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The Transformation of Kant's Transcendental Idealism: Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre

Kenneth Angwe Agede

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM:

FICHTE'S WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and

Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Kenneth Angwe Agede

December 2009

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Kenneth Angwe Agede

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM:

FICHTE'S *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSFORMATION OF KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM:
FICHTE'S *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

By

Kenneth Angwe Agede

December 2009

Dissertation supervised by Tom Rockmore

This dissertation examines Fichte's original philosophical system, or the *Wissenschaftslehre*, against the background of Kant's transcendental idealism, and was conceived within the framework of restating Kant's critical philosophy. Although Fichte hyperbolically claims that his philosophical view is identical with Kant's transcendental system, the question of his relationship to Kant is a controversial one and continues to generate intense debate in the literature. Some Fichte commentators flatly reject comparisons between the two philosophical positions, claiming that Fichte's system is a variant of Reinhold's, whose *Elementarphilosophie* sought to return Kant to a Cartesian model of mind. Others, however, see striking similarities between the theories of Kant and Fichte. They maintain, though, that Fichte's Kantianism should be qualified: for

although certain aspects of his theory look obviously Kantian, they insist that Fichte's theory is still unique in a variety of ways.

This dissertation argues the thesis that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is identical with and yet different from Kant's theory. To the extent that Fichte rejects a representationalist solution to the problem of knowledge, his position is true to the spirit of Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy. However, to the extent that his method of presentation differs from Kant's, Fichte's view is his own and should be evaluated on its own merit.

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General Introduction

In The Science of Knowledge, Fichte writes:

If people wish to make inquiries concerning such objective validity of thought, or the bond between this object and the subject, I confess that the Science of Knowledge can give no information on this point. Let them set out on their own to discover such a bond, in this way or any other case; until they bethink themselves, perhaps, that this unknown they are in search of is still their own thought and that what they again wish to lay beneath is also merely a thought of theirs, and so on forever; and that they are wholly unable to inquire or to speak about anything, without in fact thinking of it.¹

The above statement constitutes the core principle of Fichte's philosophical position, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, his attempt to establish philosophy as a systematic science, which was formulated within the broader framework of the reconstruction of Kant's critical theory.

Fichte's relationship to Kant can be described as ambivalent. On the one hand, he is attracted to Kant's so-called Copernican revolution in philosophy, especially its emphasis on the primacy of practical reason in the grounding of knowledge. On the other hand, he claims that Kant has failed in his attempt to establish philosophy as a system. Kant's intellectual revolution in philosophy proposes an alternative way of evaluating our cognitive relationship to the world. Unlike the previous intellectual paradigms, he predicates passivity of the cognitive object rather than the subject. By making the subject active vis-à-vis the object of cognition, Kant formulates the problem of knowledge in terms of cognizing the structures of consciousness rather than an autonomous object that could, under the right conditions be fully comprehended in its objective existence.

¹J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*. With First and Second Introductions, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 36.

Although Kant's position is considered an advance on that of his predecessors, Fichte is concerned that the residual dualistic tendencies in Kant's position undermine the revolutionary character of Kant's philosophical view. We may recall that Kant draws a line of demarcation between noumenon and phenomenon. In order to avoid having representation that is uncaused, Kant postulates the domains of appearance and the thing-in-itself. He declares the realm of the former the one of knowledge while insisting that the latter is the sphere of the epistemologically unknown. In Fichte's view, the appearance/things-in-themselves reduces Kant's philosophical theory to a variant of dogmatism. However, unlike Kant's critics who call for abandoning of the critical method, Fichte insists that Kant's position should be restated, not abandoned. Accordingly, he advocates abandoning its letter in order to retain its spirit.

Fichte maintains that the question of the relationship of the subject to the object could be approached from the point of view of either idealism or dogmatism, which Fichte acknowledged as the only possible systems of philosophy. According to Fichte, the sticking point between these two possible philosophical insights, which are necessarily antithetical, concerns how to constitute the ground of philosophy. Fichte indicates that idealism favors the intellect, while dogmatism privileges the thing. Owing to their deep-seated disagreement with regard to the issue of the fundamental ground of system, Fichte claims that neither idealism nor dogmatism can refute the other on its own terms. Fichte is firmly convinced that the person who is appreciative of freedom would choose idealism, while the one who privileges nature over freedom would opt for dogmatism. For electing to evaluate the subject/object relationship from the standpoint of the object, Fichte maintains that dogmatism fails as an epistemological strategy.

For Fichte, since dogmatism fails an epistemological paradigm, we should turn to idealism. Fichte further claims that it is the only possible approach with the capability of resolving the problem of knowledge. Fichte utilizes the resource of the idealistic system of philosophy with the main purpose of overcoming what he considers the pitfalls that characterized Kant's philosophical system. Consistent with his idealistic philosophical program, Fichte derives the object from the subject in the quest for knowledge. With this approach, Fichte makes the subject and the object two sides of one and same reality.

There is a renewal of interest in Fichte's philosophical position. Fichte is an important figure in the modern philosophical period. He inaugurated the post-Kantian German idealism tradition. He also serves as a link between Kant and the later philosophical discussion, especially Hegel. However, the literature tended to reduce him to a mere commentator on Kant. Concerned by what he termed an unfair characterization of Fichte, Dieter Henrich sought to establish Fichte as an original philosophical thinker in his own right. In particular, he was able to show that Fichte's philosophical position constitutes an original contribution to the history of Western philosophy.² Following the example of Henrich, other interpreters of Fichte, including Daniel Breazeale, George di Giovanni, and Henry Harris, have argued that although Fichte's theory bears certain resemblances to Kant's, it should be evaluated on its own merit. Following this example, Tom Rockmore assessed the continuing Fichtean influence on the later philosophical discussion, especially its impact on the philosophical systems of the neo-Hegelians and Marx.

²George J. Seidel, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794: A Commentary on Part 1 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 5–6.

Since the first North American Fichte conference was held on the campus of Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, sixteen years ago, interest in Fichte's philosophical position has more than doubled, as is evidenced by the volume and the sophistication of the debate. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Fichte, such as the social and historical aspects of his thought, have received only scant attention in the literature. Also, Fichte scholarship has gone in different directions as scholars continue to seek a better grasp of the basic principle and significance of his theory.

Although his *Wissenschaftslehre* is one among several theories that emerged in the attempt to revise Kant's transcendental idealism, Fichte asserts that his philosophical position is Kantianism properly stated. Furthermore, he considers himself Kant's legitimate successor. This dissertation will argue that in his early Jena period, Fichte invokes the notion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to develop an idealistic theory of knowledge in which the subject posits its existence absolutely as the subject and object of knowledge. I will interpret his *Wissenschaftslehre* as a theory of knowledge, and argue that Fichte develops a first-person epistemology, which could be viewed as a rejection of the approach of the previous intellectual systems which defined reality in terms of the givenness of the object to the subject. Fichte denies independent reality to the external world, and reduces that external world to an extension of the cognitive subject that makes it possible for the object to exist. My analysis will be based on the early Jena project, especially its 1794/5 formulation. In my opinion, the early Jena period of Fichte's theory is the closest to Kant's view.

This dissertation identifies two approaches to Fichte's theory: foundationalism and antifoundationalism. The former defends the position that Fichte's project of the

Wissenschaftslehre amounts to a search for certainty in philosophy. The latter perspective argues that although philosophy seeks the attainment of certainty, this goal cannot be met in practice. The present inquiry adopts the antifoundationalist rather than the foundationalist perspective in its investigation of Fichte's philosophical view. In particular, I argue a thesis similar to that of Ives Radrizzani. Radrizzani maintains that for Fichte, philosophy grows out of the experiences of life. In particular, he thinks that Fichte's theory was an attempt to come to terms with the events of his day, such as the French revolution, as well as an attempt to shape the reception of those events.

Chapter One

Kant's Transcendental Idealism

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the exposition of Kant's transcendental idealism, with emphasis on its immediate reception, in order to provide the background against which Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* came to be formulated. It has to be stated at the outset that it is not the scope of this chapter to undertake a full-scale reconstruction of Kant's transcendental doctrine; instead, it is intended as a rehearsal of some aspects of his theory, especially his co-called Copernican turn in philosophy, that assist us in understanding the connection between his philosophical position and Fichte's.

Although his original philosophical position was formulated within the wider framework of revising Kant's critical project, Fichte famously claims that his philosophical view is consistent with Kant's transcendental philosophy, further suggesting that his grasp of the master's theory surpasses everyone else's, including that of Kant himself, an assertion that was well received by the young Schelling and Hegel. Hence any investigation of Fichte's philosophical position must begin with an account of Kant's critical philosophical program.

Kant believed that philosophical systems earlier than his own lacked a system, as he understood it. This state of affairs, the lack of systematicity in philosophy, was a matter of concern to Kant. For instance, Kant feared that this situation undermined philosophy's ability to successfully engage the issues with which it was concerned. Most worrisome to Kant was the fact that philosophy's attempts to formulate a credible theory

of knowledge were compromised, casting serious aspersions on the status of philosophy as the “queen of the sciences.” In Kant’s view, the only way forward for philosophy was an intellectual revolution; otherwise it remained an “ocean without banks.”

In what follows, I review the rationalism/empiricism debate, the eighteenth-century intellectual discussion that formed the background to Kant’s critical method. Next, I rehearse Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy. Thereafter I examine the immediate reception of Kant’s critical method. The operative assumption of this chapter is similar to that of Zeman.¹ Zeman quite accurately hypothesizes that Kant’s critical project transforms metaphysics into epistemology by shifting the focus to our intuition of objects in space which are our inventions as opposed to trying to grasp these objects in their objective existence. In this way, Kant substitutes for the previous intellectual paradigms that formulated the problem of knowledge in terms of the subject’s direct and immediate grasp of the object of cognition an alternative way of understanding our cognitive relationship to the world by construing knowledge as the “organization of the mind itself.”

1.1 The Rationalism/Empiricism Debate as the Conceptual Framework for the Emergence of Kant’s Transcendental Idealism

It feels safe to posit that Kant’s critical project, and indeed the German idealism tradition itself, grew out of the rationalism/empiricism debate, the eighteenth-century intellectual discussion concerning the relationship of the cognitive subject to the object

¹Vladimir Zeman, “Between Kant and Hegel: Fichte’s Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge,” in *New Essays in Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (New York: Humanity Books, 2001), 199–200.

it cognizes. Attempts in traditional metaphysics to explain knowledge contributed to the emergence of two influential but incompatible systems of philosophy, rationalism and empiricism. As they rival systems of philosophy, the choice of one was believed to necessarily exclude the other. It was between these two philosophical insights that the student of philosophy had to choose at the time.²

The rationalist philosophical system propagated the doctrine that it is possible to comprehend ultimate reality, such as innate ideas, a belief that partially accounts for its willingness to employ reason beyond common sense.³ Concerned that sensation fails as a reliable source of knowledge, rationalism tended to exclude it from any serious consideration for knowledge. To the rationalist philosopher, the senses lack the capacity to yield real knowledge.

Inspired by the successes of the new sciences, especially mathematics, which it thought capable of yielding objective knowledge, the rationalist approach to philosophy took as the starting point of its philosophical investigation propositions and axioms it believed to be clearly defined and firmly established.⁴ Real knowledge, according to the rationalist philosophical system, is capable of extending beyond sensation. Among the philosophers associated with the rationalist insight are René Descartes (1591–1650), Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).

²Dieter Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures On German Idealism. Edited by David S. Pacini, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 85.

³Georges Dicker, Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Analytic Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

⁴Onora O'Neill, "Vindicating Reason," in The Cambridge Companion to Kant, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 292.

By contrast, the empiricist approach to philosophy objected to the method of the rationalist approach to philosophy. In particular, empiricism rejected the a priori method adopted by rationalism favoring, instead, the a posteriori one. In opposition to rationalism, the empiricist approach to philosophy restricted knowledge to sense perception.⁵ The empiricist philosophical method criticized the mathematical method, claiming that it failed in its effort to provide objective knowledge since all it did was offer a description of ideas. For example, on the basis of its distrust of innate ideas, the empiricist framework rejected arguments meant to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The main proponents of this approach include John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685–1753), and David Hume (1711–1776).

Although rationalism and empiricism both tended to overrate their accomplishments while undermining those of the alternative, Kant quite appropriately dismissed their claims, contending that neither of them had a satisfactory view of knowledge. Accordingly, he invited rationalism and empiricism to confront their assumptions, further inviting them to conceive new ways of evaluating our cognitive relationship to the world. Kant accused both schools of philosophy of distorting the true nature of experience, which they erroneously characterized as a “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*). Following from this mischaracterization, rationalism and empiricism, according to Kant, formulated the problem of knowledge in terms of reason’s ability to comprehend a mind-independent reality that could, under the right conditions be known, as it objectively exists beyond appearance.⁶ From rationalism and empiricism, Kant creates an

⁵Dicker, *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge*, 4.

⁶Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds* (New York: Humanities Press, 1978), 12.

alternative frame of reference that assists him in the formulation of his theory of knowledge.

Kant's model of mind allows both thought and experience to contribute to our theory of knowledge in basically the same way, something rationalism and empiricism tended to reject. By its utter distrust of the senses, Kant argues, rationalism deprives itself of the very subject matter of knowledge, while by its wholesale rejection of innate ideas, Kant contends, empiricism denies itself the concepts with which to explain experience.⁷

If Kant's model of mind offers us an insight into the nature of his relationship with his predecessors, it is that he is simultaneously a friend and a critic of traditional metaphysics. On the one hand, he rejects the claims of traditional metaphysics; on the other hand, he is sympathetic to certain aspects of metaphysical theories and actually weaves them into his own system. It is this ambivalent relationship with his predecessors, even though it looks ordinary today, which constitutes Kant's genius.

Kant's theory is a combination of several factors. He was initially influenced by the Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalist approach to philosophy, and had a genuine commitment to metaphysics as is indicated by the following correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn. In a draft of a letter to Mendelssohn Kant writes:

I am far from regarding metaphysics itself, objectively considered, to be trivial or dispensable; in fact I have been convinced for some time now that I understand its nature and its place in human knowledge and that the true and lasting welfare of the human race depends on it.⁸

⁷Roger Scruton, From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 140-1.

⁸Immanuel Kant, "Draft of a Letter Moses Mendelssohn, April 8, 1766," in Immanuel Kant, Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99, ed. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 55.

Prima facie, the above correspondence seems to be inconsistent with the spirit of Kant's intellectual revolution. However, it has to be indicated that Kant elicits a distinction between what he refers to as bad and good metaphysics. He classifies as bad metaphysics the philosophical view which grants the mind a direct intuition of the object of consciousness. He terms good metaphysics the philosophical doctrine that denies human reason immediate contact with any transcendent reality. While he is opposed to bad metaphysics, Kant is favorably disposed toward good metaphysics. Kant's interest in metaphysics, according to Henrich, makes him akin to Aristotle's. Henrich further contends that Kant's critical theory was meant to resolve the hitherto unresolved problems of metaphysics with the purpose of providing a firm foundation for metaphysics.⁹

Kant was also a product of the Lutheran pietist tradition, a seventeenth-century religious movement that tended to privilege the emotional and the moral over the dogmatic and ritualistic elements of Christianity. The pietist influence may have contributed to Kant's attraction to David Hume, whom he credits with disrupting his dogmatism: "I freely admit that the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy."¹⁰ Although he subscribed to Hume's skeptical philosophy, Kant rejected its conclusions that the

⁹Henrich, *Between Kant to Hegel*, 26–7.

¹⁰Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: With Selections from "The Critique of Pure Reason"*, ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.

principle of causality is the product of habit. For Kant, causality is the product of understanding.¹¹

In regard to Kant's theory, the impact of the Enlightenment tradition cannot be underestimated either. The Enlightenment movement was an eighteenth-century tradition that sought to subordinate everything, including faith and politics, to the authority of reason. As indicated by Cassirer, the Enlightenment scholars were agreed that something common to all should ground knowledge rather than something that was limited in scope.¹² The Enlightenment scholars believed that reason alone had the capability of critiquing itself as well as the notion of external space,¹³ further insisting that any attempt to explain knowledge on the basis of some transcendent reality was doomed to failure.¹⁴

The strategy of making everything answerable to reason marked a significant departure from the approach of the divine epistemological model, which tended to elevate faith over reason. This approach, the scholars argued, encouraged blind obedience to dead dogmas."¹⁵ As far as the Enlightenment scholars were concerned, any action that made an appeal to traditional authority—the dogmatic churches and the hereditary aristocracies of medieval Europe—was considered coerced and, therefore, should be discouraged. They argued that the time had come for the individual to invest in his reason rather than defer to someone else.¹⁶ Figures of the Enlightenment included Robert Boyle (1627–1691), Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715), Isaac Newton (1642–1727), Pierre

¹¹Otfried Höffe, Immanuel Kant, trans. Marshall Farrier (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 19.

¹²Ernest Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, trans., Fritz C. A. Koelln and James Pettegrove, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 6.

¹³Ibid., 5.

¹⁴Solomon, From Rationalism to Existentialism, 12.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶John Herman Randall, Jr., The Career of Philosophy vol 2, From the German Enlightenment to the Age of Darwin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 65.

Bayle (1647–1706), Jean le Rond D’Alembert (1717–1783), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). While the advocates may not have been particularly concerned with the issue of grounding, it could be reasonably inferred that the principles of the tradition shaped Kant’s views in significant ways, and may have contributed to his idea of the ground of system.

Without any question, Kant was concerned about the antinomies or contradictions which are generated when reason is extended beyond its limits. But he may possibly have had other concerns in view. For instance, by the mid eighteenth-century, Aristotelian metaphysics, the dominant philosophical system of seventeenth-century intellectual life in Germany, was beginning to lose its influence, due in part to the challenge posed by the new sciences. In comparison to what was widely believed to be the successes of the new sciences, Aristotelian metaphysics was deemed a failure, due to its inability to say something definitive with regard to the issues with which it was concerned. This development seemed to undermine the reputation of the “concepts and methods of Aristotelianism.”¹⁷ Christian Wolff (1679–1754) sought to facilitate an Aristotelian response by suggesting that metaphysics imitate the sciences, especially mathematics, by taking as its starting point clearly defined principles and concepts, arguing that this was the only approach capable of salvaging the reputation of philosophy.¹⁸

The Wolffian proposal was rejected, however, by the Thomasian tradition, claiming that it posed a serious threat to faith. Contrary to Wolff, members of the Thomasian tradition insisted that the method of philosophy should be empirical and

¹⁷Frederick Beiser, “Kant’s Intellectual Development: 1746–1781,” in The Cambridge Companion to Kant, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27.

¹⁸Manfred Kuehn, “The German *Aufklärung* and British Philosophy,” in British Philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment, Routledge History of Philosophy vol. 5, ed. Stuart Brown (New York: Routledge, 2003), 312.

inductive rather than “mathematical and deductive. They feared that Wolff’s proposal reinforced the Enlightenment’s attempt to subordinate everything, including faith, to the authority of reason. Beiser notes that the Thomasian scholars protested that,

the Enlightenment reign of reason had become the reign of death and denunciation since the mechanistic methods of modern science, and the critical demands of the modern philosophy were leading straight toward atheism, fatalism, and anarchism. The more science advanced, the less room there seemed to be for freedom, and God in the universe; and the more philosophy exercised its critical powers, the less authority could be claimed for the bible and the old proofs of the existence of God, providence, and immortality.¹⁹

Christian Crusius, who became the face of the Thomasian opposition to Wolff, assigned reason only a minimal role in the constitution of reality by contending that human reason alone could not provide a satisfactory account of the world.²⁰

Founded by Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), the Thomasian movement was an anti-intellectual fundamentalist tradition, with ties to Martin Luther and the Reformation, which sought to revise Christianity and faith by focusing on the emotional and the moral rather than the dogmatic and the ritualistic tendencies of faith preferred by the established churches.²¹ Though not a school of philosophy in terms of having a clearly identifiable philosophical position, and probably at its best when attacking someone else’s point of view, the Thomasian movement was associated with a correspondence theory of truth, was favorably disposed toward sensationalism, tended to subordinate the faculty of reason to that of free will, and exhibited the tendency to make philosophy the handmaiden of theology. Followers of Thomasius included Franciscus Büdde (1667–1729), Joachim Lange (1703–1744), Andreas Rüdiger (1673–1731), A. F. Höffmann

¹⁹Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1-2.

²⁰Kuehn, “German Aufklärung and British Philosophy,” 311–12.

²¹Lewis Beck, “From Leibniz to Kant,” in *The Age of German Idealism*, Routledge History of Philosophy vol. 6, ed. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2003), 6.

(1703–1741), Christian August Crusius (1715–1775), and Johann Jacob Brucker (1696–1770).

Like Kant and Fichte, Christian Wolff was influenced by the rationalist system of philosophy. Additionally, he was familiar with the Calvinist, Catholic, and Lutheran religious principles. Although not known as an original thinker, Wolff was a systematic writer, and probably the most important thinker in the period between the death of Leibniz and the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, whose views had a considerable influence on his contemporaries, including Kant's teacher, Martin Knutzen, as well as Moses Mendelssohn, J. H. Lambert, and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten²²

The battle concerning what method should be adopted in examining the relations of faith to reason, which was fought on the campus of the University of Halle, raged well into the late 1740s and the early 1750s, when Kant was beginning a career in academia at the University of Königsberg.²³ The controversy assumed an ugly dimension in 1721 following Wolff's address to the University of Halle, believed by the Thomasian tradition to be confrontational in intent. In an address entitled "On the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese," Wolff made some contentious claims. First, he suggested that reason rather than revelation was the ground of ethics; second, he minimized any serious tension between Christian and Chinese ethics by indicating that there was no fundamental difference between them; third, he rejected the suggestion that religion necessarily grounded ethics; and fourth, he submitted that reason alone was capable of yielding truth. As indicated by Beck, Wolff's position merely rehearsed that of Descartes and Spinoza,

²²Charles Corr, "Christian Wolff," in *Sociology of Knowledge to Zoroastrianism*, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol. 9 (New York: Routledge, 1998), 777.

²³Beiser, "Kant's Intellectual Development: 1746 - 1781," 27.

who had previously argued that the mind alone could lead to the discovery of indubitable truths.²⁴

Members of the Thomasian tradition regarded Wolff's claims as offensive, and accused him of provocation. More precisely, they construed Wolff's action as a flagrant exhibition of atheism and fatalism. Consequently, the pietist scholars masterminded his expulsion from the University of Halle, and further prevailed on Frederick I to banish him from Prussia.²⁵

Thus the challenge confronting any would-be participant in the debate over the relation of faith and reason, including Kant, was similar to the one faced by Wolff: how does one propose and defend a thesis that was rigorous and yet respectful of the sensitivities of the pietist fundamentalist tradition? For Kant, the answer was the transcendental analysis of reason.

1.2. Kant's Copernican Revolution in Philosophy

For Kant, the successes of the sciences, on the one hand, and the inability of metaphysics, on the other, to achieve consensus regarding the method of philosophy, which came to portray philosophy in bad light, underscored the need for a revolution in philosophy. This realization puts Kant on the same intellectual level as other intellectual greats such as Bacon, Galileo, Torricelli, and Stahl, themselves revolutionaries in their own right. These greats had earlier launched a conceptual revolution to salvage the reputation of their respective specialties by suggesting alternative but compelling ways of

²⁴Beck, "From Leibniz to Kant," 10.

²⁵Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 545.

viewing our relationship to nature. For instance, Galileo and Torricelli rightly understood that in order for physics to make progress, it had to abandon the idea of the scientist as a passive observer of phenomena in favor of a model that made it possible for the scientist to compel nature to respond to his specific questions on the basis of certain a priori criteria or principles.²⁶

Kant seemingly learned an important lesson from the new sciences, namely, that a priori knowledge of objects is crucial for the formulation of a credible theory of knowledge. Accordingly, he appropriated the revolutionary strategy in his quest to overcome what he considered the scandal confronting metaphysics. Kant utilized the resource of intellectual revolution to change the philosophical discussion, moving the epistemological discussion beyond reason's ability to grasp ultimate reality to focus, instead, on the examination of the capacities of reason: "What and how much can the understanding know apart from all experience?"²⁷

Kant distinguishes his intellectual revolution from the previous ones by conceding that human reason is limited. However, he argues that the resolution of the problem of philosophy is contingent upon adopting reason as its highest principle. In this way, Kant buys into the Cartesian view that philosophy has to begin with self-consciousness. However, unlike Descartes, he does not reduce self-consciousness to the reflection of the ego.²⁸

Surely, the Copernican turn allows Kant the facility to specify the limits of reason in terms of what cognitive claims are possible; devise the means of enabling reason to

²⁶Paul Guyer, Kant and the Claims of Knowledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

²⁷Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), A xvii

²⁸George di Giovanni, "Preface," in Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism, trans. George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), vii.

operate within its parameters, while specifying the antinomies that are generated when thought is forced to transcend its limits;²⁹ and make possible the investigation of the conditions of knowledge.³⁰ While the Copernican turn constitutes a rejection of what Kant considers the inadequacies of his predecessors, it also signals an abandoning of his earlier philosophical position held prior to his critical phase.

With the discovery of a new conceptual platform to rethink epistemology, Kant believes that he has made it possible to eliminate the antinomies that traditional metaphysics had produced. What is more, Kant thinks, he has, through an act of synthesis, reconciled understanding and sensibility by allowing both to contribute to knowledge in basically the same way: “Though all knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.”³¹ Redding sums it up succinctly:

Experience and theory interpenetrate: as each can provide a reason for the revision of the other, neither can play the role of ultimate foundation of the other. Theoretical change may lead us to redescribe our experiences just as new experiences may lead us to new theories.³²

By limiting knowledge to the domain of appearance, and still assigning epistemological function to thought, Kant believes he has proven against Hume that it is possible to have a priori knowledge. Similarly, he claims to have demonstrated against Wolff that knowledge is limited to the sphere of phenomenon.³³

In the Preface to the Second Edition of The Critique of Pure Reason, Kant describes his Copernican revolution in the following way:

²⁹Daniel Bonevac, “Kant’s Copernican Revolution,” in The Age of German Idealism, Routledge History of Philosophy, vol. 6, ed. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2003), 41.

³⁰George di Giovanni, “The Facts of Consciousness,” in Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism, trans. with introductions by George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 3.

³¹CPR, B 1.

³²Paul Redding, Hegel’s Hermeneutics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 7.

³³Edward Caird, The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Part 1 (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1889), 227.

Hitherto, it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the task of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects a priori, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved around the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the intuition of objects. If intuition must conform to the constitution of objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter a priori; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of the faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility.³⁴

By making the subject active vis-à-vis its cognitive object, Kant can be read as claiming that his revolution proceeds along the lines of the hypothesis of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), the Polish astronomer who triggered a new celestial mechanics in the seventeenth century, and which was later developed by Galileo, Kepler, and Newton.

Kant's conceptual revolution entails a couple of things. First, it indicates that Kant makes understanding correlative with sensibility in furnishing the ground of knowledge. Kant insightfully recognizes that the problem of knowledge cannot be resolved in terms of a passive mind being affected by an active world. It should be stated, however, that although Kant understands the cognitive relationship of thought to experience in mutually inclusive rather than exclusive ways, he does not reduce one to the other. Nor does he understand the relationship in question in terms of the relationship between matter and form.³⁵

³⁴CPR, B xvi–xvii.

³⁵Ibid., B xvi.

Second, Kant believes that his Copernican turn constitutes the discovery of a priori conditions that make feasible the unification of practical and theoretical reason.³⁶

Zeman explains it this way:

Proposing formal and not material idealism, Kant sought and believed himself to have identified the universal and necessary principles in question as being primarily the organizational structures of our experience, constitutive principles of the framework of possible experience, and only in a derivative way as characteristics to be ascribed to certain statements about the world as it is.³⁷

To be sure, Kant's so-called Copernican turn in philosophy represents a major breakthrough that philosophy, prior to his joining the debate, so desperately needed but that no one was able to provide.

How Copernican is Kant's view? On the one hand, there seems to be agreement in the literature that Kant's Copernican turn bears no resemblance to the view of Copernicus. On the other hand, there is disagreement among Fichte scholars over whether or not the comparison is appropriate. Norman Kemp Smith, who exhibits tendencies of hostility toward the critical system, flatly rejects Kant's Copernicus' analogy, claiming that it is indefensible. By substituting a geocentric framework for a heliocentric one, Smith argues, Copernicus purges astronomy of its anthropological elements. For his part, Kant renders philosophy anthropological by making the object the product of the cognitive subject. For Smith, Hume's theory rather than Kant's is Copernican. Kant's theory, on the contrary, due to its humanistic tendencies, is more akin to Greek thought than the thought of Copernicus.³⁸

³⁶Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel, 19–21.

³⁷Zeman, "Between Kant and Hegel," 215.

³⁸Norman Kemp Smith, A Commentary to "Kant's Critique of Pure Reason" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 22-3.

Ewing argues that Kant's Copernican comparison is warranted even as he concedes that the two positions are not alike. If I am right, unlike Smith, whose analysis is driven by concerns of whether or not Kant's views reflect an understanding of Copernicus, Ewing bases his comments on the impact the analogy in question has had on the entire philosophical enterprise. So long as Kant's critical system transforms philosophy the way Copernicus transformed astronomy, Ewing rightly maintains that the comparison is warranted.³⁹ Since the inauguration of his Copernican turn in philosophy, Kant's influence has shaped the philosophical thinking for several centuries, so much so that it has been almost impossible to do philosophy without Kant.⁴⁰ Popper agrees with Ewing:

Even those who, like myself, cannot follow Kant all the way can accept his view that the experimenter must not wait till it pleases nature to reveal its secrets, but that he must question her. He must cross-examine nature in the light of his doubts, his conjectures, his theories, and his inspirations. Here is a wonderful philosophical find. It makes it possible to look upon science, whether theoretical or experimental, as a human creation, and to look upon its history as part of the history of ideas, on a level with the history of art or literature.⁴¹

Popper further holds Kant's Copernican revolution significant not only for philosophy but for the whole of science. According to him, by having the subject contribute to the object of knowledge, Kant resolves the problem Copernicus created by denying the human person his rightful place in the world.

Without specifically getting into issues of whether or not Kant's analogy shows an accurate understanding of Copernicus, I agree with Ewing and Popper that Kant inaugurates a movement within philosophy that makes possible the unification of

³⁹A. C. Ewing, A Short Commentary on "Kant's Critique of Pure Reason" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 16.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 181.

practical and theoretical reason, viewed from the point of view of practical thought. To be sure, this view is revolutionary in light of the fact that no intellectual tradition was able to achieve this prior to Kant. Additionally, this “changed point of view” (*Umänderung der Denkart*) has gone on to inspire new philosophical positions, such as post-Kantian German idealism and analytic philosophy. We will next consider the epistemological import of Kant’s intellectual revolution.

1.3. The Epistemological Import of Kant’s Copernican Turn

The question could be raised: What is the epistemological import of the Copernican revolution in philosophy? This question could be approached from a variety of perspectives. For present purposes, I will review two insights that I am designating the constructivist and the systematic. The constructivist perspective equates the Copernican revolution with attempts by Kant to proffer a constructivist solution to the problem of knowledge. By this is meant that Kant sees the subject as contributing to or shaping the object it knows. For its part, the systematic perspective claims that Kant is interested in the discovery of indubitable truth.

In a series of essays, Tom Rockmore offers a constructivist interpretation to Kant’s project of the critique of pure reason. In particular, he thinks it is actually an attempt by Kant to assess the extent to which representation (*Vorstellung*) represents. According to Rockmore, though Kant initially formulates the problem of knowledge in terms of representation, he later rejects a representationalist solution. Rockmore calls attention to the Kantian dualism, which splits the world into the domains of appearance and things in their objective existence, locating knowledge in the sphere of the former

while denying the same to the latter. By electing to evaluate the subject/object relationship from the point of view of the subject, and further denying reason access to things-in-themselves, Rockmore explains that Kant privileges a constructivist solution to the question of knowledge over the representationalist one.⁴²

On the contrary, the systematic perspective construes the Copernican turn as the search for indubitable truth. For instance, Peter Jonkers, who thinks Kant thought the attainment of truth possible, cautions against overstressing the constructivist argument, reminding us that even though Kant reverses the positions of the subject and the object in an attempt to ground knowledge, he still holds onto a conceptual notion of subjectivity. Therefore, according to Jonkers, subjectivity fulfills the role of an abstract epistemological principle, with attendant implications for what it means for any rational being to know as opposed to what a finite human being is actually capable of knowing. Jonkers, who tries to understand Kant's Copernican turn from the point of view of the Enlightenment. Jonkers conjectures that Kant's principle of abstract subjectivity may have contributed to his conception of the categories of the understanding in universal terms. As long as the status of the Kantian subject that constructs its object remains conceptual, Jonkers maintains, it is possible, on Kant's view, to "realize" objective knowledge.⁴³

The present inquiry comes down on the side of the constructivist insight in this debate, for it is the position that enables me to establish a link between Kant and Fichte's position. But even more importantly, Kant is an important thinker in the history of

⁴²Tom Rockmore, "Remarks on the Structure of Twentieth century Philosophy," *Ars Disputandi*; available from <http://www.ArsDisputandi.org/>; Internet.

⁴³Peters Jonkers, "Perspectives on Twentieth Century Philosophy: A Reply to Rockmore," *Ars Disputandi*; available from <http://www.ArsDisputandi.org/>; Internet.

Western philosophy. And if the Copernican turn represents his greatest contribution to philosophy, then such a contribution has to be something other than a mere restatement of the views of traditional metaphysics. Specifically, if he rejects a representationalist solution to the problem of knowledge, as is indeed the case, then the Copernican turn could be construed as an indictment of his predecessors for making thought conform to external standards. Knowledge on Kant's account then is mediated rather than immediate. This means that to know, in Kant's view, is to know the contents of our mind or consciousness, the condition of the possibility of knowledge whatsoever, and truth becomes the function of our epistemological practice.

Although I side with the constructivist perspective, that is, I argue that Kant proposes a constructivist solution to the question of knowledge by making reason contribute to its object, I am not oblivious to Jonkers's point of view. Jonkers reminds the reader that Kant aimed to formulate a theory with universal implications, namely, what it means for a rational being to have knowledge, and, hence retained the concept of logical subjectivity. However, I am equally aware of the fact that the idea of finite subjectivity that constitutes one of the hallmarks of post-Kantian German idealism was inspired by Kant's transcendental project, although Kant himself does not provide any. Apparently, Kant completed The Critique of Pure Reason, his major piece on the critical theory before the French Revolution altered our way of understanding the nature of the external world, especially as it relates to us as an object of cognition. Quite understandably, he was not able to incorporate its lessons in his system. One of the consequences of the French Revolution was that it underscored the freedom of the individual human being in the constitution of phenomenon. It challenged our traditional understanding of causality.

The notion of finite subjectivity, suggested by Kant, begins with Fichte and finds its highest expression in Hegel, and continues to inspire a historical approach to the problem of knowledge even today.

Let me take the liberty to reiterate that Kant's intellectual revolution represents a major paradigm shift in philosophy, a paradigm shift that casts the thought/experience relationship debate in new light, charting a new course for philosophy. By putting the active subject at the center of everything, Kant frees the intellectual subject from the inhibitions previously placed on it by traditional metaphysics. By acknowledging the role of the subject in the constitution of phenomena Kant wishes to prove that only by creative activity is scientific knowledge possible.

A couple of comments may be appropriate. First, it may be worthwhile distinguishing between Kant's system and the previous attempts to establish philosophy as a systematic science, since it shares striking similarities with a few, for instance, the position of John Locke, who had tried to create boundaries for reason in an act of reflective self-criticism. Even though complimentary of Locke's efforts to unify reason, Kant blames Locke's physiological approach for his failure to produce the intended outcome.⁴⁴ Kant contends that Locke failed because he did not utilize the critical method. Bonevac argues that Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy constitutes his most important contribution to the history of philosophy. Without that turn his theory merely mimics those of his predecessors. He further maintains that Kant distinguishes his theory from the previous intellectual traditions by standing his system on a different ground on the basis of which he is able to specify what the mind is capable of comprehending. According to Bonevac, by designating his theory transcendental, Fichte alludes to the

⁴⁴CPR, A xi.

focused nature of his approach as opposed to the general format adopted by his predecessors.⁴⁵

Second, although Kant opts for synthesis of cognition and sensibility rather than the either/or approach of traditional metaphysics, one would be doing him a great disservice by reducing his theory to a mere synthesis of concept and thought. It is emphatically the case that in the critical project, rationalism and empiricism acquire new significations, which is suggested by the very term critical, including Kant's insistence that the cognition of any object not given in cognition is impossible.

1.3.1 The Thing-in-itself and the Problem of Affection in Kant's Critical

Philosophy

Before I turn attention to the immediate reception of Kant's transcendental philosophy, let me pause to look at the problem of dualism in Kant's philosophical thought. The problem of affection is the one aspect of Kant's theory that shapes the reception of his system. In a manner that seemingly undermines the revolutionary character of his theory, which dissolves the dichotomy between understanding and sensibility, Kant entertains a split between noumena and phenomena. He writes:

...that space and time are only forms of sensible intuition, and so only conditions of the existence of things as appearances: that, moreover, we have no concepts of understanding and consequently no elements for the knowledge of things, save in so far as intuition can be given corresponding to these concepts; and that we can therefore have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is appearance.... But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Bonevac, "Kant's Copernican Revolution," 41.

⁴⁶CPR, B xxv-xxvi.

Kant wants to avoid having to provide an account of uncaused representation. But it also enables him to restrict knowledge to the objects that are given in appearance.

By adopting a two-tiered world structure, Kant seems to follow the example of Plato, who postulates the world of the Forms and the world of appearance, the mirror image of the Forms. While Plato grants the person of nature and nurture access to the sphere of the Forms, Kant takes his dualism in a different direction and makes the world of things-in-themselves inaccessible to reason.⁴⁷ For Kant, there is no way to ascertain whether the phenomenal world truly corresponds to one that exists independently of us.

But it is enunciating the exact nature or the extent of the relationship between noumena and phenomena that creates problems for Kant. In this regard, Kant merely stutters and contradicts himself. For example, by limiting knowledge to the object of sensation, Kant indicates that the categories of the understanding are applicable only to the objects of appearance. However, Kant violates this cardinal principle of his critical project by suggesting that the categories of the understanding may be employed beyond phenomena. He asserts:

It would seem to follow that we cannot assert, what we have hitherto maintained, that the pure modes of knowledge yielded by our understanding are never anything more than principles of exposition of appearance, and that even in their a priori application they relate only to the formal possibility of experience. On the contrary, we should have to recognize that in addition to the empirical employment of the categories, which is limited to sensible conditions, there is likewise a pure and yet objectively valid employment. For a field quite different from that of senses would lie open to us, a world which is thought as it were in the spirit.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., A 379.

⁴⁸Ibid., A 250.

To Kant's readers, this sends mixed messages. I think the point at issue, as I understand it, relates to what Kant considers to be the relationship of noumena to phenomena. While one school of thought sees Kant to be suggesting a causal relationship between the two, another school of thought brings what has come to be known as the double aspect perspective to Kant's view.

Ewing argues that Kant postulates the thing-in-itself in order to be able to provide an account of what he calls the given element of our experience. Since we are thrown into a world we merely discover but do not create, Kant may have intended his dualism, especially his idea of things-in-themselves, according to Ewing, to explain the origin of our empirical experiences by conceding that there is a mind-independent world that affects the mind. For Ewing and, perhaps, others favoring a semi causal interpretation of Kant, this has to be the case, otherwise there will be nothing to cause representation, thereby reducing consciousness to self-consciousness. But Ewing is equally cognizant of the problem this creates for Kant, and indicates that in order to refute dogmatism Kant was willing to embrace principles that were clearly inconsistent with his overall critical project.

By contrast, another school of thought adopts what is often called the double aspect interpretation to the Kantian noumena/phenomena distinction, viewing the dualism as the consideration of the same thing as is given in experience and as it is in itself.⁴⁹ For example, Henry Allison hypothesizes that the consideration of the object as it appears is the consideration of the object of knowledge relative to its being presented to the mind in intuition, while to consider an object as it is in itself is, according to Allison, to consider

⁴⁹Henry Allison, Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 241

the object without reference to any sensible conditions. The thrust of the double aspect approach is that phenomena and noumena are correlative concepts, and merely represent two aspects of the same reality.

According to Allison, while Kant limits knowledge to the realm of appearance, he still leaves open the possibility that in transcendental reflection one could have knowledge of how objects must be constituted as they are in themselves.

Unlike Ewing, Allison does not think that this doctrine impacts Kant's overall philosophical position in a negative way. He argues that as long as the noumena/phenomena dichotomy makes it possible for Kant to specify what must be presupposed, in order for us to think or imagine things independently of all human experience in their a priori status, then the dualism in question, according to Allison, does not undermine the revolutionary character of Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy.⁵⁰

Both Ewing and Allison agree, however, that this indicates that even at the time he was working out the details of his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant was already looking ahead to The Critique of Judgment, and The Critique of Practical Reason, respectively. Implicit in this observation by Ewing and Allison is the idea that Kant needs a two-tiered world structure in order to be able to argue for the existence of God, freedom, and immortality of the soul. Additionally, both are open to the possibility that this aspect of Kant's theory rightly belongs to his moral rather than his theoretical philosophy.

It is my view, though, that there is textual support for both positions. There is textual evidence to warrant a causal interpretation of Kant (for example, p. 28), see also the following passage that renders his theory susceptible to a double aspect interpretation:

The transcendental Aesthetic, in all its teaching, has led to this conclusion; and

⁵⁰Ibid.

the same conclusion also, of course, follows from the concept of an appearance in general; namely, that something which is not in itself appearance must correspond to it. For appearance can be nothing by itself, outside our mode of representation. Unless, therefore, we are to move constantly in a circle, the word appearance must be recognized as already indicating a relation to something, the immediate representation of which is, indeed sensible, but which even apart from the constitution of our sensibility (upon which the form of our intuition must be grounded), must be something in itself, that is, an object independent of sensibility.⁵¹

In the former case, Kant does not only postulate noumena, he states that without things-in-themselves there will be nothing to cause representation. While in the latter case, he seems to downplay any serious causal relationship between things-in-themselves and appearance, maintaining that, depending on the occasion, things-in-themselves may also assume the identity of appearance.

As noted above, Kant struggles with the characterization of the relationship of noumenon to phenomenon. On the one hand, he postulates an independent world in order to avoid reducing consciousness to self-consciousness, and, consequently, escape the charge that his theory is a variant of solipsism. On the other hand, he seems to blur the cognition/sensibility distinction, describing their relationship in semantic terms. To be sure the noumena/phenomena dichotomy creates problems for Kant's theory, and, as we will see shortly it is the first aspect of his theory to be abandoned by his critics and followers alike. We will next examine the reception of Kant's Copernican turn.

1.4. The Immediate Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy

Kant's philosophy generated a wide range of reaction, ranging from outright rejection to endorsement. Evidently, his contemporaries struggled with his enunciation of the relationship of the subject to the cognitive object. In addition, they expressed

⁵¹Ibid., A 251-2.

frustration with the language and phraseology of the critical system, given the fact that even traditional philosophical concepts were assigned new significations by Kant's critical method. For instance, for Kant, there exists a difference between transcendence and transcendental. While the former connotes something beyond sensation, the latter implies, in the context of his epistemology, the condition of the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. As could be seen in his correspondence with Christian Garve, Kant did not feign ignorance about the sentiments of frustration occasioned by his theory. In the letter in question, Kant writes:

I must admit that I have not counted on an immediately favorable reception of my work. That could not be, since the expression of my ideas—ideas that I have been working out painstakingly for twelve years in succession—was not worked out sufficiently to be generally understandable. ...people will get over the initial numbness caused unavoidably by a mass of unfamiliar concepts and even more unfamiliar language.⁵²

Kant's critics and followers alike were concerned about the opaque nature of his system, including Moses Mendelssohn and Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Kant thought that Mendelssohn would be the one to explain his system to the public. Even today, Kant's system continues to present a challenge to commentators.

More specifically, one school of thought dismissed the critical project as failing to live up to its promise. Those who exhibited this attitude of hostility toward the critical theory included Georg Hermann (1730–1788), Friederich Henrich Jacobi (1743–1819), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). As far as they were concerned, like the previous attempts to unify thought, Kant's system had proven incapable of yielding conclusive results. In addition, they viewed Kant's claim to have resolved the problem of knowledge to the satisfaction of all a serious scandal.

⁵²Kant, "Draft of a Letter to Christian Garve, August 7, 1783," 100.

However, another school of thought developed a favorable attitude toward the critical system, and was committed to carrying it forward not abandoning it. Those who adopted a sympathetic approach to the critical method were Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1757–1823), Johann Gotlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friederich Wilhelm Schelling (1775–1854), and Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831). Unlike Hermann, Herder and Jacobi, who were dismissive of the critical philosophy, the followers of Kant, while they conceded that Kant had done a poor job of communicating his theory to the public, argued that the letter of his theory should be abandoned in order to save its spirit. In the next section, I will review the reactions, of Jacobi and Reinhold. While the former is critical of Kant’s efforts, the latter is supportive.

1.4.1 Friederich Henrich Jacobi

Jacobi was one of the early critics of the critical philosophy. Jacobi’s attack on Kant was an unintended consequence of his involvement in the Spinozism controversy. In his correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn, Jacobi alleged that the late poet and critic Gotthold Lessing had privately confessed to Spinozism, a charge Mendelssohn denied.⁵³ During the latter part of the eighteenth century, Spinozism came to symbolize atheism. Spinoza was alleged to have eliminated the concept of a personal God by equating God with the one substance of the world.⁵⁴

Mendelssohn vehemently denied this charge, claiming that Jacobi’s comments about his late friend were borne out of a misunderstanding and constituted a

⁵³Paul Franks, “All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold and Maimon,” in The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.

⁵⁴Terry Pinkard, German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93.

misrepresentation of Lessing's views. If Pinkard is right, Jacobi's comments were nothing but a stunt meant to embarrass Mendelssohn, who was contemplating a tribute to his late friend.⁵⁵ Kant, whose support Jacobi sought in his disagreement with Mendelssohn, elected to remain neutral. Apparently disappointed by Kant's neutrality Jacobi launched an attack on the critical philosophy.⁵⁶

Jacobi rejected the very idea of a transcendental analysis of reason, contending that it was inconsistent with the notion of systematicity. Not only was the Critique of Pure Reason incompatible with the idea of system, argued Jacobi, it also produced "absurdities."⁵⁷ In particular, Jacobi rejected Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself, accusing him of employing the noumena/phenomena dualism in order to escape the charge of solipsism. He criticized Kant's postulation of an active subject that shapes or fashions the object of knowledge. He argues that this move slides the critical philosophy into solipsism. As long as to know, in Kant's view, is to know the contents of our mind or the structures of consciousness, Jacobi maintained, his theory is a form of solipsism.

For Jacobi, neither appearance nor the thing-in-itself is the ground of representation. If Kant continued to hold that objects of sensation are appearances, not things-in-themselves, Jacobi noted that they could not be the cause of sensation. Furthermore, Jacobi contends that things-in-themselves cannot be the cause of representation either, since they are unknowable on Kant's terms. Either way, Jacobi maintains that Kant's theory leads to skepticism. And if this is the case, then his claims to have refuted Hume cannot be substantiated.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Beiser, The Fate of Reason, 122.

⁵⁷Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel, 116.

1.4.2 Karl Leonhard Reinhold

Reinhold's relationship to Kant is a reflection of the relationship of Kant to the post-Kantian German idealist movement as a whole, which was by all intents and purposes ambivalent, depending on what stage of German idealism is being considered. Horstmann observes that in the aftermath of the inauguration of the critical system, the post-Kantian German idealists were attracted to the critical system and considered themselves Kantians. In the wake of the publication of *Aenesidemus*, they became his critics, joining issues with the presentation of Kant's theory. They were concerned that Kant's presentation left much to be desired. In undertaking to reconstruct the critical philosophy, according to Horstmann, they were post-Kantian German idealists. Distinguishing between the letter and the spirit of Kant's view, the post-Kantian German idealists maintained that the spirit (*Geist*) of Kant's system was firmly established, while its letter (*Buchstabe*) remained suspect.⁵⁸

Though little known in the Western philosophical tradition, Reinhold is an important figure in the modern philosophical tradition. He provides the link between Kant and the subsequent philosophical discussion. In particular, he defines the character that would be assumed by post-Kantian German idealism.

The former Catholic priest fled his native of Austria for Germany in 1783, where he converted to Protestantism. Upon arrival, Reinhold acquired membership in the Weimar circle whose membership also included Goethe, Wieland, and Herder. One of the highlights of his association with this group is his siding with Herder in Herder's dispute with Kant. Kant criticized Herder's system as lacking rigor and precision, especially his

⁵⁸Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling," in The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117.

attempt to derive concepts from experience. Reinhold rose to the defense of Herder against what he considered an unfair attack by Kant. Reinhold held Kant's comments to be misguided, accusing him of employing a priori criteria in his evaluation of Herder. Reinhold argued that Kant seemed oblivious to the fact that Herder utilized the empirical method in his evaluation of history, a fluid phenomenon, and therefore, it was unfair to expect Herder to satisfy the requirements of rigor and precision. While a priori proofs were necessary in metaphysics, maintained Reinhold, they were not necessary for the analysis of history.⁵⁹ Reinhold later abandoned the Weimar circle for the critical philosophy.

Reinhold's conversion to Kantianism occurred in the autumn of 1785 following his reading of The Critique of Pure Reason. The appeal of Kant's first Critique to Reinhold was immediate and decisive; at once it dissolved the perceived tension between faith and reason.⁶⁰ On the one hand, Reinhold subscribed to Kant's transcendental method; on the other hand, he entertained misgivings about its presentation. Like other philosophers of the post-Kantian German idealism persuasion, he was concerned that despite Kant's claim to have brought systematicity to philosophy, establishing it as a science, there was little evidence to suggest that he had actually done so. Reinhold feared that Kant's system, as presented, was susceptible to a psychological interpretation.⁶¹ Hence, he embarked upon its revision in order to rid it of what he believed were its ambiguities. With this self-imposed assignment, Reinhold assumed the role of expositor of Kant.

⁵⁹Beiser, The Fate of Reason, 229.

⁶⁰Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel, 97.

⁶¹Franks, "All or Nothing," 95.

Reinhold's explication of Kantianism was contained in his Letters on the Kantian Philosophy (*Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*). In this piece, he made the bold claim that Kant had purged philosophy of the pretensions of traditional metaphysics, a claim that was momentarily well received, especially by the followers of Kant. Reinhold claimed that Jacobi's attack on Kant was unjustified and grew out of a misreading of Kant. Impressed by Reinhold's effort, which he endorsed, Kant thanked him for making the critical system available to the public in a simplified version.

Based on his newfound reputation as the author of Kantian letters, Reinhold was appointed to the chair of philosophy at the University of Jena, a position he used in propagating the tenets of the critical philosophy. Also, he was appointed coeditor of the journal *Der Teutsche Merkur*, as well as reviewer of *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, a Jena-based journal of literature edited by Gottlieb Schutz, the professor of rhetoric at the University of Jena.

The underlying assumption driving Reinhold's reconstruction of the critical philosophy is that systematicity is coimplicatory with the identification of a self-evident principle (*Grundsatz*) of philosophy, from which to deduce the entire philosophical inquiry, including Kant's system. Reinhold believed that the first principle in question was presupposed by all other philosophical principles, including the facts of consciousness and the faculties of the mind that formed the ground of Kant's system. For Reinhold, this approach transforms Kant's system into a first philosophy, the *Elementarphilosophie*. Ostensibly, Reinhold seeks to recast the critical philosophy to fit the Cartesian ideal.

Reinhold calls the first principle of his system the principle of consciousness (*Satz des Bewusstseins*), which he formulates as follows: “Representation is distinguished in consciousness by the subject from the subject and the object, and is referred to both.” Implicit in this formulation is the idea that a theory of consciousness distinguishes the subject from its object but also the representation, which the subject distinguishes from both itself and the object. Similarly, the theory relates the representation to both the subject and the object.⁶²

To be sure, Reinhold’s original intent has changed. Although his stated objective was the revision of the critical method, his strategy clearly shows an abandoning of his master’s transcendental analysis of reason for an examination of the possibility of representation. What is more, he substitutes Kant’s analytic-deductive method for a synthetic-deductive one. Ameriks remarks that Reinhold’s reduction of consciousness to representation may have been caused by his association with Leibniz, whose student he reportedly was at some point.⁶³

Reinhold’s theory remained a system in evolution. Although he initially claimed to have facilitated the critical principle in fulfilling the requirement of systematicity, Reinhold later abandoned his *Elementarphilosophie* for Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, a theory he partially inspired. After a brief stint with Fichte, he switched to the theory of Jacobi before finally becoming a disciple of Bardili.⁶⁴

⁶²Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 70–1.

⁶³Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111.

⁶⁴Tom Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel’s Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 22.

A couple of comments may suffice. First, Reinhold's exposition of the critical project popularized Kant's system by restating it in the language of the Enlightenment, an exposition that determined the manner and approach of post-Kantian German idealism. For example, while it is true that it was Kant's reconciliation of thought and experience that propelled Fichte toward the critical method, it could be reasonably inferred that it was Kantianism as passed on by Reinhold that contributed to the emergence of Fichte's original philosophical position. Second, it was Reinhold's formulation of the critical system that caught the attention of Schulze the skeptic, and which triggered Schulze's skeptical assault on the critical system.

Suffice it to say that Kant's critical system and, indeed the German idealism tradition, continues to generate intense and interesting debate even in contemporary philosophical discussions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the exchange between analytic philosophy and its Continental counterpart. Analytic philosophy charges that the contribution of idealism to the history of Western philosophy is exaggerated.

Analytic philosophy is a movement that began at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge with the main aim of undermining the principles of transcendental idealism, especially in its Kantian and Hegelian formulations. Analytic philosophy takes issue with the fact that transcendental idealism dissolved the tension between subjectivity and objectivity. The leaders of this so-called rebellion were (Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958). As reported by Moser Russell proudly identifies with this effort:

It was toward the end of 1898 that Moore and I rebelled against both Kant and Hegel. Moore led the way, but I followed closely in his footsteps. I think that the first published account of the new philosophy was Moore's article in *Mind* (1899) on the "Nature of Judgment". Although neither he nor I would now adhere

to all the doctrines in this article, I, and I think he, would still agree with its negative impact—i.e., with the doctrine that fact is in general independent of experience.⁶⁵

For his part, G. E. Moore in his essay, “The refutation of Idealism,” argues that throughout history, attempts to make thought and experience contribute to knowledge have been self-contradictory. He writes:

It is a well-known fact in the history of philosophy that necessary truths in general, but especially those of which it is said that the opposite is inconceivable, have been commonly supposed to be analytic, in the sense that the proposition denying them was self-contradictory. It was in this way, commonly supposed, before Kant, that many truths could be proved by the law of contradiction alone.⁶⁶

Moore and Russell reject attempts by transcendental idealism to overcome the dichotomy between the subject and the object.

Fueling this stance of hostility toward idealism is the erroneous but influential view that idealism denies the existence of the external world. It may be recalled that, following Kant, the post-Kantian German idealists dismiss the approach of transcendental realism as incapable of resolving the problem of knowledge. The cause of the critical system has not been enhanced by its opaque character either. Claiming that the contributions of transcendental idealism have been grossly exaggerated, analytic philosophy has sought to return philosophy to its so-called eternal foundations by employing the empiricist approach to philosophy in order to prove the existence of objects in space, with the purpose of undermining the claims of idealism.

Moore, for whom knowledge is not possible outside the framework of the law of contradiction, argues that by making the subject correlative with the object, idealism

⁶⁵Bertrand Russell quoted by Paul Moser, “Common Sense Empiricists: Moore and Russell,” in *Philosophy of Meaning, Knowledge and Value in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge History of Philosophy Series, vol. 10, ed. John Canfield (New York: Routledge, 2003), 197–8.

⁶⁶G. E. Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” in *Philosophical Studies*, ed. C. K. Ogden (Paterson, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co, 1959), 12.

violates an important principle of the law of contradiction.⁶⁷ The law of contradiction states that one cannot be simultaneously asleep and awake. Moore finds idealism guilty of failing to distinguish between, for instance, yellow and the sensation of yellow, insisting that sensation is tied to thought and any suggestion that thought enters the essence of reality should be resisted.

By contrast, Continental philosophy argues that the period between Kant and Hegel represents one of the more productive ones in the history of the Western philosophical tradition, more productive in terms of the adherents and critics it has produced, as well as the quality of debates and philosophical traditions it has inspired, which include analytic philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, etc.⁶⁸

In the wake of Kant's so-called Copernican revolution in philosophy, Continental philosophy does not see how any meaningful philosophical inquiry can ignore the role of the human agent in the search for knowledge. Although it acknowledges that it is impossible to avoid foundations in philosophy, Continental philosophy seeks to convince philosophy to expand its horizon to include the transcendental constitution of the person. The protagonists of this approach include, according to Henrich, Charles Taylor, A. V. Miller, and H. S. Harris.

Conclusion

This chapter examines Kant's transcendental idealism and its immediate reception as a way of gaining access to the thought of Fichte. The genius of Kant consists in his ability to move the epistemological discussion beyond the empiricism/rationalism debate,

⁶⁷Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1006a.

⁶⁸Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, "Introduction," in *The Age of Idealism*, Routledge History of Philosophy, vol. 6, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

thereby setting metaphysics on a new path. Kant proposes a new way of understanding the relationship of the subject to the cognitive object. His strategy makes the object the dependent variable of the subject, which makes it possible for object to exist in the first place. In the critical enterprise, subjectivity and objectivity both contribute to knowledge in the same way. This is the only way forward for metaphysics, according to Kant, if it is to continue to remain relevant to the epistemological debate. Without this approach, Kant fears that metaphysics proves incapable of dealing with the issue of knowledge.

Also, this chapter looks at the reaction generated by Kant's critical theory. While one insight dismisses the critical project as a failure, incapable of yielding conclusive outcomes, another is drawn to it. The former position represents the view of Hermann, Herder, and Jacobi, while the latter is that of the post-Kantian German idealists, such as Reinhold, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. More specifically, this chapter rehearses the reaction of Jacobi and Reinhold.

Chapter Two

The Evolution of Fichte's Original Philosophical Insight: The *Wissenschaftslehre*

Introduction

This chapter will attempt to gain an understanding into Fichte's original philosophical system, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, with a primary focus on his doctrine of positing. Fichte names his original philosophical theory the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a designation he invokes in claiming that his philosophical view is consistent with Kant's transcendental project, as well as claim that his view provides the requisite systematicity that philosophy so desperately needs but no philosophical system prior to his own, including Kant's, has been able to provide.

Ordinarily, it is a daunting task coming to grips with an original philosophical system, as the nuances of such a view may resist the full grasp of the originator of the system in question and its interpreters alike.¹ It is particularly cumbersome coming to terms with Fichte's philosophical view. Admittedly, Fichte's theory is by all accounts complex, perhaps lacking inner cohesion, even as he vigorously complains that his philosophical position has been misunderstood, further insisting that if viewed from the point of view of the whole rather than its disparate individual parts his system is coherent.²

¹Tom Rockmore, "Antifoundationalism, Circularity and the Spirit of Fichte," in *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 96.

²J. G Fichte, "Draft of a Letter to Reinhold, August 29, 1795," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 410. In the letter in question Fichte writes, "...I would ask you not to judge the individual parts too strictly before you have obtained an overview of the whole, and not seek to construct such an overview by combining the individual parts from the perspective of the whole. My mind is so constructed that it must grasp the whole either at once or not at all, and this explains the faulty construction of my writings."

In addition to the fact that Fichte was not a good writer, his other problems were seemingly self-made. For example, he has the tendency to employ terminology or concepts hitherto unknown in critical philosophy without offering any clarification or justification. What is more, his problem may further have been exacerbated by the hasty manner in which the initial formulation of his position occurred.

Named Reinhold's successor as the chair of the philosophy department at Jena in 1794, Fichte had a mixed reaction; although excited about the offer, he also had his reservations about it. While excited about the prospect of a full-time employment opportunity, Fichte was concerned about not having an original philosophical system that would serve as guide for his lectures. Consequently, he sought to delay the start of his employment at Jena by one year in order to work out the details of his theory, whose foundation he discovered in the course of the review of *Aenesidemus*. His request for a postponement was denied, however, forcing Fichte to hurriedly publish a draft of his system which was initially presented to a group of politicians and pastors in Zurich in 1794.³ That Fichte was dissatisfied with the initial enunciation of his theory is suggested by the fact that his philosophical view underwent series of fundamental changes during the course of his professional career. Although it was originally intended to fulfill employment criteria and advertise his classes at Jena,⁴ driven by financial considerations, Fichte decided to make the initial version of his system, whose details were to emerge from lecture to lecture during the course of the semester, available to the public.⁵

³Tom Rockmore, "Introduction," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 8.

⁴Wayne M. Martin, Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 23.

⁵Dale Snow, "The Early Critical Reception of the 1794 Wissenschaftslehre," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 229.

This speaks to the fact that it is not possible to provide a general characterization of Fichte's entire philosophical position. Hence, my intention here is to sketch his original philosophical view with a stress on his concept of positing as an aspect of his wider philosophical view. In particular, I will defend the position that Fichte invokes the technical term *positing* in his quest to offer a characterization of self-consciousness, the subject's awareness of its awareness of its role also as its object. In the aftermath of Kant's so-called Copernican turn in philosophy, the realization that self-consciousness is crucial for the grounding of knowledge became widespread.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section offers an account of Fichte's discovery of his vocation as a philosopher. The second section looks at *Aenesidemus*, the skeptical attack on the critical edifice, which not only confirmed Fichte's private reservations about the letter of the critical system, but was significantly instrumental to the conception of his original philosophical insight. The final section examines positing as the cardinal principle of Fichte's philosophical position. Following the example of Descartes and Kant, Fichte discovers a self-evident principle of philosophy that leads to the identification of the initial ground of his epistemology that posits itself as both the subject and the object of knowledge.

2.1. Fichte's Path to Kantianism

Fichte was born in 1762 in Rammenau, Saxony. The young Fichte's initial academic endeavors were supported variously by the local minister, Johann Gottfried Dinndorf, and a wealthy benefactor, Baron von Miltitz. Fichte caught the attention of Baron von Miltitz by reproducing a Sunday homily preached earlier in the day for the

benefit of the baron.⁶ Impressed by his performance, Miltitz offered Fichte a scholarship, which made it possible for him to attend regional schools, and which was later instrumental to his enrollment at the University of Leipzig for theology.⁷ However, Fichte's enrollment at Leipzig was short-lived as he was forced to discontinue his academic program on account of the death of his benefactor, which resulted in the loss of his scholarship.

Now a school dropout, and evidently limited in terms of gainful employment opportunities, Fichte resorted to private tutoring for his sustenance, something he abhorred. It was while occupying the position of private tutor in Zurich that Fichte had the chance to read Rousseau and Montesquieu, as well as to become acquainted with the ideals of the French Revolution, especially its stress on liberty.⁸ Ironically, it was within the context of something he resented that Fichte came to discover his calling as a philosopher.

Fichte's conversion to philosophy occurred under accidental circumstances in the summer of 1790, following his reading of the Critique of Pure Reason. The occasion was his engagement by a university student who needed help understanding Kant's transcendental thought. Unlike Karl Leonhard Reinhold, who was already grounded in the critical system and had actually undertaken its exposition and reformulation, Fichte was a novice with respect to the critical edifice at the time of his hire as a tutor. However, motivated by financial considerations, he accepted the challenge and immediately went to

⁶Anthony J. LaVopa, Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 25.

⁷George Kelly, "Introduction," in Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Address to the German nation, 1762-1799, ed. George Kelly (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1968, viii. Kelly claims that theology provided "gifted" but less privileged German Protestant children the chance to excel academically as is evidenced by the accomplishments of Kant, Hegel, and Schelling.

⁸Frederick Copleston, Modern Philosophy: From the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, A History of Philosophy VII (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1994), 32.

work.⁹ As he immersed himself in Kant's critical thought, the initial element of necessity that propelled him toward Kant's theory was replaced by one of "genuine enthusiasm," triggering an intellectual revolution in Fichte's thought. For instance, writing to his childhood friend, Weissshuhn, in the immediate aftermath of his discovery of the critical system, Fichte describes the joy of his philosophical find:

I have been living a new world ever since reading The Critique of Practical Reason. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought could never be proven—for example, the concept of freedom, the concept of duty, etc.—and I feel all the happier for it. It is unbelievable how much respect for mankind and how much strength this system gives us! You will have long since felt this, just as I do now.... Please forgive me for saying so, but I cannot convince myself that prior to the Kantian Critique anyone able to think for himself thought any differently than I did, and I do not recall ever having met anyone who had any fundamental objections to make against my (previous) system. I encountered plenty of sincere persons who had different—not thought but different feelings. Thus I was deceived by the apparent consistency of my previous system, and thus are thousands of persons perhaps still being deceived. ... I have now thrown myself completely into the Kantian philosophy—at first out of necessity, but then with genuine enthusiasm.¹⁰

The above correspondence indicates the nature and the extent of Kant's influence on Fichte, and further specifies how Fichte himself understood that influence. For better or for worse, Kant exposed the inadequacy of the philosophical propositions Fichte had previously believed to be firmly entrenched. In particular, Kant's successful defense of the primacy of practical reason in the constitution of knowledge dissolved in Fichte's thought, once and for all, the perceived dichotomy between critical rationality and emotional spontaneity.

⁹LaVopa, Fichte, 44.

¹⁰J. G. Fichte, "Fragment of a Letter to Weissshuhn, August-September, 1790," in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 357–8.

Like his contemporaries, including Kant, Fichte confronted a dilemma concerning the relation of freedom to necessity, understood at the time to be necessarily adversarial. For example, Jacobi reportedly indicates the crisis that Fichte and his contemporaries would have confronted but would have been unable to resolve. In the work in question, Jacobi reportedly characterizes the relationship of faith to reason in conflictual terms. Since faith and reason are necessarily antithetical to each other, in Jacobi's view, the two could be employed only in mutually exclusive ways if the world is to be properly understood. On the basis of this thesis, Jacobi reportedly offers the individual the choice of either unreasoned faith or reasoned atheism not both at the same time.¹¹

Fichte was initially schooled in the Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalistic system of philosophy, the dominant intellectual tradition of eighteenth-century Germany and was, prior to his conversion to the critical philosophy, committed to metaphysical determinism in its eighteenth-century form. This sought to apply:

to human behavior the mechanistic principle of causation with which modern science, inspired by Newton's explanation of motion was constructing a physical universe of regular, predictable laws, like the working of the physical universe, were reducible to actions and reactions within a chain of sufficient causes. The result was an uncompromising environmentalism, applied to the ideas as well as to actions that reduced rationality to an "epiphenomenon of natural causality." Thought was the product of sense experience, which was itself caused by external stimuli.¹²

But it was determinism, according to LaVopa, as enunciated by Carl Ferdinand Hommell, the professor of natural and criminal law at the University of Leipzig that caught the attention of Fichte. Hommell reportedly sought to fuse together determinism with the Lutheran understanding of predestination. LaVopa indicates that Hommell held that

¹¹Frederick Neuhouer, Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

¹²LaVopa, Fichte, 70.

freedom had to be supported by the higher wisdom of providence. Otherwise personal accountability remained a mirage, something that potentially undermined the concepts of reward and punishment. It also destroyed the state's moral basis for enforcing order.¹³

In relation to Fichte's philosophical position, the influence of Lutheran theology cannot be ignored either. Fichte was raised in the Lutheran pietist tradition that sought to revise Christianity by eliminating its ritualistic and dogmatic tendencies. Although not known to have held or articulated any original philosophical doctrine, the Lutheran pietist tradition's preference for emotions inclines it toward the empiricist approach to philosophy rather than rationalism.

In the immediate aftermath of his discovery of Kantianism, still savoring the sweetness of his discovery, Fichte sought a meeting with Kant. He probably would have envisioned the benefits of such an encounter to include the winning of Kant's acquaintanceship as well as the possibility of studying under the master, something that had the potential to enhance his standing in philosophical circles.¹⁴ To this end, he traveled to Königsberg in the summer of 1791. He had his wish granted, and was received in audience by Kant. However, the outcome of the meeting was far from satisfying for Fichte; he was clearly disappointed by the rather cold reception accorded him, as Kant reportedly appeared reportedly drowsy during their meeting.

Determined more than ever to bring himself to the notice of Kant, Fichte hurriedly composed a draft entitled An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation (*Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*), which was clearly influenced by Kant's views. According to Copleston, the Attempt anticipated Kant's liberal views on religion, and represented

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Daniel Breazeale, "Editor's Introduction: Fichte in Jena," in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 7.

Fichte's attempts to distinguish between theology and religion, maintaining that for Fichte they were not one and the same. Copleston notes that Fichte espouses a notion of God that presupposes acknowledgment of his power over nature without necessarily identifying him with any organized religion.¹⁵

The effect of Fichte's strategy was immediate and profound. Impressed by his brilliance, especially his demonstrated familiarity with the concepts and phraseology of the critical method, Kant arranged a second meeting with Fichte. The efficacy of the second meeting is indicated by the fact that Kant played a prominent role in the publishing of Fichte's An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation. Also, on the strength of Kant's recommendation, Fichte secured a teaching position in Danzig, near Krakow.

Fichte's luck continued to shine. His Attempt appeared in 1792 without the name of its author, and was immediately but mistakenly greeted as Kant's anticipated piece on religion, prompting positive and generous reviews. In the ensuing confusion surrounding the authorship of the work in question, Kant distanced himself from the work and identified Fichte as its author. However, the positive reviews the book received could not be withdrawn. Thus, an anonymous piece on religion, couched in the language of the critical system, published by Kant's publisher, was all that Fichte needed to introduce himself to the world as a philosopher of consequence. For the first time, Fichte had a wide array of employment opportunities staring at him.

For example, based on his reputation as the author of An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation, Fichte was selected as Reinhold's replacement when the latter suddenly resigned his appointment as the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Jena in 1794. He was also appointed a contributor to the journal *Allgemeine Literatur*

¹⁵Copleston, Modern Philosophy: From the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, 77.

Zeitung. Fichte's appointment as contributor to *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* is significant on a variety of fronts. For example, he would be mandated by *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* to formulate a response to *Aenesidemus*, the skeptical assault on transcendental philosophy, an assignment that would force him to rethink his allegiance to the critical system, and which would eventually lead him to the conception of his original philosophical program. We will look at *Aenesidemus* next.

2.2 *Aenesidemus*: A Synopsis

Although published anonymously in 1792, under the title "*Aenesidemus, oder über Fundamente der von dem Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementarphilosophie nebst einer Verteidigung gegen die Anmaassungen der Vernunftkritik*" (Concerning the Foundations of the Elementary Philosophy Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold, including a Defense of Skepticism Against the Pretensions of the Critique of Pure Reason), *Aenesidemus* was identified as the work of Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761–1833), the professor of philosophy at the University of Helmstadt and, after the disbanding of that university, the University of Göttingen.

Apparently, *Aenesidemus* was a combination of several factors. For instance, as the title of the write-up suggests, Schulze drew inspiration from *Aenesidemus*, the first century BC skeptic. But he was also influenced by neo-Humean skepticism, whose membership also included scholars such as Salomon Maimon, Ernst Platner, and A. W. Rehberg. Members of the neo-Humean skeptical philosophical system described Kant as a "skeptical idealist," accusing him of endorsing a view he claims to refute. They argued that Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction, especially his claim that things-in-

themselves are unknowable, makes him a skeptic. Correspondingly, this stance undermines his claims to have refuted Hume. Not to be forgotten is the fact that Schulze's brand of skepticism also had a moral underpinning to it. He believed in the perfectability of human reason, something he thought was made possible by the concept of striving. This explains why Schulze would take exception to any suggestion of impossibility or fully constituted reality that prohibited or eliminated the idea of striving.

Cast in the style of an exchange between Hermias, an admirer of the critical philosophy, and its opponent, Aenesidemus, Schulze embarks upon the project of convincing his interlocutor about the impotence of transcendental idealism as a philosophical system. His primary target was Reinhold, since he was believed to have inoculated the critical system against skepticism. But Aenesidemus also had Kant in view. His strategy was to convince his interlocutor that the critical theory failed on several fronts. We will review some of the skeptic's criticisms.

First, Schulze objects to Reinhold's attempt to anchor philosophy on a unitary principle of philosophy, the principle of consciousness. Schulze accuses Reinhold of reducing everything that goes on in the human mind to representation by relating representation to the subject and the object and by distinguishing it from both. The skeptic rejects Reinhold's attempt to make the principle of consciousness the highest principle of philosophy, insisting that it is subordinate to the principle of contradiction (*Satz des Widerspruchs*).¹⁶ Contrary to Reinhold's conjecture, the skeptic maintains that the principle of consciousness is anything but clear. For Aenesidemus distinction and relation are open to several interpretations. Therefore, distinction and relation are

¹⁶Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 274.

ambiguous. Schulze further argues that the principle of consciousness does not cover all consciousness, for example, intuition (*Anschauung*). By virtue of being open to several interpretations, Aenesidemus contends, the principle of consciousness is “probable” and “arbitrary” rather than “certain” or “universal” as claimed by Reinhold.¹⁷

Schulze next attacks Reinhold for suggesting a causal relationship between the faculty of representation (*Voerstellungsvermögen*) and representation (*Vorstellung*) itself, i.e., representation is related to the faculty of representation as effect to cause. He states:

It is, therefore, simply incomprehensible whence the Philosophy of the Elements obtains the right in laying down the foundation to apply the categories of cause and actuality to a suprasensible object, viz., to a particular faculty of representation which is neither intuitable nor given to any experience.¹⁸

Schulze conjectures that for maintaining that the relationship of the faculty of representation to representation is causal, Reinhold violates an important principle of the critical system, which prohibits the application of the categories of the understanding to objects that are not given in appearance. Kant claims that objects are knowable only if they are given in appearance.

Third, the skeptic targets the dualism characteristic of Kant’s exposition of the critical method and maintains that it renders Kant’s position unsatisfactory. Kant splits the world into the realms of appearance and things-in-themselves, restricting knowledge to the domain of appearance while denying the same to the sphere of things-in-themselves. What was Fichte’s response to these criticisms? We will find out.

Before we get to Fichte’s response, however, a few issues deserve mention. First, although it was a restatement of objections raised against the critical system by earlier critics, for example Jacobi and Maimon, Aenesidemus, owing to the fact that it was well

¹⁷Breazeale, “Fichte in Jena,” 55.

¹⁸Schulze, “Aenesidemus,” 110.

written, caught the attention of the friends and critics of the critical philosophy alike. For the defenders of Kant, it needed to be taken seriously.

Second, as a professed Kantian, Fichte thought he had an obligation to the critical system, including a defense in the face of the skeptical assault by Schulze. He quite correctly understood that any attack on transcendental philosophy potentially undermined his position, especially as it was becoming clear that the attacks were beginning to take their toll on the critical method. He states:

The reviewer has felt duty-bound to assess this book in detail, in part because it really does contain many good and apt remarks; in part because the author has complained in advance about the unproved verdicts (of which it is hoped, he will not accuse this reviewer); in part because this book has actually attracted some attention here and there, and some readers are said to have concluded from it that the Critical Philosophy is a lost cause; in part, finally, to help certain people overcome the prejudice of thinking that the objections to the Kantian philosophy have not been properly appreciated and that one would just as soon forget about them, since one has no well-founded reply to make to them. This reviewer wishes for nothing more fervently than that his assessment might contribute toward convincing a good many independent thinkers that the Critical Philosophy, in itself and in its inner content, still stands as firmly as ever.¹⁹

Third, Fichte had come to believe, at least initially, that Reinhold had provided the critical theory with a firm foundation capable of refuting skepticism, a belief that had to be reevaluated in the wake of *Aenesidemus*.

2.2.1 The Review of *Aenesidemus*

Fichte's *Aenesidemus* review represents the first major attempt by any member of the German idealism tradition to respond to the skeptical objections against the critical philosophy.²⁰ It also represents the first real attempt by a member of the tradition to radicalize Kant's modest transcendental analysis of reason.²¹

¹⁹Johann Fichte, "The Review of *Aenesidemus*," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 77.

Fichte's qualification for the review of Aenesidemus was not in doubt. At the time of the publication of Aenesidemus, he was widely believed to be the leading Kantian, sentiments he too shared. Second, Fichte and Schulze, the author of Aenesidemus, were not new to each other; their relationship dated back to their school days at Pforta and Wittenberg. Prior to the appearance of Aenesidemus, their relationship had turned frosty, perhaps characterized by personal animosity due to what Fichte considered Schulze's mean-spirited review of his An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation. Yet the importance of the task at hand, namely, the review of Aenesidemus, was not lost on Fichte. Even though there was no love lost between himself and Schulze, he knew he was not going to allow the sentiments of personal animosity to get in the way of such an important task. Similarly, he was fully aware that a credible response to the skeptic required a better approach than a mere restatement of loyalty to Kant. So what was Fichte's reaction?

First, Fichte agrees with and yet disagrees with Aenesidemus. On the one hand, Fichte subscribes to Reinhold's idea of basing philosophical inquiry on a self-evident principle known to be true. On the other hand, he rejects Reinhold's designee, the principle of consciousness, claiming that it is inadequate as the highest ground of philosophy. Instead, Fichte proposes to derive philosophical inquiry and, for that matter, Reinhold's principle of consciousness, from a still higher principle: "The principle of consciousness is a theorem which is based upon another first principle, from which, however, the principle of consciousness can be derived a priori and independently of all

²⁰Neuhouser, Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity, 70.

²¹Karl Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 188.

experience”²² Specifically, Fichte proposes to derive the principle of consciousness from the principles of identity ($A=A$) and opposition ($A=-A$). In this way, he partially sides with Schulze against Reinhold-partial in the sense that he, similarly, rejects the skeptic’s candidate, the principle of contradiction, as equally insufficient.

Fichte next looks at Schulze’s criticism of Reinhold’s postulation of the faculty of representation as the cause of representation. Fichte calls into question the accuracy of the skeptic’s reading of this aspect of Reinhold’s view, suggesting that Schulze’s account constitutes a mischaracterization of Reinhold’s view. Although Fichte thinks that Reinhold’s views are misrepresented (which, by the way, look Reinholdian to me) he does not state what Reinhold’s correct view is. Instead, he proceeds to state his position on the doctrine of representation: “The faculty of representation exists for the faculty of representation through the faculty of representation.”²³ By this formulation, Fichte reveals two important characteristics of the human mind, namely, self-referentiality and circularity.

Fichte then ventures into the most controversial aspect of Kant’s view, the thing-in-itself/appearance relationship, and the problem of affection it raises. Fichte upholds the skeptic’s objections, claiming that the Kantian dualism, especially its inherent suggestion that the relationship of noumenon to phenomenon is similar to that of cause to effect, sends the critical system into dogmatism. Although Kant’s project hopes to escape dogmatism, by postulating a thing-in-itself as the causal agent of things given in appearance, Fichte concludes that the skeptic’s concerns are valid.

²²The Review of Aenesidemus, 62.

²³Ibid.

Fichte's review of Aenesidemus took at least a year, a little longer than expected, a clear indication that Schulze's objections were not easily dismissable. Evidently, his assignment put him in the awkward position of having to make significant concessions to Schulze, and yet insisting upon the tenability of the critical system. On the whole, the impact of Aenesidemus on Fichte is indicated by the following correspondence with Stephani:

Have you read Aenesidemus? It has perplexed me for some time now. It has overthrown Reinhold in my eyes, has made me suspicious of Kant, and has overturned my whole system from the ground up. One cannot live under the open sky. It cannot be helped; the system must be rebuilt. And this is what I have been faithfully doing for the past six weeks or so. Come celebrate the harvest with me. I have discovered a new foundation, on the basis of which it will be easy to develop the whole of philosophy. Kant's philosophy, as such is correct—but only in its results and not in its reasons.... I believe that in a few more years we shall have a philosophy which is just as self-evident as geometry. What consequences do you think this will have for mankind? We have no wish to conceal the lamentable state of contemporary philosophy—as is only too well demonstrated by recent controversies concerning freedom and by the misunderstandings among the critical philosophers themselves. From the point of view of the new standpoint 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.²⁴

Within that same time frame, Fichte shared similar concerns with other associates, for example, Flatt and Reinhard.

Surely, Aenesidemus had triggered a second intellectual revolution in Fichte's thought. In comparison to the first intellectual revolution, the conversion to transcendental philosophy, the revolution occasioned by Schulze is more significant, even though the former is prior to the latter chronologically, because the latter has a more direct bearing on the evolution of Fichte's original philosophical system. Specifically,

²⁴Johann Fichte, "Draft of a Letter to Stephani, mid-December, 1793," in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 370-71.

Schulze led Fichte to the realization that transcendental philosophy in its Kantian and Reinholdian presentations remained an unfinished project and, therefore, stood in need of revision if it was to answer its critics. Like Kant, Fichte came to distinguish between the letter and the spirit of the critical theory, maintaining that the letter of the theory had to be abandoned in order to save its spirit. Fichte further suggested that the skeptical objections were sustainable against the letter but failed against the spirit of Kant's view.

It is worthy of note that even at the time of the review of Aenesidemus, when Fichte was supposedly preoccupied with the formulation of a defense for the critical theory against the skeptical objections raised by attacks launched by Schule, he was already thinking of his original philosophical position. Understood in this way, the case could be rightly made that Aenesidemus, which Fichte credits with disrupting his Kantianism, merely confirmed the misgivings he privately entertained about the letter of the critical view, which gives credence to Pinkard's thesis. Pinkard rightly observes that Fichte was aware of the implications of conceding the more serious objections to the skeptic; he knew, Pinkard suggests, that by so doing he would be undermining the positions of Kant and Reinhold while paving the way for the emergence of his Wissenschaftslehre.²⁵

2.3. Positing as the Hallmark of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

Fichte's account of the positing activity of the self is presupposed by his insistence that philosophy should be deduced from an initial ground known to be true:

²⁵Terry Pinkard, German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 104.

“Our task is to discover the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge. This can be neither proved nor defined, if it is to be an absolutely primary principle.²⁶ In Fichte’s view, systematic rigor in any system depends on the ability to show that the system in question is deduced from a fundamental principle. Fichte maintains that since his science of knowledge is the science of science, knowledge of knowledge, it must be derived from a unitary ground. Otherwise, it would seem to suggest that there could be more than one system of knowledge, something he manifestly rejects.

In the early Jena period, Fichte simply states that philosophy should proceed from a secure ground without revealing its identity. However, Henrich identifies the principle in question as the subjective principle, and contends that Fichte first provided the hint about his desire to erect philosophy on the principle of the self while visiting Kant in Königsberg, and later reiterated this intent in the course of his conversation with Schultz. Henrich thinks that even though this idea emerged very early in his thought, Fichte lacked the theoretical potential to articulate it at the time, and that he went public with his proposition only in the wake of the review of Aenesidemus when he acquired the confidence to defend or articulate it.²⁷

By offering to deduce philosophy from the principle of subjectivity, Fichte has demonstrated who he is—since one’s approach to the problem of knowledge is necessarily tied to “what sort of man one is:”

What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is; for a philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can reject or

²⁶J. G. Fichte, The Science of Knowledge; with First and Second Introductions, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93.

²⁷Dieter Henrich, Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism, ed. David S. Pacini (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 231-32.

accept as we wish; it is rather something animated by the soul of the person who holds it. A person indolent by nature or dulled and distorted by mental servitude, learned luxury and vanity will never raise himself to the level of idealism.²⁸

If philosophy is called upon to furnish the ground of experience (*Erfahrung*) as Fichte believes to be the case, then one is faced with two possible philosophical approaches, idealism and dogmatism. According to Fichte, the two possible systems of philosophy are distinguished from one another by their understanding of how a philosophical system should be constituted: whether it should be grounded on the principle of the self or the principle of the thing. Fichte explains the difference this way:

The essence of the critical philosophy consists in this, that an absolute self is postulated as wholly unconditioned and incapable of determination by any higher thing; and if this philosophy is derived in due order from the above principle, it becomes a science of knowledge. Any philosophy is, on the other hand, dogmatic, when it equates or opposes anything to the self as such; and this it does in appealing to the supposedly higher concept of the thing (*ens*), which it thus quite arbitrarily set up as the absolutely highest conception.²⁹

In Fichte's view, his Wissenschaftslehre, which proceeds by way of idealism, grounds its inquiry on the self (*Ich*) the principle of freedom. On the contrary, dogmatism takes as the starting point of its investigation the thing, the principle of transcendence.³⁰ Fichte seems convinced that, even though neither idealism nor dogmatism can refute the other on its terms, the person who is conscious of freedom will always choose idealism, while the one who cherishes nature over freedom would opt for dogmatism.

Fichte thinks that in order to prove the efficacy of his idealistic philosophical system, he needs to show that dogmatism is an impotent system of philosophy. Consistent with this agenda, he presents idealism as having a speculative advantage over dogmatism, a superiority that is proven in the actual construction of the two systems.

²⁸The Science of Knowledge, 16.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

³⁰*Ibid.*

Fichte's conviction concerning the superiority of idealism is grounded in the belief that it is the only philosophical system that is capable of exhibiting the "presence of consciousness of the freely acting intellect, which is the basis of experience."³¹ In Fichte's view, our ability to demonstrate our claims to knowledge is tied to something that is internal rather than external; we are better off explaining the outside world on the basis of what is within rather than the other way around. In Fichte's view, only idealism can prove the "essence" of the self, which is its ability to posit itself as something existent.

Conversely, according to Fichte, dogmatism fails as an epistemological paradigm, precisely because it cannot demonstrate its claims to know. Fichte attributes the failure of dogmatism to its willingness to make immodest and arrogant claims. Fichte fears that by holding outlandish claims about the ability of human reason to fully grasp objective reality as it is in itself, the dogmatist philosopher ignores the fallibility of thought. Consequently, according to Fichte, the dogmatist philosopher leaves the mind completely dependent on external space, so much so that space is unaffected by what the mind does.³²

In further distinguishing between idealism and dogmatism, Fichte contends that unlike the latter - which entails materialism, fatalism, and determinism-idealism espouses an active notion of subjectivity as opposed to something passive. Also, idealism also stresses the self-sufficiency of the self, from which the objects in space could be derived-

³¹Ibid. 12

³²Michael Baur, "Self-Measure and Self-Moderation in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 87-88.

for Fichte, the I is a pure act (*Tathandlung*).³³ In order not to reduce the I to mere epiphenomenon, Fichte advocates the elimination of the thing-in-itself.

Although an important doctrine of the Wissenschaftslehre, besides stating that positing is the “heart” of his system and that it refers to the I’s “self-intuition,” Fichte does not bother acquainting his readers with the import of this important principle, forcing his commentators to look to other aspects of his theory for its meaning. It makes sense, therefore, that there is disagreement among Fichte interpreters about how to approach this aspect of his view. I am cognizant of the fact that there have been attempts in the literature to subject this Fichtean doctrine to phenomenological and semantic interpretations. I will argue, however, that Fichte understands knowledge in terms of an interaction between the subject and the object.

2.3.1 The I’s Self-Positing Activity

A major characteristic of the Wissenschaftslehre is that the I posits (Setzen) its existence unconditionally as both the subject and the object of knowledge. This idea is unique to Fichte’s philosophical position and does not exist anywhere in the critical theory prior to Fichte,³⁴ and fulfills an important epistemological function in his thought. The importance of this doctrine in Fichte’s philosophical view is underscored by the fact although his theory remained a work in progress his commitment to the idea remained steadfast. Fichte employs this concept in overcoming the dichotomy between the subject and the object.

³³The Science of Knowledge, p. 21.

³⁴Günter Zöllner, “Positing and Determining in Fichte’s *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*,” in New Essays in Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 141.

Fichte's characterization of the I's self-positing activity is in evidence in his account of the I's threefold activity of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. However, my intention here is not to examine his complex account of his three principles of knowledge. Rather, it is to dwell rather narrowly on the epistemological significance of positing in his broader intellectual theory, and will approach it from the standpoint of what I construe to be Fichte's stated objective as announced in the First Introduction to The Science of Knowledge, viz.,

the total eradication and complete reversal of current modes of thought on these topics, so that in all seriousness, and not only in a manner of speaking, the object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object.³⁵

What Fichte references is the either/or approach that traditional metaphysics adopted in viewing the relationship between us and the external world, an approach that tended, for the most part, to make the subject the recipient of data from the object in the quest to explain our theoretical knowledge of the natural world.

Fichte credits Kant's categories of the understanding with pointing him toward the ground of his system.³⁶ Fichte is seemingly disappointed that the categories of the understanding assumed a different role in Kant's theory. He criticizes Kant for not making the categories of the understanding the highest principle of his theory, something Fichte thinks contributed to Kant's inability to carry out the "examination of the possibility of metaphysics, while at the same time laying down the method and the rules of the same." For instance, Fichte thinks that Kant does not satisfactorily account for the process that yields the categories. Nor does he think that Kant satisfactorily explains how it is that what goes on in consciousness is determined (*bestimmt*) by the thing.

³⁵The Science of Knowledge, 4.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 100.

The *Wissenschaftslehre* adopts the mind-set that the self is absolute, absolute in the sense that it operates by its own laws and, therefore, unconditioned by objects in space. Consequently, the self is able to posit its existence as the subject and the object. Moreover, Fichte invokes the notion of positing to think of the relation of the subject to the object both as identical with and opposed to each other-in a draft of a letter to Reinhold, Fichte states that positing refers to the mind's self-intuitive character: "The I has an inner intuition of itself." Fichte seeks to make practical reason the basis for theoretical reason by summoning (*auffordern*) the self to "free action." In Fichte's view then, the self enjoys a unique form of awareness through its self-constitution, that is, the self enjoys a self-awareness that makes it always present to itself in consciousness. If the self is always present to itself in consciousness, then such a consciousness has to be different than the subject's consciousness of the objective world. LaVopa writes:

To think of self-positing exclusively as an act is to deny that the primordial "I" exists in itself or for objects in a causal series. The self is unique in that it "comes to exist for itself" in an act of unconditionally spontaneous self-awareness. In that sense, the I is self-grounding; there is no kind of "being" prior to the act. Fichte's point was not simply that the self is not an object in relation to external objects. It cannot make itself an object vis-à-vis itself, even when it reflects on itself. When the "I" thinks about itself, as opposed to thinking about anything else, it does not create a representation that is in some sense independent of it. Its self-reflection is its being, since thought and object, agent and product, are one... and the self has no kind of being apart from the act of self-positing that is self-consciousness.³⁷

Fichte dismisses the idea that knowledge can be grounded in a world-related awareness because everything that takes place in the mind can be explained on the basis of the mind itself.

Fichte's account of self-positing leads me to three interrelated conclusions. First, I claim that Fichte employs the notion of positing to develop a first-person epistemology.

³⁷Anthony LaVopa, *Fichte* 198-99

What this means is that Fichte draws attention to what it is that we are capable of knowing as human beings when we claim to have knowledge, and cautions against holding cognitive claims that depend on the outside world for validation. Farr writes:

Human knowledge must begin and end with self-knowledge. The boundary of finite human knowledge is the activity of the I. That is the I can have no knowledge of nature except through its own activity. Hence, the boundaries of finite human knowledge are indeed subjective as pointed out. However, Kant never showed how at the base of subjectivity lie two opposing feelings (the feeling of freedom and the feeling of necessity) whereby subjectivity and necessity are constituted. It is with this bold discovery that the path toward the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre* begins.³⁸

In this way, Fichte makes subjectivity and objectivity co-implicatory, that is, he makes them two sides of the one and same reality, and evaluates their relationship from the point of view of the subject.³⁹ Like Kant, Fichte believes the cognitive subject can comprehend only the object it shapes or fashions.

Second, by making the I self-intuit in the grounding of knowledge rather than being aware of a mind-independent reality, Fichte joins Kant in rejecting a representationalist solution to the problem of knowledge. Kant initially formulates the problem of knowledge in representationalist terms but later rejects a representationalist solution. Fichte asserts:

I call your attention to the fact that this is the very essence of transcendental philosophy, namely, that it does not engage directly in representing, but rather in representing the process of representation itself. . . . Once this philosophical pathway has been discovered and entered upon, then it becomes clear that it is the only path which will lead to a well-founded knowledge.⁴⁰

³⁸Arnold Farr, "Reflective Judgment and the Boundaries of Finite Human Knowledge: The Path toward Fichte's 1794/95 *Wissenschaftslehre*," in *New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 118.

³⁹*The Science of Knowledge*, 100.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 201.

This is Fichte's way of insisting that subjectivity be thought prior to representation, i.e., any theory of knowledge worthy of the name must be based on pre representational consciousness instead of representation. By pre representational consciousness is meant that representation is explained by a higher, preconscious principle.⁴¹

Third and relationally, by rejecting a representationalist solution to the problem of knowledge, Fichte also rejects a causal theory of knowledge in whatever form, especially in its Cartesian variation. Farr agrees:

Therefore, the I is not permitted to ascribe causality to anything other than itself. It is only through the I's activity that the external world is experienced. In so far as the I discovers itself to be the ground of all experience, it discovers itself to be the ground of all laws that govern experience, and also the origin of any purpose.⁴²

Since reason is continuously present to itself in consciousness, Fichte cannot fathom its being reduced a variable independent of space, nor does he fathom how it can be made to conform to the standards set by objective reality. Since positing indicates the self's summoning to free action, "the influence of the other is not a causal one, but an influence compatible with freedom and intelligence, namely, a summons or invitation."⁴³

Based on Fichte's rejection of a representationalist solution to the problem of knowledge, namely, his rejection of the claim that thought can comprehend an independent reality in its objective existence, Fichte could be reasonably said to argue that knowledge is mediated rather than immediate.⁴⁴ A potential problem looms though.

⁴¹Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy, 176–78.

⁴²Farr, "Reflective Judgment," 118.

⁴³Robert Williams, "The Question of the Other in Fichte's Thought," in Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 146.

⁴⁴Steven Hoeltzel, "Fichte's Deduction of Representation in the 1794–5 Grundlage," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundations of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 41.

Does Fichte then fit the narrative of the analytic philosopher who accuses the idealist philosopher of denying the existence of the objective world?

2.3.2 Fichte's Philosophical System and the Solipsism Charge

The doctrine of positing is the high point and yet the most controversial of Fichte's philosophical position. On the one hand, it makes it possible for Fichte to develop his monistic philosophical program. On the other hand, it becomes its Achilles' heel. The claim that idealism denies the existence of objects in space, originally leveled against Kant by philosophers of analytic persuasion, has been extended to the friends of the critical system, including Fichte, and continues to resonate even in contemporary philosophical discussion. In relation to Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, the charge that his view is subjectivist continually recurs. For instance, Pippin accuses Fichte of overestimating the creative capacities of the human mind, while failing to recognize the contribution of nature in the explanation of knowledge,⁴⁵ an accusation that Fichte denies.

Later in his career, as Fichte tries to reformulate his position, he tries to respond to this charge. For example, in his Wissenschaftslehre: Nova Methodo, Fichte expresses belief in the reality of the object as a unique entity. He argues:

We will take for granted that one assumes that things exist outside of oneself. In support of this assumption one appeals to one's inner state. It is from within oneself that one obtains this conviction: one is conscious of an internal state from which one infers the existence of objects outside oneself.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Robert Pippin, "Fichte's Alleged Subjective, Psychological, One-Sided Idealism," in The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148.

⁴⁶J. G. Fichte, Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftstelehre) Nova Methodo (1796/99), trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 77

Neuhouser rightly comes to the defense of Fichte by advising that Fichte's characterization of knowledge as self-knowledge should be understood epistemologically, and that if this piece of advice is heeded the issue of solipsism that has continued to haunt Fichte's position would not arise. He states:

Of course, Fichte's doctrine of intellectual intuition should not be understood as attributing to the human intellect the power of creating its objects of knowledge; what it borrows from this theological conception, rather, is the general notion of a species of awareness in which the distinction that is normally made between the intuiter and that which is intuited does not apply, a state of affairs that Fichte wants to ascribe, in some form, to the subject's self-positing.⁴⁷

Neuhouser rejects the notion that Fichte's cognitive subject creates its objects *ex nihilo*, and conjectures that Fichte is not interested in the world of ordinary consciousness.

Rather, according to Neuhouser, Fichte holds that the object of cognition is transcendently constituted by the subject, the negation and self-affection of the absolute ego, the condition of consciousness of freedom.⁴⁸

Fichte's strongest defense yet comes from Ameriks. In a manner that consistent with Wayne Martin, Ameriks claims that Fichte *Wissenschaftslehre* is foundationalist rather than subjective. Ameriks argues that although Fichte had "strong metaphysical concerns," due to his concern with "freedom and focus on thought and representation rather than nature as the starting point" of his philosophical investigation, he (Fichte) considered himself an idealist:

Precisely because he follows in Reinhold's wake, it can hardly be denied that Fichte is very concerned with knowledge, especially knowledge in a most rigorous "scientific" sense, a true *Wissenschaftslehre*. But it also cannot be denied that he has a strong metaphysical concerns, and that he repeatedly characterizes himself as an "idealist" because of his interest in freedom and focus on thought and representation, rather than nature, as a starting point. All this is consistent with taking Fichte to have a robust belief in physical reality,

⁴⁷Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 77.

⁴⁸Williams, "The Question of the Other in Fichte's Thought," 143.

very much as most of us ordinarily think of it, with beings and powers that are not literally contained in or completely under the control of human or super human personal agents.⁴⁹

Ameriks further suggests that Fichte, to the extent that he dismisses the concept of things-in-themselves in philosophy, is closer to the empiricist philosophers than the rationalists. However, unlike his empiricist counterparts who focus on sense perception as the source of knowledge, Ameriks observes, Fichte is concerned, instead, with how we acquire the realization that there exists an object in space, a determination he thinks Fichte seeks to make at the moral level.⁵⁰

Evaluated within the framework of the early Jena project Fichte's characterization of the relation of the cognitive subject to its object could be said to be heavily tilted in favor of the former, which makes the latter's existence possible, something Ameriks is willing to concede. However, he suggests that Fichte, and probably Reinhold, were attracted to Kant's system because of the promise of freedom it contained. Furthermore, Ameriks indicates that they would probably have been disappointed by Kant's inability to offer a theoretical characterization of freedom. Consequently, according to Ameriks, Fichte would have been tempted to overcompensate for this perceived Kantian inadequacy by tending to overstress freedom to the near exclusion of the object.⁵¹

Fichte's preoccupation with freedom, on the one hand, and his perception of Kant's failure to provide such an account, on the other, was even more strongly felt in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, an event that challenged the old ways of

⁴⁹Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, 203.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 205.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 113. See also Williams, "The Question of the Other in Fichte," 144. Williams argues that Kant affirms the possibility of freedom for practical rather than cognitive purposes. That is, he affirms freedom but does not think that it could be known.

looking at reality. His concern with freedom led him to liken his system to the French Revolution. He writes:

My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves, which is to say, from the external influences with which all previous systems—including the Kantian—have more or less fettered man. Indeed the first principle of my system presents man as an independent being. During the very years when France was using external force to win its political freedom I was engaged in an inner struggle with myself and with all deeply rooted prejudices, and this is the struggle that gave birth to my system. Thus the French nation assisted in the creation of my system. Indeed, it was while I was writing about the French Revolution that I was rewarded by the first hints and intimations of this system.⁵²

Incidentally, Fichte was not the only one who saw a connection between his theory and the French Revolution. His Contribution to the Reflection of Public Opinion Concerning the French Revolution (*Beitrage zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die Französische Revolution*) (1793) earned him the reputation of a Jacobin, a charge Radrizzani believes remotely contributed to the atheism controversy that led to Fichte's dismissal from the University of Jena in 1799.⁵³

By likening his system to the French Revolution, Fichte hints at the fact that the French Revolution offers new insights into questions of our cognitive relationship with the world, in the process challenging the hitherto unchallenged notion of normativity. Specifically, Fichte thought it underscored the freedom of human agency in the constitution of phenomena, which was previously made the exclusive preserve of the divine.

Second, for Fichte, the French Revolution provided the blueprint for the liberation of thought, a paradigm he used to introduce speculative dimension to thought by making

⁵²J. G. Fichte, Draft of a letter of April/May 1795 to Baggessn in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 385–86.

⁵³Ives Radrizzani, "Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy and Political Praxis," in New Perspectives on Fichte, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996), 193.

the self revert to itself for knowledge. Based on his speculative approach to the problem of knowledge, Fichte dismisses the notion of things-in-themselves as mere inventions devoid of reality, further insisting that they should be eliminated from philosophical consideration if thought is to be unburdened and set free.

To state the point differently, by describing his theory as the one of freedom, Fichte is distancing himself from his predecessors, whom he accuses of destroying the freedom of the subject by locating activity in the object and passivity in the subject. On his account, positing constitutes the mind's original mode of existence, an act that does exclude, of necessity, the notion of the subject's independent existence.

Conclusion

This chapter examined Fichte's original philosophical position with emphasis on his doctrine of positing. Although seduced by the Copernican turn in philosophy, which acknowledges the primacy of practical reason in the grounding of knowledge, Fichte is sympathetic toward Reinhold's notion of systematicity rather than Kant's. In his bid to reconstruct the critical philosophy, Reinhold proposes to deduce philosophy from a self-evident principle from which the remainder of the discussion could be rigorously deduced. While he endorses the general idea of basing philosophy on a unitary principle, Fichte takes issue with Reinhold's candidate, the principle of consciousness, substituting for it the subjective principle. On the basis of his fundamental principle of philosophy, Fichte discovers the principle of his epistemology that is able to posit itself as both the subject and the object of knowledge.

The role of positing in Fichte's theory cannot be underestimated and constitutes a departure from his predecessors, including Kant and Reinhold, whose influence on Fichte is well known. In particular, Fichte invokes the notion of positing to purge philosophy of what he terms the mischief of things-in-themselves, thereby making it possible for the mind to generate its content rather than depend on the data furnished by the objective world. For Fichte, not only is the object the creation of the subject, any suggestion that there exists a mind-independent world that could be grasped in its objective existence is to be rejected, since nothing can be shown to exist beyond experience.

Chapter Three

The Wissenschaftslehre as Circular Epistemology

Introduction

The task of this chapter is to examine the epistemological significance of circular justification within the context of Fichte's intellectual theory. Fichte holds circular demonstration to be an important component of thought and indeed of the entire philosophical enterprise, so much so that to eliminate the same from philosophical consideration would amount to, in his view, denying human understanding its requisite foundation.

Although only a selected aspect of his overall philosophical method, circular demonstration contributes in no small measure toward the understanding of Fichte's philosophical position as well as the subsequent philosophical discussion, especially the philosophical view of Hegel, which Fichte's position partially inspires.¹ Although Fichte assigns circular reasoning a prominent epistemological task in his system, it has received only scant attention in the literature. Several factors may have contributed to what I am calling this attitude of neglect, including the fact that Fichte himself would have been more interested in understanding it than with acquainting his reader with the full epistemological import of the strategy.²

The position defended here is similar to Rockmore's in several respects. In particular, I will argue the thesis that when Fichte's thought is viewed from a certain

¹Wayne M. Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 100.

²Tom Rockmore, *Fichte, Marx, and the German Philosophical Tradition* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 18.

vantage point, it could be justifiably shown that he employs circular justification to designate philosophy a hypothetical rather than a certain science.³ To state the thesis differently, I will claim that Fichte appeals to circular proof in order to show that knowledge claims are valid only within conceptual frameworks in which those claims are entertained since, in his view, claims to know that extend beyond sense perception cannot be reasonably defended:

A finite rational being has nothing beyond experience; it is this that comprises the entire staple of his thought. The philosopher is necessarily in the same position; it seems, therefore, incomprehensible how he could raise himself above experience.⁴

It is the impossibility for the human mind to have a direct and complete grasp of the external object that Fichte's circular justification is meant to emphasize. In this way, Fichte utilizes circularity to make us aware of our limits and finitude as human beings.

To be sure, this approach puts me at odds with other interpreters of Fichte, especially those who privilege a foundationalist approach to his philosophical view. Contrary to the antifoundationalist perspective, the foundationalist insight maintains that although Fichte concedes that human thought is inescapably circular, it does not see Fichte as indicating, by this manifest admission, that philosophy is incapable of producing certainty. According to this insight, by virtue of his designating philosophy the science of science, not only does Fichte believe that philosophy has the responsibility of demonstrating what it means to know something with certainty, it is actually capable of producing such certainty. Seen from such angle, the foundationalist interpretation

³Tom Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 107.

⁴J. G. Fichte: *The Science of Knowledge*, p. 8.

contends that it is highly unlikely that Fichte would have reduced philosophy to a discipline that is capable of yielding only “hypothetical’ knowledge.⁵

I begin by providing a tentative description of circular argumentation. Since circularity is the epistemological contrary of linearity, both are explored together. I will next examine circular justification from the point of view of method in philosophy. Thereafter, I dwell on the notion of opposition as embedded in Fichte’s three principles of knowledge to show that Fichte is favorably disposed toward circular epistemology.

3.1 Circular Argumentation: A Tentative Description

A description of circular justification cannot be meaningfully separated from that of its opposite in the geometrical framework, linearity, since the presence of one implies the absence of the other. An epistemological demonstration could be said to be circular “in so far as the truth of the system of philosophy is supposed to be a function of the truth of its starting point; which, in turn, is supposed to be demonstrated by the very system in question.”⁶ Understood as such, circularity could be reasonably opposed to its epistemological opposite, linearity, the view that a philosophical argument “presupposes explicit beginning or ending points of a chain or arguments or reflection, points which are taken as absolute in some sense or another.”⁷

⁵Daniel Breazeale, “Certainty, Universality, and Conviction: The Methodological Primacy of Practical Reason within the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *New Perspectives on Fichte*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore, 1996), 36.

⁶Daniel Breazeale, “Circles and Grounds in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Books, 1994), 44.

⁷Kevin Stoehr, “The Virtues of Circular Reasoning,” in *Epistemology* (The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy), vol. 5, ed. Richard Cobb-Stevens (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, Bowling Green State University, 2000), 163–4.

Rockmore indicates that linearity and circularity have their origin in geometry but remarks that they could be used for functions that are otherwise than geometrical, for example, they could be utilized to justify claims to knowledge. According to Rockmore, circular and linear demonstrations both have a decent representation in the history of philosophy that goes back to the pre-Socratics.⁸ Although both epistemological models are represented in the Western philosophical tradition, there is good reason to believe that linearity remains the preferred justification in philosophy and continues to dominate the intellectual debate even today. For Seigfried, the fact that theories of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James have been unable to completely escape foundationalist metaphors succinctly demonstrates this fact.⁹ Part of the appeal of linear argument may not be unconnected with the fact that it is the intellectual model that has been passed down in the Western philosophical tradition from generation to generation over the years. At least since Plato, the philosophical tradition has tended to construe genuine knowledge as reason's ability to intuit reality in its objective existence.¹⁰

But our fascination with linear reasoning might be driven by a host of considerations that are not wholly philosophical. Somehow, we tend to be more favorably disposed toward systems that make it possible for us to verify that projects embarked upon are capable of yielding measurable outcomes. Conversely, we tend to view with

⁸Tom Rockmore, *Hegel's Circular Epistemology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 2.

⁹Charlene Seigfried, "Like Bridges Without Piers: Beyond the Foundationalist Metaphor," in *Antifoundationalism Old and New*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Beth Singer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 143–44.

¹⁰Robert Crease, "Science as Foundational?" in *Questioning Foundations*, ed. Hugh Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44.

disdain or suspicion any process that is perceived to be inconclusive. With its clearly identifiable starting and ending points, it is not surprising, therefore, that we find linear proof more appealing than its circular counterpart that many still associate with vicious circularity or error in the reasoning process.

Stoehr rightly observes that humans tend, for the most part, to seek closure to situations, and are disappointed when things remain unresolved, especially when such lack of closure borders on painful experience. For example, a family whose loved one has gone missing in combat will achieve closure only when the issue of that loved one's status is successfully determined. According to Stoehr, it is the desire for closure in our lives that that often propels us toward the divine or the absolute.¹¹ Following from this argument is the inference that we are more likely to be suspicious of a strategy that appears to be open-ended than the one that facilitates us in the resolution of our issues.

Another reason for our favorable disposition toward linearity may pertain to the influence of the theologies of the major world religious traditions, for example, Christianity and Islam. Both Christianity and Islam tend to interpret our presence on earth in teleological terms, and successfully convinced their adherents it is a worthwhile venture subordinating the here and now to the yet to come. A variant of this theology could be found in Augustine who claims that the human person, who is created for relationships with God, continually yearns for union with the creator: "For you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."¹² For the adherents of these religious traditions, while the here and now may be good, since it is not the ultimate

¹¹Stoehr, "The Virtues of Circular Reasoning," 165.

¹²Augustine, The Confessions of Saint Augustine, trans. John Ryan (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1960), 43.

it is nothing in comparison to the eternal bliss that is reserved by God for those who distinguished themselves while on Earth.

For better or for worse, these factors make us seem to privilege linearity over circularity. Without any shadow of doubt, linearity's gains constitute circularity's losses. For instance, there has been a quick rush to dismiss circular justification as a mere geometrical pictorial metaphor undeserving of any serious intellectual consideration. Some people also tend to associate circular reasoning with attempts to escape the responsibility of having to demonstrate one's cognitive claims.

Stoehr speaks for me when he argues that circularity definitely has something to contribute to the epistemological debate and is, therefore, deserving of every serious attention. Rockmore agrees: "In his claim that theory is necessarily circular and inevitably circular Fichte rehabilitates a form of argument that had been much neglected since early Greek thought."¹³ By his rehabilitation of circularity, Fichte has shown that, contrary to popular perception, circular reasoning does not render impossible the search for reliable knowledge or certainty; instead, it specifies the nature of the certainty or reliable knowledge philosophy is capable of yielding, namely, that truths are products of their conceptual frameworks. In my view, if not for anything else, circularity is worth our consideration for its pedagogical value. What is more, if anything is good in and of itself, philosophy is that something irrespective of whether or not it yields any concrete outcome.

¹³Tom Rockmore, Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 107.

3.2 Circular Justification and the Question of Method in Philosophy

Although only a selected aspect of Fichte's overall philosophical system, circular demonstration draws attention to the problem of method in philosophy and, for that matter, any discipline that is concerned with the problem of knowledge. The question of method, whose main aim is the acquisition of truth, and the avoidance of error,¹⁴ is as old as philosophy itself and remains a controversial subject. At least since the pre-Socratics, philosophers have used a wide array of methods in formulating and defending their philosophical positions. What this implies is that our attempts to understand philosophical theories are tied to a large extent to the conceptual framework within which the theories in question were formulated.

If the absence of dissension with respect to what constitutes an acceptable method of inquiry in any given field is a positive, then it could be stated that some specialties fare better than others. For example, it could be assumed that mathematics and the sciences fare better than philosophy in this regard. A typical scientific method utilizes the resource of experimentation, relying almost exclusively on the testing of hypotheses. Closely aligned with the scientific approach is the mathematical paradigm, which probes propositions in order to make determinations about the presence of contradictions or lack thereof. Moulines cautions, however, that the absence of significant disagreement within the scientific framework should not be confused with homogeneity. For instance, he

¹⁴Paul Moser, "Skepticism, Question Begging and Burden Shifting," in *Epistemology* (The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy) vol. 5, ed. Richard Cobb-Stevens (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, Bowling Green State University, 2000), 209–10.

draws a line of demarcation between Newtonian science and other scientific theories.¹⁵ Although science may not be a homogeneous discipline, the scientific community is united in the belief that knowledge transcends experience. What is more, scientists view the scientific method as the method par excellence and judge it capable of yielding objective knowledge, a view that is shared by some philosophical systems, for example, analytic philosophy. This point of view is articulated by Bertrand Russell, who reportedly accuses anyone opposed to this point of view of insincerity.¹⁶

Moser quite appropriately takes issue with this mind-set, especially that of Bertrand Russell, for suggesting that anyone who fails to recognize the scientific method as the method par excellence is “insincere.” Moser maintains that arguments relating to the dependability of memory or sense perception as a reliable source of knowledge are merely presumptive and, therefore, inconclusive.¹⁷ Moser seems to be rehearsing the thesis of John Stuart Mills, who reportedly views consensus in any given field as inimical to progress, rationality, and truth. Mills reminds us that human beings are necessarily fallible, further maintaining that when it comes to the search for truth, disagreement with regard to method should be privileged. Implicit in Mills’ argument is the idea that each approach brings only a perspective to a debate without any one position completely exhausting the discussion. To the extent that no one view brings any discussion to an end

¹⁵Ulises Moulines, “Ontology, Reduction, and the Unity of Science,” in *Philosophy of Science* (The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy), vol. 10, ed. Tian Yu Cao (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, Bowling Green State University, 2000), 21.

¹⁶Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hermann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29.

¹⁷Moser, “Skepticism, Question Begging and Burden Shifting,” 212.

by itself, consensus might prevent the discovery of truths embedded in dissenting positions.¹⁸

Kant finds the appropriation of the mathematical method for the resolution of philosophical problems problematic. In his view, the mathematical paradigm fails as a philosophical strategy because it cannot, for example, provide “transcendental and philosophical proofs,” that are crucial for the resolution of the problem of knowledge.¹⁹ Kant believes that the resolution of the problem of knowledge rests with his critical philosophy, whose strategy is the examination of our cognitive faculties in order to ascertain how much thought can comprehend independently of the mind’s activity.

One important conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing conversation is that there cannot be a sole method of philosophy, even as the aim of every philosophical system remains the attainment of truth and the avoidance of error. There are as many philosophical methods as there are philosophical systems. Philosophical strategies, to the extent that they are based on certain categories or assumptions, remain the sole prerogative of the philosopher, making it difficult, perhaps impossible, to defend the position that there is only one acceptable way of doing philosophy. The strategy for the acquisition of truth is varied for philosophy, and what each method does is merely specify how it arrives at its truth. We will now proceed to look at circular argumentation in Fichte’s system.

¹⁸Miriam Solomon, “Consensus in Science,” in Philosophy of Science (The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy), vol. 10, ed. Tian Yu Cao (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, Bowling Green State University, 2000), 193–4.

¹⁹CPR, B 810.

3.3 The *Wissenschaftslehre* as Circular Epistemology

The issue of when circular demonstration emerged in Fichte's philosophical thought is debatable. For example, Rockmore does not detect any circular reasoning in Fichte's view prior to the review of *Aenesidemus*.²⁰ For his part, Breazeale detects circular tendencies very early in Fichte's theory, and asserts that the tendencies in question are latently evident in his early attempts to formulate his philosophical position, viz., the second edition of An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation, and the first part of his Contribution Toward the Correcting of the Public Judgment of the French Revolution respectively.²¹ Breazeale further contends that in the wake of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte wrestled with the idea of incorporating circular demonstration in his theory, a struggle that received a major boost from his discussion with Johann Jacob Mnioch between November 1792 and March 1793. Breazeale's strategy is to show that circularity has always been a part and parcel of Fichte's thought and not something he abruptly turned to in order to bail out his system when it ran into problems.

While there is consensus in the literature that thought becomes inescapably circular in Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, commentators are disagreed, however, about how to interpret this aspect of his theory, whether such an interpretation should proceed in accordance with the letter of his system or whether it should be conducted in a manner that is consistent with its spirit. I will identify the former approach as the one of the

²⁰Tom Rockmore, "Antifoundationalism, Circularity, and the Spirit of Fichte," in Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanity Books, 1994), 104.

²¹Daniel Breazeale, "Circles and Grounds in Jena Wissenschaftslehre," in Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanity Books, 1994), 45.

foundationalist insight, and the latter as that of the antifoundationalist perspective. I define foundationalism operationally as “the form of epistemological strategy that intends to identify secure foundations for knowledge.”²² I will understand antifoundationalism as “any effort to validate knowledge claims without appealing to an absolute or ultimate basis known with certainty, whether the latter is held to be unattainable or the model of knowledge as a unified structure resting on a foundation of certainty is rejected in principle.”²³

In what follows, I will review the debate between these two modes of interpretation as they relate to circular proof in Fichte. I plan to focus on the robust discussion on this subject between Tom Rockmore and Alain Perrinjacquet. The debate between Rockmore and Perrinjacquet, as I understand it, concerns what could be perceived as a tension in Fichte’s position, namely, his insistence, on the one hand, that philosophical inquiry should be deduced from a self-evident principle known to be true, and his submission, on the other hand, that the principle in question cannot be demonstrated as true.²⁴

Rockmore interprets this as Fichte’s way of conceding that even though philosophy is genuinely concerned with the search for truth, it is impossible to attain that truth in practice. In this regard, according to Rockmore, philosophy, on Fichte’s account becomes a hypothetical science. Perrinjacquet disagrees with Rockmore, and denies any tension in Fichte’s position on account of the so-called twin problem in his view.

Perrinjacquet argues that Fichte aimed to design a philosophical system whose status was

²²Rockmore, “Antifoundationalism, Circularity, and the Spirit of Fichte,” 100

²³Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel*, 8.

²⁴J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*. With First and Second Introductions, trans. and ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93.

comparable to geometry and, therefore, capable of yielding certain truths. Furthermore, Perrinjaquet maintains, even though Fichte rejects a theoretical ground for philosophy, he identifies a practical principle that would facilitate philosophy in the acquisition of truth. Suffice it to say that it is not the scope of this dissertation to engage in an elaborate reconstruction of the arguments of Rockmore and Perrinjaquet; rather, it is a recap of their arguments, as I understand them to relate to the present discussion.

3.3.1 Circular Justification in Fichte: Rockmore and Perrinjaquet in Conversation

3.3.1.1 Tom Rockmore

In recent times, Tom Rockmore has been the most vocal advocate of the antifoundationalist reading of Fichte's system. His preference for an antifoundationalist interpretation is informed by several factors. First, he is convinced that Fichte sought to be true to the spirit of Kant's view, the thrust of whose argument makes objectivity an extension of subjectivity. Rockmore thinks that Fichte's open admission about the circular nature of human thought, if it is to be consistent with the spirit of Kant's transcendental project, cannot ignore the fact that the mind cannot produce certainty, an idea that was introduced by Kant's so-called Copernican turn in philosophy.

Second, Rockmore sees a correlation between Fichte's manifest admission about the circular nature of the mind and his submission that philosophy arises out of the problems of life. Rockmore hypothesizes that if the idea of an initial ground of system is to be taken seriously, that is, if theory is to be derived from practice, then we are left with the option that only practice can deal with the problems of life, a domain that has proven incapable of yielding certainty.

Rockmore's third reason for what he calls the failure of foundationalism as a philosophical strategy. For Rockmore, foundationalism in any form is "closely related to a traditional, normative view of knowledge as a permanent, ahistorical framework or matrix of reality, the way things are, the nature of the world."²⁵ Since foundationalism fails, according to Rockmore, we are better off turning to circularity. One thing Rockmore thinks is well known is the fact that circularity cannot provide certainty.²⁶ On the whole, in relation to foundationalist and antifoundationalist perspectives, Rockmore advocates the abandoning of the former while advocating patronage of the latter since, in his view, the former has become antiquated.

Rockmore argues that viewed broadly from the point of view of the reconstruction of the critical philosophy, Fichte could be shown to espouse an antifoundationalist notion of system, that is, a foundationless system of philosophy. In Rockmore's view, this has to be the case, since he does not see any way around what he considers the inherent contradiction in Fichte's view, namely, his insistence, on the one hand, that philosophy should be anchored on a self evident principle, and his claim, on the other, that the principle in question cannot be demonstrated to be true.²⁷ By this forthright admission, maintains Rockmore, Fichte indicates that, "philosophy consists in the search for a first and absolute principle of human knowledge. According to Fichte, such a principle is unlimited and indemonstrable when it is a question of a true first principle."²⁸

To some extent, Rockmore thinks that Fichte makes circularity correlative with a foundationless system. Rockmore elicits a distinction between a founded system, which

²⁵Rockmore, "Antifoundationalism, Circularity and the Spirit of Fichte," 100.

²⁶Ibid., 110.

²⁷Ibid., 81.

²⁸Rockmore, Before and After Hegel, 36.

he equates with the Cartesian Archimedean ground and a foundationless system, which he associates with Fichte's view, and cautions against the tendency to reduce one to the other. To the extent that there is justification for a system, Rockmore argues that such a system has a ground. While Fichte has offered to erect his system on a self-evident ground, Rockmore does not think that Fichte considers this ground final in the Cartesian Archimedean sense. One may wish to recall that Descartes invented the modern concept of mind by deducing the concept of external space from the indubitability of his mind. Thus, in Rockmore's view, Fichte has proven that it is possible to demonstrate our cognitive claims without a Cartesian ground.²⁹

Rockmore conjectures that Fichte's commitment to an unfounded system of knowledge is attested to by Fichte's designation of philosophy as a hypothetical science, that is, that philosophy can never go from likelihood to certainty. Also, he perceives Fichte's process of arriving at knowledge to be circular, a circularity that is inescapable. Based on these considerations, Rockmore concludes:

Both the hypothetical character and the circular nature of philosophy point to the same conclusion: philosophy cannot yield certainty, although knowledge requires it. In other words, what we can know is that the search for knowledge is an endless task because the theoretical requirement of a foundation, in other words noncircular form of reasoning cannot be met in practice.³⁰

While philosophy yearns for certainty, Rockmore does not think that it can be achieved epistemologically.

By Fichte's constructing an unfounded system of knowledge, Rockmore suggests that Fichte manifestly concedes the impossibility of eliminating circular argumentation from philosophical consideration. He argues:

²⁹Ibid., 36-37.

³⁰Ibid., 38.

Fichte perceives a circular relation between the first principle and the theory that follows from it. For the first principle underlies the latter, and the latter returns, so to speak, to the former. The result is a circle, if Fichte is to be believed, the unsurpassable circle of the human mind: either knowledge constitutes itself within the framework of this necessary circularity, or knowledge is not possible.³¹

In this way, according to Rockmore, Fichte makes knowledge self-grounding.

For Rockmore, Fichte's espousal of circular justification is indicative of his departure from Descartes as well as Reinhold, who seeks to make Kant fit a Cartesian model of mind. Fichte rehabilitates a strategy that was previously associated with failed attempts at justification. Rockmore asserts:

Fichte certainly shares Reinhold's acceptance of the basic rationalist's model of system in terms of an initial principle. But in consequence of his rejection of the view that this first principle can be established as correct, Fichte makes the very circularity, which Reinhold sought to avoid as a mistake in reasoning constitutive of knowledge. It follows that circularity cannot be avoided but rather must be acknowledged.³²

Second, it means that, according to Rockmore, by casting circular demonstration in new light, Fichte is abandoning a quasi-linear approach to knowledge that has tended to dominate the Western philosophical tradition since Aristotle for a circular one.

3.3.1.2 Alain Perrinjacquet

Alain Perrinjacquet objects to Rockmore's antifoundationalist reading of Fichte, claiming that it distorts Fichte's philosophical position. Like his other counterparts bringing a foundationalist perspective to Fichte, such as Daniel Breazeale and Wayne Martin, Perrinjacquet argues that Fichte is developing a foundationalist theory of knowledge in the quest for certainty. He takes seriously the Reinholdian influence on

³¹Ibid., 38.

³²Rockmore, *Hegel's Circular Epistemology*, 43.

Fichte that went a long way in shaping Fichte's views, something Perrinjacquet is surprised that Rockmore's account fails to acknowledge.

Exploiting the Reinholdian/Fichteian connection, Martin maintains that early in his career, Fichte considered himself Reinhold's disciple, and that not only did he succeed Reinhold as the chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Jena, he also continued with the the exposition of the critical philosophy in its Reinholdian presentation. In Martin's view, Fichte inherited Reinhold's audience that was already acquainted with Reinhold's presentation of the critical philosophy, including its foundationalism, and that it would have been a serious mistake on Fichte's part to substitute for Reinhold's method something completely new. According to Martin, in order not to alienate his audience at Jena, Fichte would have elected to maintain Reinhold's formulation of the critical system, including its foundationalism.³³

Unlike Rockmore, Perrinjacquet does not perceive any contradiction between Fichte's proposal to deduce philosophical inquiry from a self-evident principle known to be true, on the one hand, and the concession that the principle in question cannot be demonstrated to be true. He notes:

Although Fichte rejects the idea of a theoretical ground of philosophy, as Rockmore maintains, he provides a practical foundation for this science. Philosophy acquires in that case a quite different status than that of a merely hypothetical form of knowledge.³⁴

Perrinjacquet understands Fichte to be arguing that the resolution of the problem of knowledge should take place at the level of practical rather than theoretical philosophy.

³³Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity*, 83.

³⁴Alain Perrinjacquet, "Some Remarks Concerning the Circularity of Philosophy and the Evidence of its First Principle in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*," in *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Books, 1994), 72.

Hence, argues Perrinjaquet, Fichte's rejection of theoretical reason as the fundamental ground of philosophy concerns an initial type of ground and should not be construed as his opposition to the idea of ground in general.³⁵

Like Rockmore, Perrinjaquet is willing to concede that Fichte grants that there is more than one approach to philosophy. However, he maintains that Fichte also concedes that what makes it possible for the philosopher to justify his cognitive claims in his system is the philosopher's conviction. According to Perrinjacquet, Fichte believes that, unlike his predecessors, including Kant, who lacked conviction about their philosophical systems, he is fully convinced about the certainty of the initial ground of his Wissenschaftslehre: "His description of his conviction concerning the truth of this principle allows no room for the sort of probabilism that would be implied by a merely circular foundation."³⁶

Breazeale concurs:

The misconception that Fichte believed the certainty of the first principle of the Wissenschaftslehre could or ought to be somehow "proven" must be firmly rejected. On the contrary, he insisted that the first principle of a systematic philosophy must be "purely and simply certain" and explicitly added that such a proposition "cannot derive its certainty from its connection with other propositions." When Fichte concedes that 'every proof presupposes something that is simply indemonstrable' he is manifestly not suggesting that the first principle from which we proceed in philosophy cannot be known to be true; instead, he is insisting that the first principle must be self-evident.³⁷

Since Fichte believed that philosophy, as the science of science, has the onus of establishing what "certainty means and what it means to know something with certainty,"

³⁵Ibid., 80.

³⁶Ibid., 78-79.

³⁷Breazeale, Circles and Grounds in the Jena Wissenschaftslehre, 36-37.

Breazeale argues, he could not have conceived philosophy as a “hypothetical form of knowledge.”³⁸

Breazeale attributes an antifoundationalist reading of Fichte to the failure to distinguish between extra systematic and intra systematic strands of circular demonstration in Fichte’s position. Breazeale designates extra-systematic circularity Fichte’s forthright admission of the circularity of reason, whereas by intra-systematic circularity he means Fichte’s allusion to the latent instances of the circularity that characterizes the relationships shared by the various propositions within his system. While Fichte may have considered the former type of circularity unavoidable, he would have been open to the idea that the latter type could, under certain circumstances be waived. More specifically, Breazeale understands by extra systematic circularity, the presuppositions that philosophy must entertain, including its fundamental ground and laws regulating its operations, and therefore, according to Breazeale, “the condition for the possibility of inquiry—including inquiry into the possibility of consciousness itself.”³⁹

Perrinjacquet acknowledges that Fichte assigns a demonstrative function to circular reasoning in Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but insists that the function in question is aimed at showing the discovery of the principle rather than establishing the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In his view, Fichte utilizes circular proof to establish three things. The first circular function of thought, according to Perrinjacquet, concerns the completeness of his philosophical system. Perrinjacquet appropriately reports that Fichte makes the first principle of his system the highest principle of philosophy and that as such, the starting principle of his theory furnishes the

³⁸Ibid., 36.

³⁹Ibid., 44, 49.

certainty of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as well as the certainty of subsequent propositions in his theory. To underscore the completeness of his position, argues Perrinjacquet, Fichte turns to circular proof to show that the outcome of his philosophical inquiry is also its starting principle.⁴⁰

The second function, according to Perrinjacquet, pertains to the uniqueness of his philosophical theory. While Fichte insists that the initial ground of his theory is the highest principle of philosophy, he is willing to grant that one could possibly detect other instances of knowledge that may not be deduced on the basis of the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. These instances of knowledge may be true, even though they may possibly stand in opposition to the initial ground of the science of knowledge.

Perrinjacquet indicates that Fichte admits, by this concession, that there could be more than one principle of philosophy and, by implication, more than one possible system of knowledge. But since the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the highest philosophical principle, the system it grounds is unique even if contradicted by systems derived on the strength of other principles.⁴¹

The third function Fichte assigns circularity, according to Perrinjacquet, relates to the laws of thought philosophy employs for its deduction. By this, claims Perrinjacquet, Fichte's philosophical view presupposes the laws which regulate or govern the operations of the mind, and that these laws are contained within the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.⁴²

The foundationalist perspective seemingly concedes that there is textual evidence to support the position that Fichte makes philosophy self-grounding, in terms of deducing

⁴⁰Perrinjacquet, "Some Remarks Concerning the Circularity of Philosophy and the Evidence of Its First Principle in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*," 75.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 75.

⁴²*Ibid.*

possible experience from the initial ground of his system. Breazeale claims, however, that this does not tell the whole story. He argues that Fichte judges the first principle of his system capable of yielding only inner truth. But since he thought a philosophical system ought to possess inner and outer truth, maintains Breazeale, Fichte believed that the outer truth of his system could be provided by the actual construction of a system of philosophy:

What is hypothetical is not the certainty or inner truth of this principle; instead, the philosopher's "hypothesis" is simply that this immediately certain and self-evident proposition is in addition capable of serving as the first principle of a transcendental deduction of experience. It is this hypothesis that must subsequently be confirmed by actually constructing a system on the basis of this Grundsatz.⁴³

Breazeale maintains that, considered by itself, Fichte's principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which is the I, to be completely certain.

Perrinjacquet further views Fichte's nondemonstrability of the fundamental ground of the *Wissenschaftslehre* argument from the point of view of the disagreement between idealism and dogmatism concerning the starting point of philosophy, especially in light of Fichte's insight that neither system can refute the other on its own terms. He states:

Fichte grants that he cannot demonstrate to the dogmatists themselves that their starting point is wrong. The reason for this inability is that transcendental philosophy and dogmatic realism share no common principle, and someone can prove something to someone else only if they grant at least one common principle. Moreover the dogmatist cannot be possibly constrained to adopt the starting point of the transcendental idealist. This starting point cannot be externally enforced, since it is the consciousness of freedom.⁴⁴

⁴³Breazeale, "Circles and Grounds in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*," 51.

⁴⁴Perrinjacquet, "Some Remarks Concerning the Circularity of Philosophy and the Evidence of Its First Principle in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*," 79.

Although the idealist is not able to convince the dogmatic philosopher about the starting principle of his system, it is emphatically not the case, according to Perrinjacquet, that the starting principles of the two systems are both self-evident. Rather it is the case that the starting principle of idealism, to the extent that it founds the system of freedom, cannot be enforced from outside.

Suffice it to make one quick comment. Since the present disagreement between Rockmore and Perrinjacquet borders on whether an analysis of Fichte's circular proof should be conducted in accordance with the letter or the spirit of his theory, it may be worthwhile heeding Breazeale's caution against the tendency to overstretch the letter/spirit distinction. Breazeale quite correctly notes that a satisfactory characterization of Fichte's philosophical view requires both approaches, maintaining that looking at a philosophical theory strictly from the angle of its letter may render the position in question dull. Similarly, he fears that an analysis of a position strictly in terms of its spirit to the exclusion of its letter may encourage the attribution of views to an author that are not his own. Breazeale rightly notes that both approaches are required if justice is to be done to Fichte's philosophical theory.⁴⁵

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, my sympathies lie with the antifoundationalist perspective in the present debate. If there is more than one way of interpreting a philosophical theory, as is emphatically the case, there is definitely more than one way of looking at Fichte's philosophical system, including an antifoundationalist reading, since no single insight completely exhausts his view.

⁴⁵Daniel Breazeale, "The Spirit of the Wissenschaftslehre," in The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.

Furthermore, given the complex nature of Fichte's thought, excluding other interpretations may not be the right way to proceed.

Second, although Fichte advocates the grounding of philosophy on a self-evident principle of philosophy, which opens his system to a foundationalist interpretation, both participants in the current conversation agree that Fichte's notion of foundationalism is not traditional in terms of the search for an Archimedean ground. I find Baur's comments in this regard very insightful. Baur notes:

On the one hand, Fichte's thought seems to be a form of foundationalism: after all, Fichte is seeking to give an account of the ground of all possible experience. On the other hand, Fichte's project seems to be antifoundationalist: traditional foundationalism entails the search for some kind of foundationalism that is other than the doubting self and to which the doubting self may appeal in order to put an end to its doubt. By contrast, the first principle or "foundation" of Fichte's philosophy is nothing other than the questioning, doubting self-consciously fallible self that knows that no given content can be necessarily determinative for it.⁴⁶

Baur makes the important point that while Fichte's theory may be foundationalist, it is not foundationalism in the traditional sense since it depends on nothing "other than the doubting self" for the establishing of its claims to know.

3.3.2 Fichte, Systematicity, and Circular Justification in Philosophy

Fichte's open admission that human thought is inescapably circular occurs in the review of *Aenesidemus*. In the work in question, he writes:

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 we can conceive, is necessarily confined. Anyone who wants to escape from this circle does not know himself and does not know what he wants.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Michael Baur, "Self-Measure and Self-Moderation in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 91.

Fichte later restates this claim in Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre, his attempt to present his thought as a coherent system, advising the adherents of the critical system not to be “embarrassed” by the fact that human reason is circular:

No one has cause to be embarrassed by the existence of this circle. To desire the abolition of this circle is to desire that human knowledge be totally without any foundation. It is the desire that nothing should be absolutely certain and that all human knowledge should instead be only conditional, that no proposition should be valid in itself, but rather that every proposition should be so only on the condition that the proposition from which it follows is valid. In a word, it is to claim that there is no immediate truth at all, but only mediated truth – but without anything to mediate it. Whoever so wishes can always ask himself what he would know if his I were not an I, that is, if he did not exist, and if he could not distinguish something not-I from his I.⁴⁸

Fichte maintains that his manifest admission about the circular nature of thought constitutes one of the major differences between the *Wissenschaftslehre* and other philosophical systems, for although, according to Fichte, other systems of philosophy are fully aware that reason is necessarily circular, only his *Wissenschaftslehre* is willing to concede it. It may be recalled that Fichte conceived his circular strategy during the review of *Aenesidemus*. As acknowledged by Fichte, *Aenesidemus* conferred the painful realization that neither Kant nor Reinhold had resolved the problem of philosophy, that is, neither had established philosophy as a systematic science.

Ameriks notes that the concern with systematicity was not unique to the critical philosophy or German idealism, as previous intellectual traditions, including rationalism and empiricism, all wrestled with this problem. The belief has been widespread in

⁴⁷J. G. Fichte, “The Review of Aenesidemus,” in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 67.

⁴⁸J. G. Fichte, “Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre, or of So-called Philosophy,” in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 119.

philosophy that the ability to refute skepticism of any kind is contingent upon the ability to show that philosophy is a scientific discipline.⁴⁹ This belief, according to Ameriks, was inspired by the successes of the new sciences, in particular the scientific revolution initiated by Galileo, Newton, and Descartes—the new sciences were perceived as providing a blueprint for achieving systematicity in any given field. Ameriks maintains:

The strong systematicity of their works was a striking feature from the start; the general laws that they contained, and the way they were combined to explain many very different kinds of phenomena were critical to their initial formulations in the precise mathematical “system” of the world.⁵⁰

Although Kant’s position was inspired, among others, by Descartes, who is credited with the creation of a new physics and a new ground whose epistemological characteristics seemed to belong to the realm of ordinary science or common knowledge, he flatly rejected the utilization of the mathematical strategy for philosophical inquiry. For Kant, his critical theory was synonymous with systematic science.

Rescher intimates that two notions of system tended to dominate the systematicity debate at the time of Kant. The first notion of system, which predominated the scientific discussion, was in evidence in “Euclid’s systematization of geometry,” “Archimedes’ systematization of statistics,” and Newton’s systematization of celestial mechanics.” The second understanding of system, according to Rescher, was prevalent within the rationalist system of philosophy and characteristic of the theories of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.⁵¹ Kant understood system in terms of the “unity of manifold modes of

⁴⁹Karl Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54.

⁵⁰Ibid., 52-53.

⁵¹Nicholas Rescher, Kant and the Reach of Reason: Studies in Kant’s Theory of Rational Systematization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65.

knowledge under one idea,” and whose realization was made possible by the art of system creation, architectonic.⁵²

Rescher argues that Kant’s idea of knowledge as the interrelating of facts makes him more sympathetic to the rationalist philosophers than the scientists, especially Christian Wolff who “stressed the deductive interaction of the individual propositions.”⁵³ Kant’s identification with the rationalist philosophers was borne out of the quest to construct a priori system of possible experience, as well as his desire to demonstrate that experience rightfully belongs in the domain of possible experience. And that as such, Kant thought he was better served if he engaged concepts as they emerged rather than proceed from clearly defined concepts like mathematics.⁵⁴

Kant’s understanding of system, construed to be normative by both critics and followers, was rejected. In particular, his contemporaries feared that he failed in his project of the unification of thought he claimed to have accomplished. If the refutation of skepticism was based on the ability to establish philosophy as a science, then Kant’s peers were concerned that his failure to achieve one, namely, his failure to bring systematicity to philosophy, translated into an inability to refute skepticism. For the post-Kantian German idealists, the way to make Kant realize his objective rested with the provision of a new foundation for his theory, i.e., deduce philosophy from a unitary ground known to be true.

The idea of system that calls for the standing of philosophy on a unitary principle acknowledged to be true was the brainchild of Reinhold, who pioneered the

⁵²CPR, A 622/B 860.

⁵³Rockmore, *Hegel’s’ Circular Epistemology*, 18.

⁵⁴Vladimir Zeman, “Between Kant and Hegel: Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire System of Knowledge,” in *New Essays in Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 200.

reconstruction of the critical system. Reinhold's principle of consciousness, his highest principle of philosophy, related the representation to the subject and the object and distinguished it from both. While he supported the general idea of basing philosophy on a self-evident principle, Fichte queried Reinhold's principle of consciousness, claiming that it failed as the highest ground of philosophy. What this suggests is that despite Fichte's insistence that his position is an extension of Kant's, his understanding of system, in terms of the ground of philosophy, is consistent with Reinhold's system rather than Kant's. In the wake of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte parted ways with Reinhold by adding a circular dimension to thought.

With respect to circularity, Fichte was anticipated by Vico, who had previously held a circular view of history. Giambattista Vico (1688–1744) started out as a pupil of radical Cartesianism before abandoning it for a circular view of human history. Taking as his premise the principle that the truth is made, Vico rejected the idea of eternal truths, especially as proposed and defended within Cartesianism, a view that was heavily influenced by his studies in literature, history, law and Greek societies. Berlin argues:

Vico became convinced that the notion of timeless truths, perfect and incorrigible clothed in universally intelligible symbols which anyone, at any time, in any circumstances, might be fortunate enough to perceive in an instantaneous flash of illumination was a chimera.⁵⁵

Contra Descartes, who made the ego discovered by the cogito the most secure ground of knowledge, Vico makes the true correlative with the made. Vico holds truth to be the creation of humans, further arguing that mathematical truths, thought to be pure by Cartesianism, were our inventions after all. And to the extent that they are our own creation, mathematical truths are valid, Vico maintains, “only about concepts not the

⁵⁵Berlin, *The Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hermann and Herder*, 29.

objective world.” For Vico, the a priori deductive method is not applicable outside the framework of mathematics and the natural sciences.⁵⁶

The difference between Fichte and Vico, however, is that, unlike the former, Vico does not attach any epistemological significance to his cyclical view of history. While Fichte himself may not have engaged in a systematic construction of a circular epistemological theory, there is textual support that the method is in evidence in his philosophical position. For example, circular proof could be found in Fichte’s characterization of the relation of the ideal and the real, the I to the Not-I, the subject to the object, etc. What I intend to do in the next section is to appeal to Fichte’s dialectical reasoning, as embedded in his three principles of knowledge, in an attempt to show that his view is circular.

3.4 Fichte’s Three Principles of Knowledge and Circular Demonstration

Fichte’s three principles of knowledge are intended to highlight the opposition or contradiction that characterizes the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, form and content, the ideal and the real, practical and theoretical reason. *Prima facie*, the idea of contradiction appears incompatible with Fichte’s overall philosophical project of ridding philosophy of its dualistic tendencies, which he claims rendered Kant’s position unsatisfactory. However, Breazeale calls attention to an inherent dualism in Fichte’s view that is often overlooked. He writes:

Despite influential claims to the contrary, Fichte remained throughout his Jena period a dualist of a sort, a thinker for whom difference remains fundamental and philosophically irreducible and for whom pure can never be more than, on the one hand, a philosophical hypothesis or fiction, produced by reflective abstraction for the purposes of a mere “thought-experiment,” or, on the other hand, a necessary

⁵⁶Ibid., 28.

goal or practical demand, posited—but never achieved—by the finite “I,” which finds itself compelled by the very structure of selfhood to maintain that it ought to be what it never is: namely, infinite in its freedom and unified in its nature.⁵⁷

Fichte formulates the problem of knowledge in terms of the subject’s interaction with the object. For example, Wood indicates that the fundamental ground of Fichte’s position already presupposes a subject/object relation: “The I, therefore, seems to contain in itself the ground of every relation of a subject to an object, and thereby also the form of every possible subject-object relation, hence the sole sufficient condition for the possibility of all cognition.”⁵⁸

In Breazeale’s view, Fichte understands the freedom/necessity relationship to be necessarily unstable, unstable in the sense that it illustrates the “ongoing temporal process through which the original contradiction between the I’s freedom and its original limitation is transformed into an endless struggle to subordinate the latter to the former: to transform every ought into an is.”⁵⁹ Rockmore corroborates Breazeale’s claim by arguing that viewed from a foundationalist perspective, the three principles of knowledge mirror Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception that grounds Kant’s system.⁶⁰

Although Breazeale identifies dualistic tendencies in Fichte’s philosophical system, he aptly distinguishes Fichte’s brand of dualism from other forms of dualism, including the Kantian, insisting that the Fichtean dualism is neither metaphysical nor psychological, rather it is transcendental. He writes:

Like Fichte’s “idealism,” his “dualism” is neither metaphysical nor psychological in character, nor is it a dualism of reality and appearance. It does not postulate the

⁵⁷Breazeale, “The Spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” 189.

⁵⁸Allen Wood, “The I as Principle of Practical Philosophy,” in *The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel*, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 95.

⁵⁹Breazeale, “The Spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” 191.

⁶⁰Rockmore, “Antifoundationalism, Circularity and the Spirit of Fichte,” 101.

interaction of two sorts of substance, nor is it a description of how an independent reality appears to a finite consciousness. Nor does the Wissenschaftslehre pretend to recount the acts and passive states of some special sort of “mental objects.” The dualism of the Jena Wissenschaftslehre is strictly transcendental and is implicit in the structure of consciousness itself, at least as that is characterized within this system. It is a dualism of infinity and finitude, of self-positing and feeling, of freedom and facticity, or, to employ the technical terminology of the Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre, or Tathandlung (Act) and Anstoss (check)—neither of which can be ultimately reduced to nor derived from the other and both of which are necessary for the possibility of ordinary consciousness and self-consciousness.⁶¹

Fichte does not think that the reality of freedom can be derived from that of limitation or vice versa. But he thinks that, transcendently, one could be presupposed as a necessary condition for the possibility of the other. Although Fichte’s dualism is transcendental, due to the fact that the three principles of knowledge refer to the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, form and content, ideal and real, etc., analyzed from an antifoundationalist standpoint, Fichte’s three principles could be utilized to support a circular reading of his theory.

Fichte’s first principle of knowledge states: “That whose being or essence consists simply in the fact that it posits itself as something existing, is the self as absolute object.”⁶² His second principle of knowledge stipulates: “So surely is a not-self absolutely opposed to the self.”⁶³ The third principle of knowledge claims: “Both self and not-self are posited as divisible.”⁶⁴ To be sure, this constitutes a major shift in Fichte’s position. On the one hand, he postulates a fundamental ground for his system. On the other hand, the actual delivery of his system leaves him with a trio. Remarkably, Fichte

⁶¹Breazeale, “The Spirit of the Wissenschaftslehre,” 189-90.

⁶²Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 98.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 108.

does not see this as constituting a problem to his system since, in his view, the second and the third principles derive their certainty from the certainty of the first.

Let us look at the three principles more closely. The first principle posits the absolute existence of the self, something that reveals the most primordial act of the mind, i.e., reason's awareness of its free activity. The I is able to posit itself unconditionally because it operates by its own laws and, hence, cannot be conditioned by the outside world. But Fichte perceives a problem here. Although reason, in its most primordial mode, is able to generate its content, namely, affirm its existence unconditionally, Fichte fears that the I's affirmation of its existence alone does not constitute knowledge or consciousness because consciousness is necessarily consciousness of an object.⁶⁵ Due to the fact that Fichte considers knowledge to be both active and passive, the absolute act of consciousness, the self's self-positing activity, which is infinite and unbounded, has to be negated by another absolute act of consciousness.

The second principle, that of the I's counterpositing by the not-I, which is conditioned relative to content, offers the opposition that is required to keep the I in check (*Anstoss*). Interestingly, the act of counterpositing, another absolute act of consciousness, is performed by the I itself. Copleston indicates that the counterpositing act of the not-I is also absolute because the counterpositing object is not your typical object but transcendental, meaning that Fichte entertains a generic concept of objectivity,

⁶⁵Sally Sedgwick, "Introduction: Idealism From Kant to Hegel," in The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

objectivity counterposited within subjectivity.⁶⁶ But since both the positing subject and the counterposited object are absolute, Fichte is concerned that the I and the not-I run the risk of annulling each other. Fichte is afraid that this threatens the sustenance of consciousness, something that should not be allowed to happen. So Fichte has to find a way of preventing the I from cancelling the not-I and vice versa. And the solution is the third principle.

The I's absolute affirmation and the not-I's absolute opposition, conditioned relative to form, prompt an act of synthesis, an act that momentarily unifies the subject and the object by allowing the I and the not-I, through the process of reciprocal determination to confront and limit each other.⁶⁷ The synthetic principle which represents the resolution of the thesis/antithesis disagreement may turn out to be unsatisfactory or one-sided and trigger another opposition, reducing synthesis to a thesis for the process to start all over again. LaVopa summarizes the process this way:

In the larger structure of the argument, theoretical knowledge turns out to harbor a fundamental contradiction, one that can be resolved only by demonstrating that the possibility of theoretical reason is contingent on its subordination to the moral knowledge that Kant called "practical" reasoning. In the transition from the theoretical to the practical, the deduction reverses direction; a dialectical spiral out from the first principle becomes a plunge back into it. Having extended the text as its point of departure, the self-positing "I" becomes its point of culmination.⁶⁸

Thus, Fichte demonstrates the relationship of the I to the not-I by showing that they could be split into further parts.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Frederick Copleston, Modern Philosophy: From the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, vol. VII, (New York: Image Books, 1994), 46.

⁶⁷Chernor Maarjon Jalloh, Fichte's Kant's Interpretation and the Doctrine of Science (Lanham, MD and London: University Press of America, 1988), p. 135.

⁶⁸Anthony J. LaVopa, Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762 – 1799, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 187.

If Rockmore is right, Fichte utilizes the concept of opposition or contradiction to explain consciousness from the point of view of both idealism and realism. Hence, according to Rockmore, he conceives the self as activity, i.e., the self as simultaneously subject and object. From the point of view of idealism, Fichte entertains the notion of a free autonomous subjectivity that is unconstrained by its environment, a characterization of the self that Fichte realizes to be inadequate, since it fails to offer any account of how it is that the I is constituted or affected by nature.⁷⁰ The realization that an account of the self from the perspective of idealism alone is inadequate leads Fichte, according to Rockmore, to provide another from the standpoint of realism. It is by considering the self also from the point of view of realism that will result in a comprehensive account of the self.

Looking at the self from the angle of realism, Rockmore maintains, Fichte acknowledges the contribution of the objects in space in the constitution of knowledge. That is, Fichte hopes to escape the solipsism charge by identifying something the self can reference in the justification of its cognitive claims. While Rockmore understands Fichte to be open to the idea that objects in space contribute to the grounding of knowledge, he explains that reality, in Fichte's view, is reality for us rather than something that is externally imposed on the self. Rockmore thinks that, like Kant, Fichte accepts that both idealism and realism are necessary for a satisfactory theory of knowledge, while maintaining that the resolution of the problem of knowledge is possible at the practical rather than the theoretical level.

⁶⁹Rudolf Makkreel, "Fichte's Dialectical Imagination," in *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Books, 1994), 8–9.

⁷⁰Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel*, 38.

Following from this, it could be concluded that Fichte holds a dual view of subjectivity; from the point of view of realism, Rockmore sees Fichte as embracing the notion of a finite subject; while from the perspective of idealism, Rockmore thinks that Fichte adopts a theoretical view of an infinite subject and, hence, allows both notions of subjectivity to furnish our understanding of self-consciousness.

In Fichte's view, then, consciousness presupposes both freedom and limitation, as the former is necessary for the possibility of the latter and vice versa. But unlike the the Kantian things-in-themselves, the check involved in this relationship is not external but internal to consciousness. The influence of the other is not causal but an influence that is compatible with "freedom and intelligence, a summons or invitation."⁷¹

Conclusion

This chapter investigates the import of circular strategy within the framework of Fichte's overall philosophical position. It argues that appraised from the standpoint of its spirit rather than its letter, Fichte's philosophical system could be shown to be developing a circular epistemology, understood as a theory of knowledge that does not postulate clearly identifiable starting and ending points for philosophical inquiry. Broadly understood, it is the desire to unify practical and theoretical reason that leads Fichte to embrace a circular theory of knowledge.

By the same token, it could also be shown that despite his attempts to overcome the dualism by adopting a monistic approach to the problem of knowledge, Fichte, in certain readings, still formulates the problem of knowledge in terms of an interaction

⁷¹Robert Williams, "The Question of the Other in Fichte's Thought," in Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Books, 1994), 145.

between the subject and the object, ideal and real, form and content. However, unlike his predecessors, including Kant, who construed circular justification in terms of a vicious circularity, in the process presenting it as something to be avoided, Fichte rehabilitates the strategy forcing us to see it in new light. I conclude by arguing that Fichte's circular proof calls attention to the fact that claims to know cannot be validated independently of the finite human being who is interested in the question of knowledge. More importantly, Fichte's circular demonstration invites us to acknowledge our fallibility as human beings.

Chapter Four

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*: A Critique

Introduction

In the Second Introduction to The Science of Knowledge, Fichte posits: “I have long asserted, and repeat once more, that my system is nothing other than the Kantian; this means it contains the same view of things, but is in method quite independent of the Kantian presentation.”¹ Although this claim was quite appropriately rejected by Kant, it was well received by the young Schelling and Hegel, who believed at first that Fichte’s philosophical position was an advance on Kant’s. For instance, in a draft of a letter to Hegel, Schelling writes:

Philosophy is not yet at an end. Kant has provided the results. The premises are still missing. And who can understand results without premises? Perhaps a Kant, but what is the great crowd to make of it? Fichte, the last time he was here, said that one must have the genius of a Socrates to fathom Kant. I find this truer everyday. We must continue still further with philosophy. Kant has swept everything away, but how is the crowd to notice? One must smash it to pieces before their very eyes, so they grasp it in their hands. The great Kantians now everywhere to be seen have got stuck on the letter, and bless themselves on seeing still so much before them. I am definitely convinced that the old superstition of so-called natural religion as well as of positive religion has in the minds of most already once more being combined with the Kantian letter. It is fun to see how quickly they can get to the moral proof. Before you turn around the Deus ex machina springs forth, the personal individual Being who sits in heaven above! Fichte will raise philosophy to a height at which even most of the hitherto Kantians will become giddy. I am now receiving the beginning of the detailed exposition from Fichte himself, the Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge.²

¹J. G. Fichte: The Science of Knowledge: With First and Second Introductions, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 4.

²“Schelling’s Reply of January 5, 1795” in Hegel: The Letters. Translated by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29.

In the above correspondence, Schelling alludes to what is widely believed to constitute the liability of Kant's philosophical position, namely, the noumena/phenomena split, while expressing confidence in Fichte's ability to correct the problem in question.

The issue of Fichte's Kantianism is a controversial one and continues to generate intense debate in contemporary philosophical discussion. Karl Ameriks finds the argument that Fichte's view is a variant of Kant's, or for that matter that Fichte's philosophical theory surpasses that of Kant, a laughable proposition. He thinks it ridiculous that shortly after Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy was widely held as a major breakthrough in philosophy, attempts were made to subordinate it to the theories of his followers, including that of Fichte.³ Ameriks is disappointed that these claims were made while Kant was still around. Ameriks insists that a distinction should be drawn between the philosophical positions of Kant and Fichte since, in his view, the latter read the former through Reinhold's *Elementary Philosophy* that sought to return Kant to Cartesian ideals.

Other commentators, for instance, Zöller, perceive a certain degree of correlation between the systems of Kant and Fichte. While they agree that certain aspects of Fichte's theory are consistent with the spirit of Kant's transcendental project, they also observe that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is an original philosophical position in its own right. These commentators insist that Fichte should have moderated his claims with respect to his Kantianism or at least qualify it. To the best of their knowledge, Fichte's

³Karl Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109.

relation to Kant is “a curious mixture of unconditional allegiance and metacritical distancing.”⁴

I argue, with Rockmore, that “although deeply influenced by the critical philosophy, Fichte’s position, which is never a restatement of Kant’s, is always very much his own.”⁵ I will utilize a historical approach to argue that, on the one hand, Fichte’s theory is true to the spirit of Kant’s Copernican turn. On the other hand, however, his *Wissenschaftslehre* is a philosophical system in its own right. Fichte’s philosophical system marks a significant departure from the systems of his predecessors, including Kant and Reinhold. Although Fichte himself was cognizant of the fact that his views were influenced by Kant and Reinhold, he was equally convinced that his science of knowledge was a philosophical project of its own.

4.1 Fichte’s Relationship to Kant

Nevertheless, Fichte consistently maintains that his philosophical theory is Kantianism properly understood. This makes it incumbent on the person interested in understanding the relationship in question to take seriously this Fichtean claim, especially his understanding of how his relationship to his master was instrumental to the evolution of his original philosophical theory. This approach would help us to appreciate why Fichte espoused the views that he did. It would also assist us with the understanding of the issues his system was meant to address.

⁴Günter Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

⁵Tom Rockmore, “Introduction” in *New Essays in Fichte’s Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 9.

Fichte's relationship to Kant is a reflection of Kant's relationship to post-Kantian German idealism, which could aptly be described as ambivalent, perhaps complex. In the immediate aftermath of Kant's Copernican turn, the post-Kantian German idealists considered themselves Kantians, identifying with the principles of his critical system.

Their Kantianism was challenged almost immediately. Although attracted by the critical philosophy, the post-Kantian German idealists expressed reservations about the delivery of Kant's philosophical theory. They were concerned that Kant failed to accomplish the task he had set for himself. In particular, they took issue with Kant's retention of a limited notion of ideality, claiming that it diminished the efficacy of his Copernican revolution in philosophy. In their view, the systematicity Kant promised was nowhere present in what he presented to the public. Thus, by their criticism of Kant, the post-Kantian German idealists transformed themselves into the critics of Kant's critical method.

Despite their reservations about the presentation of Kant's system, the idealists were resolved that Kant's position should be reconstructed, not abandoned as advocated by his early critics, especially Hermann, Herder, and Jacobi.⁶ It should be indicated that while the motivating circumstances for their attraction to the critical method is the same for the idealists, it is inaccurate to characterize post-Kantian German idealism as a homogeneous movement, as each idealist "pursued a very individual project that was guided by the very assumptions concerning what philosophy is all about." For Fichte, it

⁶Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling," in The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117.

meant substituting Kant's modest account of knowledge for a radical one.⁷

Fichte's initial relationship to Kant could be traced to 1791 when the latter hosted him in Königsberg, a relationship that became warmer after the publication of An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation. Fichte's early attempts to introduce himself to the sage of Königsberg, failed leaving him disappointed. It took the appearance of the Versuch in order for him to win the notice of Kant, who arranged for their second meeting, which was beneficial to Fichte in several ways. For example, Kant was instrumental to the publication of the Versuch. Also, based on Kant's recommendation he got a teaching position in Danzig. Very significantly, Kant's perceived endorsement removed whatever doubts Fichte may have had about his ability to do philosophy, which also went a long way to transform a hitherto unknown private tutor into a philosopher of consequence in eighteenth-century Germany.

In relation to the reconstruction of the critical system, a task that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* partially represents, Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie* plays a pivotal role. Although not a well known philosophical figure, Reinhold is important in post-Kantian German idealism tradition for a variety of reasons. First, he pioneered the revision of the critical system, in the process setting the agenda that went a long way to influence the philosophical thoughts of other post-Kantian German idealists.

Second, even though his concept of system differs in many respects from Kant's, it was Reinhold, not Fichte, the self-proclaimed legitimate successor to Kant, that Kant endorsed as possessing the correct view of his system.

Third, it was Reinhold's reformulation of the critical system that prompted the skeptical attack on the transcendental system. We recall that in his quest to recast the

⁷Zöllner, Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy, 11.

critical theory, Reinhold offered to secure philosophy on the principle of consciousness. By this proposal, Reinhold wanted to show that consciousness was grounded in self-consciousness. He also sought to show that both practical and theoretical reason were grounded in the faculty of representation. *Aenesidemus* challenged Reinhold to demonstrate how every activity of the mind could be reduced to representation. Implicit in this is that despite Fichte's claim that his philosophical position was a direct consequence of Kant's transcendental system, I hold that it was Reinhold's Elementary Philosophy that served as the trigger event for the conception of his original philosophical view, that is, Kant's views as received and interpreted by Reinhold.

So far, I have detected two influences that shaped Fichte's philosophical view, influences he himself quite appropriately acknowledges, as can be evidenced from the Preface to the First Edition of Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre. In the passage in question, Fichte writes:

I leave to future ages the task of fathoming the genius of this man who, often as if inspired on high, drove philosophical judgment so decisively from the standpoint at which he found it toward its final goal. I am just as sincerely convinced that nothing, following Kant's spirit of genius, could contribute more to philosophy than Reinhold's systematic spirit, and I believe that I recognize the honorable place which Reinhold's Elementary Philosophy will always be accorded, despite the further progress which philosophy must necessarily make under the guidance of whomever it may be. I have no malicious wish to undervalue or depreciate any service at all. I realize that every step which science has ever attained had first to be climbed before a higher one could be reached, and I take no personal credit for the fortunate accident of that I am called to work after excellent workmen have gone before me.⁸

Fichte is making two seemingly contradictory claims. On the one hand, he acknowledges the monumental contributions of Kant to the history of Western philosophy. On the other

⁸J. G. Fichte, "Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre or, of so-called Philosophy," in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 96.

hand, he claims that both Kant and Reinhold have failed in their effort to resolve the problem of knowledge, and further insinuates that his theory surpasses theirs.

Without question, there are striking similarities between the views of Kant and Fichte. However, I dare to say that Fichte's theory, to the extent that it aims to overcome the shortcomings of Kant's position, is his own and, therefore, "not on all counts a direct critical response to Kant." As indicated earlier, not only is his theory his own, it represents a major departure from the positions of his predecessors, including Kant's and Reinhold's. Amazingly, Fichte continued to insist that his view was Kantian although he was fully cognizant that his philosophical system was unique. Fichte seems to be rehearsing a familiar theme: like the rest of the post-Kantian German idealists, Fichte came to understand that his path to philosophical greatness went by way of Kant, something he took full advantage of and continued to emphasize even when he went his separate way.

It is common knowledge that Kant's followers and critics alike took issue with the dualistic tendencies that inhered in his position. Although Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy synthesizes thought and experience, it elicits a distinction between objects as they are in themselves and objects as they appear to us. Kant rightly restricts knowledge to objects that are given in experience, while claiming ignorance about objects as they are in themselves. Understandably, Kant wants to be able to explain experience by postulating something that causes it. This move was objected to by his critics on the grounds that it constituted a violation of the underlying principle of the critical method, namely, the application of the categories of the understanding to objects that are not given in sensation.

In the wake of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte came to the painful conclusion that despite Kant's claim to have resolved the problem of philosophy once and for all and, further, despite Reinhold's reconstruction of the critical system, which Fichte momentarily believed had purged philosophy of the "mischief" of things-in-themselves, the scandal confronting philosophy persisted. In the review of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte notes:

Thus, here at the foundation of this new skepticism, we clearly and distinctly have that old mischief which, until Kant, was perpetrated with the thing in itself. It seems to the reviewer anyway that neither Kant nor Reinhold has by any means declared himself loudly and strongly enough against this mischief, which has been the common sense of all objections—skeptical as well as dogmatic—which have been raised against the critical philosophy.⁹

Evidently, Fichte is concerned about what has become the lingering problem of the thing-in-itself, which he maintains constitutes the greatest undoing of Kant's critical enterprise, and which he claims further convinces him that an account of the transition from inner to outer space that does not extend reason beyond sensation is needed if philosophy is to become truly scientific:

Kant demonstrates that the causal principle is applicable merely to appearances, and nevertheless he assumes that there is 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.¹⁰

Fichte believes that Kant has to be saved from himself and, accordingly, appropriates the latter's concept of transcendental unity of apperception to provide an account of self-consciousness as self-positing.

Fichte shares Kant's concern that philosophy stands in need of a fundamental grounding. However, they disagree about how exactly this ground is to be constituted.

⁹J. G. Fichte, "The Review of *Aenesidemus*," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 72–73.

¹⁰J. G. Fichte, "Draft of a Letter to Niethammer, December 6, 1793," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 369.

Fichte's science of knowledge insists that philosophy must be based on a unitary principle that is known to be certain and from which the philosophical discussion can be derived. In the wake of the skeptical attack on the critical project, Fichte also came to the conclusion that Reinhold's principle (Grundsatz) was inadequate as the highest principle of philosophy. Fichte thought that the entire critical method had to be rethought, hence the formulation of his original philosophical theory.

On the basis of his discovery of an initial ground of philosophy, Fichte identifies a fundamental ground of his theory of knowledge, or the self, that he claims posits its existence simultaneously as the subject and the object of cognition. In this way, Fichte dissolves the tension between subjectivity and objectivity and renders them one and the same. For example, he uses the concept of the self-positing activity of the self to ground the transition from inner to outer space on the ideality of the self. In other words, even the account of opposition that Fichte tries to provide is made possible by the unity of consciousness:

Since the question arises from a reversion into oneself, from observing that the immediate object of consciousness is in fact only consciousness itself, it can refer to no other existence than an existence for us; and it would be absurd to assimilate it to the question as an existence unrelated to consciousness. Yet it is the greatest absurdities that seem most commonly put forth by the philosophers of our day.¹¹

Fichte is opposed to any concept of objectivity that does not, at the same time, include the idea of subjectivity, since the object is the subject's object. For Fichte, the opposition of the subject to the object is a function of thought, and further notes that it is the nature of the human mind to posit itself and thereafter proceed to posit something in opposition to itself when, in reality, the counterposited object is the positing subject.

¹¹Fichte, "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*," 31–32.

Although Fichte insists that his theory is Kantianism properly stated, he employs the technical term positing to radicalize thought in a way that Kant merely imagined.

Höffe explains:

In a radicalization of critique so as to question even the most basic assumptions and in the attempt to explain the connection of the theoretical and practical knowledge from one common principle, Fichte seeks the supreme principle of unity for knowledge in general.¹²

In Höffe's view, Fichte sets out to provide an account of knowledge in general, a consideration that partially accounts for the naming of his philosophical system the *Wissenschaftslehre*, or the doctrine of scientific knowledge.

4.2 The Reception of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

I plan to tentatively examine the reception of Fichte's original philosophical insight as a way of getting to Kant's rebuttal of it. Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy generated a wide array of reaction, ranging from acceptance to rejection. To his critics, the critical method was a failed project and should, therefore, be abandoned. To his followers or defenders, however, it was the only method with the potential of resolving the problem of philosophy. Amidst all this, Kant himself was confident about his project, claiming to have resolved the problem of philosophy once and for all, and warning that any attempt to alter anything about his system would create problems for human thought.

Apparently, as we shall see shortly, the young Schelling and Hegel, who were initially supportive of Fichte's philosophical project, saw things differently and turned against it. This means, unlike Kant, Fichte never really had defenders. To be sure, he was

¹²Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*. Translated by Marshall Farrier (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 235.

disappointed by the reception accorded his philosophical theory, sometimes tending to lose control of himself. His original philosophical insight drew criticisms from friends and critics alike. Some criticisms were general in scope, while others were directed at specific aspects of his system. For example, his childhood friend Weisshuhn expressed frustration over his inability to understand Fichte's characterization of positing, claiming that his "eyes" were shown something they could not comprehend.¹³

Remarkably, the strongest objections yet against Fichte's system were raised by his fellow post-Kantian German idealists, who had earlier viewed him as providing the critical system with foundations that Kant merely assumed. Let us take a quick look at Schelling. Schelling espoused the critical method following his reading of The Critique of Pure Reason. Like Hölderlin and Hegel, he was a member of a group of Swabian students that turned to Kant in order to shake off the orthodox influences of the theology faculty at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Tübingen. Convinced that Kant provided the rational foundation for religion, this group sought to follow up on the discussion initiated by Kant, as well as seek to provide his system with new foundations.¹⁴

Though he started out as expounder of Fichte's system, Schelling later abandoned Fichte's position for his own original philosophical program. Breazeale maintains that Schelling's first two publications, On the Possibility of a Form of All Philosophy (1794) and On the I as the Principle of Philosophy (1795) were devoted, in a qualified sense, to

¹³Dale Snow, "The Early Critical Reception of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*," in New Essays in Fichte's Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), 232.

¹⁴Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling," in The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127–28.

the defense of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. But in addition, Schelling reportedly had his reservations about Fichte's view, reservations that were inspired by Spinoza.¹⁵

Schelling joined issues with Fichte, in the aftermath of Schelling's reading of Spinoza, accusing Fichte of failing to provide an account of nature. It may be recalled that in the name of making the critical method truly critical, Fichte collapsed the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy, and made the two coimplicatory by having the self posit itself as both the subject and object of knowledge. Schelling argues that Fichte's theory fails and ends up as subjective idealism, since it fails to offer an account of nature.

Fichte suspected certain disagreements between his theory and the position of Schelling. But when those disagreements became the topic of a publication by Hegel, it became clear to Fichte that Schelling had emerged as an original thinker in his own right. Aside from the criticism that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is subjective idealism, Schelling accuses Fichte of entertaining a narrow concept of intellectual intuition. Unlike Fichte, who makes intellectual intuition the sole preserve of the subject, Schelling makes subjectivity and objectivity equal partners in providing the ground of knowledge. Thus Schelling makes positing a feature of both subjectivity and objectivity. While Fichte derives the object from the activity of the I, for his part Schelling derives consciousness from the I and the not-I, thereby making both the subject and the object active.¹⁶

Implicit in Schelling's making of the subject and the object active is his rejection of the proposal to secure philosophy on a supreme universal principle known to be true, as proposed by Reinhold and ratified by Fichte. According to Schelling, knowledge could

¹⁵Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte and Schelling: The Jena period," in *The Age of German Idealism*, Routledge History of Philosophy, vol. 6, ed. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2003), 161.

¹⁶Ibid., 165-66

be raised to the status of an absolute principle only if it is established as science, something that is not achievable with Fichte's view.

Hegel follows closely the example of Schelling in rejecting Fichte's philosophical theory. Hegel basically restates the concerns of Schelling. However, he is more effective in undermining Fichte's philosophical position. He unfairly but effectively portrays Fichte's theory as a failure, further contending that the *Wissenschaftslehre* anticipates his (Hegel's) theory, which he claims constitutes the watershed of the critical project. I will next look at Kant's reaction to Fichte's theory.

4.3 Kant's Rebuttal of Fichte

Kant took exception to Fichte's philosophical theory, especially his claim that it had transformed Kant's project of the transcendental analysis of reason into the science of knowledge. Accordingly, he issued a disclaimer. On August 7, 1799, Kant wrote an "Open Letter on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*." In the letter in question, Kant protests that not only is Fichte's system untenable, as formulated, but that it bears no resemblances to his (Kant) philosophical project. He declared:

I hereby declare that I regard Fichte's Theory of Science (*Wissenschaftslehre*) as a totally indefensible system. For the Pure theory of science is nothing more or less than mere logic, and the principles of logic cannot lead to any material knowledge. Since logic, that is to say, pure logic, abstracts from the content of knowledge, the attempt to cull a real object out of logic is a vain effort and therefore a thing no one has ever done. If the transcendental philosophy is correct, such a task would involve metaphysics rather than logic. But I am so opposed to metaphysics, as defined according to Fichtean principles, that I have advised him, in a letter, to turn his fine literary gifts to the problem of applying the Critique of Pure Reason rather than squander them in cultivating fruitless sophistries. He, however, has replied politely by explaining that "he would not make light of scholasticism after all." Thus the question whether I take the Fichtean philosophy to be a genuinely critical philosophy is already answered by Fichte himself, and it is unnecessary for me to express my opinion of its value or lack of value. For

the issue here does not concern an object that is being appraised but concerns rather the appraiser or subject, and so it is enough that I renounce any connection with that philosophy.

I must remark here that the assumption that I have intended to publish only a propaedeutic to transcendental philosophy and not the actual system of philosophy is incomprehensible to me. Such an intention could never have occurred to me, since I took the completeness of pure philosophy within the Critique of Pure Reason to be the best indication of the truth of my work.

Since some reviewers maintain that the Critique is not to be taken literally in what it says about sensibility and that anyone who wants to understand the Critique must first master the requisite “standpoint” (of Beck or of Fichte), because Kant’s precise words, like Aristotle’s, will kill the mind, I therefore declare again that the Critique is to be understood by considering exactly what It says and that it requires only the common standpoint that any cultivated mind will bring to such abstract investigations.¹⁷

Among other things, Kant quite appropriately rejected Fichte’s assertion that his position was merely a propaedeutic and not a complete system. Fichte seems to have forgotten that Kant’s claim to a successful resolution of the problem of knowledge was ridiculed by his critics. He also criticizes Fichte for arriving at a concept of a finite human being from logic alone.

Apparently, Kant seems to have taken the matter personally, and tended to have pretty strong words for Fichte, as could be seen from the following:

There is an Italian proverb: May God protect us from our friends, and we shall watch out for our enemies for ourselves. There are friends who mean well by us but who are doltish in choosing the means for promoting our ends. But there are treacherous friends, deceitful, bent on our destruction while speaking the language of good will, and one cannot be too cautious about such men and the snares they have set. Nevertheless the critical philosophy must remain confident of its irresistible propensity to satisfy the theoretical as well as the moral, practical purposes of reason, confident that no change of opinions, no touching up or reconstruction into some other form, is in store for it; the system of the Critique rests on a fully secured foundation, established for ever; it will be indispensable too for the noblest ends of mankind in all future ages.¹⁸

¹⁷Immanuel Kant, “Open Letter on Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, August 7, 1799,” in Immanuel Kant: Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99. Edited and translated by Arnulf Zweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 254.

¹⁸Ibid., 254.

Kant's disclaimer looks harsh if viewed from the standpoint of someone who had earlier made similar claims with respect to another person's theory. Kant had previously claimed to have understood Plato better than Plato understood himself.¹⁹ The difference here is that Kant had the luxury of making his comments while Plato was long gone. With these claims and counterclaims, what is the status of Fichte's theory in relation to Kant's?

In the course of this dissertation, I have tried to portray the Kant/Fichte relationship as ambivalent. As Fichte himself has done on several occasions, I have tried to compare and to contrast the two philosophical systems, highlighting their differences as well as their similarities. One concrete example may suffice. In chapter 2 I argued that Fichte rejects a representationalist solution to the issue of knowledge. I also indicated that this, in my view, was consistent with the spirit of Kant's Copernican turn in philosophy. Both Kant and Fichte deny the subject a comprehensive grasp of its object in its objective existence. And if both reject a representationalist solution to the question of knowledge, then, both could be said to favor the idea that knowledge is mediated rather than immediate.

What I want to do at this juncture is to dwell on Fichte's proposal to stand philosophy on a self-evident ground, the principle of subjectivity, to show that his theory is both consistent with and opposed to Kant's. That is, I will argue that, on the one hand, the basing of philosophical inquiry on a fundamental ground is a residue of Kantianism preserved through Reinhold. On the other hand, I will contend that Fichte uses the principle of subjectivity as the starting point of his monistic theory of knowledge, thereby distancing himself from the master. The position defended here is that while both Kant and Fichte are concerned about making philosophy scientific, not only is their

¹⁹CPR, B 370.

understanding of system different, they further disagree about their method of achieving it.

Reminiscent of Kant's system, Fichte thinks that subjectivity is prior to representation. Critical to the projects of Kant and Fichte is the idea that philosophy should be grounded on the principle of subjectivity, which they invoke in standing metaphysics on its head in terms of making the cognitive subject active vis-à-vis its object. But it should be pointed out that the strategy of securing philosophy on the subjective principle transcends Kant and represents a widespread approach in the Western philosophical tradition. Seen in that light, Kant and Fichte merely appropriate an old philosophical strategy.

In order to ensure that philosophy produced a priori knowledge, philosophical systems earlier than Fichte's adopted the subject as the starting point of their investigation. In the modern philosophical period, the method was pushed to prominence by Descartes and reached its watershed in Fichte. Based on the certainty of his consciousness, Descartes drew conclusions with implications for the existence of the objective world. For instance, in the Second Cartesian Meditations, Descartes states:

But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly who is always deliberately deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.²⁰

²⁰René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, fourth ed., trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 24.

Descartes, who sought to refute skepticism in all forms, thinks that in order to successfully do this he has to show that our knowledge claims are premised on a secure principle. Descartes' discovery of the modern concept of inner space inspired the views of Leibniz, Locke, and Kant, and the subsequent efforts aimed at attaining certainty in the field.

Although like Descartes Fichte seeks a first principle for philosophy, one should resist the temptation to reduce his position to a variant of Cartesianism; his system is not a search for an Archimedean ground. Seidel agrees:

The difference between the Descartes of the Meditations on the First Philosophy and the Fichte of the Wissenschaftslehre is the difference between one who simply accepts the certainty of mathematics but must find "something" (cogito) that is existent, as well as certain (Descartes), and one who merely starts with $A=A$ in order to discover that the "synthetic" truth of $A=A$ is really analytic, or better axiomatic, and depends entirely upon the activity of the synthesizing self (Fichte). ...Another difference is that Descartes' "Ego sum, ego existo" is already too "substantial" for Fichte. Fichte's "I" or self is essentially activity. And freedom is hardly a substance in the Cartesian sense.²¹

While Descartes moves from the indubitability of the ego to prove the existence of external objects, Fichte moves from the certainty of the self to demonstrate the activity (*Tätigkeit*) of the self. Fichte's search for a ground of system is, according to Seidel, tantamount to a search for a "ground of explanation" (*Erklärungsgrund*), the condition for the possibility of knowledge of an object in general.²²

But it is at this point that Fichte turns his back on Kant. Unlike Kant, who opts for synthesis in his account of knowledge, Fichte radicalizes Kant's modest system with his monistic approach, making the subject and nature two sides of one and the same reality.

Ameriks describes Kant's project this way:

²¹George J. Seidel, Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre of 1794: A Commentary on Part 1 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 24.

²²Ibid., 23.

Kant's philosophy is unique in focusing on a level "in between" the domains of ordinary empirical judgment and theoretical science. While it accepts both domains as legitimate, it takes neither as absolutely by itself but rather aims to articulate the philosophical principles they need to share in order to be jointly understandable and acceptable.²³

It may be worthwhile reminding the reader that although Kant understands the relations between subjectivity and objectivity in complementary rather than conflictual ways, he does not view the the relationship in terms of the relationship of matter to form.

Fichte overcomes the self/not-self split, claiming that it is something artificial, existing only at the level of consciousness, not in fact. Since consciousness fails as a unifying principle, Fichte thinks we should begin our investigation with self-consciousness; consciousness must be mediated by self-consciousness:

That the activity of the self and the not-self are one and the same means that the self can only not posit something in itself by positing it in the not-self.... Passivity of the self, and of the not-self are also one and the same.... Activity and passivity of the self are one and the same.... Activity of the not-self are one and the same.²⁴

That the self is able to act this way, according to Fichte, is because it is absolute, absolute in the sense that it operates by its own laws that are part of its existence and, hence, unconditioned by its environment.

Another difference between Kant and Fichte pertains to Fichte's transformation of Kant's abstract subject into a finite subject. Since the Kantian subject is an abstract epistemological principle, he investigates what it means for a rational being to have knowledge irrespective of time and place. Fichte, on the other hand, examines what it means for a finite human being to actually have knowledge. Thus, Fichte transforms Kant's transcendental idealism, the condition of the possibility of knowledge whatsoever, into the condition of the possibility of knowledge for finite human beings. I tend to agree

²³Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, 45.

²⁴Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 163.

with Radrizzani that although Fichte set out to formulate a philosophical theory, he also sought to understand the cultural and political events of his day as well as shape their reception, the French Revolution, for example.²⁵ Rockmore cautions, however, that while it is not possible to divorce philosophical theories from their milieus, they cannot, by the same token, be reduced to their historical or cultural environment either.²⁶

This puts me on the wrong side of Copleston, who flatly rejects any attempt to bring a historical perspective to Fichte's philosophical position. He claims that Fichte had previously dissociated his theory, especially his subjective principle, from a finite subject in the winter of 1810–1. He argues that Fichte is interested in the concept of subjectivity that has the connotation of “immediate spiritual life” and, therefore, a metaphysical “subject.” For him, the Fichtean absolute subject is a reference to “infinite activity” and not an “individual self.”²⁷ He concedes, though, that the metaphysical elements in Fichte's position are not altogether self-evident.

Although Copleston is not convinced that Fichte transforms Kant's conceptual subject into a finite one, I think it is indeed the case. Copleston seems to downgrade the impact of the French Revolution on Fichte's thought, an influence that Fichte himself acknowledges. For Fichte, the gunshots that reverberated across Jena were fired by a real human being, Napoleon.

²⁵Ives Radrizzani, “Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy as Political Praxis,” in New Perspectives on Fichte, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996), 194.

²⁶Tom Rockmore, “Fichte's Antifoundationalism, Intellectual Intuition, and Who One is,” in New Perspectives on Fichte, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996), 87.

²⁷Frederick Copleston, Modern Philosophy: From Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, A History of Philosophy, vol. VII (New York: Image Books, 1994), 44.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, like his philosophical theory, which was a theory in progress, and which underwent fundamental changes during the course of his professional career, Fichte's understanding of his relationship to Kant too continued to fluctuate depending on where he was in his career or what he accomplished at a particular time. To be sure, it was Kant's approach to issues of the relation of freedom to necessity that attracted him to philosophy. However, while certain aspects of his philosophical position look obviously Kantian, it is equally true that Fichte's original philosophical position is his own, something that is well known, including Fichte himself. However, it feels as if, like his post-Kantian idealism colleagues, Fichte uses Kant to bolster his original philosophical view before finally stepping out of his shadow. But, owing to the benefits that are derived from his perceived association with Kant, Fichte is apt to flash his Kantian credentials. Fichte should not lose sight of the fact that it was his association with Kant that won him the immediate recognition as a philosopher. It was the same association that also exposed him, for the first time, to a wide range of employment opportunities.

General Conclusion

This dissertation examined Fichte's original philosophical position, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, against the Kantian background. It investigated the extent to which Kant's theory is consistent with Kant's philosophical view and the extent to which it is not. The analysis revealed a few things. First, the dissertation gained the insight that on certain readings, in particular if seen from the angle of its spirit, Fichte's theory is consistent with Kant's so-called Copernican turn in philosophy. The major thrust of Kant's intellectual revolution makes the subject active vis-à-vis the object of knowledge. This constitutes a major break from the previous intellectual paradigms that made reason the recipient of data from the external object that affects our faculties in our quest for knowledge. Fichte follows Kant's example by postulating a supreme universal principle of knowledge that posits itself simultaneously as the subject and object of cognition. Thus, like Kant, Fichte locates activity in the cognitive subject rather than the object.

The second insight that was gained concerns the difference between Kant and Fichte with regard to the presentation of their theories. To be sure, Kant's Copernican revolution constitutes a monumental contribution to philosophy. But Kant also retains some limited notion of the causality that he criticizes. Kant splits the world into the domains of appearance and things-in-themselves. He restricts knowledge to the sphere of the former while holding the realm of the latter to be the one of the unknown. For his part Fichte favors a monistic strategy and makes the subject and the object two sides of one and the same reality. By his monistic approach to philosophy, Fichte does not only reject Kant's dualistic approach to philosophy, he substitutes a monistic one for it. Thus on this

count, that is, the issue of presentation, Fichte's system differs from Kant's. To the extent that Fichte's method of unifying practical and theoretical reason differs from Kant's, his theory is not the same as Kant's. Rather, Fichte establishes himself as a philosopher in his own right. Correspondingly, his system constitutes an original contribution to the philosophical enterprise.

The third insight relates to the relationship between Fichte and Reinhold, in terms of the extent to which Fichte's views were influenced by Reinhold. Admittedly, Fichte initially bought into Reinhold's idea of basing philosophical investigation on a self-evident principle known to be true. However, Fichte rejected Reinhold's designee, the principle of consciousness, which Reinhold believed reduced every activity of the mind to representation. Instead, Fichte offered to deduce philosophical inquiry from a higher principle he thought was better suited to founding philosophy, the principle of the self.

Evidence exists to support the assertion that Fichte later separated himself from Reinhold, especially at the time of the evolution of his original philosophical insight. In a fragment of a letter to Reinhold, Fichte writes:

I myself, however, am a declared opponent of your system. But why can one not be an opponent of your system and at the same time be your personal friend? I believe that I have justified my opinion of *Aenesidemus*. From my review of it, it should at least be clear to you that I have acted in good faith. It is now true that I now think much less highly of the literary merits of *Aenesidemus* than I did even then; yet it does seem to me that it has refuted your Elementary Philosophy.¹

Fichte is concerned that Reinhold took the refutation of his (Reinhold's) system personally. It will be recalled that Reinhold later abandoned his own original position and became a student of Fichte, whose theory he partially influenced.

¹J. G. Fichte, "Fragment of a Letter to Reinhold, March–April, 1795," in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 383.

Fourth, in my opinion Fichte seems to confuse his theory with Kant's, as is evidenced by the fact that his claim with respect to Kant's position continues to fluctuate depending on the occasion. Sometimes he claims that his view is identical with Kant's. On other occasions, he claims his theory surpasses that of Kant. And still on other occasions, he claims that Kant's position was developed on account of Fichte's principles. One thing that is emphatically clear is that Fichte's position does not surpass that of Kant—at least he fails to make that argument. I think Fichte seems oblivious to the fact that Kant is an important figure in the Western philosophical tradition and that his theory represents a major paradigm shift in philosophy that, in my view, carries Fichte in its wings, even as Fichte's theory remains his own.

Finally, Fichte establishes post-Kantian German idealism as we know it, and serves as a link between Kant and the subsequent philosophical discussion. Fichte deserves credit for calling attention to an idea that has gone a long way to influence later and subsequent philosophical systems, especially the philosophical position of Hegel, the neo-Hegelians, and Marx. In particular, he deserves credit for transforming Kant's abstract notion of subjectivity into a finite one. In the wake of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, the concept of finite subjectivity has been propelled to prominence in the philosophical discussion, and rightly so. That the philosopher has nothing beyond experience as Fichte rightly points out is evidenced by the fact that our humanity is the only thing that remains the same while our concept of normativity continues to fluctuate.

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