kant and Thomas Reid. But if we read Fichte while taking for granted the assumptions of this tradition, we will not understand the questions Fichte is asking and we will understand his answers to transcendental questions as a bizarre metaphysical theory, fundamentally at odds with common sense, about the "real" nature of the world our thoughts represent. This would be a "subjective idealist" theory, something like Berkeley's idealism, which declares the material world of common sense an illusion, nothing more than a collection of subjective ideas in our minds.

Fichte's transcendental inquiry, however, does not ask directly about reality in itself at all. It takes for granted what common sense realism holds about the objects of our representations, and never tries to get beyond or beneath it. Fichte's transcendental philosophy addresses an entirely different set of questions. It asks how representations

[5] A thoughtful and well-documented discussion of Fichte's conception of the relation between the standpoints of common sense and of philosophy is presented in Chapter 13 of Breazeale (2013), pp. 360–403. An extensive defense of Fichte against the charge of "subjectivism" is found in Beiser (2002), II, Chapters 1–8.

[6] This aim of Fichte's project, both in his review of *Aenesidemus* and in the 1794 *Doctrine of Science*, is emphasized by Wilson (2011).

are possible at all, and what is presupposed, as a condition of their very possibility, about the *relation* of representations to the reality they represent. About the represented reality, it explicates only what we must presuppose about it in order to make possible our cognitive and active life in relation to it. In all this there is obviously an anticipation of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological tradition. The relation of the Doctrine of Science to the everyday standpoint in Fichte is, I think, the clear ancestor of the relation in Husserl between the phenomenological standpoint and the everyday standpoint or (in the later Husserl) the "life-world." For Fichte as well as Husserl, the aim of philosophy is to help us understand the life-world and our own relation to it. Husserl, however, has sometimes been misunderstood in just the same way as Fichte, and consequently also dismissed as a metaphysical idealist.[7]

Fichte may thus be seen as rejecting the entire project of *metaphysics*, if that term refers to a theory about reality as it exists "in itself" in abstraction from our living interaction with it. In this Fichte saw himself as allied with Jacobi, not opposed to him. Both attempt to preserve a healthy relation to the life-world of ordinary experience, in opposition to a metaphysics that would undermine it. Jacobi rejects Fichte's philosophy because he sees an irreconcilable opposition between life and philosophical reason. For Jacobi, the rationally examined life could not be worth living because it could not be lived at all. Any rational, systematic philosophical procedure would only alienate us from the life-world. This rejection of rationalism is an extreme position, with which Fichte does not agree. Fichte's rejection of metaphysics in favor of transcendental philosophy does, however, anticipate much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century critique of metaphysics. It agrees not only with Jacobi but also with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and the existentialist tradition, and even Wittgenstein and Vienna Circle positivism. If we view Fichte's systematic philosophy as the sort of thing all these later philosophers were rejecting, then (along with Jacobi) we thereby profoundly misunderstand him.

The crucial question for transcendental philosophy is this: How do we combine what we think about the world with what we must think about our own activity in knowing and acting on it, in order to make our conception of the world coherent with our conception of our own activity? Some of Fichte's statements of this project are easily misunderstood: "From the transcendental standpoint [says Fichte] there is no world that subsists on its own. Wherever we look, we see nothing but the reflection of our inner activity" (GGW 8:180).

This is *not* the "subjective idealist" metaphysical claim that the so-called "material" world is metaphysically dependent on consciousness and therefore "unreal." Instead, it is only a description of the way the real, material world is viewed transcendentally,

[7] See Føllesdal (1998). Husserl, according to Føllesdal, is known to have made an intensive study of Fichte's works around 1917, leading him to embrace a concept of transcendental idealism that was intended to be entirely compatible with realism on ontological or metaphysical questions. Husserl seems therefore to have understood Fichte correctly, and his later philosophy should be seen as Fichtean in the most proper sense.

solely for the purposes of philosophical inquiry. Or consider this statement by a noted Fichte scholar: "Indeed, the world can be nothing other than something known, something thought, something represented: the world as object of cognition and the world as sphere of acting."[8] This quotation accurately paraphrases Fichte in many places, and is correct if it is understood as an account of how things are presented *from the transcendental standpoint*. But it is highly misleading if that gloss is omitted. For then it suggests that Fichte's transcendental philosophy is a metaphysical theory meant to discredit the everyday realism of the ordinary standpoint.

Transcendental idealism, according to Fichte, *endorses* "the assumption that objects exist outside and quite independently of us" (ZE 1:455n). Fichte's position about the material world has nothing in common with those empiricist views that want to identify external objects with (or reduce them to) "sense-data" or "permanent possibilities of sensation." Its aim is to show that the mind-independence of the world is a transcendentally necessary condition for consciousness itself. As we will see in Chapter 4, Fichte even extends this mind-independent objectivity to the reality of the moral law, "something objective . . . and entirely independent of the act of thinking" (SL 4:22). Thus Fichte is a common sense realist even about moral truth. In moral philosophy and metaethics, it is a common move (a common error) to identify our valuation of objects with the valuation of our conscious states in being aware of them. The objective achievements of a good life are reduced to our pleasure in being conscious of them; the objective value of things is identified with our mental states of valuing them. Fichte's transcendental idealism in ethics involves no view of that kind, but insists on its rejection.

According to Fichte, when common sense speaks of real things existing "externally," it means things existing "outside my body," or at most "external to my *acting*." Transcendental philosophy does not take issue with these claims. It accepts them, and even vindicates them through "deductions" (roughly, *transcendental arguments*—though we will have to see in due course what such a term might mean in Fichte's philosophy). When, for the purposes of these arguments, transcendental idealism claims that nothing exists except insofar as it is "posited in the I," it means something quite different from what common sense might mean by such statements. From its standpoint, these statements represent "subjective idealism" as a metaphysical theory—in other words, they are dogmatic nonsense. Fichte endorses that judgment of them. When Fichte claims that an object of intuition—for example, an object seen by us—"comes to be only through the intuiting itself" he is taking the transcendental

[8] Baumanns (1990), p. 129. The misleading impression is reinforced when Baumanns cites Schelling's account, which claims that Fichte's "explanation of experience" appeals to an "absolute I"—a metaphysical absolute lying outside experience (Baumanns 1990, p. 111). Fichte does say that philosophy should begin with an absolute I, which is *methodologically* outside experience; but this "absolute I" is not an entity "in itself" that grounds the reality of the world metaphysically, but rather a methodological abstraction adopted as part of Fichte's transcendental procedure. To reify the absolute I would turn Fichte's philosophy, in his own terms, into a form of dogmatism.

point of view, which he explicitly contrasts with "the way common sense tends to conceive bodily vision" (NR 3:57–8).

> The idealist observes how there must come to be things for the individual. Thus the situation is different for the individual from what it is for the philosopher. The individual is confronted with things, human beings, etc. that are independent of him. But the idealist says, "There are no things outside me and independently of me." Though the two say opposite things, they do not contradict each other. For the idealist, from his own viewpoint, displays the necessity of the individual's view. When the idealist says "outside of me" he means "outside of reason": when the individual says the same thing, he means "outside of my person."
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> (WLnm GA IV/1: 25)

To understand what Fichte means here by "reason," we need to explore the options open to philosophy, as Fichte understands them. Experience, according to Fichte, involves both *subjectivity* (the conscious representation of a world to an I) and *objectivity* (the world thus represented) (EE 1:425). Sometimes Fichte draws a distinction between two species of representations: those of which we are conscious that they depend on us, and are therefore "accompanied by a feeling of freedom," and those we are conscious of coming from outside us, "accompanied by a feeling of necessity" (EE 1:422–3, NR 3:2–7). He associates the latter with objectivity and the former with subjectivity. What is objective is experienced as independent of us and as constraining us; what is subjective is open to our free influence. Transcendental philosophy tries to understand the necessary conditions of our experience of objectivity; it does not seek to *reduce* objectivity to those conditions or to identify it metaphysically with them. It leaves objective reality itself just where common sense always took it to be.

Transcendental necessity. Another common misunderstanding of transcendental philosophy needs attention as well. The *necessity* involved in Fichtean deductions is not merely psychological. When transcendental philosophy speaks of "necessary conditions" of experience, its claim is not merely that, in our pitiful human weakness, we "can't help" thinking of our representations as referring to a world outside us. The fact that we are psychologically "unable" to believe some proposition is no argument for or against it. Fichte agrees with that assessment. As we will see in Chapter 3, Fichte's defense of freedom is *not* based on the supposed fact that we can't bring ourselves to believe otherwise. That would leave entirely open the question whether it is true that we are free. The necessity in all these cases is rather conceptual, theoretical: that is, it is *normative.* It is driven by the requirement that our conception of ourselves and our activity must be a systematic conception, self-consistent, not self-undermining, and capable of being presented in a coherent transcendental system. Such an incoherence is not merely something we (psychologically) *can't* believe; it is something we (normatively) *must not* believe.

The requirement of systematic coherence here involves more than avoiding self-contradiction or denying analytic truths. It requires also a systematic explanation—which, for example, avoids vicious circularity or a vicious regress—for the

presuppositions that are held to be necessary for the possibility of consciousness. These conditions are to be understood by way of the specific arguments given by transcendental philosophy. They stand or fall with the soundness of those arguments. These normative requirements claim a methodological priority over any empirical arguments that might result from whatever facts are *presented to* our consciousness.

Again, this is likely to be misunderstood. From the transcendental standpoint, there is no room for the speculation that although we cannot coherently think otherwise than that there is an external world, and we must think of this world using such-and-such concepts, the true metaphysical reality "in itself" might be quite different from this, or might not exist at all. Transcendental philosophy rejects all speculations of that form as metaphysical, that is, dogmatic. They are rejected because they could never be justified. But transcendental philosophy does not declare such speculations *false*, since that too would be dogmatism. Rather, it declares the questions raised by these speculations to be in principle unanswerable. This is why Fichte so often declares his dogmatic opponents not to be asserting falsehoods but rather to be failing to understand him, and also, without realizing it, to be talking incoherently or nonsensically, expressing "no philosophy at all" (EE 1:434, 438, 439; ZE 1:505, 508–11). Transcendental philosophy offers us an account of the necessary conditions for posing the questions we can answer, and also for combining our answers with our questioning in such a way that the answers cohere with, and do not undermine, the conditions of their own possibility.

Jena and later. After his dismissal from his professorship on grounds of "atheism" and his move to Berlin, the foundations of Fichte's philosophy underwent important changes (see Baumanns, 1990, pp. 175–442). It became more religious in orientation—I think precisely in response to the charge of atheism. The world, according to the later Fichte, is the image (*Bild*) of God (SW 11:117). It is not the I which has the concept, Fichte says, but the "concept" (sometimes identified with the mind of God) which "has" the I. In God, the concept becomes "a seeing, a seeing of seeing, a self-seeing" and becomes "the absolute eye, the faculty of seeing, understanding" (SW 11:64–5). The "concept" in our minds is also God's image, not in the sense of a copy or imitation, but in the sense of a necessary manifestation. This "concept" is the ground of the world, or of being (SW 10:5), but that is because it is also the ground of all those images, which, like the practical concepts of things in Fichte's earlier philosophy, provide ethical theory with its ends and principles.

It is beyond the scope of this book to decide how far these changes involve Fichte in a philosophy incompatible with the transcendental idealism of his Jena period.[9] It is

[9] The changes in Fichte's Doctrine of Science after 1800 (whatever they amount to) make it all the more remarkable that in his final system-cycle, Fichte's 1812 lectures on right and morality involve relatively little modification in the substantive ethical and political views present in Fichte's treatises of the Jena period. Just as the I as practical activity was opposed to objectivity and made its foundation, so now the concept, which takes the I as its conscious form, is likewise contrasted with being or the existing world and regarded as its foundation. In practical philosophy, this is once again taken to mean that the real is grounded on a spiritual activity which proposes ideals and demands according to which it is to be transformed. Much of

easy to think that insofar as Fichte's later Doctrine of Science grounds philosophy on "the concept" (or God) rather than on "the I," it must have been transformed into a speculative metaphysical system rather than remaining a transcendental investigation that brings us back to common sense or the ordinary standpoint. This last thought, however, is highly questionable. In Fichte's day, belief in God was itself taken to be part of common sense or the ordinary standpoint. This was especially insisted on by Jacobi and others who took Fichte to be *abandoning* common sense. The fact that Fichte's later Doctrine of Science is more explicitly theistic is not good evidence that it departs from common sense, or that it tries to tell us about ultimate metaphysical reality as it is "in itself." We will see that Fichte's theism is not "supernaturalist," in the usual understanding of that term, but rather a form of rationalist humanism, which accepts traditional religious claims on a "spiritual"—that is, a symbolic or aesthetic—interpretation.

I suggest that Fichte continues to employ traditional theological concepts and words connoting metaphysical transcendence as a way of expressing truths not about a metaphysical "beyond" but instead about our human world—just as in his early *Aphorisms* he understood traditional Christian doctrines of sin and redemption to be ways of thinking about our finitude and imperfection. In §3 of this chapter I will propose such a reading of Fichte's references to the "intelligible world"; in Chapter 7 §§4 and 9, I will suggest that in both the Jena and the later Fichte, the life of God and human immortality can also be reinterpreted as references to the life of humanity on earth, its collective strivings, and the ideals associated with them. Fichte's enemies in Jena were not mistaken when they saw in his religious views something they could only consider "atheistic" or a "cult of reason"—something many now would condemn as "rationalist humanism" or even "secular humanism." Fichte was, in effect, rejecting traditional religious superstition in favor of a more rational world view. It was to this deeply unsettling symbolic or aesthetic reinterpretation of religious transcendence that they were reacting. Their treatment of Fichte was unjust, but they did not misunderstand the mortal threat to traditional religion represented by his philosophy. They were right to be scared. Even today views like Fichte's pose a challenge to the way that traditional religion is usually appropriated, and also to the way it is commonly rejected. They challenge philosophical "naturalists" as much as religious "fundamentalists."

§2: Rejection of Dogmatism or the "Thing in Itself"

Any system of philosophy, Fichte argues, must begin with an act of abstraction, either from subjectivity or objectivity. The philosopher can choose to base a system either

the *Ethics* of 1812 focuses on the subjective side of the ethical disposition, which rests on the principles of "selflessness" (SW 11:86), "universal philanthropy" (SW 11:92), "truthfulness and openness" (SW 11:96), and "simplicity" (SW 11:99). It would be a mistake to think that Fichte's ethical theory has lost its earlier social orientation (see Verweyen 1975, pp. 259–60). Although his language now has religious overtones, Fichte continues to hold that ethics requires us to represent all rational beings as a community, or as he now puts it, a "communion" or "congregation of I's" (*Gemeinde von Ichen*) (SW 11:65).

on the abstraction of the free subject, the I or "intelligence in itself," or else on the necessitated object or "thing in itself" (EE 1:425–6). Thus he claims there are two (and only two) possible philosophical systems: (1) the *critical* or *idealist* system, based solely on taking the free, self-positing I as the starting point, and (2) the *dogmatist*, *realist*, or *materialist* system, based on taking the *thing in itself* as the starting point (EE 1:427–9). The notion of the "thing in itself," when it occurs in Fichte, is often taken to be the same as that notion in Kant. However, the meaning of this notion in Kant is itself notoriously controversial, and reading Fichte in this way leads only to confusion and misunderstanding. It will be better to develop this notion as Fichte does, and leave it to Kant scholars to decide how far it has the same meaning in Kant.[10]

Idealism accepts the realism of common sense, a world of things existing independently of our empirical encounter with them. But it approaches this world from the standpoint of "reason," by a philosophical method we will be exploring later in this chapter. The real, for transcendental idealism, is that whose mind-independent reality is capable of being established by this transcendental method. The "thing in itself," by contrast, is some supposed reality that lies outside "reason," a reality that *cannot* be transcendentally vindicated, but is instead presupposed and theorized about by metaphysicians who have never taken the transcendental standpoint, never asked how cognition of these things is possible. This sense of "dogmatism," though perhaps different from Kant's, is nevertheless recognizable from Kant's use of the word. Dogmatic philosophy, as Fichte means it, is one which makes claims that cannot be justified transcendentally—some of which, therefore, are nonsensical, others self-undermining.

Dogmatism is opposed to idealism in the sense that it intends to develop a metaphysics that tries to explain—in effect, to explain *away*—our consciousness, our cognition, our action as the causal results of the interaction of things in themselves. Fichte's critique of dogmatism is motivated in part by the way such philosophies represent our free action, our cognition, even our consciousness, in a way that he argues is self-undermining, requiring us to dismiss our cognitive and active relations to the world as involving a kind of pervasive illusion. As some recent "naturalistic" approaches to philosophy illustrate, even today Fichte's target is by no means a straw man.

Fichte argues that the dogmatist's "thing in itself" and the idealist's "intellect" or "I in itself" are *equally* far from common sense.[11] Common sense does not reflect on the

[10] Anyone interested in my opinion on this, *qua* Kant scholar, may consult Wood (2005), pp. 63–76. It should come as no surprise that I favor an interpretation of Kant of which I take Fichte to be one of the earliest representatives. It is an interpretation at some distance from interpretations that place Kant in the context of a pre-critical metaphysics of physical influence between substances. But I concede that Kant himself is always torn between pre-critical German metaphysics and a transcendental philosophy closer to Fichte. Henry Allison may be attempting to read Kant in a Fichtean way when he describes transcendental idealism as a "metaphilosophical" position; Allison (2004), p. 35.

[11] Breazeale (2013), p. 366, presents Fichte in 1794–1795 as holding that common sense accepts the existence-in-itself of external objects, and thus sides with dogmatism—which Fichte describes as a "deception" (UGB GA II/3, 331). But in the passage Breazeale cites, this deception is presented not as the unreflective position of common sense, but rather as the result of "stopping at the lowest level of reflection." I take this to be not the common sense view but that of a (dogmatic) philosophy that has begun to reflect

transcendental conditions for becoming conscious of the world, so it is not concerned with developing those conditions. The dogmatist can try to give an account of consciousness—for example, empirical "naturalistic" theories about its origin in the body or the brain, as an effect of the causal interaction of things. These theories, Fichte claims, cannot coherently account for our agency as subjects, the *active* side of our contribution to experience. They always take for granted the possibility of our awareness of what they report, attempting causal explanations of it which, Fichte argues, are committed to *explaining away* crucial parts of it as illusory. They may give an impressive empirical account of how the real world works, but they always come to grief if they must account for their own possibility as human knowledge, and for the free action needed to acquire such knowledge.

Fichte distinguishes the transcendental activity of "speculation" from what he calls the "way of thinking" (*Denkungsart*) that belongs to that experience as well as the empirical science that is grounded on it. Speculation, whether critical or dogmatic, proceeds by means of voluntary abstraction and transcendental construction. Neither criticism nor dogmatism directly takes the standpoint or "way of thinking" that belongs to common sense. Both attempt to *explain* what is given, each from its own philosophical standpoint.

> The philosopher occupies the standpoint of pure speculation, whereas the I itself occupies the standpoint of life and science ("science," that is, in the sense in which science itself is to be contrasted with the "Doctrine of Science"). The standpoint of life is comprehensible only from the standpoint of speculation... The standpoint of speculation exists only in order to make the standpoint of life and science comprehensible. Idealism can never be a way of thinking; instead, it is nothing more than speculation.
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> (ZE 1:455n)

The first important conclusion drawn by Fichte early on in his attempts at a system of critical idealism is that the I is limited, its activity meets with a "check" (*Anstoss*), and thus it stands in necessary relation to a real world or not-I.[12] Another important conclusion, which we will also examine in Chapter 3, is that the I necessarily stands in a relation to other I's. For Fichte, the I is always situated in a material world. It has (or is) a material body, and stands in communicative relations with other I's.

Fichte's philosophy has therefore been accurately characterized as "a philosophy of finite freedom," and best seen as the founder of the existentialist tradition, leading to Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre.[13] This is important to emphasize, because those

but has not done so deeply or thoroughly. Fichte regularly presents dogmatism as the result of a *deficient* form of reflection, involving culpable and self-inflicted *moral* delusion and incapacity. Breazeale himself recognizes (p. 366, n.14) that the later Jena Doctrine of Science attributes the dogmatist deception not to common sense but to inadequate reflection (cf. ZE 1:514). I think careful attention to UGB shows that this was always his position, even as early as 1794.

[12] One interesting discussion of the relation of realism and idealism in Fichte is Schüssler (1972).

[13] Probably the most prominent exponent of Fichte who brought the finite subjectivity of Fichte's I into discussion is Philonenko (1966). This point about Fichte is also emphasized repeatedly and its different

who compare Fichte's system with the "absolute idealisms" of Schelling and Hegel often do represent the "absolute I" as a "one-sidedly subjective" metaphysical absolute, frequently contrasted with the "one-sidedly objective" absolute found in Spinoza. I hope the error in that picture has now become evident.

The place of empirical science. Empirical science, as Fichte understands it, views the world from the ordinary or natural standpoint.[14] Its results, to the extent that they can be established by experience and presented in a coherent theory, are not contradicted by transcendental philosophy. Transcendental philosophy does, however, place certain constraints on what the theories of natural science can justifiably say about reality, on the ground that these theories must always remain consistent with the conditions of their own possibility. The natural science based on common sense always passes over into indefensible dogmatism when it offers theories that undermine the conditions of possible experience and action through which we humans relate to the world. In Chapters 3 and 4, we will see that Fichte takes the absolute freedom of the I and the objective reality of the moral law to be among these conditions.

Fichte argues that the two types of realism, common sense realism and dogmatic realism, are quite distinct—in the end, even mutually incompatible. The metaphysical commitments of dogmatism are incompatible with the presupposed agency of the dogmatic philosophers themselves, insofar as they undertake to investigate the real world by freely acting in it. Dogmatism must deny freedom, and therefore represent our ordinary experience of action and consciousness as involving unavoidable, systematic error and self-deception (EE 1:430). Dogmatism is therefore a form of *faith*. It requires a blind belief in a world of "things in themselves" through which it offers a philosophical account of the world of ordinary experience (EE 1:433, SL 4:26). But just as it cannot account for itself, it also cannot admit that it has this blind faith as its presupposition. It simply takes the "thing in itself" for granted, perhaps as a presupposition or even a result of "science." It dismisses every transcendental challenge to it as an absurd "subjective idealist" metaphysical theory.

The moral vices of dogmatism. In Fichte's view, the philosophical defects in dogmatism are fundamentally *moral* defects. Fichte, like Spinoza, sees the life of the free and rational human being as led in a different way, on a different plane, from the life of those who are slaves to their passions. Like Kierkegaard, he thinks there are different "stages" of human existence, whose assumptions are incommensurable, so that communication between those occupying them is necessarily difficult. Fichte depicts

aspects brought out by Breazeale (2013). Philonenko was anticipated in this by Weischedel (1973, originally published in 1939).

[14] Part of Fichte's projected Jena system, but one he never developed, was a "philosophy of nature." Fichte never endorsed a speculative doctrine of nature of the kind offered by Schelling or Hegel; in fact, this is one of the chief grounds of his break with Schelling. On this point, see Breazeale (2013), pp. 104–5. For a highly speculative attempt to project a Fichtean philosophy of nature (one I would not endorse), see Lauth (1984).

dogmatism as a closed circle of illusion and self-deception which people inflict on themselves because they remain at a lower, less reflective stage of the moral life than the stage reached by critical idealists. Dogmatism is a philosophy that rationalizes the life-attitude of passivity and self-indulgence, the unreflective giving-in to one's empirical desires and passions. Dogmatists think of themselves as manipulated by objects, and therefore subject to unavoidable illusions. Denying their radical freedom, they lack a conception of themselves that enables them consistently to affirm their human dignity.

Because they cannot affirm their self-worth through free action, dogmatists depend on *things* for their sense of self (EE 1: 433). Dogmatists are therefore prone to social-political-economic conservativism, since the relation of privileged classes to things—their ownership and power over things—is where they acquire their self-esteem. Unable to ascribe to themselves the human dignity that belongs equally to all rational beings, dogmatists therefore adopt an attitude of vanity and arrogance, grounded on their possessive relation to things, their social privileges, their ability to subordinate and manipulate other people in the very same way they take themselves to be pushed around and manipulated by objects.

Dogmatists live in a world of things. They think of all things as objects to be controlled and manipulated. Their relation to everything and everyone tends to be that of *objectification* (see Beauvoir 2010 [1949], Part One, and Haslanger 2012, Chapter 1). For them, people or rational beings, even they themselves, are only so many further items in this world of things subject to causal necessity. As knowers of this world, dogmatists adopt what Haslanger calls the attitude of "assumed objectivity." The only relations between things are causal relations. Things are the way they are because this is the way they are caused to be. The way they are caused to be is the way they have to be. There is no point in resisting the way things are, or in trying to change them. If I am on top in the social system, then my power over others is necessary. It is an unalterable fact, like the freezing point of water, the specific gravity of a metal, the motions of the heavens. If in this causal order I have power over others, then *I myself am necessary*.[15] To question the way things are is to show only that you do not understand the world objectively. The dogmatist becomes master over the objective world first by controlling it, and then by understanding this control as an unquestionable, objective necessity.

Since they look at the world as a network of causal relations, dogmatists view themselves as part of it. Practically as well as theoretically, they objectify other things, including other people. Others are objects of their own causal control. Their only conception of practical reason is instrumentalist. Reason is and ought to be only a slave of the passions—in the first instance, of their own passions. In Fichte's view, however,

[15] "Those who hide from total freedom . . . who try to show that their existence is necessary . . . —these I shall call *salauds*" (Sartre 1956b, p. 308). In the Mairet translation, *salauds* is rendered as "scum"; it has also been translated as "swine," "shits," or "bastards"; the latter is Lloyd Alexander's term for it in his translation of *Nausea* (Sartre 1964, pp. 82–94).

because they reject radical freedom of the will, the causal mastery over the world of things to which dogmatists aspire is, spiritually regarded, a condition of servitude (EE 1:434). The denial of freedom deprives dogmatists of any ground to assert their own human dignity. Thus if the way things are that gives you mastery over others is causally necessary, then it follows that if matters were different, it would be equally pointless for *you* to resist. "Anyone who considers himself the master of others is himself a slave. If such a person is not a slave in fact, it is still certain that he has a slavish soul and that he will grovel on his knees before the first strong man who subjugates him" (VBG 6:309).

To many philosophers today who might see themselves in Fichte's theoretical portrayal of dogmatism, this moral diagnosis may seem arbitrary, even absurd. Most "naturalist" philosophers today are not socially or politically conservative. Many of them would agree with Fichte that the social world *ought* to be changed; many think it *can* be changed. As we saw in Chapter 1, Friedrich Engels later directly reversed the social and political associations of idealism and materialism. Many materialist philosophers today would agree.

Such associations, however, in either direction, where they exist at all, probably depend on incompatible conceptions of "idealism" and "materialism." Even the characterizations of the opposed positions are likely to talk past each other. They surely apply only contingently, to certain individuals or at least certain limited intellectual and social environments. Perhaps for us the associations are arbitrary or even wrong, but they may have been accurate for Fichte's time and place.

The issues involved are contentious, the subject of ongoing, deep disagreements that are perhaps harder to define than they are to settle. Both in Fichte's time and in ours, the positions he considered "dogmatist" would be associated with materialism in metaphysics, empiricism in epistemology, and the prestige of modern natural science. The relation of these, especially the last, to morality and politics has never been simple. We know that natural science and its respect for empirical evidence have often been rejected by those who are backward socially and politically. Galileo was persecuted by the Church, religious fundamentalists reject evolution by natural selection, political conservatives with vested economic interests reject the scientific consensus on the environment and climate disruption.

Science, however, is a human institution. It is usually a creature of the existing social power structure, and though its findings may oppose the powers that be, science has no base of power radically independent of them. It has not always been on the "right" side in political struggles, or even the side of the evidence. Racism was at one time good science (see Gould 1981). Ever since the treatise *On Voluntary Servitude*, written by Montaigne's best friend, Étienne de la Boétie (1942 [1548]), we have known that the oppressed tend to take over the world-view of their oppressors, and oppressors have tended to control the results of science. Deference to scientific expertise has played an important part in the justification of oppression (Manfred Stanley 1978). Fichte views transcendental idealism as a way of justifying the legitimate claims of common sense

and science, while at the same time preserving the presupposition of human freedom necessary for both knowledge and morality.

Fichte's association of dogmatism with moral and political conservatism may also be in part autobiographical. "One becomes an idealist," he says, "only by passing through a disposition to dogmatism—if not by passing through dogmatism itself" (EE 1:434). Fichte's temptation to dogmatism, and then its vehement rejection, may represent his uncomfortable relation to the social world into which his life history had thrust him, and his violent rejection of the world-view he found among many privileged intellectuals in his day.

§3: Transcendental Idealism

Fichte emphatically denies that either he or Kant is seeking a transcendent metaphysics of things in themselves (EE 1:440–9, ZE 1:480–491). He accuses critics who take him to be passing beyond the "necessary thinking" to "being" of misunderstanding him—even deliberately and maliciously (SL 4:16–18). He thinks the same to be true of Kant as well. It was typical of those who read Kant as accepting an affection of the self by a transcendent "thing in itself" to accuse him of self-contradiction. (The group of those who did this included J.S. Beck, Jacobi, Schelling, and Hegel.) Fichte proposes to avoid the contradiction by accepting affection by the not-I from a transcendental standpoint, but rejecting affection by a transcendent thing in itself (ZE 1:482–91; cf. GA I/4:433–4). Fichte even accounts, though only from a transcendental standpoint, for our thought of the object that affects us as existing "in itself" (BWL 1:29n, GWL 1:157, 174–5, 194–5, 239–41, GEW 1:343, 361). In this way, Fichte accepts the finitude of human cognition, while rejecting (not as non-existent, but as unknowable and therefore not a possible object for *philosophy*) any metaphysical concept of a "thing in itself" that cannot be transcendentally deduced. This is his proposal for the way a Kantian can avoid the alleged contradiction.

Philosophical abstraction. The starting point for philosophy, as Fichte presents it, is an act of abstraction (EE 1: 426, ZE 1:501–2, NR 3:1, SL 4:78). As we have seen, philosophy for Fichte always begins with (or in) common life; it has no starting point that is radically independent of that. One description Fichte gives of his philosophical procedure is that it follows the necessary series of mental acts through which the I makes experience possible: "What emerges in the I's necessary acting... itself appears as necessary, i.e. the I feels constrained in its presentation of what emerges. Then one says that the object has reality" (NR 3:3).

> The type of realism that presses itself upon all of us—including the most resolute idealist—when it comes to acting, i.e. the assumption that objects exist outside us and quite independently of us, is contained within idealism itself and is explained and derived within idealism. Indeed, it is the sole aim of all philosophy to provide this derivation of objective truth.
>
> (ZE 1:455n)

Fichte realizes that the realism of common sense may be what misleads some dogmatist philosophers into accepting dogmatism, since its "thing in itself" is also "real" by contrast to the way transcendental philosophy approaches what is given to us in experience. But if Fichte's transcendental approach offers no "naturalistic" or "materialist" account of freedom or of moral obligation, does it therefore offer a "supernaturalist" (or *metaphysically* "idealist") one? I think not. That too would be an account of the world as it is "in itself"—hence transcendent and unknowable, as transcendental philosophy sees it. Fichte's vindication of common sense was, as we have already seen, supposed to be a vindication of some kind of theism. But in Fichte's day, that would have been seen by most as nothing but a vindication of common sense, not a defense of any transcendent metaphysics.

The intelligible world. Fichte does sometimes contrast the sensible or phenomenal with the intelligible or the noumenal, and claims that transcendental philosophy enables us to understand ourselves as members of the intelligible world (SL 4:91, 133, 259–60). But this may easily mislead us. Kant's readers often take the terms "noumenon" and "intelligible world" to refer to a supernatural realm, made into the object of a kind of faith or belief, but of which we can have no cognition.[16] However matters may stand with Kant, I think Günter Zöller is correct when he says that Fichte's conception of the noumenal or intelligible is not supernaturalist. See Zöller (1997), pp. 111–16. I interpret Fichte's conception of the intelligible or noumenal in the same ("modernist" or "secular humanist") way I have already proposed to interpret the religious views for which Fichte was branded an "atheist." For Fichte, the noumenal or intelligible is always part of the way we must think of ourselves from a transcendental perspective in order to form a coherent conception of our action and the world in which we act (ZE 1:482–3, WLnm, pp. 243, 260–1, 281, 330, 402). For transcendental philosophy, "reality" in general is proven only by its necessity for consciousness. "What is intelligible," Fichte says, "originates and enters consciousness only by means of transcendental philosophy itself" (WLnm, p. 334). Or, as Zöller puts it, "the intelligible or noumenal is a necessary product of thinking and its laws. It is part of the coming about of experience and a reflection of human finitude rather than its transcendence" (Zöller 1997, p. 113). For instance, Fichte often uses the concept of the intelligible or noumenal world to refer to the community of rational beings insofar as they are in communication with one another according to norms of reason (SL 4:259–60, WLnm pp. 303–5, 454).

I suggest that for Fichte the intelligible world could not be a realm of "things in themselves," since that would turn all talk of it into only a *supernaturalist* version of *dogmatism*. For transcendental philosophy, the noumenal or intelligible world can refer only to a way of thinking about ourselves *as finite and natural beings* that is

[16] I think common understandings of Kant exaggerate the extent to which he accepts this picture, and especially the extent to which Kant's philosophy is committed to it. In fact, a commitment to faith in supernaturalist theories, for example about the freedom of rational beings, seems to me inconsistent with the critical philosophy. See Wood (2008), Chapter 7.

necessary from a transcendental standpoint. Again, Fichte's religious opponents in Jena, though profoundly unjust to him, were not wrong in being terrified by the worldview his philosophy represents. Fichte was, as they claimed, an "enemy of throne and altar." His is a philosophy that respects human autonomy in contrast to authority. It accepts religious ideas, but only symbolically or aesthetically, as a vocabulary of thought and feeling, richer than any provided by dogmatic materialism, through which human beings may freely live and act.

§4: The Epistemology of the Jena Doctrine of Science

The task of philosophy, as Fichte understands it, is to recreate artificially (like a "skeleton") the objects of common life and science, based on a voluntary abstraction from the ordinary standpoint. The final criterion of its success is that it does not deny the ordinary standpoint but succeeds in explaining and vindicating it. In this way, every attempt at philosophy is really an "experiment," or the manufacture of an artificial product, which Fichte calls the "appearance" of ordinary life and science. The philosopher's task is to report the results of the experiment.

> The action of the philosopher who manufactures an artificial product is, to be sure, identical with the appearance itself, since the object he is constructing does not act on its own. But what is reported by the philosopher who has conducted an experiment is not identical with the appearance he is investigating, but is merely the concept of the latter.
>
> (ZE 1:455)

The outcome of the experiment is measured *internally* by the cogency of the thoughts and arguments contained within it; *externally* it is measured by its capacity to explain and harmonize with its starting point in ordinary life. The internal criterion involves both the rigor with which each new thought is derived, and also the systematic harmony or agreement among the derived thoughts.

Fichte claims there are two decisive advantages the critical or idealist system has over the dogmatic or realist system. *First*, in relation to the *external* criterion, idealism begins with our immediate experience of consciousness and the awareness of freedom that goes with exercising our agency, and accepts these experiences as true, whereas dogmatism must declare them to be illusions and must attempt to explain them away as the result of the causality of things (EE 1:428–9). *Second*, in relation to the *internal* criterion, idealism can successfully explain our experience, whereas dogmatism (Fichte alleges) can never successfully complete the philosophical task (EE 1:435–6). This last advantage, however, is one Fichte cannot be said to be in a position to claim in its full form. Against dogmatism, he can claim it to be self-undermining in certain ways, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4. But Fichte never completed the Doctrine of Science. So as regards the positive claim for his transcendental idealist system, he can make the claim only provisionally, hoping eventually to redeem it when his Doctrine of Science is complete.

Fichte first outlined the ambitious program of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in his early essay *Concerning the Concept of a Doctrine of Science* (1793) (BWL, which here I will call the *Concept*). The (partial) execution corresponds most closely to the *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science* (1794) (GWL). It sets forth an epistemology that is to govern the construction of a philosophical system and that may be regarded as his standards for meeting the *internal* criterion, the inner cogency of the thoughts on which the philosophical experiment is based. This program is apparently what Fichte was trying to execute in his notoriously obscure *Foundation* (1794) and related texts, such as the *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Doctrine of Science* (1795). Very soon, however, Fichte began to reconceive the method of a Doctrine of Science, in ways that show themselves in the lecture transcriptions of 1796–1799 that commonly go by the name "*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*." It is this new conception that also governs the two Introductions and the fragmentary first chapter of *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Doctrine of Science* (1797–1798) (K1) which represent his last attempt at a presentation of his system during the Jena period. This new conception is operative in his two works of practical philosophy. Even the "new method," however, seems to retain many of the philosophical theses and aims of the 1793 essay, which therefore still provides a necessary guide to understanding what Fichte is about, at least during his Jena period.

The first principle as foundation. Perhaps the most striking feature of Fichte's Doctrine of Science is his insistence that any systematic philosophy must always rest on a *single* first principle. Fichte provides remarkably little argument for this claim, insisting first that it is "generally admitted" (BWL 1:38). But he later adds the argument that "a science can have no more than one first principle, for if it had more than one, it would be several sciences rather than one" (BWL 1:42). The idea that a philosophical system has only a single first principle seems to have been taken over by Fichte from Reinhold's so-called "elementary philosophy." Reinhold proposed to give the Kantian or critical philosophy a firm basis by resting it on a single self-evident first principle. He called this the "principle of consciousness": "In consciousness the subject distinguishes the representation from both the subject and the object and relates it to them both" (Reinhold 2011 [1790], 1:267.) Fichte came to be convinced, by the critique of Reinhold presented by G.E. Schulze in *Aenesidemus,* that this was not a satisfactory first principle (SW 1:5). But he remained convinced, at least for a time, that a philosophy can have a "systematic form" only by being based on a single first principle (BWL 1:38). Fichte's first principle, whose meaning we will examine in §5 of this chapter, is: "The I posits itself absolutely" (BWL 1:71, cf. GWL 1:96).

The *Concept* argues that any science consists of a first principle, which is both *known* and *certain,* and then a series of propositions that are based on it by being shown to be "equivalent" to it, so that it communicates its certainty from each proposition to the next. The "content" of any science, Fichte says, is determined by the "inner content of its first principle"; but the "form of the science" consists in a determinate kind of

inference, grounded on a determinate "warrant" through which the first principle communicates its certainty to the propositions resting on it (BWL 1:43). These claims are supposed to be true not only of a philosophical system, but of anything that is entitled to the name of a *science*. For Fichte, however, the project of philosophy is to ground all sciences on a single fundamental one, to which he gives the name "Doctrine of Science" (*Wissenschaftslehre*). "The I posits itself absolutely" is apparently the first principle of this fundamental science.

Fichte's talk about grounding all subsequent propositions on a first principle might easily be understood as a commitment to *foundationalism*, as that term is understood in recent analytical epistemology. Foundationalism is the doctrine that all knowledge is to be divided into two types: (1) foundational knowledge, that is fundamental, either grounded on itself, or at least known without any ground beyond itself, and (2) non-foundational knowledge, which must be grounded solely on foundational knowledge. Fichte's statements early in the *Concept* may give the impression that the first principle of the Doctrine of Science, and it alone, constitutes foundational knowledge; everything except this first principle is non-foundational knowledge, since it is based solely on the first principle.

A foundationalist interpretation of Fichte's epistemology, in this sense, is, however, impossible to sustain in the face of many of his most crucial claims. To begin with, Fichte thinks that all sciences other than the Doctrine of Science derive their first principles from the Doctrine of Science; it is only the first principle of *this* science that is not proven through anything else (BWL 1:47). On the foundationalist interpretation, we would have to suppose that all human knowledge is based solely on the first principle of the Doctrine of Science—the I's self-positing; no other source of knowledge could be permitted at all: no empirical contents, no self-evident *a priori* truths. Fichte surely accepted no such absurd proposition.

Fichte also soon makes further claims that rule out foundationalism. "The Doctrine of Science," he says, "has absolute totality. Within it, each thing leads to everything and everything leads to each thing" (BWL 1:59n). Coherence for Fichte is not merely an added *sine qua non* condition of self-consistency, as it might still be in a foundationalist theory. Instead, at every stage, the thoughts that have been derived must constitute a coherent system in a stronger sense than mere self-consistency. This is why Fichte can derive new concepts using not only threatened contradictions, but also vicious circularities or the inability satisfactorily to explain something.

Further "coherentist" claims are forthcoming in Fichte's account of what a science has to be. Fichte insists that a first principle has been "exhausted" only when "a complete system has been erected upon it, that is, when the principle in question necessarily leads to *all* the propositions which are asserted and when *all* these propositions lead back to the first principle" (BWL 1:58). It is a "negative proof" of a system, he says, when it is shown that "no proposition occurs [in it] which could be true if the first principle were false—or could be false if the first principle were true" (BWL 1:58–9). "We infer the correctness of the system from the agreement between what we

presupposed and what we discovered. But this is only a negative proof, which establishes mere probability" (BWL 1:75). A "positive proof" of the system consists in "completing the circuit" by showing that the first principle "governs human knowledge completely." From this need for a "positive proof" Fichte infers that "there is thus a circle here from which the human mind can never escape" (BWL 1:61). Even if we establish "systematic unity" through the negative proof, "something more is still required. This 'something more' is something that can never be strictly demonstrated, namely that this unity itself is not something which has been accidentally produced by an incorrect deduction" (BWL 1:75). Also: "A system can actually be on the whole correct, even though its individual parts lack self-evidence" (BWL 1:77–8).

From this it is clear that we can make no sense of Fichte's epistemology within a framework countenancing only the standard alternatives: "foundationalism"/"coherentism." For Fichte, transcendental philosophy begins with a first principle that is certain not because it bears some mark of self-evidence, but because it can be shown that it would be self-undermining not to assent to it. Fichte establishes further claims based on the first principle not by deriving them from it deductively, but by establishing them as necessary for the coherent exposition of the possibility of cognition or action, starting with the first principle.

The Doctrine of Science and the particular sciences. It is also important to look at the relation of the Doctrine of Science to the other sciences falling under it—including the sciences of natural right and ethics. "The Doctrine of Science includes all of those specific actions which the human mind is necessarily forced to perform," and "in the first principle of any particular science an action which has been permitted to remain free in the Doctrine of Science becomes determined . . . As soon as an action which is in itself free has been given a specific direction, we have moved from the domain of the general Doctrine of Science into that of some particular science" (BWL 1:63–4). In other words, Fichte takes the "self-positing" act of the I to be an act admitting of a variety of different forms or, as he also puts it, different *directions*. Once such a "direction" of self-positing is given, Fichte thinks certain conclusions follow necessarily from it. The task of any particular science is to begin with the free choice of a determined direction of the I's self-positing, and then derive the series of necessary conclusions that follow.

§5: The First Principle

The first principle of the Doctrine of Science is: "The I posits itself absolutely." In the first Jena system of 1793–1794, it is presented as a principle Fichte thinks will be assented to spontaneously by all who achieve a certain kind of self-knowledge in the right way: that is, all those who form a concept of the I, along with the acts of abstraction necessary to grasp the concept Fichte is trying to elicit. Fichte's clearest account of this process in the late Jena period occurs in the (uncompleted) Chapter 1 of a new

presentation of the Doctrine of Science for which the two Introductions of 1797 were to prepare the reader. By then, however, he had changed his mind about the status of the first principle. It was no longer taken to be self-evident to all, but only to those who are committed to affirming their own freedom. This commitment is not arbitrary, however, and Fichte thinks there is in the end no rational alternative to it. We will postpone until Chapter 3 our discussion of the issues surrounding freedom as they appear in the later Jena system.

The *cogito*. Fichte's first principle, consisting in an act of self-awareness, is bound to remind us of Descartes' *cogito*. Descartes takes the *cogito* to be the presentation to ourselves of our own existence through a mode of access to this existence (namely, thinking) that makes it self-evident and undeniable. Descartes anticipates Fichte's principle when he treats the *sum* as an awareness I *actively produce* through the act which is the *cogito*. There is also something "transcendental" about Descartes' argument, since to refuse to affirm that you are thinking would be self-undermining—it would deny a necessary condition of the possibility of that very act of consciousness itself. Fichte agrees that Descartes "put forward a similar proposition" (GWL 1:100). But the better we come to understand Fichte's conception of the I, the more we will come to appreciate that it is Fichte, of all modern philosophers, who first offered a conception of the mind or subject that is decisively different from Descartes. Fichte was the first to understand the subject as necessarily *embodied* and also necessarily *intersubjective*—standing in an interdependent communicative relation to other subjects. Fichte's conception of subjectivity is, in these ways, fundamentally anti-Cartesian, anti-Lockean, even anti-Humean.[17]

Fichte would not permit the inference from *cogito* to *sum res cogitans*, and even denies the latter proposition in the sense Descartes meant it. The Fichtean I is not a *thing* at all, it is only an *act*—the act, Fichte thinks, which lies at the ground of all consciousness whatever, and necessarily precedes any "giving" of ideas, perceptions, representations, things, or objects, or any *facts* about these, however immediate and self-evident they are supposed to be (ZE 1: 457–63). As we have seen, for Fichte philosophy must begin not with what is *real* (the thing "in itself"), but instead with the conditions of the possibility of our knowing what is real. Our own *act* of self-positing, as the condition of all consciousness, is the first of these conditions. That is the sense in which Fichte says that "with its first proposition, the Doctrine of Science succeeds

[17] I have tried to bring out this point in Wood (2014a), pp. 194–9. Perhaps the most striking thing about Fichte's first principle is that it is *not* supposed to be a "fact" of any kind. The I is not any *object* or *thing* that is theoretically "given" to us. *Who I am* is who I make myself to be, even who I *ought to* make myself to be. Even personal *identity* is normative rather than descriptive: see Chapter 6 §2. Fichte's approach is anti-Humean, if that means it rejects the view of personal identity that Hume adopts at the end of Book I of the *Treatise* (Hume 1958, pp. 186–95). But that approach famously comes to grief and ends in deep and disorienting skepticism. Early in Book II of the *Treatise*, Hume suggests that my real concept of *myself* is really the object of *practical* attitudes: pride and shame (Hume 1958, p. 204). I think in this way Hume began a way of thinking about personal identity that leads directly to Fichte.

in establishing not just philosophy in its entirety, but also the conditions for all philosophizing." The first principle is not anything *given to me* (however undeniably or self-evidently). It is "a truth that cannot be provided from without and which one has to produce within oneself." Nothing and no one else can perform the act of self-positing for me, or provide me with the unique transcendental awareness it affords: "This is something not even God himself can do" (SW 2:443).

Pure apperception. Perhaps this is true of the Cartesian *cogito* as well, in the context of the project presented in the *Meditations*. For there the reader is invited to share in the meditator's act of producing self-awareness. As Fichte would be the first to insist, however, a better comparison than Descartes would be Kant. The title of Fichte's unfinished Chapter 1 is: "All consciousness is conditioned by our immediate consciousness of ourselves." This title inevitably suggests that Fichte's first principle is closely related to the principle used by Kant in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: that of *pure* or *original apperception.* Fichte explicitly confirms this (GWL 1:99, ZE 1:472–8). For both philosophers, the argument is that the possibility of all conscious experience is conditioned by a certain kind of self-awareness that guarantees a unity both to the subject of experience and to its contents and objects. Apperception is "pure" in the sense that it consists solely in the active exercise of the understanding, and not at all in the receptivity of the senses. Kant distinguishes "empirical apperception"—the association of representations according to contingent, empirical laws (such as Hume's laws of association)—from pure apperception, which is the work of the understanding alone, and involves synthesis that is *a priori* and necessary for the possibility of experience (KrV A107, B132, B140).

In one meaning, "pure apperception" refers for Kant to the consciousness of one's own activity that accompanies the deliberate formation and application of concepts. In this sense, apperception is "the vehicle of all concepts" (KrV A341/B399). "The numerical unity of this apperception therefore grounds all concepts *a priori*" (KrV A107). "For only because I ascribe all perceptions to one consciousness (of original apperception) can I say of all perceptions that I am conscious of them" (KrV A122). In another closely related meaning, "apperception" refers to an act of self-awareness whose object is the thinking self itself, when the thinking self is regarded as nothing but the spontaneity of the understanding that unifies all representations into one consciousness. The self to which apperception ascribes its perceptions and of which apperception in this sense is conscious is the ultimate ground of all unity in experience. Thus Kant explains "original apperception" as "that self-consciousness which, because it produces the representation 'I think,' which must be able to accompany all others and which in all consciousness is one and the same, cannot be accompanied by any further representation" (KrV B 132). Fichte quotes this last statement from Kant at ZE 1:476.

The Kantian idea of apperception is that every consciousness involves a kind of active self-awareness which is the ground of the subject's application of concepts to the contents of its experience. It guarantees simultaneously that they belong to the

experience of *one* self-identical subject and that they constitute *one* single coherent experienced world. Conscious representations always represent things to some subject, and to numerically the same subject; what they represent is represented to this subject in the form of a unified system of representations whose connections the subject can bring under concepts; these two features of conscious experience account for the unity of both the representer and of what is represented. The active subject's self-awareness is always in a sense present to it: if I am consciously engaged in thinking about something, I do not need any additional input to make me aware either that this is *my* experience and *my* conscious activity, or that it belongs to the same system of experience, the same world, as other things of which I am consciously aware, either through actively thinking about them, or in other ways, such as by sensing or remembering or imagining them. At the same time, the specific direction of attention to the subject, and the explicit ascription of items of experience to *this* subject, this *I* (in the form of an "I think"), is not always present; but its possibility, and its availability to the subject, are permanent and necessary features of all conscious experience.[18]

First, there is the active self-awareness involved in any experience, and especially in the application of concepts to what we experience, guaranteeing the unity of both the subject of that experience and the organized whole of what it experiences. Second, there is the permanent availability, made possible by this first self-awareness, of the subject's turning its attention to itself, making itself the object of its own consciousness, and thereby appending an explicit "I think" to whatever else it may be thinking or experiencing at the moment. Both involve self-awareness as the ultimate ground of unity: the unity of the experiencing subject itself and the unity of the conceptualizable system of what the subject experiences. This is what Kant means when he says that "the representation 'I think,' which must be able to accompany all others, and which in all consciousness is one and the same, *cannot be accompanied by any further representation*" (KrV B132). It is also what Fichte means in his principle: "the I posits itself absolutely," and in regarding this as the *first principle*.

§6: The Summons to Self-Activity

The fragmentary Chapter 1 of the Doctrine of Science Fichte projected in 1797 is divided into three sections. Section I attempts to prepare the reader to move from ordinary self-consciousness to the philosophical, transcendental, or "higher speculative" standpoint, from which the first principle can be grasped. Sections II and III of the chapter attempt to present the conception of the I as it is grasped when we form a

[18] Some natural languages (Vietnamese is sometimes cited) have no personal pronoun "I." Such languages constitute no counterexample to the claims of Cartesian, Kantian, or Fichtean philosophy. The speakers of such languages have ways of referring to things and persons other than themselves and of ascribing thoughts and actions to themselves. Even Descartes' Latin word *cogito*—paradigmatic for the philosophical thoughts of I (*ego*, *Ich*)—contains no explicit first person pronoun.

conception of the active self with clear consciousness of how this is done. The chapter apparently breaks off before this process is completed, but taken together with what Fichte tells us in other texts, I think it brings us close enough to the first principle of his Jena system to be able to identify that principle.

In Section I, Fichte begins by addressing himself to the reader in the second person, and "summoning" (*auffordern*) the reader to have certain thoughts. In Chapter 3, we will see that the concept of a "summons" (*Aufforderung*) will play a key role in Fichte's development of his system, especially in the systems of right and ethics. It also indicates that in the second phase of his Jena period, Fichte has integrated an intersubjective or "dialogical" approach into his philosophical method, anticipating similar approaches in twentieth-century continental philosophy. See Theunissen (1984), Habermas (1984), Lévinas (1987), Gadamer (1989).

Postulates. Fichte's system is grounded on what he calls "postulates." Fichte understands this term in the original sense used in Euclid, where the Greek word for "postulate" (αἰτῆμα) means "something requested or asked for." More specifically, a Euclidean postulate involves two related summonses (or requests): first, a request to *perform a certain action* (for instance, in the case of Euclid's First Postulate: given any two points, draw a straight line between them) and second, a request to *concede some proposition* based on that action (here, the proposition that between any two points a straight line may be drawn). This understanding of "postulate" captures three basic Fichtean theses: first, theoretical assent is interconnected with practical activity; second, within this interdependency the practical has priority; and third, philosophy, like self-consciousness itself, fundamentally involves a dialogical summoning and responding.[19]

The concept of the I. In the Second Introduction, for instance, Fichte describes the task of forming the concept of the I in precisely these terms: "Thus our first question would be: What is the I for itself? And our first postulate would be the following: Think of yourself, construct the concept of yourself and take note of how you do this" (ZE 1:458). In Chapter 1, Section I, however, Fichte is making a request (or summons) that is even preliminary to this, with the aim of preparing the reader to move from the standpoint of everyday common sense to the philosophical standpoint from which the first principle may be grasped. He proceeds in four stages:

(1) Fichte summons the reader to form the *concept* "I," as the subject of any other thought that the reader might be thinking. Fichte notes that this concept, as it is drawn from ordinary consciousness, may initially include a great deal from which Fichte will ask us to abstract in order to reach the I as the first principle (K1 1:521).

(2) As the first step toward this abstraction, Fichte summons the reader to think of a particular thing and apply an appropriate concept to it: the table, the wall,

[19] For a detailed examination of Fichte's philosophy of geometry, see David Wood (2012). The discussion of postulates is mainly in Chapters 3 and 4. This study, however, deals mainly with Fichte's *Erlanger Logik* (1805), which dates from later than the works with which the present book is concerned.

the window. To the reader who freely chooses to do this, Fichte then issues a second summons: to notice that this consciousness consists in a free activity: "You take note of the activity and freedom that is involved therein. Your thinking is for you an *acting*" (K1 1:521). Fichte realizes that not all readers will do as he has requested: some will refuse. He does not expect to be able to prove his Doctrine of Science to those readers.[20]

(3) Next, Fichte summons those readers who are still with him to note that part of their active thinking which is specifically directed to the I itself, rather than the table, the wall, etc. (to that which is distinguished from the I). He asks them to discover that the object of the acting to which they are now attending is the same as the subject of that acting, so that the actions in question are "self-reverting" or "go back into yourself, the thinker" (*auf dich selbst, das Denkende, zurückgehen*) (K1 1:522). Fichte now expects the reader to be able to understand, and also to concede, the content of the claim he regards as his first principle: "The concept of a self-reverting act of thinking and the concept of the I thus have exactly the same content: the I is what posits itself" (K1 1:523). He warns the reader, however, that this content is now the result of an act of abstraction. He calls attention to two ways in which this is so, one obvious, the second less so. First, every act of consciousness has an object distinct from it (the table, the wall, etc.) and the self-positing I is the act involved in being conscious of this object, yet for philosophical reasons, it is considered in abstraction from that object. Second, this act has also involved abstraction from the *individuality* of the I (from what makes the I of one reader distinct from that of some other, from your I, my I, or Fichte's I). The concept of the I as self-reverting and self-positing is *not* the concept of a particular person. In the Second Introduction, Fichte insists that this feature of the I as first principle must belong also to Kant's apperception:

> Nor can Kant understand by this pure apperception the consciousness of our individuality, or confuse the one with the other; for the consciousness of individuality is necessarily accompanied by another consciousness, that of a *thou* [*du*], and is possible only on this condition.[21]
>
> (ZE 1:476)

[20] Fichte acknowledges that dogmatists will not concede what he is asking at this point, because they are unable (that is, stubbornly unwilling) to concede the consciousness of their own activity. They are hardened in the delusion that their self-consciousness is a mere appearance or illusion, produced by the causal interaction of the things in themselves, in which they believe while refusing ever to ask how awareness of them is possible. To them he says: "Let us part from each other in peace at this point, for you will be unable to understand anything I say from now on. I am addressing myself now to those of you who understand what I am saying concerning this point" (K1 1:522). As we will see in Chapter 5 §8, however, Fichte thinks their incapacity is self-inflicted, and thus still capable of correction. He must hope they will undergo a moral conversion, making the idealist system accessible to them.

[21] Of course this act of abstraction is not the same as a *denial* that any given I is an individual, or the claim that it could exist without the opposition of a not-I, or a real world distinct from it. The mistake of thinking that Fichte denies this is part of what leads people to think that Fichte's philosophy involves the

(4) In the final step of this transition from the everyday to the philosophical standpoint, Fichte calls attention to the way in which the act he has summoned involves abstraction in what may seem like an even more radical and paradoxical way: *The self-positing I is only an act*; in its concept is included no being or thing as the agent of this act: "Here I am not yet the least concerned with any 'being' the I may have apart from this concept" (K1 1:524).

Fichte is aware that the reader may now think he has been asked to make one concession too many. "I am supposed *to think*, but before I can think I have to *exist*" or else

> I am supposed to think of myself, to direct my thinking back upon myself, but whatever I am supposed to think or turn my attention back upon must first exist before it can be thought or become the object of an act of self-reverting.
>
> (K1 1:524)

Fichte's reply appeals to the most basic or essential feature of the I (or of Kantian apperception), namely, that it is the ultimate and fundamental ground of consciousness: the representation "I think," which must be able to accompany every other representation, "cannot be accompanied by any further representation" (KrV B132).

> Who is it [Fichte asks] that claims you must have existed prior to your act of thinking? It is undoubtedly you yourself who make this claim, and when you make such a claim you are undoubtedly engaging in an act of thinking . . . It follows that this existence of the I is also nothing more than the posited being of yourself, that is, a being you yourself have posited.
>
> (1K 1:524–5)

The claim is *not* that you could not exist independently of your self-awareness. Fichte is not arguing, in the manner of Berkeley, that the tree in your yard, or the books in your closet, could not exist without someone's perceiving them. (Berkeley of course calls upon God to guarantee their reality when no one else is available.) We are *not* concerned with the metaphysical question of what exists in itself, but rather with the transcendental conditions of the possibility of our being conscious of the mind-independent reality that exists outside our bodies and that resists our actions. Where this is the nature of our inquiry, it is legitimate to insist that you cannot become aware of yourself as thinking without actively positing yourself and being aware of the act of self-positing. The I that posits any being you might call "yourself" has been identified as nothing but the *act* of self-positing itself. The point is this: there is as yet nothing contained in the concept of the self-positing I except the concept of an *act*—there is no concept of an acting *being* or *thing* transcendentally prior to this act.

We should not forget that we are talking about the result of a deliberate act of abstraction. We are constructing a "skeleton." So *of course* the concept of the self-positing

insane metaphysical notion that only "the absolute I" is real, and all else is merely an illusion or a figment of the I.

I is necessarily a concept of something radically incomplete. It is quite in order to point out that the concept of the I as self-positing is not fully coherent if the act which is the I is represented as capable of existing all by itself without a subject of this act. This feature of the I, in fact, is precisely what Fichte thinks will enable the self-positing I to serve as the principle of a system of philosophy. This system is supposed to consist of the necessary progression of thoughts that are successively needed to restore coherence to the first principle if we use it to represent something concrete and complete in itself. At times (such as at the beginning of the *Foundations of Natural Right*), Fichte represents his procedure as following the succession of thoughts through which the mind proceeds, by necessity, in forming the concept of the I, thereby completing the necessary conditions of experience (NR 3:1–7).

Here Fichte's method should remind us less of Kant's and more of Hegel's—for which it obviously provided the model. Fichte will proceed by generating a whole series of problems or (apparent) contradictions. "All contradictions are reconciled by more accurate determinations of the propositions at variance" (GWL 1:255). More specifically, they are resolved through the introduction of a new concept that permits this more accurate determination. In this way, "philosophy" is supposed to consist in the "complete deduction of all experience from the possibility of self-consciousness" (ZE 1:462). In §§8 and 9 of this chapter we will explore the method through which Fichte introduces these new concepts.

Fichte observes that when I make the claim that I must already exist in order to perform the act of self-positing, this existence too can refer in the first instance only to another self-positing act, which I think of as prior to the act I am now performing, presupposed by it but without consciousness of that act. This is one direction in which the abstractness or incompleteness of the thought of the self-positing I might reach out for completion:

> In addition to the act of self-positing which you have at present raised to clear consciousness, you must also think of this act as preceded by another act of self-positing, one that is not accompanied by any clear consciousness, but to which the former act refers and by means of which it is conditioned.
>
> (K1 1:525)

§7: Intellectual Intuition

In Section II of the new presentation of the Doctrine of Science, Fichte proposes to "shift to a higher speculative standpoint" (K1 1:525). This step consists in a philosophical reflection on the nature of the knowledge of the I that is present in the principle that the I posits itself absolutely. Fichte takes this principle to be a cognition (*Erkenntnis*) in the Kantian sense. Every cognition requires both an intuition and a concept.

Fichte appears to break with Kant at this point in one respect, however, claiming that the self-positing of the I is an *intellectual* intuition. It is significant that Fichte employs

this term only when moving to the "higher speculative standpoint." This is the standpoint from which the transcendental philosopher not only abstracts the I's self-positing activity from its experiential context, but also *reflects* on this abstracted activity:

> Now, however, I say to you: pay attention to your own act of attending to our act of self-positing . . . What constituted the subjective element in the previous inquiry must be made into the object of the new inquiry we are now beginning.
>
> (K1 1:525)

The paradox of self-consciousness. Fichte now develops a paradox: if I make my thinking, the active I, into an object of reflection, I

> obtain a new subject, one that is conscious of what was previously the being of self-consciousness. I now repeat this same argument over and over again, as before, and once we have embarked upon such a series of inferences, you will never be able to point to a place where we should stop.
>
> (1K 1:526)

Self-reflection, in other words, assumes a *previous* acquaintance with the act which has become its object, but reflection cannot account for this acquaintance, simply because the subject of reflection is distinct from the object it must claim to know.[22]

> In this way, we will never arrive at a point where we will be able to assume the existence of any actual consciousness.—You are conscious of yourself as the conscious subject; but then this conscious subject becomes, in turn, an object of consciousness . . . —and so on *ad infinitum* . . . In short, consciousness simply cannot be accounted for in this way.
>
> (1K 1:526)

Fichte then argues that if self-consciousness is to be possible, "there is a type of consciousness in which what is subjective and what is objective cannot be separated from each other at all, but are absolutely one and the same" (K1 1:527).

> This immediate consciousness is the intuition of the I just described. The I necessarily posits itself within this intuition and is thus at once what is subjective and what is objective . . . I am this intuition and nothing more whatsoever, and this intuition itself is I.
>
> (1K 1:529)

Fichte vs. Kant. This is what Fichte means by "intellectual intuition" (K1 1:530). Kant denies that we have any intellectual intuition—of the self or of anything else. He also abstains from the claim that pure apperception is a cognition of the self, on the ground that all our intuition is sensible, and apperception is pure thinking, which to be sure must be applied to sensibility to make experience possible, but apperception itself involves no intuition (KrV B157–9). How far Fichte's position really is from Kant's depends on our understanding of that to which the term "intellectual intuition" may

[22] This paradox is obviously closely related to the one famously explored by Dieter Henrich (1966). As I understand Fichte, however, he thinks this paradox has a solution, which is to be found in intellectual intuition.

refer.[23] "Intuition" is that cognition which involves a direct or immediate cognitive relation to an individual object (KrV A19/B33). Kant maintains that all human intuition occurs when objects affect us through the senses (KrV A19/B33). Intellectual intuition would have to be an immediate cognitive relation that relates *actively* to the object known, as in traditional rational theology, where God's knowledge *creates* the objects it knows (KrV A256/B311–12, B308). Kant therefore holds that pure apperception gives us awareness of our intellectual *activity*, but no cognition of the thing or object—"the I or he or it (the thing)" that performs this activity; this is why it is not to be considered an intellectual intuition of the self (KrV B157–9, A341–8/B399–406, B406–13). Fichte, however, expands the meaning of "intellectual intuition" (and perhaps also of "cognition") to include the purely intellectual consciousness of *activity*: "The philosopher," he says, "is able to engage in abstraction. That is to say, by means of a free act of thinking, he is able to separate things that are connected with each other within experience" (EE 1:425). The idealist philosopher abstracts the *act* of the intellect *from all things*, whether the object of the intellect or the agent of its activity, employing this transcendentally in accounting for the objective world. The dogmatist philosopher, by contrast, abstracts the *thing* from its representation in experience, and tries to use it to explain consciousness and activity. Fichte's claim is that, when understood in these terms, a coherent idealist system is possible, while a coherent dogmatist system is not. We can understand the world in which we live (know and act) *transcendentally* through our active consciousness, but we cannot understand our life, our active consciousness, *metaphysically* and *causally* through experience of, or theories about, this world.

As the starting point of idealism, the I or the intellect "has no *real being*, *no subsistence or continuing existence* . . . Idealism considers the intellect to be a kind of *doing* and absolutely nothing more. One should not even call it an *active subject*, for such an appellation suggests the presence of something that continues to exist and in which activity inheres" (EE 1:440). Fichte does not affirm the same intellectual intuition that Kant denies, but instead only expands the reference of the term "intuition," applying it to the same active awareness of thinking to which Kant declines to apply it on the ground that it involves no cognition of the *object* which thinks.

In the Second Introduction of 1797, Fichte replies to J.F. Schultz, who objected to his use of the term "intellectual intuition." He tells Schultz that his use of "intellectual intuition" refers to nothing but what Kant meant by "pure apperception" and is therefore not at variance with Kantian doctrines, properly understood.[24] Intellectual intuition is

[23] There is much controversy about the history of the term "intellectual intuition" in Fichte's philosophy—for example, whether the concept is even present in the GWL of 1794. For an account of this dispute, see Breazeale (2013), Chapter 8, pp. 197–229. As Breazeale points out, the term is used increasingly in the later Jena period, after 1796 (p. 200). My exposition here, since it aims primarily at helping us understand Fichte's *System of Ethics* (1798), is focused on the later Jena presentation, in which the term "intellectual intuition" is indisputably present.

[24] Schultz, a close associate of Kant in the late 1790s and one of Fichte's earlier benefactors, is often thought to have urged, or even perhaps ghost-written, the famous *Open Letter* denouncing Fichte which

the immediate awareness of activity that is inseparable from all consciousness, and which unifies consciousness into experience of a world.

The term "intellectual intuition" has several closely related meanings for Fichte.[25] Intellectual intuition is our awareness of acting, when we act. It is also our awareness of that which makes possible the unity of experience. For this reason, it also refers to the starting point of the fundamental philosophical science, the *Wissenschaftslehre* (ZE 1:471). The method of the Doctrine of Science is that of developing out of the intellectual intuition of our own activity the series of necessary thoughts that make experience possible. Fichte thus extends the meaning of the term "intellectual intuition" to include our awareness of these necessary thoughts, and also our self-observation of the "how" through which experience is constituted (WLnm p. 121, cf. GA IV/2: 33). Our awareness of activity, however, is not to be understood merely as a passive or empirical awareness of something occurring now. It is an awareness of acting from the standpoint of the agent engaged in it. Thus intellectual intuition includes also an awareness of how we *can* and *should* act—in other words, something *normative*. Ultimately, it is awareness of the fundamental norm that makes consciousness possible: the categorical imperative.

> The intellectual intuition of which the Doctrine of Science speaks is not directed toward any sort of being whatsoever; instead, it is directed at an acting—and this is something Kant does not even mention (except perhaps, under the name "pure apperception"). Nevertheless, it is still possible to indicate the exact place within Kant's system where he should have discussed this. For Kant would certainly maintain that we are conscious of the categorical imperative, would he not? What sort of consciousness is this? Kant neglected to pose this question to himself, for nowhere did he discuss the foundation of all philosophy.
>
> (ZE 1:472)

In the *System of Ethics*, Fichte does hold that our awareness of the principle of morality is, according to its form, an intellectual intuition (SL 4:45–7). When we say the I is active (self-reverting, self-positing), and that it is aware of itself as active, we cannot mean only that the I is some *object* or *thing* that has some *property* which it observes itself to have. We must mean that the I is aware of a free decision which it *is to make*, and of *a norm or reason* that applies to this decision. The I's awareness of its acting, in other words, is not theoretical knowledge. It is more fundamentally an awareness of something *to be done*, of something I *ought* to do. This might also explain why Fichte considers this awareness of the I's activity to be possible in abstraction from any awareness of the being or agent that acts. For if it is awareness not of how the I *is acting*, but of how I *ought to act*, then there need be no awareness myself as the subject of a prior (or occurrent) action: the self or agent of what is to be done will, so to speak, come into

Kant—whose intellectual powers were by that time very much in decline—published in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* in August 1799.

[25] That Fichte uses the term "intellectual intuition" in more than one sense is noted by Breazeale (2013), p. 221, Tilliette (1995), pp. 51–2, and Baumanns (1972), p. 73.

being only after I have responded to the ought, either by conforming to it or refusing to conform. The subject of a norm, imperative, or reason for acting is a being that can have no existence and no determinate properties, because it will come to be only after my absolute freedom responds to the norm or reasons in some way that is still open to me to determine. The "self-reverting" act of the I, or its "self-positing," that is, must be understood most fundamentally as an act *still to be performed*, whose task is to bring the I into being. If that is correct, then this *ought*, or *ought-for-a-reason*, constitutes the self-intuition of the I that acts, or posits itself absolutely. This will be key to the arguments we will examine in Chapter 4.

Further, Fichte is identifying this norm-laden awareness of freedom with that very self-consciousness (Kantian "pure apperception") which is the ultimate and fundamental condition of the possibility of all consciousness and all experience. Fichte is arguing for the fundamental identity of three philosophical problems that still plague us because they prove resistant to every attempt to "naturalize" them. These are the problems of *consciousness*, of *normativity*, and of *freedom*. As we will see in Chapter 3, of these *freedom* is for Fichte the most fundamental.

§8: Moving Beyond the First Principle

Conceptualizing the intellectual intuition. Kant insists that cognition requires both intuition and concepts: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (KrV A51/B75). In his response to Schultz, Fichte quotes these remarks and presses them emphatically (ZE 1:473–5). The I's intellectual intuition of itself as self-positing must therefore be brought under concepts in order to result in a cognition of the I. This step is what Fichte undertakes in Section III of Chapter 1, though the chapter breaks off before he has gotten very far into it. In this section, Fichte argues that in contrast to the intellectual intuition of the I, which is an "agility" (*Agilität*), a concept is a state of repose from which we wrench ourselves into activity (K1 1:531–3).

"Agility" is a term Fichte uses for activity in the sense we have just been understanding it—that is, for *acting* in the sense of *being about to act*, or facing a choice that is subject to a norm or imperative which provides a reason for choosing, but leaves the I free to act in conformity or not. "Agility consists in a movement of transition from determinability to determinacy" (WLnm, GA IV/2: 183). A *concept*, by contrast, is something stable, either a way the world is (providing a fixed point in relation to which the I is to act) or else a norm (imperative or end) that fixes the manner the I ought to act, or a result of acting—what is posited in contrast to the act of positing (GWL 1:234, NR 3:77, SL 4:2, 66, 71, 220, WLnm GA IV, 2: 32–3). Philosophy (or "the higher speculative standpoint") must first discover the I's self-positing as an intellectual intuition, and then grasp it in a concept: "Like sensory intuition, which never occurs by itself or constitutes a complete state of consciousness, this intellectual intuition never occurs

alone, however, as a complete act of consciousness. Both must be brought under concepts or comprehended [*begriffen*]" (ZE 1:463).[26]

The "not-I." To conceptualize an intuition, as we have seen, is to *determine* it, which means to contrast it with something else that falls outside the sphere of the concept that is being applied to it. "No matter what is being determined, all determination occurs by way of opposition" (K1 1:532; cf. GWL 1:131). This is apparently the meaning given by Fichte to the principle attributed to Spinoza: *omnis determinatio est negatio*.[27] Fichte infers from this that in order for the I to grasp its intellectual intuition in a concept, it must perform a second act of positing: it must posit a not-I opposed to its own activity (GWL 1:106–7, ZE 1:459). Sometimes Fichte describes the formation of the concept of an I, and the positing of the not-I that is required for it, as the act of "reflection" (BWL 1: 67, GWL 1:91–2, 107, EWL 1: 359, ZE 1:489).

Fichte is emphatic that *for philosophy*, the not-I comes about through an act of positing by the I: "All that is not-I *is* only for the I" (RA 1:20). From the act of self-positing, he says, "we may proceed to infer the occurrence of another act, by means of which a not-I comes into being for us" (ZE 1:459). "I posit myself as something limited . . . since it conditions my own positing of myself" (ZE 1:489). Fichte rejects, both as a philosophical error and as a misinterpretation of Kant, the notion that the I is to be limited through something's being given to the I "from outside" (ZE 1:486–9). "From the transcendental standpoint it appears utterly absurd to assume a not-I as a thing in itself in abstraction from reason" (SL 4:100). The essence of the critical standpoint, the "revolution" accomplished by it, he declares, is that "the object will be posited and determined by our power of cognition, and not vice-versa" (EE 1:421).

The not-I is *not* a mere subjective *representation* of some sort—an "idea" (in the Cartesian, Lockean, or Berkeleyan sense) or a Humean "perception of the mind." Fichte intends the I's necessary act of positing the not-I to constitute the equivalent to Kant's Refutation of Idealism in the B edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: a proof that there exists a real world distinct from our representations or mental acts: "This proof clearly shows, against [Descartes' "problematic idealism"], that the consciousness of the thinking I, as understood by Descartes himself, is possible only under the condition that there be a not-I which is to be thought" (RA 1:21). Like Kant, Fichte rejects the view that we must infer a world of external material things from our inner representations, as their "causes." He takes it to be a condition of the free efficacy of the I that there is an external, sensible world of material things on which the I is to act, and that this world must be given in time as already existing prior to the free action of the I (NR 3:23–9; SL 4:23–4).

Fichte accepts that there is in our experience "a double series, of being and seeing, of the real and ideal" (EE 1:436, cf. ZE 1:494). But he thinks that the ideal series, in this

[26] This also implies that for Fichte, as for Kant, there can in fact be no intuiting apart from thinking. That point has been argued by Breazeale (2013), pp. 222–9.

[27] *Determinatio negatio est* was stated by Spinoza in *Epistle* 50 to his friend Jarigh Jelles dated June 2, 1674. But cf. *Ethics* IP8s1. For a discussion of this principle in Spinoza and two other German idealist philosophers, see Melamed (2012).

sense, is *derivative from the real*—that the category "representation" (*Vorstellung*) is to be given a transcendental deduction based on the "check" (*Anstoss*) of the activity of the I by the not-I (GWL 1:227–8). We do not get at the material world through our ideas or representations—by the causality of material things on us or through our inferences from our ideas or representations to material things; on the contrary, we can get at our ideas or representations only as an abstraction from our living relation to the material world. This illustrates Fichte's view that idealism as a philosophical or "speculative" standpoint is not only compatible with common sense realism, but even provides a philosophical vindication of it.

§9: The Synthetic Method

The positing of the not-I, as a necessary condition of the I's own self-positing, provides Fichte with the first and most basic opportunity to apply what he calls the "synthetic method" in transcendental philosophy. This is the procedure by which philosophy moves from its initial abstraction back toward the concrete starting point, by generating a series of (apparent) contradictions, each of which is successively resolved through the introduction of a new concept.

Conceptual impoverishment. Apparent contradictions easily arise if we are working with too few concepts. That forces us to choose between false alternatives, and we seem to have no way out of contradictions. Adding more concepts to our repertoire enables us to make subtler distinctions and avoid contradictions. This simple point is the basis of Fichte's synthetic method.

We have already seen the synthetic method in operation in §6. Self-consciousness was displayed as incapable of explanation until we introduced the concept of an immediate, active awareness that the I has of itself in its act of self-positing. We can also see the synthetic method being used in the first move Fichte typically makes after asserting the first principle—the I's activity—and then the second, the existence of a not-I against which it acts. The I and the not-I are each required for the other, but they are opposites. If we have only the conception of negating activity, then the activity of each seems to contradict the existence of the other, but since each is the condition of the other, each seems to negate its own possibility, making the I itself impossible.

Antinomies and their resolution. In the *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science*, Fichte presents the self-positing of the I and the positing of the not-I presupposed by it as threatening us with an antinomy:

1. Insofar as the not-I is posited, the I is not posited; for the not-I completely nullifies the I.... Thus the I is not posited in the I insofar as the not-I is posited in it.
2. But the not-I can be posited only insofar as an I *is* posited in the I (in one identical consciousness) to which the not-I can be opposed... Thus insofar as the not-I is to be posited in this consciousness, the I must also be posited in it.

3. The two conclusions are opposed to each other... Hence [our] principle is opposed to itself and nullifies itself.

(GWL 1:106)

The contradiction can be avoided, however, if we introduce a new concept—that of limited, *partial*, or *divisible* activity or negation (GWL 1:105–10). The I and the not-I limit each other by *partially* negating each other, abolishing each other's activity only in part. This compatibility offers us a common ground for their synthesis or reciprocal dependency. The new concept thus generated is therefore the concept of *ground* (GWL 1:110–22).

All our conclusions have been derived from the principles already set forth... so they must be correct... And thereby our task is now determined. For we have to discover an X by means of which all these conclusions can be granted as correct, without doing away with the identity of consciousness.

(GWL 1: 107)

In the present case, Fichte identifies the X in question with the concept of limitation: the I and the not-I must be seen as acting on and limiting each other (GWL 1: 108), or (as this concept is further specified) they are related by *reciprocal determination* (*Wechselbestimmung*) (GWL 1:131). The I and the not-I must both be seen as "divisible" (GWL 1:108–9). They are each in part *different from* each other, and yet in part also *the same as* or *equal to* (*gleich*) each other.

This divisibility leads, according to Fichte's argument, to a third principle in addition to those of *identity* and *difference*: the principle of *ground*. When two things are the same or alike (*gleich*), there must be some mark or characteristic (*Merkmal*) in which they differ. Otherwise there could be no meaningful assertion of their sameness. Hesperus, for example, must appear in the evening and Phosphorus in the morning; even in the identity statement "A = A," the first token of A must appear to the left of the identity sign and the second to the right, and the first "A" must somehow refer to A in a way that is distinct from the way the second "A" refers to it; otherwise no meaningful assertion of identity has been made; likewise, when two things are different or opposed there must be some mark in which they are alike (*gleich*) or there could no relation between them, not even one of opposition. A plant and an animal are both living things (GWL 1:116). In both cases, the respect in which they agree is called a *ground*: in the former case, it is the ground of a *distinction* (within what is selfsame); in the latter case, of a *relation* (between two items that are opposed) (GWL 1:110–13).[28]

Fichte's synthetic method consists in generating a series of (apparent) contradictions, each of which is avoided or resolved by the introduction of a new concept.

[28] Fichte's actual use of the synthetic method predates its formulation as a method (or in the jargon of "thesis–antithesis–synthesis"). It is to be found already in *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, where it is used to resolve threatened conflicts, for example between moral vs. non-moral volition, impulse vs. the moral law, the law as objective vs. legislated by our own will, and moral vs. sensuous incentives in divine revelation (VKO 5:33, 35–6, 36–8, 40–2, 52–6, 79–80).

Sometimes Fichte presents the apparent contradiction as an antinomy, "thesis vs. antithesis," and considers the new concept required to avoid the antinomy as the "synthesis" of the two opposites (RA 1:7, GWL 1:114–15, GEW 1: 337, NR 3:101–2, SL 4:102–5). It was Fichte, therefore, who invented the jargon: "thesis–antithesis–synthesis."[29] In fact, as we shall see, the incoherence often does not take the form of a contradiction, but rather that of a circular explanation, a vicious infinite regress, a dilemma (a forced choice between two equally unacceptable options). It is always some kind of unsolved problem, *aporia*, or paradox that demands a resolution. What threatens us with a *contradiction* is sometimes the initial (abstract) statement of the new concept needed to avoid the problem or escape the *aporia*. The resolution then takes the form of an explanation that removes from it the appearance of contradiction through the use of the new concept, and makes the situation at last intelligible.[30]

The "synthetic method," according to Fichte, involves the discovery of "a new synthetic concept" (GWL 1:141) in which opposites are united or reconciled (GWL 1:114, 123, NR 3:99, SL 4:104). In Part Two of the *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science* (GWL), Fichte uses the "synthetic method" to provide similar deductions of other theoretical categories: causal efficacy (GWL 1:136), substance/accident (GWL 1:142), quantity and quantum (GWL 1: 139), qualitative reality (GWL 1:142); then imagination (GWL 1:215–19), representation (*Vorstellung*) which had been the first principle of Reinhold's "elementary philosophy" (GWL 1:227–9), followed by understanding (GWL 1:233), the modal categories of necessity and possibility (GWL 1:238–41), and judgment (GWL 1:242). In the subsequent essay *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Doctrine of Science* (1795), he derives the subjective conditions for theoretical cognition (sensation, intuition in space and time) (EWL 1:331–471).[31] Fichte tells us in the *Foundation* that the synthetic method is appropriate only for theoretical philosophy and an opposed or "analytical" procedure is required for the practical part of the Doctrine of Science (GWL 1:114–15). We will see in Chapters 4 through 7 that Fichte

[29] Fichte's synthetic method was clearly the original model for Hegel's dialectic, but Hegel deliberately avoids using the same triadic terminology. Hegel means to avoid having his dialectic associated with Fichte's method, and with Fichtean transcendental philosophy, which he does not accept in an unmodified form. Marx's only use of this jargon is in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, where he uses it to ridicule Pierre Proudhon's poor understanding of German philosophy. When expositors of Hegel or of Marx use this jargon to present their "dialectic," they are forcing on these philosophers a mode of expression they conspicuously did not accept. These expositors are also telling you—without intending to—something else even more important: that *they do not know what they are talking about*.

[30] For example: Fichte argues that the I must act negatively on the not-I but can never abolish it. This activity, he argues, must therefore be conceived as "a causality that is not a causality"; Fichte explains the meaning of this concept by saying that it refers to a striving (RA 1:23–4, BWL, FGA I, 1:151–2, GWL 1:261, SL 4:34, 73, 121). In this way, Fichte appropriates Spinoza's conception of *conatus* (striving or endeavor; Spinoza, *Ethics* IIIP6).

[31] A good recent exposition of this development in GWL is presented by Förster (2012), Chapter 8, pp. 179–204. He then expounds the even more tentative and undeveloped practical part of GWL in Chapter 9, pp. 205–20. But Förster neglects the later development of Fichte's practical philosophy found in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796) and *System of Ethics* (1798) (GWL 1:114–15).

uses the synthetic method explicitly throughout the *System of Ethics* (SL 4:104); it is also used in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (NR 3:99).

Metaphysical deduction, transcendental deduction, schematism. Any new concept that is introduced in this way, and shown to be necessary to avoid a contradiction, is thereby given (in Kantian terminology) a *metaphysical deduction*. That is, its origin is seen to be *transcendental* rather than empirical, since the concept is needed if the possibility of experience, grounded on the self-positing I, is to be coherently conceived at all. At the same time, it is provided also with a *transcendental deduction*. That is, its objective instantiation in experience is shown to be necessary as a requirement for coherently conceiving the conditions under which the I can be, and be aware of itself as, active. The concept is also provided with what we might call a "determination"—a specification of its transcendental content, which is that of being precisely that concept that avoids the threatened contradiction. The series of such concepts, and their deductions through the synthetic method, is supposed to constitute the Doctrine of Science, and also constitutes the other sciences (such as that of right and ethics) that are grounded on the Doctrine of Science.

The principal concept that will receive this treatment in Fichte's *System of Ethics* is that of the principle of morality or the categorical imperative—the concept which, in Chapter 4, we will call that of moral authority. It receives a *metaphysical deduction*—a demonstration of its *a priori* transcendental grounding—in Part One of the *System of Ethics*, then its applicability (in Kantian terms, its *transcendental deduction*) is supplied in Part Two (which we will discuss in Chapter 5), and its actual application (Kantian *schematism*) is presented in Part Three (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 of this book). In the course of these arguments, other concepts—such as those of drive, the system of necessary drives of the I, and conscience—will be similarly developed. Most important will be the drive to absolute independence or self-sufficiency, expressive of the I's freedom, and the summons, by which the I's relation to others is cognized. The foundation for these two concepts will be the topic of Chapter 3.

The process of deriving new concepts through the synthetic method can also lead to their radical reinterpretation, and also the reinterpretation of the familiar concepts of common sense they aim to justify. What might look like an individualistic ethics, or a teleological ethics, might turn out to be nothing of the kind, but even its virtual opposite. These transformations are also a fertile ground for exegetical disputes about the meaning of some of Fichte's fundamental doctrines. We will see in Chapters 5 and 6 that in Fichte's *System of Ethics*, the fundamental drive for self-sufficiency, which might look like the basis for a calculative-consequentialist ethics, cannot coherently be represented that way, because self-sufficiency cannot be coherently represented as any determinate end that could be achieved, or even maximized. The determination of ethical duty will be seen at one stage (in Chapter 5) as an issue for individual conscientious conviction, but later (in Chapters 6 and 7) as something to be determined through social communication.