

# Fichte's Transcendental Phenomenology of Agency

## Commentary on Fichte's Introduction to the *Sittenlehre*

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Fichte's introduction to the *Sittenlehre* rather strikingly says nothing about Sitten or Sittlichkeit, nothing about Moral, virtually nothing about die Ethik. Aside from one very pregnant promissory note with no immediate bearing on ethical matters, it says nothing about the specific tasks and strategy of the book it introduces. What it provides instead is a concise statement of Fichte's fundamental philosophical commitments and a powerful illustration of his distinctive combination of transcendental and phenomenological approaches in philosophy in general and to the problems of action in particular. In approaching Fichte's text we will do well to focus on three points: the systematic place of the text in Fichte's corpus and in his system; Fichte's sketch of the phenomenology and transcendental conditions of agency; and the problem of understanding the distinctive normativity of Fichte's transcendental/phenomenological laws.

### **1      SYSTEMATISCHE ORT**

Fichte placed a very high value on systematic rigor; indeed one might well say he fetishized it. He took systematic order to be an essential characteristic of science in general and philosophy in particular. The *Sittenlehre* was composed at a moment in Fichte's development when this ambition to systematicity -- and indeed Fichte's accomplishment -- were at their peak. Fichte was thirty-eight years old when the *Sittenlehre* appeared in 1798; it was (depending on how one counts) his fifth major independent work of philosophy. The first of those books -- *the Critique of all Revelation* -- had appeared anonymously in 1792, prior to Fichte's widespread public recognition, and prior to his appointment at Jena; for the most part it was conceived and carried out firmly within the Kantian framework of exposition and argument. But after arriving in Jena in 1794, Fichte very quickly produced a series of works intended to provide systematic foundations and skeletal structure for a new systematic philosophy deserving a new name: *Wissenschaftslehre*.

In four years Fichte produced four books laying out these foundations. The *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* appeared in two published parts in 1794 and 1795 respectively. Although the presentation was hasty and at times impenetrable (as Fichte himself acknowledged) it was meant to provide the first principles of philosophical inquiry, and to establish its proper scope and aims. There followed in quick succession three books building on these foundations. The (now almost entirely neglected) *Grundriss* considered the application of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to broadly cognitive forms of conscious subjectivity and to epistemological issues in philosophy.<sup>1</sup> But in many ways the crowning achievements of the Jena period were the pair of books applying Fichte's methods and results to topics in moral and political philosophy. *Die Grundlage des Naturrechts* (1797) introduced the notions of *Aufforderung* and *Anerkennen* as the basic concepts of political order and obligation; the

*Sittenlehre* (1798) turns attention to ethics. Even while working on these developments of his philosophy, Fichte was also at work on a more satisfactory presentation of the foundational portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and in the 1797-98 *Philosophisches Journal* published four brilliant installments of *Ein Versuch Einer Neue Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* -- an undertaking that was cut short by the Atheism Controversy of 1798-99.

What we can see from this brief survey is not only the work of an extraordinarily prolific and influential writer, but also the filling in of a systematic vision for philosophy -- and a systematic structure in self-conscious subjectivity. Certainly the basic division -- between issues about cognition and issues about action -- had been taken over from the division of labor between Kant's two *Critiques* dealing with theoretical and practical reason respectively. But Fichte was at the same time forging his own way -- most importantly with the insistence upon a level of foundational subjectivity (and hence foundational inquiry) prior to the division between theoretical and practical reason.

The distinction between theoretical and practical subjectivity (and accordingly between theoretical and practical philosophy) is anchored, for Fichte, in two facts of our conscious experience: *ich erkenne* und *ich wirke*. I have knowledge of an objective reality and I also act in it. In both cases, Fichte contends, our consciousness is structured as a distinctive division and harmonization of subject and object. But this subject-object harmonization takes two fundamentally different forms: in the broadly theoretical cases, the subject seeks to form true judgments about the world -- whether perceptual judgments or scientific hypotheses or juristic determinations; in the practical cases the subject seeks to act in and upon the world. Fichte pioneers an approach to this division which has become standard in the intervening centuries:

Das subjective, und objective wird vereinigt, oder als harmonirend angesehen, zuförderst so, daß das subjective aus dem objectiven erfolgen, das erstere sich nach dem letztern richten soll\*: *ich*

*erkenne*. Wie wir zu der Behauptung einer solchen Harmonie kommen, untersuchte die theoretische Philosophie. -- Beides wird als harmonierend angesehen so, daß das objective aus dem subjectiven, ein Seyn aus meinem Begriffe, (dem Zweckbegriffe) folge soll\*: *ich wirke*. Woher die Annahme einer solchen Harmonie entspringe, hat die praktische Philosophie zu untersuchen. (sec. 2, ii)<sup>2</sup>

The subjective and objective are united, or are viewed as harmonizing, in the first instance such that the subjective follows from the objective, the former should orient itself according to the latter: *I know*. Theoretical philosophy investigated how we come to the assertion of such a harmony. The two are viewed as harmonizing such that the objective should follow from the subjective, a being should follow from my concept (the intention): *I act*. Practical philosophy has to investigate where the assumption of such a harmony originates.<sup>a</sup>

The contrast is between two basic patterns of subject-object relation, distinguished by the characteristic normativity of the two cases -- in modern jargon the ‘direction of fit.’ In forming beliefs and judgments about the world, a governing ideal of my self-determination is that my subjective representations should conform to the objective nature of things. Mistakes are to be corrected by altering my representation. Theoretical consciousness in this sense exhibits mind-to-world direction of fit, or mind-to-world normativity: the object provides the standard which determines the correctness or incorrectness of the subject. Fichte characterizes these cases broadly under the heading ‘*Ich erkenne*,’ but it is important to recognize the distinctive scope of this category. My perception of the table is every bit as much a piece of Erkenntnis as is my belief about the molecular structure of water. And so is a mistaken belief. What is definitive of all these cases, according to Fichte, is the characteristic normativity or ‘harmonizing’ of the mind-world encounter: I aim to discipline my subjective representations so as to conform to the objects represented.

Something quite different is involved in the practical domain. Once again, according to Fichte, we find a mind-world or subject-object division. As subject, I act in an objective world.

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<sup>a</sup> [[translation issues: why is ‘wird’ singular if it has a conjunctive subject (Das subjective, und objective wird ...’)?; what is the mood of “untersuchte”?; is it fair to translated “Zweckbegriff” as ‘intention’? Should it be “aim” instead?]]

And once again the encounter is normative: it can either succeed or fail. But the normativity in this case runs in the opposite direction: my action succeeds where the world is made to conform to my representation of how it should be (world-to-mind direction of fit). Once again it is worth emphasizing the breadth of Fichte's categories here. Whereas Kant's treatment of practical reason had focused almost exclusively on the moral dimensions of action, Fichte's practical net is cast much wider: he is interested in all cases of action, even those actions which we normally think of as lacking any particular moral significance. Whether I drive the nail cleanly or not is not a matter of moral assessment by any measure; but it exhibits exactly the normativity that is characteristic of what Fichte calls 'Wirkung.' Practical Philosophy in Fichte's sense is thus not narrowly or even paradigmatically concerned with the moral assessment of action; its concern is with understanding the structures and conditions of a subject's acting in an objective world.

But for Fichte the crucial issue -- and the strategic place of his inquiry -- concerns the unity of what is divided in this analysis. How do I come by the understanding that the one who knows is also the one who acts? Is there a point at which theoretical and practical consciousness are essentially united? And is there a point where the subject-object *Trennung* characteristic of both theoretical and practical consciousness is originally unified? Fichte's answer provides the thesis with which the *Sittenlehre* begins:

Wie ein objectives jemals zu einem subjectiven, ein Seyn für sich zu einem vorgestellten werden möge -- daß ich an diesem bekanntern Ende die Aufgabe aller Philosophie fasse -- wie es, sage ich, mit dieser sonderbaren Verwandlung zugehe, wird nie jemand erklären, welcher nicht einen Punkt findet, in welchem das objective, und subjective überhaupt nicht geschieden, sondern ganz Eins sind. (sec. 1, i)

How something objective could ever become something subjective (I tackle the task of philosophy at this more familiar end), how a being for itself could become a represented being, how, I say, this strange transformation could occur, no one will ever explain who does not find a point in which the objective and subjective are in general not divided, but are rather completely one.

Philosophy will never succeed at its explanatory tasks unless it uncovers the fundamental points of unity presupposed by the divisions characteristic of consciousness. Fichte here makes reference to the ‘bekanntern’ question about the representation of a being, but the work of the *Sittenlehre* gets underway with Fichte’s attempt to exhibit this unity as a fundamental characteristic of agency.

## **2 ICH FINDE MICH ALS WIRKEND ... ICH SETZE MICH ALS THÄTIG**

In seeking to articulate these matters, the course that Fichte plots can best be characterized as transcendental phenomenology. Indeed in his characteristic combination of transcendental and phenomenological strategies we find one of Fichte’s most important contributions and chief innovations. The project is phenomenological in something like the modern sense: it seeks to articulate a fundamental structure of our conscious experience -- in this case my experience of effective agency in the world, *Wirksamkeit*. But it is at the same time transcendental in Kant’s sense: it seeks to establish certain conditions on the very possibility of that experience.

In posing this problem in this way, Fichte sees himself as correcting a kind of theoretical one-sidedness that has characterized philosophy since its epistemic turn. The moderns had worried with increasing acuity and urgency about how knowledge was possible -- in Fichte’s formulation:

wie wir dazu kommen mögen, die Uebereinstimmung unsrer Vorstellungen mit unabhängig von ihnen vorhanden seyn sollenden\* Dingen zu behaupten. (sec 2, ii)

How we can we come to assert the correspondence of our representations with things which are supposed to be there independently of them.

Yet the correlative question about agency, he claims, has been neglected:

[W]ie es möglich sey, einige unsrer Begriffe zu denken, als darstellbar, und zum Theil wirklich dargestellt in der ohne unser Zuthun bestehenden Natur, darüber hat bisher die Philosophie sich auch *nicht einmal gewundert*. (sec 2, iii)

Until now, philosophy has not even once wondered how it is possible to think some of our concepts as representable, and in part actually represented in nature that persists independently of our activity.<sup>b</sup>

This neglected question must now, Fichte insists, take the lead in practical philosophy. We cannot simply take agency for granted as a fact of consciousness; we must uncover its structure and conditions.

Fichte's point of departure in this enterprise is resolutely phenomenological: 'Ich finde mich als wirkend in der Sinnenwelt' (sec. 4, iv) I discover myself as an agent of change in the world. This, Fichte insists, is a fact of our conscious experience. I am aware of myself in a world in which I am effective. In one sense we might try to express the content of this discovery in reflective terms: I am the ground of a certain change in the world. But such reflective self-determination cannot, Fichte insists, capture the most fundamental manifestation of this self-awareness. As in the case of apperceptive self-awareness, the self-relation at the root of agency must be immediate and unreflective.<sup>3</sup>

The core of Fichte's phenomenological analysis is proposed in the form of a hypothetical. Let's suppose, he says, that our experience is indeed in some sense comprised of brute sensory experience provided from outside of consciousness. Though he clearly signals that he views this position as an ultimately untenable 'Nichtgedanken' (sec. 4, iv), his point here is to show that, even if there were some such 'outer source' for experience, it could not possibly suffice to generate the experience here in question: the self-discovery of one's own agency in the world.

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<sup>b</sup> Translation issues: What is the difference between "unsrer" and "unser" in this passage?

Our sense of agency is something that must be brought to this sensory manifold, and could not possibly be derived from it.

[S]o liegt doch noch etwas in der Vorstellung von meiner Wirksamkeit, was mir schlechthin nicht von außen kommen kann, sondern in mir selbst liegen muß, was ich nicht erfahren, und lernen kann, sondern unmittelbar wissen muß; dies, daß *ich selbst* der letzte Grund der geschehenen Veränderung seyn soll\*. (sec 4, iv-v)

So something indeed still lies in the representation of my agency, something that cannot come purely from outside me, but must rather lie in me myself, something that I can neither experience nor learn, but must know immediately -- namely this: that I myself am supposed to be the ultimate ground of the change that has occurred.

Here it is useful to try to imagine the experience of an infant, in rapt attention at the discovery of its own toes. It is one thing to discover the toes as a new object of visual and tactile attention in my crib. (Here is something that produces pleasant sensations!) But the really exciting discovery is that these toes are *mine*. I learn this not simply by discovering them as a site of pleasure and pain; the discovery of ownership is inextricably tied to the discovery that I can *move* them, and with them move the world. But how do we possibly come to this awareness? Not, Fichte argues, simply on the basis on the sensory content produced by the interaction with those toes. What that interaction produces is simply a variety of more-or-less pleasant, more-or-less varied sensory experiences. No amount of multiplication or combination of that content, nor merely associative pairings thereof suffice to generate the understanding that the motions of the toes are the *product* of my agency. To recognize patterns in my sensory barrage is not the same as recognizing myself as the agent of change.

It is important to appreciate that the appeal to the some felt urge or desire does not of itself resolve the problem, if urges are understood simply as further matter in the stream of experience. Though there is no doubt a sensory component to desiring or wanting or trying to do something, the mere addition of such a sensory component simply provides one further

dimension of variation to the sensory show; it does not add the essential insight that I am the agent of motion. So if the self-awareness of agency does not derive from sensory content, it must, Fichte reasons, be brought to it: agency is the a priori of experience.

It is worth taking explicit note of the structure of this argument. We begin with a phenomenological fact: I discover myself as active. It is shown that under a certain assumption, that consciousness is exhausted by the stream of sensory content, what is known to be actual would be impossible. On this basis Fichte claims title to a transcendental result. Most modestly stated: There must be something ('doch noch etwas') in our self-representation that is neither experienced nor learned from the manifold of sensory experience.

But Fichte is not content with this first result. What particularly concerns him is a further condition on the experience of agency. To recognize that I am the ground of a change in the world requires that we recognize a fundamental point of unity between the theoretical and practical forms of consciousness.

*Ich bin der Grund dieser Veränderung, heißt: dasselbe und kein anderes, welches um die Veränderung weiß, ist zugleich auch das wirkende; das Subject des Bewußtseyns, und das Princip der Wirksamkeit sind Eins. (sec. 4, v)*

*I am the ground of this change means: the same thing and nothing other which knows about this change is at the same time also the agent; the subject of consciousness and the principle of agency are one.*

To recognize my agency in moving my toes is both to know the world and to act in it; but it is also to appreciate that the very same I who knows is the one who acts. Fichte claims here to have identified both a structural feature of my engaged agency and a transcendental condition on the recognition of self-possessed agency. Without some implicit knowledge of this identity, we could never discover ourselves as agents.

Having staked this claim, Fichte introduces the fundamental notion of his philosophical system, the notion of absolute or unconditional positing [setzen schlechthin]

[W]as ich weiß, dadurch, daß ich überhaupt weiß, kann ich aus keinem andern Wissen gezogen haben; *ich weiß es unmittelbar, ich setze es schlechthin.* (sec 4, v)

What I know in virtue of the fact that I know at all [*überhaupt*], I can have drawn from no other knowledge; I know it immediately, I posit it absolutely.

Fichte's point of phenomenological departure was the claim: 'ich finde mich als wirkend;' but the claim that becomes his drumbeat is rather: 'ich setze mich als thätig.' (The same phrase opens each of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> sections of the Introduction.) Notice the derivation that has taken place. 'Ich finde' becomes 'Ich setze.' Self-discovery is a phenomenological fact. In the course of my experience, one of the things I discover (it should go without saying!) is myself as an agent -- most saliently, perhaps, when I am called upon to make a difficult decision or in the feeling of pride or shame. This reflective self-discovery is a fact that must be explained. Underlying it, Fichte claims, as the condition on its possibility, is a self-relation of a different sort -- a pre-reflective self-relation that provides the ultimate source of unity in my experience. Self-positing marks a point of unity between theory and practice, insofar as the knower is also the agent; and it marks a point of subject-object unity, since knower and known, agent and project are 'Ein und Dasselbe.' This is the signature move in Fichte's philosophy: our reflective self-discovery presupposes a more fundamental self-relation: an active, pre-reflective, self-awareness of my own activity ('Selbstthätigkeit' or 'Thathandlung').

Das Eine, welches getrennt wird, das sonach allem Bewußtseyn zum Grunde liegt, und zufolge dessen das subjective und objective im Bewußtseyn unmittelbar als Eins gesetzt wird, ist absolut = X., kann als einfaches, auf keine Weise zum Bewußtseyn kommen. Wir finden hier eine unmittelbare Uebereinstimmung zwischen dem subjectiven und objectiven: ich weiß von mir, dadurch daß ich bin, und bin, dadurch, daß ich von mir weiß. (sec 5, vi-vii)

The unity, which is divided, and which accordingly lies at the foundation of all consciousness, and as a consequence of which the subjective and objective is posited in consciousness immediately as unity, is absolutely = X, and can in no way come to consciousness as something simple. We find

here an immediate correspondence between the subjective and the objective: I know myself because I am, and I am because I know myself.

Notice that this moment of subject-object unity is *not* a fact of consciousness -- here lies the limit of any strictly phenomenological description. As Fichte puts it: ‘Diese absolute Identität [...] läßt sich nur schließen, nicht etwa unmittelbar als Tatsache des wirklichen Bewußtseyns nachweisen.’ (sec. 1, i-ii) [“This absolute identity can only be derived, not somehow immediately proved as a fact of actual consciousness.”]

### **3 GRUNDBEGRIFFE UND GRUNDGESETZE**

Having provided this preliminary characterization of the self-positing activity of the self, Fichte proceeds to lay out the fundamental concepts governing its theoretical and practical development. The fifth and sixth sections of Fichte’s Introduction revisit the central categories of the theoretical portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Having identified the necessary structure of self-positing, Fichte considers how it can manifest itself in experience. The key move here concerns the determinacy of our self-positing. I cannot simply discover myself as active in general; my agency only ever exhibits itself as some particular form of activity, having some determinate content: I discover my agency in moving this rock, or in building this wall, or in wondering which of these two paths to choose.

Where the mode of subjectivity is cognitive, we must somehow experience that determinacy as originating from an independent, objective world. What is known is something that appears as something simply there, without my having done anything to produce it -- ‘ohne unsrer Zuthun.’ And this is essential to the normative role it is meant to play. In order to serve its objectivity-disciplining function, the object must be treated as fixed (determined) independently of my judgment. Fichte sometimes characterizes this as ‘the unchangeable’ in

experience (sec. 9, xvii), but this does not mean that there is some static constant in experience; the point is rather that the standing and features of the object of judgment are not themselves determined by my judging, which must rather answer to those features. In the formulation Fichte proposes in the *Grundlage* as the Hauptsatz of theoretical philosophy: ‘Das Ich setzt sich, als bestimmt durch das nicht-Ich’ (I, 2, 287). [“The I posits itself as determined by the not-I.”]

But how do we come by that experience of an independently determined world? Here Fichte introduces one of his fundamental laws of consciousness: the principle of resistance.

Was heißt nun das; eine *bestimmte* Thätigkeit, und wie wird sie zur bestimmten? Lediglich dadurch, daß ihr *ein Widerstand entgegengesetzt wird*; entgegengesetzt, durch ideale Thätigkeit, gedacht, und eingebildet, als ihr *gegen über stehend*. Wo und in wiefern du Thätigkeit erblickst, erblickst du nothwendig auch Widerstand; denn außerdem erblickst du keine Thätigkeit. (sec. 6, ix)<sup>4</sup>

Now what does this mean: a determined activity, and how does it become determined? Only in virtue of a resistance being opposed to it -- opposed through ideal activity, conceived and imagined as standing over against it. Wherever and to whatever extent you glimpse activity, you necessarily also see resistance. For otherwise you see no activity.

We can experience the independence of the world only because we can encounter resistance in our experience. Once again we must not confuse this experience of resistance with some merely sensory episode. I do not encounter resistance simply by feeling the cold pressure of the boulder against my hand. To experience resistance one must somehow also experience oneself as striving toward or for something -- an endeavor that one finds thwarted by the resistance of the world. The conscious experience of oneself as having aims and of the world as resistant are thus inextricably intertwined.

This forms the core of Fichte’s basic argumentative progression in the *Wissenschaftslehre*: we know that there must be an original self-relating activity constitutive of the I. We know this because we see manifestations of this self-relation in all consciousness: in theory in immediate apperceptive self-knowledge; in practice as the prereflective awareness of

our own agency. And yet this fundamental active self-relation cannot itself come from or to conscious experience, since its structure is fundamentally different from the reflective, attributive self-knowledge characteristic of conscious self-presence. Fichte then sets out to uncover the structure and conditions of this fundamental self-relation -- die Grundgesetze des Bewußtseyns: An I can only come to self-awareness through confrontation with something that is not-I. A not-I can only be experienced as such insofar as something in experience is manifest as resistant. And this in turn presupposes a particular kind of activity of the subject: the having of ends or goals. Return to the crib for the phenomenology: the very independence of the rattle or bottle I want is manifest in the fact that I cannot get it -- that it will not allow itself to be grasped even though I reach for it. And this in turn manifests me to myself -- as the one whose aims the world may or may not satisfy.

The self-awareness that emerges in this progression may be a necessary condition on the experience of agency, but Fichte also insists that it is not sufficient. One dimension that is missing is that of the Other or Thou. In the *Naturrecht* Fichte had tried to show that the I is only brought to complete self-consciousness in its encounter with another I -- an Other who both challenges me to exhibit my freedom and whose status as a subject I in turn beckon. In the *Sittenlehre*, the focus from the outset is the self-consciousness at work in engaged agency in a sensible material world. The fundamental concepts here are those of purpose, will, freedom, and embodiment. All of these, Fichte claims, can be traced to what he calls the Hauptsatz of practical philosophy: 'Das Ich setzt sich als bestimmend das nicht-Ich' (I, 2, 386).

The basic notion in this domain is the idea of a purpose. To discover myself as an agent is to take up some of my representations as goals to be accomplished in the world. This is not to be explained as some kind of association between certain sensory representations and some

salient urge -- as if I discover myself as an agent by feeling the secretions of my salivary glands upon opening a jar of pickles. To discover myself as agent is rather to cast some among my representations as the determining *ground* of change in the world. The representation that is to serve as such a ground is a purpose: *Zweck*. And along with this basic notion there comes immediately a second (the constitutive concepts of the experience of agency come as a package deal): to take my concept as a purpose is to cast myself as will: 'Das geistige in mir, unmittelbar als Princip einer Wirksamkeit angeschaut, wird mir zu einem Willen' (sec 8, xv).

But the crucial structure of practical consciousness is, for Fichte, the agent's experienced freedom. There is, to be sure, a fundamental dimension of freedom even in theoretical consciousness. As Fichte insists again and again: knowing is itself a doing. But the experience of freedom here enters only as a higher order determination. I have freedom to describe but not to perceive: 'zwar nicht wahrzunehmen, aber doch frei zu beschreiben' (sec. 6, ix). For Fichte our very capacity to judge presupposes an underlying freedom, but the *experienced manifestation* of cognitive subjectivity is most fundamentally passive; the object, as he puts it, 'hovers before me' (vorschwebt); it is present 'ohne meiner Zuthun,' als 'das Unveränderliche,' 'keineswegs und in keiner Rücksicht als ein thätiges Hervorbringen der Vorstellung' (sec. 6, ix). When we do experience cognitive freedom it is largely associated with the capacity for synthesis. The imagination is of course celebrated for its freedom, but I also experience my freedom to combine when I assemble a proof or theory. The freedom is normatively constrained, to be sure -- were it not it could not amount to cognitive consciousness. But in this very sensitivity to normative constraint I am aware of myself as the agent and not simply the site of theoretical representation.

In all these manifestations of cognitive freedom, however, the experienced freedom is at root a capacity for self-determination -- a doing unto self, rather than a doing unto others. I

effectively determine my own representational state: I judge this rather than that, I imagine you rather than them, I explore hypothesis x rather than hypothesis y. In such cases I am aware of myself as a determinant of change, but the change I effect is a change in myself rather than a change in the world I represent. In order to experience myself as an agent for change in the *represented* world a further condition must be met: the will must become an objective causal force, ‘eine wirkliche Kausalität’ (sec. 9, xvi).

It is on this basis that Fichte proposes his celebrated ‘deduction of the body’:

Nun aber soll\* *ich* auf den schon oben seiner Entstehung nach beschriebenen Stoff *wirken*. Aber es ist mir unmöglich eine Wirkung auf ihn zu denken, außer durch das, was selbst Stoff ist. Wie ich mich daher, wie ich muß, wirkend denke auf ihn, werde ich mir selbst zu Stoff; und inwiefern ich so mich erblicke nenne ich mich einen *materiellen Leib*. (sec. 8, xv)

Now however I am supposed to be effective upon [work on] the matter whose origin has been described above. But it is impossible for me to think of being effective on it, except by means of something that is itself matter. Accordingly, insofar as I think of myself, as I must, as effectively thinking of it, I myself become matter; and insofar as I view myself in this way I call myself a material body.

For Fichte, what is original in our subjectivity is activity [Thätigkeit]; we discover that activity in effective agency. In this sense the will is the original self-manifestation. But we can experience the agency of that will only in its engagement with something fundamentally other -- a sensible material world that is there without my doing. To represent myself as a causal force in that world is to represent my agency as a part of it; this, for Fichte, is the phenomenological structure of our embodiment: the body is the point of subject-object unity in agency.

Ich, als Princip einer Wirksamkeit in der Körperwelt angeschaut, bin ein articulirter Leib; und die Vorstellung meines Leibes selbst ist nicht anderes, denn die Vorstellung meiner selbst, als Ursache in der Körperwelt, mithin mittelbar nichts anderes, als eine gewisse Ansicht meiner absoluten Thätigkeit. (sec. 8, xv)

I, viewed as a principle of efficacy in the corporeal world, am an articulated body, and the representation of my body is itself nothing other than the representation of myself as a cause in the corporeal world, hence mediately nothing other than a particular view of my absolute activity.

The body is part of the objective world, which is itself the domain of my activity. But it is also the fundamental manifestation of my freedom. For Fichte, the mind-body problem is much rather the will-body problem, and the point of unity comes in action.

#### 4 SOLL\*

Among the many philosophical and interpretative problems raised by Fichte's analysis, two in particular merit comment, particularly in connection with Fichte's proposal to build an ethics on these foundations. The first concerns Fichte's characteristic crescendo in the final paragraph of the Introduction, pronouncing the active I to be the one pure truth.

Das Resultat derselben ist kürzlich folgendes. Das einzige absolute, worauf alles Bewußtseyn, und alles Seyn sich gründet, ist reine Thätigkeit. [...] Das einige rein wahre ist meine Selbstständigkeit. (sec. 9, xvii-xviii)

The result, in short, is as follows: The only absolute, on which all consciousness and all being is grounded, is pure activity. ... The one pure truth is my independence.<sup>c</sup>

This is hardly the sort of pronouncement that one expects to find at the outset of a book of ethics; indeed it sounds much rather like an articulation of the metaphysics of megalomania. (Napoleon and Fichte were almost exact contemporaries, and both short.) I have argued here that Fichte proposes these results as principles of transcendental phenomenology, as articulations of fundamental structural features and conditions of our experience of effective agency in a sensible world. Fichte's, 'es giebt kein Seyn außer vermitteltst des Bewußtseyns' (sec. 5, vii) is thus best approached by way of its passive transformation: except in consciousness, kein Sein ist gegeben.

The best textual evidence for this lies immediately between the two lightning rod claims just cited:

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<sup>c</sup> [[Translation issues here: about einige, about selbstständigkeit -- self-standing, self-sufficiency? autonomy?]]

Diese erscheint, zufolge der Gesetze des Bewußtseyns, und insbesondere zufolge seines Grundgesetzes, daß das thätige nur als vereinigt Subject, und Object, (als Ich) erblickt werden kann, als *Wirksamkeit auf etwas außer mir*. Alles, was in dieser Erscheinung enthalten ist, von dem mir absolut durch mich selbst gesetzten Zwecke an, an dem einen Ende, bis zum rohen Stoffe der Welt, an dem andern, sind vermittelnde Glieder der Erscheinung, sonach selbst auch nur Erscheinungen. (sec. 9, xvii-xviii)

In accordance with the laws of consciousness, and in particular in accordance its fundamental law -- that the active can only be viewed as a united subject and object (as an I), this only absolute appears *as efficacy on something outside of me*. Everything which is included within this appearance -- everything from the ends absolutely posited by me for myself at one extreme to the raw matter of the world at the other -- are mediating parts of the appearance, and accordingly are themselves only appearances. <sup>d</sup>

Fichte's central result is a principle of transcendental phenomenology, formulated here as a 'Gesetz des Bewußtseyns': the ultimately active element in subjectivity can only be glimpsed where my effective agency is exercised on something independent of me. As we have seen, Fichte argues that there must be an immediately self-relating subject at work in all consciousness, but that this fundamental unity can only make its appearance in consciousness ('nur [...] erblickt werden kann') as free effective agency in an independent world. By contrast to the 'rein wahre' of subject-object unity, everything else is 'nur Erscheinung.' But 'Erscheinung' does not here mean Schein or Täuschung. To call my effective embodied agency *Erscheinung* is to say that it is the appearance or manifestation of the one thing that is immediate and absolute in subjectivity: self-positing.<sup>5</sup>

The second problem concerns the normativity at work in Fichte's proposed laws of consciousness. If the *Sittenlehre* is to fulfill its promise to provide an ethics 'nach den Principien der Wissenschaftslehre,' then it seems we must find some normativity in or derivable from its basic principles. Presumably we must also find some laws that can be *violated* while still retaining their authority. But it is far from clear that Fichte's 'Grundgesetze des Bewußtseyns'

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<sup>d</sup> [[what is declension and gender of "der Gesetze" here? was 'Gesetz' a feminine noun in 1797?]]

satisfy these conditions. For at root the principles of Fichte's transcendental phenomenology seem to state impossibilities rather than norms. A subject can *never* be self-conscious except in confrontation with something taken to be other. A will *must be* embodied in order to be a ground of change in the world. Such principles seem to express strict necessity rather than normative guidance or constraint.

The problem of extracting ethical content from the fundamental principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is of course the task and challenge of the *Sittenlehre* itself, and is not an issue that can be settled here. However we do now find ourselves in a position to consider one key element of this complex question. As I have marked with the interpolated asterisk (\*), the laws of Fichte's transcendental phenomenology are characteristically formulated as *soll*-claims. In Erkenntnis *soll* das Ich nach dem nicht Ich richten; in Wirkung *soll* ein Seyn aus meinem Zweckbegriff folgen. Ich *soll* auf den Stoff wirken; ich *soll* ein wirkliche Kausalität und körperliche Leib sein. Ich *soll* sei frei. In all of this Fichte exploits the double meaning of 'soll.' To say that some object 'soll unabhängig seyn,' for example, is to say that it is *supposed to be so*, that I *take* the object to be independent; I *assume* it so to be. But 'soll' also has its normative sense. To judge is to treat the object as the Soll for my representation; my representation *ought to be true* to the object it represents. To act is to treat my Zweck as the Soll for the world. If there is megalomania here it is one that lies at the heart of the discovery of agency: to realize my agency is to find the world as a task for *my* determination. We encounter here the form of lawfulness characteristic of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In part it states an impossibility: I cannot come to self-consciousness except in engaged encounter with something that I experience as not-me. Yet it also exposes an inescapable system of normative necessity. The norm of truth

requires the subject to be determined by the object; the norm of freedom requires the world to be determined by me.

For Fichte, the reflective task of philosophy is to articulate this system of necessity:

Die Sittenlehre ist praktische Philosophie. So wie die theoretische Philosophie das System des nothwendigen Denkens, daß unsre Vorstellungen mit einem Seyn übereinstimmen, darzustellen hat; so hat die praktische das System des nothwendigen Denkens, daß mit unsern Vorstellungen ein Seyn übereinstimme, und daraus folge, zu erschöpfen. (sec. 3, iii).

The Sittenlehre is practical philosophy. Just as theoretical philosophy presents the system of necessary thought concerning the correspondence of our representations with a being, so practical philosophy has to exhaust the system of necessity concerning the correspondence of a being with our representations.<sup>e</sup>

We can compare the normativity of such an inquiry with that of logic. The logician articulates a system of necessity: the formal inferential necessity that hold among representations. Our representations do not conform to this inferential necessity mechanically or universally. The necessity figures rather as a necessary norm, a governing ideal, a normative condition on representation harmonizing with its object. The logician expresses explicitly and exactly the content of a norm that every cognizing subject (every judge) must already recognize implicitly and inexactly. The laws of logic are written on man's mind. As with Fichte's laws, there is also often said to be an impossibility at the heart of the system of logical necessity: the impossibility of simultaneously, sincerely, and explicitly affirming both *p* and not-*p*. For Fichte, the possibility of action is rooted in a system of such necessity -- a normative network the recognition of which is constitutive of the possibility of self-conscious agency.

Someone might worry that Fichte's 'soll' is still insufficiently categorical here: I ought to be true *if* I want to know an object; I ought to be free *if I want to act*. But there is no space for

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<sup>e</sup> [[translation question: haben plus infinitive is that imperatival in force?]]

us outside these conditions. To be self-consciously engaged in a world we shape is the inescapable form of our existence; ‘Ich bin’ heißt ‘Ich soll wirken.’

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Grundriß des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre in Rücksicht auf das theoretische Vermögen* (Jena u. Leipzig: Gabler, 1795; 108 pp).

<sup>2</sup> Citations to the Introduction to the *Sittenlehre* are given to the section number and Roman pagination of the first edition (Jena u. Leipzig: Gabler, 1798; xviii + 494 pp). Marks of emphasis in citations are mine, although in places the emphasis coincides with Fichte’s original. The interpolated asterisk (\*) is my own addition, marking for attention Fichte’s use of the verb ‘sollen’ in articulating his basic philosophical principles. I take up the issues raised by Fichte’s ‘soll’ in the final section of these remarks.

<sup>3</sup> By apperceptive self-consciousness I mean the knowledge that the cognitive subject has of its own cognitive stance. In judging that p, the subject knows that it is *judging*, rather than, for instance, *wondering whether p* or *denying that p*. In the *Versuch* Fichte argues that this self-knowledge must be immediate and non-representational, notoriously dubbing it ‘intellectual intuition’ (*Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*, see in particular I, 4, 271-81).

<sup>4</sup> It is the next sentence of this passage that explicitly poses this as *law*: ‘Zuförderst lasse man sich hierbei dies nicht entgehen; daß ein solcher Widerstand erscheint, ist lediglich Resultat der *Gesetze des Bewußtweyns*, und der Widerstand läßt sich daher füglich als ein Product dieser Gesetz betrachten” (sec. 6, ix-x).

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting how these final pronouncements struggle against the limits of grammar.

Fichte calls our activity ultimate and absolute, but he cannot say that it is the ultimate or absolute reality, or entity, or being. For Fichte the I is no thing, and any attempt to nominalize it threatens to reify what cannot be reified. Accordingly Fichte resorts to adjectival phrases robbed of any noun: ‘das einzige absolute,’ ‘das einige rein wahre.’ The adjectives here are inflected so to modify a noun, but there is no noun to modify.

Zu den Autoren:

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