

## *From Kant to Fichte*<sup>1</sup>

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### § 1

Few periods in the history of philosophy manifest the degree of dynamism and historical complexity that characterize early post-Kantian philosophy. The reasons for this special character of so-called “classical German philosophy” are no doubt themselves quite complex. Institutional and political circumstances certainly played an important role. The end of the eighteenth century marks a point at which philosophy was seen as being deeply implicated in the political developments of the day (in particular: the upheavals in France). What’s more, this intense political context for philosophy coincided with the reemergence of “academic” philosophy: the first point in the modern period when the leading figures on the philosophical scene were members of a common (and flourishing) academic community.<sup>2</sup> But more narrowly philosophical factors are also important. Kant’s philosophical accomplishment was widely seen as marking a watershed in philosophy’s development, but it was an accomplishment whose lessons and viability were highly

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<sup>1</sup>References to Fichte’s works are given to the *Gesamtausgabe* of the Bavarian Academy. References to this edition are preceded by the abbreviation “GA” and cite three numbers (in the form: X/Y, Z) indicating series, volume and page respectively. Where possible I have provided a citation to a modern English translation as well, though I have not always followed the translator exactly. These citations follow the German citation and a semicolon and make use of the following abbreviations:

EPW: Early Philosophical Writings; edited and translated by D. Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988).

IWL: Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Other Writings; edited and translated by D. Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>Of particular importance in this connection was the emergence, under Goethe’s administration, of the university at Jena as a leading intellectual center. Between the mid-1780s, when Kant was still in the midst of publishing his major works, and 1806, the year of both Napoleon’s victory at Jena and Hegel’s completion of the Phenomenology of Spirit, many of the leading figures of the early Kant-reception were associated for some period with this university. The result was what Dieter Henrich has described as a “constellation” of the leading thinkers of the era, sometimes in daily contact, actively cooperating and competing with each other in a common institutional context. [D. Henrich; “The Path of Speculative Idealism: Retrospect and Prospect”; in Henrich, The Course of Remembrance and other Essays on Hölderlin; translated by T. Carman (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996).]

contested. Moreover, part of the legacy of Kant’s project was an intertwining of particular philosophical investigations and theories with accounts of the development of recent philosophical enquiry. The idea that philosophy must be self-conscious about its own history is one that has since come to be associated particularly with Hegelian thought, but its origins are already to be found in Kant’s idea of a “critical philosophy.” The critical project -- the investigation of the self-undermining tendencies of reason -- is motivated, after all, by an account of the trajectory of the history of philosophical theorizing. When combined with a widespread (and now quite alien) optimism about the prospects for a final, thoroughly “scientific” resolution of philosophy’s questions, it gave rise to a period in which philosophical undertakings were often informed and justified by appeal to an account of their place in philosophy’s unfolding endgame.

Given all this there is clearly good reason to approach any philosophy from this period via an understanding of its original philosophical context and to locate it in this dynamic philosophical development. In the case of Fichte’s thought, however, there are further circumstances which make such a contextual approach at once indispensable and all but irresistible. The indispensability derives mainly from the state of Fichte’s early corpus -- in particular the writings from his short tenure at Jena and the time in Zurich just preceding it. It was during this period (roughly, the last seven years of the eighteenth century) that Fichte developed his most original ideas and exercised his greatest influence on his contemporaries. Yet despite the importance of this period, and despite the fact that he published extensively during it, Fichte’s foundational texts from the Jena period remain fragmentary and incomplete. The student of the Jena corpus is left to work with various documents pertaining to Fichte’s lectures from this period: most notably the “handbook” Fichte prepared for his students and student-transcripts of the lectures themselves. We also have a number of what Fichte called “critical”<sup>3</sup> discussions and summaries of his views from

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<sup>3</sup>In the second edition preface to *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* [Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*] Fichte defines “critique” as the investigation “into the possibility, real meaning

various essays and reviews, as well as extensive private notes from his *Nachlass*.<sup>4</sup> If we are to make an intelligent attempt to interpret these puzzling and often context-bound works, we must begin by trying to situate them in the rich and dynamic philosophical conversation to which they were a contribution.

The irresistibility of this approach stems from a tantalizing puzzle about the history of classical German philosophy. One of the central aims of Kant’s critical project was strictly to limit the domain of rational enquiry. His positive theory -- the transcendental account of the cognitive faculties -- was meant to be in the service of this negative project of confining those faculties to their legitimate applications. To this end Kant laboriously documents and diagnoses the dangers of speculative excess: in particular the logical tangles which he held to be the product of the traditional philosophical project of extending a metaphysical theory beyond the limits of possible experience. Yet to all appearances, this spirit of restraint -- along with the specific strictures Kant sought to establish -- was the first casualty of the rage for “critical philosophy” that followed. Hence the puzzle: how did Kant’s critical project so quickly inspire a tradition which at once claimed its name and legacy and yet seemed so palpably to depart from both its letter and spirit?<sup>5</sup> Any attempt to resolve this paradox must in the first instance come to terms with the philosophical context in which Fichtean philosophy could -- at least for a time -- claim the Kantian mantle.

This question about the puzzling transformation of critical philosophy has long admitted of a quick and simple answer -- an answer which, however, has frequently yielded a distorted (and dismissive) account of Fichte’s thought. This

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and rules” of philosophical enquiry (GA I/2, 159; EPW, 97). Accordingly, Fichte’s “critical” essays are second-order discussions about the nature of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

<sup>4</sup>Once we go beyond the “foundations” of Fichte’s system, the Jena corpus provides a much less disjointed and fragmentary record. Two of Fichte’s major accomplishments of the Jena period were extended studies in moral and political philosophy: book-length works that were edited and prepared for general publication. Despite several attempts, however, Fichte never produced a comprable statement of his epistemological and metaphysical views. (For a discussion of Fichte’s works in “practical philosophy” see the contribution to this volume by A. Wood.)

<sup>5</sup>For a particularly damning account of this departure, see Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a reply to Ameriks see Daniel Breazeale, “Two Cheers for Post-Kantianism: A Reply to Karl Ameriks” *Inquiry* 46:2 (2003), 239-259.

reading begins with the claim that Fichte’s philosophy is an attempt to carry out a “consistent Kantianism” -- in particular a Kantianism that would renounce any appeal to the problematic notion of a “thing in itself.” Like most neat formulae in the history of philosophy, there is a kernel of truth here. One of the main contentious issues in the early discussions of Kant’s Critiques concerned the notion of things in themselves. The most notorious formulation of the criticism of this part of Kantian doctrine came from F.H. Jacobi, who complained, in an oft-quoted remark from the appendix to his dialogues on David Hume,<sup>6</sup> that

I was held up not a little by this difficulty in my study of the Kantian philosophy, so much so that for several years running I had to start from the beginning over and over again with the Critique of Pure Reason, because I was incessantly going astray on this point, viz. that without that presupposition I could not enter into the system, but with it I could not stay within it.<sup>7</sup>

According to Jacobi’s influential criticism, Kant is committed to the claim that things in themselves casually interact with (or “affect”) the senses to produce representations. Yet as Jacobi sees it, such a thesis contradicts at least three central claims of Kantian theory. First, it is incompatible with what Jacobi took to be Kant’s quasi-phenomenalistic idealism. If Kant’s claim that objects are “mere appearances” amounts, as Jacobi holds, to the claim that they are “merely subjective beings, with no existence outside us,”<sup>8</sup> then they cannot also be mind-independent realities that affect the senses. Secondly, the thesis violates the limits imposed by Kant’s account of causality: the doctrine of affection constitutes an illegitimate application of the categories of cause and effect to things as they are in themselves. Finally, the affection thesis contradicts Kant’s most general and important critical claim: that things in themselves are unknowable. If we are to remain true to this Kantian result then it seems we must renounce any claims about the role of things in themselves in

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<sup>6</sup>F.H. Jacobi; *David Hume über den Glauben; oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch* [David Hume on Belief; or Idealism and Realism: A Dialogue] (Breslau: Loewe, 1787). Citations to Jacobi’s work are to *Werke*; edited by F. Roth and F. Köppen (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812ff; reprint: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968). An English translation of many of Jacobi’s works can be found in F. H. Jacobi; The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill; edited and translated by G. di Giovanni (Montreal : McGill-Queen's UP, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>Jacobi, *Werke* II, 304.

<sup>8</sup>Jacobi, *Werke* II, 305.

experience. The conclusion Jacobi draws is that the moderated form of idealism advocated by Kant -- an idealism which, as he sees it, retains realist commitments by invoking things in themselves -- must inevitably collapse from its own internal tensions. If one is to pursue the idealist strategy consistently, Jacobi claims, the idealism must be of a much more radical form. Accordingly Jacobi's appendix closes with a challenge to would-be idealists -- a challenge that, in some sense, Fichte took up:

The transcendental idealist must have the courage, therefore, to assert the strongest idealism that was ever professed, and not be afraid of the objection of speculative egoism, for it is impossible for him to pretend to stay within his system if he tries to repel from himself even this last objection.<sup>9</sup>

But although Jacobi's challenge certainly informs Fichte's appropriation of Kantian philosophy, it has often proved to be a misleading point of reference from which to construct an interpretation of his positive philosophical doctrine. In particular, this account of Fichte's antipathy towards things in themselves has suggested all-too-ready an answer to the puzzle about the transformation of classical German philosophy. For what would be involved in meeting Jacobi's challenge? How would Kant's "critical" philosophy emerge from the systematic excision of all invocation of things in themselves? An important part of what would be lost is the dualistic theory of cognition that lies at the heart of Kant's epistemological doctrine. Kant claims that human knowledge requires the contributions of distinct and mutually irreducible cognitive faculties -- in particular a faculty of intuitions (sensibility) and a faculty of concepts (understanding). This thesis -- sometimes called the "distinctness of the faculties thesis" -- provides the key both to Kant's positive epistemological views and to his critique of his empiricist and rationalist predecessors. The attempt to meet Jacobi's challenge, however, would seem to involve renouncing this central Kantian doctrine. For the rejection of the doctrine of affection by things in themselves would seem to require the rejection of its correlate: the claim that there is an essentially passive, receptive dimension of human cognition. This cost seems

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<sup>9</sup>Jacobi, *Werke* II, 310.

quickly to generate others. If there is no passive dimension to human cognition then the spontaneous activity of the subject can no longer be seen as one moment (the formal, synthesizing, organizing element) of the cognitive process. We are led, it seems, to the idea of an active knowing subject which is somehow wholly productive of its experienced world. It is the emergence of this idea of a “world-productive” (or “absolute”) subject that has seemed to many commentators to mark the transformation of post-Kantian philosophy. For it would seem here that we have left behind Kant’s epistemological framework and embarked on the seas of speculative metaphysics against which he had warned. Indeed, since it seems clear that we finite human subjects are not wholly productive of our world, one might be led to think that the discourses of transcendental philosophy have here been replaced by a metaphysical discourse that borders on the theological. Evidence for this shift has seemed to some commentators to be readily visible in the talk of the “Absolute I” and “Absolute Spirit” that soon became the characteristic idiom of the post-Kantian tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Although there may be a certain logic to this sequence of interpretative moves, and although it makes contact with Fichte’s arguments and doctrines at various points, the outcome must be deemed a fundamental distortion of Fichte’s aims and views. In what follows I provide an account of Fichte’s early philosophical project by drawing on a richer account of the context of his initial forays into transcendental philosophy. Naturally the scope of this contextual approach must remain very limited here.<sup>11</sup> But

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<sup>10</sup>For a classic statement of this line of interpretation -- which is very common in general histories of philosophy -- see Volume VII (“Fichte to Nietzsche”) of F. Copleston, History of Philosophy (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963). Other accounts in English along these lines can be found in J. Lachs, “Fichte’s Idealism,” American Philosophical Quarterly IX (1972), 311-18; and in P. Gardiner, “Fichte and German Idealism”; in G. Vesey (ed.) Idealism Past and Present (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 111-26.

<sup>11</sup>Two important limitations of the present discussion deserve mention here. The first is the omission of any account of Fichte’s earliest philosophical publications, which dealt with the theme of religious revelation and also with philosophical issues pertaining to the revolution in France. For a discussion of these aspects of Fichte’s early thought see the contributions to this volume by F. Beiser and H. Verweyen. The second is the omission of a discussion of Fichte’s complex relationship to Salomon Maimon. A broader and much more systematic analysis of this period has been undertaken in a series of major studies by Frederick Beiser. See in particular The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987) and German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002). On Maimon’s role in the development of post-Kantian idealism see also Paul Franks, All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005).

even a basic familiarity with this context will provide us with a historically more accurate and philosophically more interesting account of the aims and methods of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as well as a more complex answer to the puzzle about the Kantian legacy in German Idealism.

## § 2

The first step in contextualizing the *Wissenschaftslehre* is to attend to the crucial role played by one mediating figure in particular -- Fichte's predecessor at Jena: Karl Leonhard Reinhold.<sup>12</sup> In the late 1780s and early '90s, Reinhold was (after Kant himself) the most widely known and influential of the growing group of proponents of the new “critical philosophy.” His writings during this period were devoted to two separate purposes. As he explained in a 1790 preface:

The plan of my future endeavors now has two main parts, one of which I take up in my letters on the Kantian philosophy [i.e., the *Briefe*], the other in these contributions [i.e., the *Beyträge*]. In the former I seek to develop the consequences, the applicability and the influence of the critical philosophy; in the latter its grounds, elements and particular principles.<sup>13</sup>

Reinhold's influence was felt on both these fronts. Of the two projects mentioned here, the first provided the medium through which Kantian philosophy first attracted a broad public audience. It was the second project however -- the attempt to investigate the foundations of Kant's system -- that was to have a decisive influence on the subsequent development of German Idealism. In a number of related writings, Reinhold sought to forge a “philosophy of the elements” or “elementary philosophy”

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<sup>12</sup>For our purposes here, the most important of Reinhold's texts are the following: *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* [Letters Concerning the Kantian Philosophy; hereafter: *Briefe*] (Weimar: Der Teutscher Merkur, 1786-7; enlarged second edition: Mannheim: Bender, 1790); *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens* [Attempt at a New Theory of the Human Faculty of Representation; hereafter: *Versuch*] (Prague and Jena: Widtmann und Mauke, 1789; reprint: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); Volume I of *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Mißverständnisse der Philosophen* [Contributions to the Correction of the Previous Misunderstandings of the Philosophers; hereafter: *Beyträge*] (Jena: Mauke, 1790); *Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* [Foundations of Philosophical Knowledge; hereafter: *Fundament*] (Jena: Mauke, 1791; reprint: Hamburg: Meiner, 1978). Part of *Fundament* is translated by di Giovanni and Harris in *Between Kant and Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985); an English edition of Reinhold's *Letters* can be found in Ameriks and Hebbeler (eds.), *Karl Leonhard Reinhold: Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup>*Beyträge* I, iv.

(an *Elementarphilosophie*<sup>14</sup>) which would spell out the basic principles and arguments upon which Kant’s critical edifice is erected.

Reinhold’s guiding conviction regarding Kant’s critical writings was that they held out the promise -- without actually fulfilling it -- of raising philosophy to the ranks of “strict science.” On Reinhold’s repeatedly-professed view, Kant had provided the necessary materials to take such a step; what was needed was a more perspicuous presentation of them. Three leading ideas animate Reinhold’s attempt to provide, in his *Elementarphilosophie*, such a reconstructed Kantianism. The first is the idea of philosophical system. In part we can see Reinhold’s project here as a reaction against the all-but-impenetrable architectonic of Kant’s critiques. The obscure structure of the critiques -- a structure tailored in part to their polemical, particularly anti-rationalist function -- stood in the way of their attaining what Reinhold took to be one of the hallmarks of a mature science: consensus among its practitioners. If a philosophy is to defend a claim to general validity (if it is to be, in Reinhold’s terms, *allgemeingültig*) then it must seek general acceptance (it must aim to be *allgemeingeltend*) as well.<sup>15</sup> One could only hope for general acceptance of the Kantian system, Reinhold held, if its strength were made more apparent in its exposition. This demand for systematicity, however, goes beyond merely expository considerations. The deeper complaint is that there are crucial premises in the critiques whose status is left obscure in Kant’s own account. One important example of such a premise is the distinctness of the faculties thesis (discussed above). As we have seen, this is a central pillar of the Kantian system, yet Kant nowhere provides an explicit argument in its support. For Reinhold it was only by recasting Kant’s views in systematic form that such shortcomings could be identified and corrected. As regards the form that would satisfy this demand for system, Reinhold’s views betray a

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<sup>14</sup>I shall hereafter leave this term untranslated. Reinhold’s most detailed presentations of the *Elementarphilosophie* are given in the *Versuch* and in *Beyträge* Volume I, Chapter III: “*Neue Darstellung der Hauptmomente der Elementarphilosophie*” [“New Presentation of the Main Elements of the *Elementarphilosophie*”; hereafter: *Neue Darstellung*].

<sup>15</sup>*Versuch*, §II; 120ff.

clear rationalist lineage: philosophy must be a deductive system of propositions based on a single self-evident first principle or *Grundsatz*.

Of course it is one thing to hope for a fully and transparently systematic philosophy; it is something else to imagine that it might actually be carried out. Reinhold's confidence on this latter point arises out of a second guiding idea of his *Elementarphilosophie*: a claim about the central insight at stake in Kant's philosophical revolution. The 1791 *Fundament* is an attempt to capture this insight (and its philosophical importance) by situating the Kantian project in the context of the development of modern philosophy. According to the sketch Reinhold provides there, the central philosophical project of the modern period has been to develop a theory of the foundations of knowledge -- in particular to establish those foundations through what Reinhold broadly calls “theories of the origin of representations.” It is this project that is at work both in the empiricists' account of “simple representations drawn from experience” as well as in the rationalist theories of “innate representations.”<sup>16</sup> Reinhold sees the roots of Kant's accomplishments in his contribution to this modern epistemological undertaking. For Reinhold, Kant has fundamentally advanced the project by directing his attention to certain basic structural features of consciousness -- features that his predecessors had failed to investigate systematically. One way in which Reinhold formulates this point is to attribute to Kant an insight into “the essential distinction ... between a mere impression and a representation,” or “between experience, understood as the connection of perceived objects, and ... sensations, which only contain the material of perception.”<sup>17</sup> In a word, Kant's contribution was to explore the presuppositions of the representational character of our conscious life -- to realize that a theory of knowledge must not simply account for the presence of certain sensations or impressions in consciousness, but must explain the capacity of those conscious contents to relate to or express objective states of affairs. It is this interpretation of

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<sup>16</sup>*Fundament*, 43-4.

<sup>17</sup>*Fundament*, 58-9.

the roots of Kant’s philosophical accomplishment that determines the strategy for Reinhold’s systematizing project: critical philosophy must be systematized by tracing its main philosophical doctrines back to this concern with the fundamental “faculty of representation” [*Vorstellungsvermögen*].

The third idea that gives shape to Reinhold’s Kantianism is his introduction of what can now best be thought of as a version of phenomenological methodology. Reinhold insists that the only way in which a philosophical system can be securely founded is if its first principles are drawn from the “facts of consciousness” themselves. This aspect of Reinhold’s program has at least two motivations. In part it arises out of his requirement that a scientific philosophy must be generally accepted [*allgemeingeltend*]. According to Reinhold’s rather narrow conception of how such consensus might be attained, it is only by starting from something that must be admitted by all parties at the outset that philosophy can hope to rise above its perennial factionalism. Hence philosophy must avoid any starting point which begs the question against the skeptic, for instance; and it cannot begin, as for instance Spinoza had, with abstract and contestable definitions. The only way of assuring universal acceptance, Reinhold concludes, is to start from indisputable facts of consciousness. Additionally, however, this methodological injunction reflects an important point about the object of philosophical investigation in the wake of Kant’s attack on traditional metaphysics. The facts of consciousness must provide the starting point for philosophy because the conscious subject is now the primary domain of philosophical investigation. Philosophy must no longer be in the business of constructing a priori arguments about being as such; its aim is to provide an adequate account of human subjectivity.

These three ideas flow together in what is Reinhold’s most important single contribution to the early Kant-reception: his claim that critical philosophy must begin from what he dubs “the principle of consciousness” [*der Satz des Bewußtseins*]:

In consciousness the representation is distinguished by the subject from the subject and the object and is related to both.<sup>18</sup>

The principle of consciousness is meant to articulate a self-evident, phenomenologically-accessible fact which can ground a rigorous philosophical science. The fact it articulates concerns the complex representational structure characteristic of conscious states. Consider, for example, my belief that Socrates died in Athens: it is related to and distinguished from me (it is my belief but not me) and it is related to and distinguished from Socrates (it is about Socrates but not Socrates). According to Reinhold, it is the analysis of this fourfold structure which must occupy the place of *Philosophia prima* in a new, rigorously systematic transcendental philosophy.<sup>19</sup> The most fundamental notion in this new first philosophy will not be the notion of substance or subject or even knowledge, but representation -- i.e., that which stands in this complex structure of relation and distinction.

Reinhold's attempt to develop this *Elementarphilosophie* shaped the early reception of Kant's philosophy in a number of important ways. His demand for systematicity (and his particular conception of what would count as meeting that demand) set in motion a lively debate about the starting point and methodology of philosophical investigation. That debate -- which would soon count, for instance, Fichte's "Introductions" and Hegel's Phenomenology as prominent chapters -- would become one of the most important philosophical legacies of German Idealism. Secondly, although Reinhold's particular claims about the principle of consciousness were challenged, his introduction of this principle provided a focus to many early discussions of Kant's theoretical philosophy. From the Reinholdian perspective which briefly dominated the scene, the central doctrines of the first critique -- e.g., its account of the structure of reason, its doctrine of the ideality of space and time, even its deduction of the categories -- are subordinated to (and sometimes neglected in favor of) what seemed to be the more general and fundamental issue raised by the

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<sup>18</sup>*Neue Darstellung* §1; *Beyträge* I, 167.

<sup>19</sup>See for instance Reinhold's essay "*Über den Begriff der Philosophie*" ["Concerning the Concept of Philosophy"]; Chapter I of *Beyträge*; in particular pp. 72-78.

principle of consciousness: how are we to account for the complex relation and distinction of a representation to its subject and object? Finally, as we shall now see, Reinhold’s undertaking shaped the Kant-reception not only through its positive project but through its failure -- in particular its vulnerability to skeptical criticism.

### § 3

Reinhold’s “systematized Kantianism” very quickly came under attack from a number of quarters. For the purposes of understanding the emergence of Fichte’s project, the most important of the attacks came from a number of self-proclaimed skeptics who sought to vindicate a broadly Humean position against the purported refutation Hume had suffered at the hands of “critical” philosophy. One of the most prominent of these skeptics -- and certainly the one whose work was most intimately involved with the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre* -- was Fichte’s onetime schoolmate, G.E. Schulze. Schulze wrote under the penname Aenesidemus, and in 1792 published his influential attack on critical philosophy, particularly (though not exclusively) as manifest in its Reinholdian version.<sup>20</sup>

Schulze attacked Reinhold’s system on many particular points. Indeed the philosophical core of his work consists of a long section in which he reproduces substantial portions of the *Neue Darstellung*, providing a running critical commentary on Reinhold’s claims and arguments. Two clusters of objections in particular seem to have exercised Fichte’s attention and ultimately played a key role in his rejection -- or revision -- of Reinhold’s variety of Kantianism. The first cluster directly relate to the principle of consciousness and to what we might call “Reinholdian representationalism”: the view that all our conscious states are representations,

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<sup>20</sup>Anonymous [G.E. Schulze]; *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie: Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaaßungen der Vernunftkritik* [Aenesidemus, or Concerning the Foundation of the Elementarphilosophie Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold, Including a Defense of Skepticism against the Pretensions of the Critique of Reason; hereafter: *Aenesidemus*] (published without details of publication: 1792; reprint: Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1969). An excerpt is translated by di Giovanni and Harris in Between Kant and Hegel (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985).

exhibiting the fourfold structure articulated in Reinhold’s first principle.<sup>21</sup> This form of representationalism, Schulze argues, is untenable: the principle of consciousness can at best be considered a claim about a subset of our mental states; it is not the case that every mental act or content [*Äußerungen des Bewußtseyns*] exhibits Reinhold’s complex fourfold structure.<sup>22</sup> At one level this objection is cast simply as a phenomenological report: if we reflect on our conscious lives we will discover some conscious events to which the principle of consciousness does not apply. But in his commentary on §§II-V of Reinhold’s *Neue Darstellung* Schulze goes on to make a stronger claim: it is not a contingent matter that the principle of consciousness fails of universal applicability; it could not be the case that all our mental states are representations. He argues that the very possibility of representation requires a set of mental acts -- acts he refers to as “intuitions” or “perceptions” -- to which the principle of consciousness does not apply:

[T]he act of distinguishing and relating can only take place if something exists [*wenn etwas da ist*] that can be related to and distinguished from something else. It is quite impossible to conceive of an act of distinguishing where there is nothing is at hand that can be distinguished.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, since Reinhold’s representations have as constituent moments a relation to the object and a relation to the subject, we must, Schulze argues, assume the existence of some non-representational relation to subject and object:

The perception of the object to which the representation is related and from which it is distinguished does not consist once again in something’s being related and distinguished by the subject to the subject and the object.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Reinhold’s commitment to representationalism of this sort is not immediately apparent; after all, the principle of consciousness is not explicitly universal in form. The overall strategy of the *Elementarphilosophie*, however, exhibits his commitment to the universal applicability of the principle. This commitment is particularly evident in his argument for the unknowability of things in themselves (see the *Neue Darstellung*, §§XII-XIII; *Beyträge*, 184-6). In short, Reinhold’s strategy is to argue that nothing which fulfills the conditions derivable from the principle of consciousness could count as a representation of a thing as it is in itself. The generality of this argument would be sacrificed if one conceded the possibility of conscious states to which the principle of consciousness did not apply. The commitment to representationalism is also implicit in Reinhold’s claim that his notion of representation provides the genus for which Kantian intuitions, concepts and ideas are the species.

<sup>22</sup>See *inter alia*, *Aenesidemus*, 72:

<sup>23</sup>*Aenesidemus*, 85.

<sup>24</sup>*Aenesidemus*, 87-88, emphasis added.

Otherwise we would seem to be left with a regress: representations would themselves always require further representations as their constituents. Schulze’s view thus seems to be that the complex act of representation, with its fourfold relations among mental content, subject and object, depends on the prior availability to consciousness of the items which enter into those relations. I can only represent, that is, once I have some (accordingly non-representational) acquaintance with mental content, subject and object.

The principle of consciousness also suffers, Schulze argues, from ambiguity and indeterminacy. Schulze develops this line of criticism by documenting Reinhold’s inconsistent use of key terms from the principle and by charging that he fails to specify, for instance, what type of “relation” is supposed to hold between representation and subject and between representation and object (part to whole? cause to effect? substance to accident? sign to signified?<sup>25</sup>). These demands for clarification of the first principle pose a dilemma for the defender of *Elementarphilosophie*, since either to refuse or to address them undercuts the principle’s purported status. On the one hand, to refuse the demand for clarification, especially in the face of the specific charges of ambiguity, undermines the claim that the principle is self-evident. After all, how can we assess the self-evidence of a proposition whose key concepts are not fully specified? On the other hand, any move to address the charge of ambiguity or indeterminacy is at odds with the claim that the principle marks the absolute beginning of all philosophical theory. If phenomenological reflection is not sufficient to warrant the principle without some prior determination of its concepts then there must be a philosophical enquiry which logically (or at least pedagogically) precedes the *Elementarphilosophie*, thus undermining its claim to the title of first philosophy.

The second cluster of objections centers around the issue of causality. It is here in particular that Schulze seeks to defend a skeptical Humean position against its

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<sup>25</sup>See *Aenesidemus*, 67.

alleged Kantian refutation. Hume, at least as Schulze understands him, had cast doubt on the validity of causal judgments, denying the legitimacy of an inference from effect to cause (or vice versa). Citing Kant’s famous claim about his dogmatic slumbers, Schulze takes one of the chief aims of the *Critique* to be the refutation of Hume’s skepticism on this point: the *Critique* sets out to vindicate the rational credentials of the notion of causality, to show that it is a “pure concept of the understanding” and a condition on the possibility of any experience. Schulze complains, however, that this purported refutation of Hume, particularly as it appears in Reinhold’s *Elementarphilosophie*, begs the crucial question at issue. For Reinhold’s first substantive move is to argue from the principle of consciousness to a “faculty of representation.” This inference from the fact of representation to a faculty of representation, Schulze charges, is tantamount to an inference from effect to cause; Reinhold has simply assumed the validity of just the sort of claim which Hume had cast in doubt.

It is therefore simply incomprehensible whence the *Elementarphilosophie* obtains the right, in laying down its foundations, to apply the categories of cause and actuality to a supersensible object, viz., to a particular faculty of representation which cannot be intuited and which is not given in any experience.<sup>26</sup>

If we construe Schulze's point narrowly as a critique of Reinhold’s inference from the fact of representation to the faculty of representation then the objection is less than conclusive. For it is certainly possible (and, in this context, charitable) to construe this as an inference from an actuality to its possibility rather than from effect to cause.<sup>27</sup> But when we consider the overall strategy of the *Elementarphilosophie*, Schulze's objection -- that it helps itself to a causal model of the faculty of representation -- begins to seem more telling. This is perhaps most striking in Reinhold’s notoriously problematic argument from the principle of consciousness to the Kantian “distinctness of the faculties” thesis. In its barest form Reinhold’s

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<sup>26</sup>*Aenesidemus*, 103.

<sup>27</sup>The word standardly translated as “faculty” is “*Vermögen*,” a nominalized form of the verb “to be able.” The inference from representations to a faculty of representations can thus be interpreted as an inference from the claim that I actually have representations to the claim that I am able to. So interpreted the inference would not involve a causal claim.

argumentative strategy is as follows: from the principle of consciousness we know that representations are related to both subject and object. In order for this to be the case, however, the representation must have at least two constituents: one in virtue of which it is related to the subject, a second through which it is related to the object. Reinhold goes on to dub these two constituents the “form” and “matter” of the representation, and concludes that it is the form which relates to the representing subject and the matter which relates to the object.<sup>28</sup>

This argument is vulnerable to criticism on several grounds. Schulze, for instance, rightly objects to the major premise, which would seem to admit of obvious counterexamples; Reinhold simply assumes that a simple entity cannot stand in the same relationship to two different things.<sup>29</sup> What’s more, Reinhold’s introduction of the form-matter distinction seems (particularly given its importance in the sequel) curiously unmotivated and arbitrary. But the more fundamental problem with Reinhold’s argument is the slide it exhibits in his use of the notion of “relation” [*Beziehung*]. When, in the principle of consciousness, Reinhold asserts a relation between representation and object, the relation in question must clearly be an intentional relation. In this context, that is, to say that the representation “relates” to an object is to say that it is about an object, that it is a representation of something. It is, after all, only in this intentional sense that the relation between representation and object can possibly have the status of a “fact of consciousness.” But when Reinhold concludes, in the context of the distinctness argument, that the matter of representation relates to the object, this cannot, on his own theory, be interpreted as an intentional relationship. For in abstraction from the form of representation, the matter of representation is not about anything.<sup>30</sup> Reinhold’s account of the distinctness of

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<sup>28</sup>*Neue Darstellung*, §§IX-XI; *Beyträge*, 180-4.

<sup>29</sup>For Schulze’s statement of this objection -- and a geometrical counterexample to Reinhold’s claim -- see *Aenesidemus*, 188.

<sup>30</sup>According to Reinhold’s account (see in particular, *Versuch*, §XVI; 235ff.), the form of representation is that through which the matter becomes a representation. Hence in abstraction from that form, the matter is not a representation at all, and so cannot be said to relate to an object in the sense specified in the principle of consciousness.

the faculties thus must be construed as a departure from the intentional vocabulary of his starting point. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, as Schulze charges, Reinhold here seeks to draw a causal conclusion directly from the principle of consciousness.

#### § 4

It was Fichte's confrontation with Schulze's attack on the *Elementarphilosophie* -- a confrontation occasioned by Fichte's assignment to review Schulze's work for the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* -- that led to the first formulations of the program of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte's surviving correspondence from 1793 clearly indicates that the task of coming to terms with Schulze's critique prompted him to a fundamental reassessment of his own basic philosophical commitments.<sup>31</sup> The review itself is composed in three distinct voices. At each stage, Fichte provides a statement of a Reinholdian claim, a summary of Schulze's objection and then a commentary on the exchange in his own (anonymous) voice. Although the rhetoric of the review suggests that Fichte is providing a defense of Reinhold against Schulze, a closer examination quickly reveals that he in fact grants many of Schulze's central objections. At the same time, however, Fichte points towards a reconstrual of *Elementarphilosophie* -- towards a system of critical idealism which would stand up to Schulze's assault. Although the discussion ranges over a wide variety of issues -- from the philosophical significance of skepticism to the possibility and structure of so-called “moral theology”<sup>32</sup> -- the most important points for our purposes concern the two clusters of objections discussed above.

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<sup>31</sup>See in particular the letters to Flatt (November or December, 1793; GA III/2, 17-18) and to Stephani (mid-December, 1793; GA III/2, 27-29). We should note here that all of Fichte's published works -- and indeed virtually everything of philosophical interest in his *Nachlaß* -- date from after his “conversion” to Kantian philosophy. For some hints about this conversion, however, see the letters to Weisshuhn (August-September, 1790; GA III/1, 167-8) and to Achelis (November, 1790; GA III/1, 190-95). All of these letters are translated in EPW, 357ff.

<sup>32</sup>For a more systematic discussion of the review, see D. Breazeale, “Fichte's Aenesidemus Review and the Transformation of German Idealism”; *Review of Metaphysics* XXXIV (1981); pp. 545-68. For an account of the issues in Kantian moral theology discussed in the review, see my “Without a Striving, No Object is Possible: Fichte's Striving Doctrine and the Primacy of Practice”; in Breazeale and Rockmore (eds.), *New Perspectives on Fichte* (Humanities Press, 1995).

A first general lesson to be drawn from Schulze’s objections to the principle of consciousness, Fichte holds, concerns the relation of transcendental philosophy to the “facts of consciousness.” As we have seen, Reinhold proposes that the first principle of the *Elementarphilosophie* be drawn directly from phenomenological reflection on these facts. In raising the issue of the universality of the principle of consciousness, however, Schulze alerts us, in Fichte’s view, to a fundamental difficulty with Reinhold’s phenomenological procedure. In short, there seems to be mismatch between the empirical, inductive generalizations that might be warranted by Reinhold’s “empirical self-observation” (as Fichte dubs it<sup>33</sup>) and the a priori science it purportedly grounds. If, to take a key example, the transcendental philosopher seeks to establish with strict necessity that knowledge of things in themselves is impossible (and not merely, for instance, that no such knowledge has been gained to date) then the principle which provides the ultimate foundation for that claim must surely be more than an empirical generalization across observed cases. Yet on Reinhold’s conception of phenomenological grounding, the latter is the best that can be claimed for the principle of consciousness. Fichte’s conclusion -- which in effect marks the first of several “speculative turns” in the history of post-Kantian Idealism -- is to insist that while transcendental philosophy must concern itself with the empirical facts of consciousness, those facts cannot themselves provide the foundation for the transcendental project.

Secondly, Fichte effectively agrees with Schulze (in a key case of taking Aenesidemus’ side against Reinhold) in rejecting the thesis of “Reinholdian Representationalism.” “Representation,” Fichte writes, “is not the highest concept for every act of our mind”.<sup>34</sup> In part, Fichte’s reasoning here follows Schulze’s. The possibility of my engaging in a particular, complex act of representation -- of my relating a mental content to a subject and an object and distinguishing it from both -- depends on my having at my disposal some notion of subject and object, some

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<sup>33</sup>GA I/2, 46; EPW, 63.

<sup>34</sup>GA I/2, 48; EPW, 65.

conception of the world as distinct from me (and of me as distinct from it). Since the availability of the subject-object schema is a condition on the possibility of any representation (in Reinhold’s sense), it cannot itself be understood as a product of a further set of representational acts. Accordingly, we must attribute to any representing subject a set of cognitive capacities or “acts” that are not themselves representational. But Fichte declines to follow Schulze’s empiricist construal of these pre-representational acts as “perception” or (empirical) “intuition”:

The absolute subject, the I, is not given by empirical intuition; it is, instead, posited by intellectual intuition. And the absolute object, the not-I, is that which is opposed to it. Neither of these occur in empirical consciousness except when a representation is related to them. In empirical consciousness they are both present only indirectly, as the representing subject and as what is represented.<sup>35</sup>

What Fichte provides here is a first glimpse of the technical vocabulary that becomes the vehicle for his own philosophical project. The notions of “absolute subject” and “absolute object” (or alternatively, in the language Fichte would soon come to prefer, “I” and “not-I”) are here introduced to characterize the general subject-object bipolarity involved in representation. The construal of conscious experience in terms of this bipolarity is then itself described as the product of two acts: the positing (or intellectual intuition<sup>36</sup>) of the I, and the opposing of the not-I to the I. Although at this stage Fichte’s deployment of this language is very sketchy, the general shape of his account is already beginning to come into view: the cognitive acts or capacities that make conscious representation possible must include not only the familiar sensory capacities but also certain very basic cognitive acts whereby I generate for myself the fundamental schema of subject-object opposition. Part of the point of describing these as acts of “positing” (the German is “*setzen*,” cognate of the English verb, “to set”) is to emphasize that this schema is in no way drawn from experience,

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<sup>35</sup>GA I/2, 48; EPW, 65.

<sup>36</sup>Fichte’s use of the term “intellectual intuition” is, of course, intentionally provocative, since Kant had denied that humans possess such a capacity. But Fichte makes it clear elsewhere (in particular in the “Second Introduction”) that he does not intend to be asserting what Kant denied (GA I/4, 216ff.; IWL 46ff.). He does not, that is, mean to suggest that we might somehow directly know things as they are in themselves. The use of the term intuition is meant to emphasize the pre-representational character of the act in question.

serving rather as a general condition thereof. (In this sense we can call these acts “a priori.”) But the term “*setzen*” should also be seen as a placeholder of sorts, a very general term to mark the point where a more fine-grained account is required. If we are to carry out the transcendental task of providing a theory of experience then we must investigate the (possibly very complex) structure of *setzen* -- the structure of our capacity to posit an objective realm which exists for a representing subject.

What is already clear in the review of *Aenesidemus* is that, in Fichte’s view, the prospects for a successful Reinholdian *Elementarphilosophie* depend on its beginning from an investigation of these non-representational acts of positing and opposing. In a passage which points the way from *Elementarphilosophie* to *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte writes:

[This] reviewer, at least, has convinced himself that it [the principle of consciousness] is a theorem that is based on another principle, but that it can be strictly deduced from that principle, a priori and independently of all experience.<sup>37</sup>

This “other principle,” which is here left unspecified, will be a principle expressing the subject’s pre-representational positing of itself in opposition to an objective realm. It is important to emphasize, however, that Schulze’s critique does not, in Fichte’s estimation, impugn the principle of consciousness per se. Reinhold’s mistake does not lie in his formulation of the principle of consciousness, nor in recognizing its crucial importance to transcendental philosophy. His mistake was to think that the principle of consciousness could itself be the first principle of philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

What about Fichte’s response to the second cluster of Schulzean objections, the charges that critical philosophy begs the question against Hume by presupposing a causal model of the faculty of representation? Fichte makes his general position on this point abundantly clear: transcendental philosophy should not be construed as a causal investigation; and accordingly the faculty of representation should not be seen as some sort of cognitive mechanism whose effects are manifested to us in

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<sup>37</sup>GA I/2, 48; EPW 64.

<sup>38</sup>GA I/2, 48-49; EPW, 65; see also Fichte’s letter to Reinhold of March 1, 1794 (GA III/2, 75; EPW, 376).

consciousness. In Fichte’s uncharitable technical vocabulary, any such reading reduces the critical project to “dogmatism.”<sup>39</sup> Fichte denies that Reinhold himself advanced such a causal theory, blaming Schulze for “reproaching the *Elementarphilosophie* for making claims that he has first read into it.”<sup>40</sup> As I argued above, it is not clear that Reinhold can be so easily acquitted of Schulze’s charge. But the important question raised by this exchange does not concern the proper interpretation of Reinhold’s theory but the viability of transcendental philosophy. What Schulze’s objections bring out is the extent to which that viability depends on the availability of an alternative to the tempting but ultimately untenable causal construal. Schulze sees no such alternative and concludes that the transcendental project is indefensible. Fichte clearly does not share this pessimism, but at this stage has little to offer by way of an alternative. In the context of the review he is content loudly to denounce any conception of the *Vorstellungsvermögen* as something that exists independently of representations as a cause exists independently of its effects:

The faculty of representation exists for the faculty of representation and through the faculty of representation: this is the circle within which every finite understanding, that is, every understanding that we can conceive, is necessarily confined. Anyone who wants to escape from this circle does not understand himself and does not know what he wants.<sup>41</sup>

Each of these two major points of dispute among Reinhold, Schulze and Fichte provide an insight into the character of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. What we see, first of all, is that the project of providing a theory of the “self-positing” or “absolute” I is motivated -- at least in its general outlines -- quite independently of Jacobi’s attack on the doctrine of things in themselves. Far from marking some radical departure from the epistemological discourses of Kant’s transcendental project, the attempt to give a theory of the “positing” of I and not-I can be seen to lie at the very heart of that project -- the project of giving a theory of the possibility and a priori structure of experience. Indeed it is only a slight distortion to describe the

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<sup>39</sup>I have discussed Fichte’s use of this notion in “Fichte’s Anti-Dogmatism”; *Ratio* V (1992); 129-46.

<sup>40</sup>GA I/2, 51; EPW, 67.

<sup>41</sup>*ibid.*; see also GA I/2, 49; EPW, 66

“Transcendental Analytic” of the Critique of Pure Reason as Kant’s theory of the positing of I and not-I.<sup>42</sup> After all, the account of the pure categories of the understanding is Kant’s answer to the question of how the respective unities of self and world, subject and object, are constituted.

Jacobi’s challenge is relevant, on the other hand, to the issues about causal inference in transcendental philosophy. In the wake of the failure of the *Elementarphilosophie*, however, Jacobi’s objections to things in themselves take on a new significance. For Jacobi’s critique now appears alongside Schulze’s as different manifestations of a single underlying objection: where Schulze complains about Reinhold’s causal analysis of the faculty of representation, Jacobi complains of Kant’s causal claims about things in themselves. So construed, the problem of things in themselves becomes more an issue in the methodology than the ontology of transcendental philosophy.<sup>43</sup> As we have seen, part of the challenge Fichte faces in trying to improve on the failed *Elementarphilosophie* is the challenge of freeing the transcendental project from the difficulties raised by reliance on the principle of causal inference.

## § 5

Paradoxically, one of Fichte’s most distinctive contributions to the Reinhold/Schulze exchange is one that appears only obliquely in his review of

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<sup>42</sup>It is something of a distortion, however, if only because Kant’s doctrine of the ideals of reason must be counted as part of his theory of “world-positing.” Kant would also presumably decline to follow Fichte in describing the positing of the unity of the self as something “immediate” or “intuitive,” since, on his view, the unity of apperception is achieved only through the synthesis of the manifold of experience in accordance with the categories. This latter point, however, may ultimately not mark such an important difference from Fichte, since Fichte’s own claims about the “immediacy” of self-positing are fundamentally qualified in the course of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

<sup>43</sup>In this connection see Fichte’s letter to Niethammer of December 6, 1793:

Kant demonstrates that the causal principle is applicable merely to appearances, and nevertheless he assumes that there is a substrate underlying all appearances -- an assumption undoubtedly based on the law of causality (at least this is the way Kant’s followers argue). Whoever shows us how Kant arrived at this substrate without extending the causal law beyond its limits will have understood Kant. (GA III/2, 21; EPW, 369)

This passage -- dating from the period when Fichte was most intensely engaged with his review of Schulze’s argument -- indicates the extent to which Fichte’s concerns about things in themselves were indexed to the problem of finding a suitable methodology for transcendental inquiry.

*Aenesidemus*. The issue in this case concerns freedom, in particular the proper place (and interpretation) of the notion of freedom in transcendental philosophy. One key source in this regard is a letter Fichte wrote from Zurich to his friend, Heinrich Stephani.<sup>44</sup> Much of this important letter -- for instance his claim that Aenesidemus “has overthrown Reinhold in my eyes” and that a new system must be built “from the ground up” -- we are now in a position to understand. But Fichte also makes an important remark to Stephani that as yet remains obscure. Fichte writes of “the lamentable state of contemporary philosophy,” citing as evidence “the recent controversies concerning freedom” and “the misunderstandings among the critical philosophers themselves” on this topic. Fichte then continues:

From the point of view of the new standpoint that I have reached, these controversies concerning freedom appear ridiculous. It is amusing when Reinhold tries to make everything that happens in the human soul into a representation. Anyone who does this can know nothing of freedom and the practical imperative. If he is consistent, he must become an empirical fatalist.<sup>45</sup>

What does Fichte mean by these remarks? What does Reinhold’s theory -- and in particular the thesis that I have been calling “Reinholdian representationalism” -- have to do with the issue of freedom? In order to answer these questions (and to understand this distinctively Fichtean juxtaposition of issues) we must look a little further into the contemporary context of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in particular into Fichte’s contributions to those “ridiculous recent controversies concerning freedom.”

Part of the explanation of these remarks from the correspondence can be gleaned from Fichte’s very first contribution to the *ALZ*, his review of L. Creuzer’s *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freyheit des Willens*.<sup>46</sup> Creuzer’s book concerns the traditional problem of freedom and determinism. The position Creuzer defends is “skeptical” in the sense that he holds all the leading solutions to the problem to be failures. The aim of the work is starkly to present the nature of the problem (and the

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<sup>44</sup>GA III/2, 27-29; EPW, 370-71.

<sup>45</sup>GA III/2, 28; EPW 371.

<sup>46</sup>The full title was: *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freyheit des Willens mit Hinsicht auf die neusten Theorien über dieselbe* [Skeptical Observations concerning Freedom of the Will, with Attention to the Most Recent Theories Thereof]; (Giessen: Heyer, 1793).

inadequacies of the “most recent” solutions to which Creuzer’s subtitle refers) in the professed hope that this will provide the occasion for a new and more adequate theory. Much of Creuzer’s book is concerned with various purportedly Kantian resolutions to the problem of freedom,<sup>47</sup> and for Fichte, its main significance lay in its identification of an obstacle to the adequate interpretation of Kantian philosophy.

As Creuzer sees it, the central move in the Kantian accounts of freedom is the identification of free actions as actions caused by the rational will. Such a definition contrasts free action with “heteronomy” -- cases where human behavior is simply the effect of a sentiment or passion. Creuzer, of course, goes on to criticize this position. (His claim is that the Kantian analysis can either satisfy the demands of theoretical reason or those of practical reason, but never both.) For our purposes, however, the details of his objection are less important than the general interpretation of the Kantian position it assumes. As Fichte sees it, this sort of (purportedly “transcendental”) account of the will amounts to nothing less than a betrayal of the “true spirit of Kantian philosophy.”<sup>48</sup> To treat the rational will as the cause of free action is, in Fichte’s words, “pulling something intelligible down into the sequence of natural causes,” “transposing it into the sequence of natural effects.”<sup>49</sup> We should not be surprised that the Kantian theory of freedom, so understood, proves vulnerable to Creuzer’s skeptical attacks. For in essence he has treated reason as simply one more of the deterministic mechanisms of nature. The Creuzer review thus identifies a first point of contact between the issues from the Reinhold/Schulze debate on the one hand and the problem of freedom on the other. Once again it is the issue of causal analysis in transcendental philosophy that is the key point here. The problems which emerged in the Reinhold/Schulze debate as issues about the general methodology of transcendental philosophy reappear here as questions about the tenability of a Kantian theory of freedom.

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<sup>47</sup>Creuzer is particularly concerned with the positions of Reinhold and of another of the “Jena Kantians,” C.C.E. Schmid.

<sup>48</sup>GA I/2, 10.

<sup>49</sup>GA I/2, 10.

The relevance of these issues to Fichte’s positive philosophical program becomes clearer in yet a third early review, the review of F.H. Gebhard’s *Über die sittliche Güte aus uninteressirtem Wohlwollen*.<sup>50</sup> In this case the discussion bears on more explicitly ethical issues, in particular the conflict between two different kinds of moral theory: “moral sentiment theory” on the one hand and Kantian ethical rationalism on the other. The debate here (another long-standing one) concerns the foundations of morality. On moral sentiment theory, the roots of morality are to be traced back to a basic human moral sentiment -- a feeling of benevolence [*Wohlwollen*] -- that motivates our concern for the welfare of others. On the rival Kantian view, the demands of morality are not expressions of any kind of sentiment but of reason: the demand of the categorical imperative is as much a demand of reason as is the law of non-contradiction. Once again in this case, reason and freedom are closely identified on the Kantian view: to act freely is to act in response to reason; hence morality, reason and autonomy converge in the same demands.

Gebhard’s book presents an extended argument for the superiority of the Kantian theory over its moral-sentimentalist rival. As such, Fichte’s sympathies certainly lay on Gebhard’s side. Nonetheless, the body of Fichte’s review systematically defends the moral sentiment theory from Gebhard’s attack. In contrast to Gebhard, who sees a demonstrable advantage for the Kantian position, Fichte casts the two ethical theories in a standoff of sorts. Each, in his view, provides a consistent and explanatorily rich account of human moral behavior. Yet the accounts each yield of human subjectivity are sharply at odds with one another. The fundamental choice between the two positions, Fichte holds, concerns the question of freedom. The sentimentalist has no need or place for an appeal to freedom, while on the Kantian account freedom (principled action motivated by rational demands) lies at the foundation of the account of human agency. If we are to carry out the project

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<sup>50</sup>Literally: *Concerning the Moral Good from Disinterested Benevolence*; (Gotha: Ettinger, 1792).

Gebhard has undertaken -- the task of demonstrating the superiority of the Kantian view -- then what is required is a positive proof of the reality of human freedom.

In the closing passages of the review Fichte clearly signals that he thinks such a proof to be possible, providing a sketch of the argumentative route that must be traversed:

It must be proved that reason is practical. Such a proof, which could quite easily be the foundation of all philosophical knowledge (according to its material) would have to be carried out approximately as follows: Man is given to consciousness as unity (as I); this fact can only be explained under the supposition of something absolutely unconditioned in him. Therefore we must assume something absolutely unconditioned in man. Such an absolutely unconditioned, however, is a practical reason.<sup>51</sup>

This admittedly cryptic passage helps illuminate the convergence of Fichte’s concern with freedom and his rejection of Reinhold’s representationalism. For what becomes clear here is that Fichte’s attempt to give a theory of “self-positing” (a theory of the constitution of the subject as a self-conscious unity) is meant to bear on the question of freedom. At the core of Fichte’s attempt to improve on Reinhold’s failed *Elementarphilosophie*, then, is the task of exhibiting the ways in which human freedom serves as a condition upon the possibility of representation.

## § 6

Our account of Fichte’s engagement with the early Kant-reception thus allows us to draw some specific conclusions about the aims of the Jena project. In particular, the early *Wissenschaftslehre* can now be seen to be devoted to three specific philosophical tasks which emerge from the disputes we have been examining. By way of conclusion I summarize these tasks in turn, providing in each case a brief indication of the strategies by which Fichte sought to execute them.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>GA I/2, 28.

<sup>52</sup>As will be immediately apparent, my aim here is only to give a general indication of the strategies of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*. For a more detailed discussion, see F. Neuhauser’s contribution to this volume and my *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte’s Jena Project* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997).

1. Certainly the most informative of Fichte’s early “statements of intent” is that which we encountered in the review of *Aenesidemus*: the *Wissenschaftslehre* is to provide a deduction, starting from a more fundamental principle, of Reinhold’s principle of consciousness. It is ironic, then, that this task is one that Fichte may seem never explicitly to have undertaken. One searches in vain, at least in the various published versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, for even a sketch of a proof whose conclusion is the principle of consciousness.<sup>53</sup> Construed a bit less narrowly, however, this project is everywhere in evidence in the Jena versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Throughout the “foundational” works of the period Fichte seeks to provide a systematic accounting of the structures of self-relation and objectivity expressed by Reinhold’s *Grundsatz*. Particularly in the first published version of the system, the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*,<sup>54</sup> this task is pursued in the form of a category theory. The task of “deducing” the fact expressed by the principle of consciousness, that is, is carried out by investigating the a priori conceptual resources (categories) necessary to construct a consistent model of the self-positing I and its counter-positing of the not-I.

2. This “model constructive” feature of the *Grundlage* is closely tied up with the second main task of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: the task of finding an alternative to causal inference as the principle of investigation in transcendental philosophy. For the Jena Fichte, the prospects for such an alternative turned on the possibility of developing a “geometrical method” in transcendental philosophy.<sup>55</sup> The model Fichte has in mind in this context is not Spinoza’s “geometrical proof” (i.e., proof by appeal to axioms, definitions and theorems) but rather the constructive method which Kant

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<sup>53</sup>One does find something more closely approximating such an argument in the *Nachlass*, particularly in the set of notes collectively entitled *Eigne Meditationen über Elementarphilosophie* [Personal Meditations on the *Elementarphilosophie*]; GA II/3, 21ff.

<sup>54</sup>Foundations for the Entire *Wissenschaftslehre* [hereafter: *Grundlage*]; GA I/2, 173ff; SK, 87ff.

<sup>55</sup>References to a geometric method can be found in many of the letters cited above. A particularly important (although cryptic) elaboration on this theme can be found in one of Fichte’s marginal notes in the opening pages of the *Eigne Meditationen* (GA II/3, 23-4). Fichte there explicitly associates the prospects for an answer to *Aenesidemus* with the idea of a “constructive” method for the *Elementarphilosophie*. For a discussion see J. Stolzenberg, *Fichtes Begriff der intellektuellen Anschauung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986); Chapter 1.

sees at work in geometry. Fichte follows Kant in seeing geometry as a synthetic a priori science made possible by the availability of a “pure intuition” of space. We gain geometrical knowledge, on this view, through our capacity to construct geometrical figures (and hence geometrical concepts) in non-empirical intuition. For Fichte, it is this methodological example which holds out the prospect for an alternative to the “causal inference” construal of transcendental investigation. The transcendental theorist must proceed by “constructing” models of the subject/object (I/not-I) relation. Furthermore (in a step which marks the quiet reintroduction of the ancient procedures of dialectic) the principle of this constructive project is to be the systematic generation and elimination of contradictions in successive constructions.

3. Finally, as we have seen, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is intended to provide a proof of human freedom -- a proof, in Kantian terms, that human reason is practical. Only in this way, Fichte thinks, can the true spirit of Kant’s philosophy be secured. We have already seen from the Gebhard review the general strategy for such a proof: freedom is to be demonstrated as a necessary condition on the unity of the subject. Through the course of the Jena period, Fichte’s views about the prospects and structure of such a proof would undergo a number of changes.<sup>56</sup> In the earliest version of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, however, Fichte’s strategy follows, at least in general outline, the sketch from the Gebhard review. The investigation takes its start from the unity involved in a theoretical judgment. Following Kant, Fichte sees the capacity for judgment as requiring a spontaneous act of synthesis: an act of bringing together subject and predicate terms in response to reasons. Kant, of course, had sharply distinguished the so-called spontaneity of the understanding (involved in theoretical judgment) from genuine human freedom (autonomy of action in response to the moral law). Fichte’s strategy in the *Grundlage* is to provide a proof of human freedom by showing the two to be inextricably intertwined. The argument for human freedom thus proceeds (to use Kantian terms again) by seeking to show that the self-

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<sup>56</sup>For a detailed accounting of these changes, see F. Neuhauser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990); pp. 32-65.

determination involved in theoretical judgment must ultimately be practical. Fichte’s task is thus to establish that the capacity for representation and judgment presupposes a capacity for free self-determination and agency.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, far from marking some radical repudiation of the critical-transcendental program, Fichte’s philosophical project can legitimately lay claim to a place firmly within that Kantian tradition. Nonetheless, the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* does indeed mark an important transformation of classical German philosophy. In response to the early disputes and crises of Kantian philosophy, Fichte transforms the transcendental investigation -- the investigation he describes as “tracking the constituents of our cognitive faculty” -- into the project of developing a dialectical category theory which would exhibit the deep unity of man’s theoretical and practical capacities.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I explore this dependence in my [Theories of Judgment: Psychology, Logic, Phenomenology](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see in particular Chapters 2 and 5 for discussion pertinent to Fichte’s legacy.

<sup>58</sup> On Fichte’s account of this unity, see Günter Zöller, [Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).