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JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE

The System of Ethics

According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
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Introduction

Fichte's life and works

Johann Gottlieb Fichte was born on May 19, 1762 in Rammenau, Saxony (in the eastern part of today's Germany). He studied theology and law at Jena, Wittenberg and Leipzig without taking a degree (1784–1788) and served as a private tutor in several families in Saxony, Prussia and Switzerland (1784–1793). In 1790, upon studying Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), he became an enthusiastic adherent and supporter of Kant's Critical philosophy. Indeed, when his first publication, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792)¹ appeared anonymously, it was widely assumed to be a work by Kant himself. Kant publicly declared Fichte to be the author of the latter work and thereby launched Fichte's meteoric philosophical career. He was offered a professorship at the University of Jena, where he began teaching in the Summer Semester 1794. During his five years at Jena, Fichte's widely attended lectures and numerous publications exercised a tremendous influence on German philosophical and literary culture.

Fichte's major works from his Jena period are *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1794),² *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*

¹ *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

² *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre or, of so-called "Philosophy,"* in Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988; Cornell Paperbacks, 1993) [henceforth = *EPW*], 94–135.

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(1794–1795),³ *Foundation of Natural Right* (1796–1797),⁴ *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797–1798),⁵ and *The System of Ethics* (1798). His lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796–1799),⁶ which are preserved only in student transcripts, are also central documents for any informed understanding of Fichte’s early system. Though written shortly after he left Jena for Berlin, *The Vocation of Man* (1800),⁷ represents an effort on Fichte’s part to summarize the conclusions of his Jena system in a more accessible or “popular” form.

In 1799 Fichte lost his professorship in Jena over charges of atheism stemming from his publication in 1798 of a brief essay “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World.”⁸ He spent most of the remaining years of his life in Berlin, where he initially supported himself by giving private and public lecture courses and later assuming a professorship at the newly founded university there (1810–1814). During those years Fichte published little, and what he did publish were not the new versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that he was developing in his private lectures, but revised versions of his public lectures on the philosophy of history and philosophy of religion, as well as his celebrated *Addresses to the German Nation* (1806).⁹ As a result, he came to share the fate he himself had helped bring upon Kant: that of being surpassed in the eyes of the philosophical public by his own followers and successors, first Schelling and later Hegel.

In fact, Fichte remained philosophically active and productive until shortly before his death from typhoid fever January 29, 1814. He left behind a large number of unpublished works and lecture notes, some of which were edited by his son, Immanuel Hermann Fichte, in the mid-nineteenth century and all of which are now being made available in the complete

³ Contained under the title “Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge,” in J. G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge With the First and Second Introductions*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) [henceforth = *SK*], 87–286.

⁴ *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser and trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) [henceforth = *FN*].

⁵ Contained in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797–1800)*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) [henceforth = *IWL*], 1–118.

⁶ *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo (1796/99)*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) [henceforth = *FTP*].

⁷ *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

⁸ “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World,” trans. Daniel Breazeale, in *IWL*, pp. 141–154.

⁹ *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. George A. Kelly, trans. G. H. Turnbull (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

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critical edition of Fichte's writings undertaken by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.¹⁰ Due to this immense body of posthumous work, Fichte remains very much a philosopher to be rediscovered and, with respect to many of the previously unknown versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from the post-Jena period, even discovered for the first time.

Fichte between Kant and Hegel

In the overall development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger, Fichte occupies a crucial place. On the one hand, he continues the aspirations of his predecessors – especially Descartes and Kant – toward a scientific and methodologically sound form of philosophy that is free from error, illusion and doubt. On the other hand, he is the first major representative of a type of philosophy that is explicitly informed by human interests and specifically practical orientations as much as by the pursuit of pure knowledge for its own sake. Yet in contrast to later philosophers, such as Marx and Nietzsche, who criticize the very project of the pure, disinterested search for truth as a mask for hidden interests and motivations, Fichte stills seeks to preserve the ahistorical, “absolute” character of knowledge, while simultaneously acknowledging the predominantly practical nature of the pursuit of the same and the human, all-too-human obstacles to achieving it.

In more specific, historical terms, Fichte is a crucial link between Kant and Hegel. With the former he shares the critical spirit of determining the conditions as well as the boundaries of any claims to objectively valid judgments, while preparing the way for the latter's inclusion of the social and historical dimension of human existence into the domain of systematic philosophical investigation. Yet with his insistence upon the ultimate unknowability of the absolute (“God”) and upon the resistance of ultimate facts to complete theoretical reconstruction (“facticity”), Fichte remains closer in “spirit” to Kant than to Hegel. Fichte approaches philosophical issues in the oblique manner of investigating what and how we can know rather than

¹⁰ *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte, eight vols. (Berlin: Viet & Co., 1845–1846); rpt., along with the three vols. of *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes nachgelassene Werke* (Bonn: Adolphus-Marcus, 1834–35), as *Fichtes Werke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971) [henceforth = *SW* and cited by volume and page number]. *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky†, and Erich Fuchs. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964ff.) [henceforth = *GA* and cited by series, volume, and page number].

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through any purported direct insight into the nature of things. Like Descartes and Kant, and unlike Hegel, he places epistemology before metaphysics. Alternatively put, he subjects metaphysics to an epistemological turn.

Fichte's influence on the course of philosophy has been tremendous. He was among the first to move from the immediate, often piecemeal reception of Kant's work to its original appropriation and transformation into a comprehensively conceived systematic philosophy. Moreover, he single-handedly changed the character of philosophical teaching, and by extension that of other academic subject matters, by inaugurating the practice of lecturing on his own writings, often work in progress, rather than expounding an official textbook. In the process, he also contributed to changing the style of philosophical discourse from dispassionate academic language to a vigorous, rhetorically charged prose that reflects the personality of its author as much as the demands of the subject matter. Regarding the content of philosophy, in addition to his Herculean efforts to construct a new and more encompassing theory of human consciousness, Fichte did pioneering work in separating the legal and political sphere from the moral domain and in placing ethics into the larger framework of the theory of action and the theory of social relations.

Philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre*

Fichte's technical term for his chief philosophical project is *Wissenschaftslehre*, alternatively rendered in English as "doctrine of science" and "science of knowledge" (though often left untranslated, as a technical term of art). For Fichte, this term with its emphasis on knowledge (*Wissen*), and specifically scientific knowledge or science (*Wissenschaft*), replaces the older designation "philosophy," whose literal meaning as "love of wisdom" reflects an understanding of the discipline that is at once too modest and too ambitious: too modest in its restriction to the mere *pursuit* of wisdom rather than its attainment of the same; and too ambitious in aiming at (practical) wisdom rather than (theoretical) knowledge.

The specific sort of knowledge sought by philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre* is knowledge regarding knowledge, more precisely, knowledge concerning the grounds and conditions of all knowledge. Rather than being object-oriented and object-specific, philosophical knowledge is reflectively oriented toward the grounds or conditions of knowledge as such. It is not about this or that object to be known but

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rather about the very objectivity of knowledge. Philosophical knowledge is “transcendental” in the Kantian sense of that term.

Whereas Kant essentially limited transcendental philosophy to the “theoretical” realm consisting of the transcendental theory of the knowledge of objects (nature), to the exclusion of practical (moral and social) philosophy, Fichte conceives of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a truly universal, “transcendental” science that is concerned just as much with the grounds and conditions of our knowledge of *what ought to be* or what *ought to be done* as it is with the grounds and conditions of our knowledge of *what is*. Nevertheless, the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself remains a thoroughly theoretical enterprise, even if one of its chief concerns is to produce a transcendental theory of human action and practice.

The new and broader conception of transcendental philosophy that underlies the *Wissenschaftslehre* allows Fichte to unify and to integrate into a comprehensive philosophical system elements and disciplines that remain disparate and disjointed in Kant. Fichte’s move beyond Kant occurs in two main directions. In a reductive direction, or in moving from the spheres of nature and social life to their underlying grounds and conditions, Fichte traces the distinction between theory and practice to an ultimate origin that precedes but also conditions and makes necessary this seemingly elementary distinction. Whereas Kant had insisted on the irreducibility of theoretical reason (knowledge of nature) and practical reason (knowledge of morals) to each other, Fichte reveals their hidden common ground in the necessary structure of self-positing self-hood (the pure I). This unitary ground is both the source of reason’s differentiation as theoretical reason and practical reason and the source of the latter’s ultimate identity as reason.

Fichte also strengthens the integration of reason in a deductive direction inasmuch as his system proceeds methodically from the ultimate and intermediate grounds and conditions of all knowledge to their successive unfolding in various kinds of knowledge and their respective object domains. Unlike Kant, who had radically separated the pure principles of theoretical and practical reason from their contingent instantiations in experience and social life, Fichte insists on the gradual, methodically controlled transition from the highest principle or principles to the ever-more specific aspects and features of human mental life and its natural and social object domains. Thus, not only does his system include transcendental deductions of the first principles of theoretical and

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practical philosophy, but also deductions of the “applicability” of the same. This is the basis for his claim to have constructed a “real” and not merely a “formal” science of philosophy.

Fichte’s radical integration of the absolute ground of all knowing with that which it grounds results in a radically unified system of the mind. It also assures the systematic unity of the philosophical reconstruction of the system of knowledge in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte was thus the first of Kant’s successors to envision and to realize the systematic constitution of philosophical knowledge as well as its object, i.e., non-philosophical knowledge of all kinds. Unfortunately a series of external circumstances, chiefly the loss of his professorship at Jena, the impact of the Napoleonic wars on Prussia (his adopted homeland after 1799) and his untimely death in 1814, prevented him from completely executing the projected entire system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

Despite its systematic scope and methodological rigor there is a remarkable openness to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which for Fichte is not a fixed doctrine to be laid down once and for all in teaching and in writing, but an open system animated and sustained by a spirit of continuing inquiry and self-improvement. Fichte always insisted on the freedom of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from any specific final formulation and from any specific technical vocabulary. Over the course of two decades he developed fifteen radically different presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, continually reworking the “body” of his philosophy, while insisting that its “spirit” remained the same.

The systematic place of ethics within the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*

That a complete system of philosophy would have to include a division devoted specifically to moral theory or ethics was, one might say, self-evident to a philosopher with Fichte’s background and with his intensely practical orientation toward both life and philosophy. His earliest remarks concerning the systematic structure of his new system embrace a three-part organizational scheme, consisting of “universal philosophy” as well as the two branches of the same, “theoretical” and “practical” philosophy.¹¹ Yet even this simple scheme was somewhat complicated,

¹¹ Fichte to F. I. Niethammer, December 6, 1793 (*GA* III/2: 21).

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first of all, by the fact that the first, “general” or “foundational” part of the entire system was in turn originally divided into “theoretical” and “practical” portions and, secondly, by the fact that Fichte himself sometimes referred to the practical portion of this foundational portion of the system (corresponding to Part III of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*) simply as “practical philosophy” or, more perspicuously, “*Universal Practical Philosophy*.”¹² Despite this ambiguity, it remains clear that Fichte envisioned from the first that his entire system would include a specifically “practical” sub-division, to be constructed upon the basis of a new foundation, which would in turn include theoretical and practical parts.¹³ This project is first made public and explicit in the brief “hypothetical” sketch of the contours of his new system contained in Part III of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), in which Fichte confidently forecasts that the second, “practical” portion of his forthcoming presentation of the foundations of his new system will also provide the basis for “new and thoroughly elaborated theories of the pleasant, the beautiful, the sublime, the free obedience of nature to its own laws, God, so-called common sense or the natural sense of truth, and finally for new theories of nature and morality, the principles of which are material as well as formal.”¹⁴

As the preceding, rather motley collection of topics suggests, Fichte had at this point still not worked out the precise content and details of the “specifically practical” portion of the new system. The most arresting point of this promissory note, however, is surely the claim that his new ethics – in implicit contradistinction to that of Kant – will be “material” as well as formal. What this means first becomes clear, not in the 1798 *System of Ethics*, but two years earlier in the first part of the *Foundation of Natural Right*, where he explains “How a real philosophical science is to be distinguished from a mere formulaic philosophy.”¹⁵ A “real” philosophical science has content as well as form, because content and form (object and concept) are inseparably connected in the original and necessary self-constitutive acts of the I; such a science observes and describes

¹² This is from Fichte’s April 2, 1794 letter to K. A. Böttiger (*GA* 111/2: 92).

¹³ See, e.g., Fichte’s March 8, 1794 letter to G. Hufeland, in which he discloses his plans for his inaugural lectures at Jena and remarks that in his “private” lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* he will provide a completely new presentation of the *concept* of philosophy and will develop the first principles of the same up to the point of Reinhold’s Principle of Consciousness, and “perhaps also establish the first principles of an entirely new kind of practical philosophy” (*GA* 111/2: 82).

¹⁴ *EPW*, p. 135 (*SW*I: 66; *GA* 1/2: 151). ¹⁵ *FNR*, pp. 3–8 (*SW* 111: 1–7; *GA* 1/3: 313–318).

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these very acts – with respect both to their (necessary) form and their (necessary) content. One “real” philosophical science is distinguished from another simply by the particular determinate acts it observes and describes. The foundational portion of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*, which is also a “real” philosophical science in its own right, describes the most basic acts of the I and thus establishes the “reality” of the I itself, along with that of its domains of experience, both theoretical and practical (the “sensible” and “rational” or “spiritual” worlds). The special philosophical sciences obtain their reality or material content from those additional, necessary and determinate acts of the I that they observe and describe – with respect both to the necessary form of these acts themselves (necessary, that is, for the possibility of self-consciousness itself, or for that “real” act of ungrounded self-positing with the postulation of which the entire system begins) and to the necessary content of the same (that is, the product that necessarily emerges as an object for reflection as a result of this same originally posited action). The “real content” of the special philosophical science of natural right or law (*Naturrecht*) is provided by the concept of right itself, which is deduced or, as Fichte puts it, “genetically derived,” along with its necessary object or content: a community of free, embodied individuals, each of whom must limit his external freedom and constrain his efficacious acting in specific ways in order to posit himself as one among many, and, ultimately, in order to be able to posit himself (as an individual) at all. So too, Fichte envisioned a philosophical science of ethics that would describe certain necessary acts of the I, through which it will obtain for itself a distinctive sphere of objects, as well as insight into the necessary laws (the form) of the same. Such an ethics would therefore be “material as well as formal.”

When he published a second edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* in 1798, Fichte omitted Part III, “Hypothetical Division of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.” The reason he did this was, no doubt, because he had since arrived at a clearer and more fully articulated understanding of the overall systematic structure of his own system. This new systematic conception is most fully presented in the “Deduction of the Subdivisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*” with which he concluded his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Beginning in the Summer Semester of 1796/97, with his first presentation of the foundations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* “in accordance with a new method,” Fichte abandoned the tripartite division of *prima philosophia* that he had followed in the

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Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre. Gone entirely is any preliminary discussion of the relationship between logical laws and the first principles of transcendental philosophy, along with the pretence of deriving the latter from the former. Gone too is the distinction between the “theoretical” and “practical” portions of the foundational portion of the system, an absence that eliminates the previous ambiguity regarding the meaning of the term “practical philosophy.” From now on, the term “practical philosophy” designates a specific sub-division of the larger system, the first principles or foundations of which are presented in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.

According to this new division, philosophy as a whole is divided into four major divisions: (1) the first or foundational part of the entire system, (2) theoretical philosophy, (3) practical philosophy, and (4) “philosophy of the postulates,” which is in turn divided into philosophy of right and philosophy of religion. The foundational portion of the system is expounded in the lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. The task of this first part of the entire system is to derive only the most basic concepts (and objects) of transcendental philosophy, the further analysis and determination of which is the subject of the “special philosophical sciences,” each of which has the further task of exhaustively determining the particular concepts (and objects) that constitute its distinctive domain of inquiry.

The first of these special sciences is “theoretical *Wissenschaftslehre*, or the *Wissenschaftslehre* of cognition in the Kantian sense,” which considers what we necessarily *cognize* whenever we *find* ourselves: i.e., nature or the world, as an object of objective cognition, considered both as a mechanical system and as subject to organic laws. Such a philosophical sub-discipline establishes “how the world is” and thus what we necessarily can and cannot experience. To be sure, the world (nature) is an object of philosophical interest and inquiry only to the extent that it is determined a priori by necessary laws of *thinking*, a limitation that prevented Fichte from taking seriously the project of *Naturphilosophie* as developed by Schelling and Hegel. Fichte, of course, never published any separate treatise on “theoretical philosophy” or “philosophy of nature,” perhaps because – as his account of this science suggests – at least the basic features of such a science are already contained in the systematic presentation of the first principles or foundations of the entire system.¹⁶

¹⁶ *FTP*, pp. 467–470 (*GA* 1V / 2: 262).

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The second special philosophical sub-discipline is the “*Wissenschaftslehre* of the practical,” or “*ethics* in the proper sense of the term.” Of course, as Fichte notes, if the domain of “the practical” is taken to be congruent with that of acting as such, then the entire system of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is shot through with “practical” elements. As a “particular science,” however, practical philosophy deals specifically with those universal laws of reason that determine how every rational person, irrespective of his individual circumstances or nature, must limit his actions and must act in a determinate manner. These universal commands are the subject of “universal ethics,” a philosophical science that tells us not how the world actually is, but rather, “how the world ought be made by rational beings”; it deals not with individuals as such, but with “reason as such in its individuality,” inasmuch as individuality is itself a universal condition for the possibility of reason. Viewed in this way, ethics can be characterized as “the highest abstraction in thinking,” inasmuch as it involves an “ascent from the level of what is sensible to the pure concept as a motive for action.”¹⁷ This is the science expounded in *The System of Ethics*.

¹⁷ “In order to find ourselves we must think of the task of limiting ourselves in a certain way. This task is different for every individual, and it is precisely this difference that determines which particular individual one actually is. This is not a task that appears to us all at once and once and for all; instead, it presents itself in the course of experience every time an ethical command is issued to us. But since we are practical beings, this summons to limit ourselves also contains a summons for us to act in a determinate way. This applies differently to every individual. Everyone bears his own conscience within himself, and each person’s conscience is entirely his own. Yet the manner in which the law of reason commands everyone can certainly be established in abstracto. Such an inquiry is conducted from a higher standpoint, where individuality vanishes from view and one attends only to what is universal or general. I must act; my conscience is my conscience, and to this extent the theory of ethics is an individual matter. This, however, is not the way it is dealt with in the general theory of ethics. {If one attends only to what is universal, there arises} the practical *Wissenschaftslehre*, which becomes the particular [science of] ethics, {or ‘ethics’ in the proper sense of the term}. That is to say, what is practical is acting as such, but acting is constantly present throughout the *Foundation*, inasmuch as this entire mechanism [of reason] is based upon [acting]; consequently, the specifically practical *Wissenschaftslehre* can only be ethics. Ethics explains how the world ought to be constructed by rational beings, and its result is something ideal (to the extent that what is ideal can be a result), since this is not something that can be grasped conceptually. {[In contrast,] the theoretical *Wissenschaftslehre* explains how the world is, and the result of the same is pure empirical experience.} *Remark:* Both theoretical and practical philosophy are [included within] the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Both are based upon the transcendental point of view: Theoretical philosophy is based upon the transcendental point of view precisely because it deals with the act of cognizing, and thus with something within us, and it is not concerned with any sort of {mere} being. Practical philosophy is based upon the transcendental point of view because it does not deal with the I as an individual at all, but instead deals with reason as such, in its individuality. {The theory of ethics maintains that individuality is contained within and follows from reason. That I am precisely this specific individual, however, is not something that follows from reason.} The former theory is

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The third special philosophical science or systematic subdivision of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* is called “the philosophy of the postulates,” because it deals with the objects of both theoretical and practical philosophy (nature and freedom), but it deals with these not in isolation from each other but in their *relation* to each other; more specifically, this subdivision of the system is concerned with the specific *demands* that practical and theoretical philosophy each makes upon the realm of the other, and hence with what each specifically “postulates” with respect to the other. The first systematic subdivision of the philosophy of the postulates, “Doctrine of Law or Natural Right,” concerns itself with those postulates that theory addresses to the practical realm, that is to the domain of pure freedom as embodied in finite rational individuals. The doctrine of right or theory of natural law is the special philosophical science that demonstrates how each individual must limit his own freedom within the context of a “juridical world” and subject himself to a legal constitution, in accordance with a certain mechanical and externally enforceable connection, in order to advance toward the universal end of reason itself. Since the latter is, properly speaking, also the end of morality, Fichte concludes that this “juridical world must precede the moral world.”¹⁸ The theory or doctrine of right is thus equally theoretical and practical, since it deals with the *world* not as it is found, but rather, “as it ought to be found”; and it is up to us to produce such a social world, that is, to establish a just society. This is the science systematically expounded in the *Foundation of Natural Right* (1796/97).

There is also a postulate addressed by practical to theoretical reason and to the realm of the latter, that is, to nature, a postulate regarding the ways in which “the sensible world ought to accommodate itself to the end of reason.”¹⁹ This second postulate indicates the distinctive object of the other subdivision of Fichte’s philosophy of the postulates, Philosophy of Religion. The distinctive task of a transcendental philosophy of religion is to describe and to deduce how nature, in accordance with a supersensible law, is supposed to be compatible with morality. Unfortunately, Fichte

{in a certain respect} concrete; the latter is the highest abstraction {present within thinking and involves an ascent} from the level of what is sensible to the pure concept as a motive [for action]” (*FTP*, pp. 469–470 [*GA* IV/2: 263 and IV/3: 520–521]).

¹⁸ But note too the passage in the *Foundation of Natural Right* where Fichte says that the rule of right obtains a new sanction from moral conscience, which gives us a moral obligation to live in a human community and thus in the juridical world (*FNR*, pp. 10–11 [*SW* III: 10–11; *GA* I/3: 320–322]). The precise relationship between the disciplines of natural right and ethics is a topic worthy of further examination in its own right, inasmuch as Fichte’s own comments on this topic do not appear to be always consistent with one another.

¹⁹ *FTP*, p. 471 (*GA* IV/2: 265 and IV/3: 522).

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never had the opportunity to develop adequately this final subdivision of the *Wissenschaftslehre* during his tenure at Jena, though strong hints regarding the probable contents of such a special science may be gathered from his 1798 essay, “On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World,” as well as from portions of his introductory lectures on “Logic and Metaphysics” and from Book 3 of *The Vocation of Man*.²⁰

When we compare this lucid statement of the overall systematic structure of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* with what Fichte was actually able to accomplish during this same period we should note that he was able to publish full, scientific presentations of only two of the various “subdivisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”: namely, his treatises on natural right and ethics, which K. L. Reinhold accurately described, in his “Open Letter to Fichte,” as the “two pillars of your philosophy.”²¹ Ironically enough, Fichte was forced by the Atheism Controversy to leave Jena before he was able to develop his projected philosophy of religion, and he seems never to have seriously contemplated writing a separate work on theoretical philosophy (philosophy of nature).²² Nor was he ever able to publish a complete presentation of the new, foundational portion of the system “according to a new method,” despite the fact that he thrice lectured on this topic and even began publishing a revised version of these same lectures in installments in his own *Philosophical Journal*, under the title *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*.²³

²⁰ See Fichte’s lecture notes on §§ 933 ff. of Platner’s *Philosophische Aphorismen*, GA 11/4: 288–353. In 1799, during the height of the Atheism Controversy, some revised excerpts from a student transcript of this portion of Fichte’s Platner lectures were published anonymously under the title “Des Herrn Professor Fichte’s Ideen über Gott und Unsterblichkeit. Nach einem Kollegienheft herausgegeben,” in a volume entitled *Etwas von dem Herrn Professor Fichte und für ihn*. Though composed shortly after Fichte left Jena, Bk. 111 of *The Vocation of Man*, entitled “Faith” (*Glaube*), is obviously relevant to this topic as well.

²¹ K. L. Reinhold, *Sendschreiben an Fichte und Lavater* (1799), GA 11/3: 306.

²² Despite its title, the 1795 *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre with respect to the Theoretical Faculty* (in *EPW*, pp. 243–306) does not appear to be a treatise on “theoretical philosophy” in the sense here indicated, but rather, a necessary supplement to the *Foundation of the entire Wissenschaftslehre* – a surmise that is confirmed by Fichte’s insistence on publishing these works together in a single volume when he reissued them in 1802. Concerning Fichte’s “philosophy of nature,” see, above all, Reinhard Lauth, *Die transzendente Naturlehre Fichtes nach der Wissenschaftslehre* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989).

²³ Fichte’s decision to abandon this project following the publication of two introductions and a single chapter raises important questions for interpreting the evolution of Fichte’s philosophy and concerning the unity – or lack thereof – of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The circumstances relevant to understanding this decision include not only the Atheism Controversy but also Fichte’s ongoing debate (mainly in his correspondence) with Schelling regarding the proper limits of

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On the basis of the preceding survey of Fichte's efforts to describe the overall structure of his Jena system, the systematic place of *The System of Ethics* therein would appear to be unambiguous and unproblematic: Ethics is one of several "special" philosophical sciences. Its first principles – above all, the concepts of will, freedom, and drive – are contained in and derived from the first or foundational portion of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre*. Ethics is also a "real philosophical science," which specifies and provides itself with its own, distinctive object, as well as with the formal laws that apply to the same. As the distinctively "practical" portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, ethics stipulates how every individual ought to determine his own freedom in accordance with universal laws of reason.

This characterization of ethics as one of several systematic subdivisions of a larger system is also repeated in *The System of Ethics* itself, where Fichte writes: "Ethics is practical philosophy. Just as theoretical philosophy has to present that system of necessary thinking according to which our representations correspond to a being, so practical philosophy has to provide an exhaustive presentation of that system of necessary thinking according to which a being corresponds to and follows from our representations" (p. 2).²⁴ The starting point of such a special science is the proposition that the I, in order to posit or become conscious of itself – and thus, in order to be an I at all – must *find* itself to be engaged in actual willing, and hence must become conscious of its own efficacy in the external world (p. 12). This principle, however, is not demonstrated in *The System of Ethics* itself, but must instead be derived within and thus obtained from the preceding foundational portion of the entire system, "and thus the science of ethics that we are here engaged in establishing stands firmly on common ground with philosophy as a whole" (p. 23).

transcendental philosophy and the relationship of the latter to *Naturphilosophie*. After arriving in Berlin in 1800 Fichte made one final effort to revise his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* for publication, but this project too was quickly abandoned.

²⁴ References to *The System of Ethics* in this editors' introduction will be provided according to the pagination in vol. IV of *SW*. This pagination is also provided in *GA* and in most other modern editions of *The System of Ethics*, including the *Philosophische Bibliothek* edition and the present English translation.

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***The System of Ethics* as the culmination of Fichte's early philosophy**

Having considered Fichte's comments *about* the systematic place of ethics within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, let us now look more closely at *The System of Ethics* itself in order to determine the *actual* (in contrast with the intended or "official") place of the former within Fichte's early system. It was not until the Summer Semester of 1796, in a course of private lectures announced under the title "*Ethicen secundum dictata*,"²⁵ that Fichte was finally able to carry through on his longstanding plan to develop the "specifically practical" portion of his system. Since he had been fully occupied throughout the preceding year with the construction of his new theory of natural right, as well as with the total revision of the foundational portion of his system "according to a new method," he was unable to do much preliminary work on this new science prior to his lectures of ethics; instead, as he wrote to Reinhold on August 27, 1796, "These days I am lecturing in three different courses, one of these on an entirely new science [viz., ethics], in which I first have to construct the system as I present it."²⁶ These lectures on ethics were repeated in the Winter Semesters of 1796/97, 1797/98, and 1798/99. *The System of Ethics* was first issued, in printed fascicles, to students attending Fichte's lectures on ethics during the Winter Semester of 1797/98 and finally published in book form in June of 1798.

In a public appeal for subscriptions to the forthcoming *System of Ethics*, an appeal issued by Fichte's publisher, Gabler but surely written by Fichte himself, two distinctive features of the new book are emphasized: first of all, as indicated by its full title (*The System of Ethics according to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*), Fichte promised that his forthcoming book would not be an *ad hoc* or freestanding treatise on ethics, but that he would instead take special care to establish the systematic connection between the principles of *ethics* and those of *philosophy in general*. According to this same announcement, one of the greatest shortcomings of all previous works on this subject lay in the failure of their authors to establish the foundations of their science

²⁵ Latin for "ethics according to his dictation." A student transcription of these 1796 lectures on ethics (presumably by Otto von Mirbach) is contained in *GA IV / 1*: 7–148.

²⁶ *GA III / 3*: 33.

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securely and deeply enough, which is why most of the main concepts of this discipline – including the concepts of freedom and the moral law – remain beset with difficulties. In contrast, Fichte confidently promised that his new *Ethics* would explain the *origin* of the entire system of practical concepts.

This first point leads directly to what is described in this same announcement as the second major innovation of the new book: unlike previous treatises on ethics, *The System of Ethics* would also include a scientific demonstration of the *applicability* of the ethical principles of pure reason to actual life, “by means of a rigorous deduction of these principles from the highest principle of all knowing.”²⁷ This, of course, is simply another way of saying what was already promised several years earlier: that the *Wissenschaftslehre* would make possible an ethical theory that is “material” as well as formal, and thus deserves to be called a “real philosophical science.”

It is this second innovative feature of *The System of Ethics* that is particularly stressed in Fichte’s “Introduction” to the work itself (the portion of the text that was printed last, and, presumably, the part that was composed last as well). Practical philosophy, as conceived by Fichte, explicitly addresses and answers an essential question that had been largely ignored by philosophers prior to him (with the possible exception of Kant, in the third *Critique*). Whereas previous philosophers devoted ample attention to the issue of how we are able to *cognize* the external world, and thus to the problematic relationship between our representations and those objects to which they allegedly correspond, they displayed no similar curiosity concerning the equally important issue of how and with what right we are able to think of some of *our* concepts as actually *exhibited* in nature, i.e., to the question of how it is that we can actually have any *effect* within and upon the world. Moreover, according to Fichte, if they had tried to explain this possibility in a systematic fashion, this alone would have been sufficient to force them to re-examine their explanations of cognition as well, for it would have forced them to consider the previously ignored possibility that the will is a constitutive principle not merely of practical, but also of theoretical philosophy.

Another “previously unasked question” that is explicitly addressed in *The System of Ethics* concerns the basis for our everyday distinction

²⁷ *GA* 1/5: 6–7.

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between those aspects of the external world which we can alter by means of our will and those we cannot: between the “contingent” and the “necessary” features of nature.²⁸ This question too, according to Fichte, forces us to reconsider the extent to which our practical freedom is not simply the principle of moral willing, but is at the same time “itself a theoretical principle for the determination of our world” (p. 68). Though this important point was certainly anticipated in Part III of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and then made fully explicit in the *Foundation of Natural Right*, it still required a more complete and more deeply grounded deduction, which would be forthcoming only in *The System of Ethics*.²⁹

To the extent that *The System of Ethics* really does provide a new and deeper account of the essential role of the principle of willing in the constitution of experience, it goes well beyond the limits of what is usually thought of as “ethics” or even “practical philosophy.” Insofar as it does this, moreover, it is not simply a systematic *subdivision* of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but includes material that really pertains to the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole and has important implications for the very *foundations* of the entire system – or at least for a proper understanding of those foundations.

In considering the systematic place of the *Sittenlehre* one must always recall that – with the exception of those students who were fortunate enough to have personally attended Fichte’s lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* – the only full-scale, “scientific” presentation of the foundational portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with which potential readers of *The System of Ethics* could have been acquainted was the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, a work that, even in Fichte’s own eyes, not only followed a defective method of presentation, but also failed to make clear the crucial relationship between the theoretical and practical “activities” of the I and the “equiprimacy” of both with respect to the transcendental conditions of experience.³⁰ This circumstance

²⁸ This question, though not mentioned in Fichte’s appeal for subscriptions, is raised at the beginning of Part II of the text itself: “A thorough and complete philosophy has to explain why some things appear to us to be contingent in this manner, and in doing this it will also determine the boundary and the extent of what is contingent. To be sure, these questions have until now not even been asked, much less answered” (p. 67).

²⁹ “Here, however, the investigation would have to be extended even further, and the proofs of this assertion would have to reach even deeper, since we here find ourselves precisely at the ultimate point of origin of all reason” (p. 68).

³⁰ Regarding Fichte’s dissatisfaction with the 1794/95 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, see the Editor’s Introduction to *FTP*. Regarding the “equiprimordiality” interpretation of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, see Günter Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original*

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helps one understand why *The System of Ethics* includes discussions of so many issues that, as Fichte himself concedes, really belong within a scientific presentation of the first or foundational portion of the system: that is, because no remotely adequate presentation of these same foundations was publicly available to the first readers of Fichte's *Ethics*.

Accordingly, the best published account of Fichte's revised presentation of the *foundations* of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole is to be found in – or perhaps, inferred from – *The System of Ethics*, which must therefore be recognized not merely as the promised presentation of that portion of the complete system that deals with the specific topic of ethics, or “practical philosophy” in the narrow sense, but also as an indispensable public presentation, however rudimentary and schematic (in comparison with the lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*) of the first, or “foundational” portion of the entire system. This is true not only of the Introduction and Part I (“Deduction of the Principle of Morality”) but also of Part II (“Deduction of the Reality and Applicability of the Principle of Morality”); for what turns out to be required in order to establish the “reality and applicability of the principle of morality” is that one revise one's prior notions concerning “reality” in general and recognize the latter as an *appearance of the will*. It is no wonder that no author on ethics prior to Fichte had attempted such a “deduction” of the ethical law, since such a project requires a thoroughly new account of the relationship between cognition, willing, and nature, as well as the systematic articulation of a radically new doctrine of the relationship between the sensible and supersensible realms.

Fichte himself recognized that *The System of Ethics*, and particularly the first portions of the same, does much more than simply extend the principles of his previously developed system to a new domain, and, both in public announcements and in private correspondence, he recommended this new work – along with the *Foundation of Natural Right* – as providing a clearer presentation of “philosophy in general” than the one contained in the 1794/95 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.³¹

Duplicity of Intelligence and Will (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Daniel Breazeale, “The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory: Fichte and the ‘Primacy of Practical Reason,’” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1996), 47–64.

³¹ See Fichte's public “Announcement of a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” dated November 4, 1800 (in *IWL*, pp. 186–201 [*GA*, 1/7: 153–164]), in which he bemoans the fact that the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* has been universally misunderstood by all but his own students and appears to be a text that cannot be understood properly without oral assistance.

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Thus he wrote to Friedrich Johannsen on January 31, 1801: “My printed *Wissenschaftslehre* bears too many traces of the era in which it was written and of the manner of philosophizing that then prevailed. As a result, it is much less clear than a presentation of transcendental philosophy should be. I can recommend much more highly the first portions of my works on natural right and ethics (particularly the latter).”³² Unfortunately, the eruption of the Atheism Controversy, less than six months after the publication of *The System of Ethics*, fatally distracted the attention of the philosophical public from the latter work,³³ the central importance of which for a systematic interpretation of Fichte’s early *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole has, up to the present day, seldom been recognized.

A careful reading of Fichte’s *System of Ethics* forces one to rethink not only the content of philosophical ethics but also the foundations of the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* and to amend and augment some of the central doctrines of the same, particularly as these are expounded in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. It thus plays a dual role within the overall context of the Jena system: on the one hand, it does indeed expound the “special science” of practical philosophy in the narrow or proper sense: the transcendental subdiscipline that explicitly accounts for our consciousness of the moral law and then derives material duties from this principle. On the other hand, this same text also implies and to a large extent actually furnishes a revised presentation of some – though certainly not all – of the first principles of the entire system, a presentation which, as such, belongs to no special philosophical science but to the *Wissenschaftslehre as a whole*; and to this extent *The System of Ethics* augments the first or foundational portion of the entire system. This last point was clearly grasped by Fichte himself, who concludes his deduction of the principle morality in *The System of Ethics* with the following observation (pp. 58–59):

The perspectives upon philosophy as a whole that offer themselves at this point are manifold, and I cannot forego the occasion to point

Then, however, he adds: “It seems to me, however, that in my books on *Natural Right* and *Ethics I* have been somewhat more successful in presenting my thoughts concerning philosophy in general as well.”

³² *GA* III/5: 9.

³³ Indicative of this neglect is the fact that *The System of Ethics* received only five contemporary reviews, fewer than any of the other books published by Fichte during the Jena period. See *J. G. Fichte in zeitgenössischen Rezensionen*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Wilhelm G. Jacobs und Walter Schieche (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), Vol. 2, pp. 204–280.

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out at least some of them. – Because it is self-intuiting and finite, reason determines through itself its own acting. This proposition has a twofold meaning, inasmuch as reason’s acting can be viewed from two different sides. In the context of a treatise on ethics this proposition refers only to the kind of acting that particularly merits this name: the kind of acting that is accompanied by a consciousness of freedom and is recognized as “acting” even from the ordinary viewpoint, i.e., *willing* and *acting efficaciously*. But this same proposition applies just as well to the kind of acting that is, as such, found only from the transcendental viewpoint: the kind of acting that is involved *in representation*. The law reason gives to itself for the former type of action, that is, the moral law, is not a law that it obeys necessarily, since it is directed at freedom. The law reason gives itself in the latter case, however, the law of thinking, is a law that it obeys necessarily, since in applying it the intellect, even though it is active, is not freely active. Thus the entire system of reason – both with respect to what *ought* to be and what is simply posited as existing in consequence of this ought, in accordance with the former kind of legislation, and with respect to what is immediately found as being, in accordance with the latter kind of legislation – is determined in advance, as something necessary, through reason itself. Yet what reason itself assembles according to its own laws, it also should undoubtedly be able to dissemble again according to these same laws; i.e., reason necessarily cognizes itself completely, and hence an analysis of its entire way of proceeding, that is, a system of reason, is possible. – Thus everything in our theory meshes with everything else, and the necessary presupposition is possible only under the condition of these specific results and no others. Either all philosophy has to be abandoned, or the absolute autonomy of reason must be conceded. The concept of philosophy is reasonable only on this presupposition.

The structure of *The System of Ethics*

Fichte’s *System of Ethics* appeared a year after Kant published his own system of ethics, which he called the “Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue” and which, together with his system of law or right, called the “Metaphysical First Principles of Doctrine of Right,” make up Kant’s last major work, *The Metaphysics of*

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Morals.³⁴ Yet Fichte nowhere in his work refers to Kant's publication from the previous year, presumably because the elaboration of his own *System of Ethics* predates the appearance of Kant's parallel treatment. However, there are implicit and explicit references to other works in moral philosophy by Kant to be found in Fichte's text. Specifically, Fichte refers to Kant's earlier foundational writings in moral philosophy, which therefore form the background of Kant's own elaborated ethics of 1797 as well as the point of orientation for Fichte's parallel effort of 1798. These writings by Kant are *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785),³⁵ *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788),³⁶ and *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793),³⁷ especially the first part of the latter, "On Radical Evil in Human Nature."

Kant's elaboration of an ethics in the "Metaphysical First Principles of Doctrine of Virtue" of *The Metaphysics of Morals* had focused on the systematic presentation of particular duties and had limited more general considerations to two comparatively brief introductions, the general introduction to *The Metaphysics of Morals* as a whole and the special introduction into that work's second part, the doctrine of virtue. By contrast, Fichte's *The System of Ethics* is for the most part an investigation into the principle of morality and the general conditions of its application. The treatment of ethics in the narrow sense is limited to the work's final thirty-some pages, amounting to no more than a ninth of the entire work.

The System of Ethics is divided into three lengthy parts (*Hauptstücke*), the third of which comprises more than half of the entire work. Part I contains the deduction of the principle of morality as a necessary condition for an individual human being's self-consciousness. Part II comprises the deduction of the applicability of the principle of morality, which proceeds by establishing our power to act in and upon a pre-existing world of objects and other human beings. On the basis of the prior deductions of the principle of morality and of its applicability, Part III demonstrates the actual systematic application of the previously deduced principle of morality by presenting, first, the formal conditions for

³⁴ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Allen Wood and Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 363–603.

³⁵ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 41–108.

³⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 137–258.

³⁷ *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 55–215.

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the possibility of our actions (theory of the will, nature of evil) and, second, the content or material of the moral law (theory of the drives), and, third, the division of our duties into universal duties pertaining to all human beings and particular duties pertaining to groups and classes of human people (spouses, parents and children, and different estates and professions).

The philosophical contribution of *The System of Ethics*

Both chronologically and in terms of philosophical content, *The System of Ethics* lies closer to the above mentioned, second Jena presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*) than to the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. Whereas the latter had presented the absolutely first principles of knowledge in separation from their systematic unfolding and had observed a strict separation of the theoretical and practical parts of the theory of knowledge, Fichte subsequently achieved a doubly integrated presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which proceeds directly from the part containing the absolutely first principles into the general theory of what falls under those principles, within which the separation of the theoretical forms of knowledge from the practical forms of knowledge is itself grounded in and derived from a pre-disjunctive basic form of knowledge in general.

Like the first Jena presentation of the first principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, this second one “according to a new method” deals with the grounds of knowledge in relation to the finite subject of knowledge or human reason, which Fichte also terms “the I.” The earlier version had artificially dissociated the I into the absolutely positing I (absolute I), on the one hand, and the theoretical I, which is determined by the object or the not-I (the knowing I), and the practical I, which determines the object or the not-I through its own activity (the doing I), on the other hand. By contrast, the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* provides a genetic reconstruction of the development of the essential forms of consciousness along with those of its objects, starting from the minimally articulated, but infinitely differentiable basic form of the I, viz., the “original duplicity”³⁸ of the theoretical moment and the practical moment within the I. Fichte also characterizes the radical duality of the subject as its “ideal” (knowing) and “real” (doing) double nature and

³⁸ See *FTP*, p. 365 (*GA* 1V/2: 187 and 1V/3: 475).

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uses the terms “subject–object” or “subject–objectivity” and “practical intelligence”³⁹ to convey the original complexity of the I.

The conception underlying this characterization is that of the I as always only active, is nothing but its activity, and is what it is only in consequence of its activity. But the I not only *is* this self-constituting activity; it also is this *for itself* or is *aware of itself as* active. In Fichte’s terminology, the I “posits” or “sees” its own activity. The original duplicity of the I (or of knowledge as such) consists in the manner in which the real and ideal forms of activity reciprocally condition one another at every moment and stage in the constitution of I-hood.

The ideal–real double nature of the I not only prefigures the latter’s subsequent differentiations into theoretical or cognitive and practical or volitional consciousness, it also prepares the articulation of the spheres or “worlds” that are correlated with each form of consciousness. In the one case, that of theoretical, cognitive or objective consciousness, this is the world of things (“the sensible world”) and in the other case, that of practical or volitional consciousness or consciousness of doing, it is the world of other subjects (the “rational” or “spiritual” world).

In *The System of Ethics* Fichte distinguishes two possible forms under which the originally united two moments of the I (the subjective and the objective, the ideal and the real, or seeing and doing) are unfolded into relationships of succession. In the case of cognition, thinking – i.e., the conception of an object – appears to be the passively produced product of some being. In the case of willing – the conception of an end – being seems to follow or even to flow from some concept. Upon closer analysis, however, it becomes clear that the I is also active in the cognition of an object. It turns out that both the being that apparently precedes cognition and determines the latter as well as the being that is apparently first brought about by practical activity exist only in and through consciousness. For the *Wissenschaftslehre* knowing and doing, along with the aspects of the world they involve, are only finite forms for the appearance of the I’s basic character, which can never appear as such and which Fichte understands as sheer “agility” – that which is absolute or infinite in the I, and which remains outside of the latter’s manifold finite manifestations: “The

³⁹ See Ch. 1 of Fichte’s fragmentation “Attempt at a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*” (*IWL*, pp. 113–115 [*SW* 1: 276–278; *GA* 1/4: 527–530]). See too *FTP*, pp. 82 and 114 (*GA* 1V/3: 326–328 and *GA* 1V/2: 31–32 and 1V/3: 346–347).

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sole absolute on which all consciousness and all being rest is pure activity. [...] The one true thing is my self-activity” (p. 12).

But how does the I come to experience the pure self-activity that it is *as* its own? What is the I’s original experience of itself as purely active or absolutely spontaneous, in short, as an I? According to Fichte, the I’s authentic self-experience occurs in its experiencing itself as willing: “I find myself as myself only as willing” (p. 18). The proof of this first and only formally presented theorem in *The System of Ethics* can be summarized as follows (pp. 21ff.): All determinate thinking, no matter what the object that determines the act of thinking may be, is subject to the distinction, as well as the relation to each other, of what is subjective, which does the thinking, and what is objective, which is what is being thought. This also holds for the act of thinking of oneself, in which case the thinking and the thought are *materially* identical (since they concern the very same being) but in which nevertheless the *formal* distinction between what is subjective (thinking) and what is objective (thought) remains. To give up that distinction would mean the loss of any and all consciousness, whether of oneself or of anything else.

But how is the I as thinking able to grasp its material identity with the I as thought? The difficulty only increases if one realizes that this finding of itself on the part of the I must precede all self-knowledge by means of reflection inasmuch as it is supposed to render the latter possible in the first place. Only once the I has found the concept of itself can it refer reflectively to its own states and ascribe them to itself.

What is thought originally and pre-reflectively by the I in the peculiar case of the original, pre-reflective thinking of oneself (or the original finding of oneself) must be such that the I as subject (as engaged in thinking) is able to find itself for the first time only in this thought – although, to be sure, still under the form of being thought or being objective. Now the objective counterpart to the coincidence, contained in the concept of the I, the coincidence between that which is thinking and that which is being thought, is, according to Fichte, the I’s own real activity insofar as the latter is directed only at itself and consists in the “real self-determining of oneself through oneself” (p. 22). Thus one could say that by means of one’s acting or doing one accomplishes in a *real* way what one accomplishes in an *ideal* way by means of thinking of oneself. Yet it is essential to recall that such self-finding (or the original self-experience on the part of the ideal thinking of oneself) does not actually *precede* the

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doing (or the I's real acting-upon-itself), even though it *conditions* the latter.

The concept of the I – along with the original grasp of this concept *by* the I itself – is first obtained on the basis of the I's original self-experience in willing. But what is subjective (the thinking) does not find what is objective (the thought) immediately and as such, as a real self-determining activity that one simply encounters, as it were, naturally. In order for the I as subject to find *itself* in its real acting-upon-itself, the I must, or must be able to, relate this real self-determining activity to itself. It must, as Fichte likes to put it, posit this activity *as itself*. It is not simply the merely *found* real self-determining activity but the latter *as so posited*, i.e., the *understood* real acting-upon-itself, that forms the I's complete original self-experience as willing.

For Fichte the understanding or cognition of the real activity does not occur passively, as though it were a matter of observing a preexisting real activity. The original relation between thinking and willing is itself an *active* and *productive* relationship, a becoming-real of what is ideal as well as a becoming-active of the awareness of the same (the I's seeing of what is ideal). “Hence,” as Fichte puts it, “in this case, the intellect is not merely an onlooker, but itself, as intellect, *becomes* – for itself [. . .] – the absolutely real force of the concept” (pp. 32–33).

Fichte's account thus subordinates the real force, insofar as it is understood or thought, to the concept. In order for practical self-determination to be an instance of willing, the real activity (force) has to be brought “under the dominion of the concept” (p. 32). Moreover, the concept that governs the practical self-determination of willing is not a concept of some objective, given being (that is, it is not a concept engendered by the reproductive power of imagination) but is instead a concept (engendered by the productive power of the imagination) of some *end* that has to be made actual or “realized” by the I itself.

In accordance with this shift from a theoretical to a practical conception of the concept in question (that is, the shift from the concept of an object to the concept of an end), a new, practical or activity-oriented form of thinking or of ideal activity emerges – one that no longer proceeds reproductively or by providing copies or after-images (*Nachbilder*), but which provides models or prefigurations (*Vorbilder*). In Fichte's terminology, the ideal activity is here engaged in “designing” or “projecting” (*entwerfen*) the concept of an end for its own real activity. This is how