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THE "I" AS PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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[Preface]

Fichte founded a revolutionary philosophical movement and invented an entirely new kind of philosophy; and he did so knowingly and intentionally. Yet, paradoxically, he did all this merely in the course of attempting to complete the philosophical project of Kant and protect critical philosophy against the possibility of skeptical objections. Kant had distinguished the activity of *critique* from that of *science*, and advertised the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a propaedeutic or methodological inquiry, examining our powers of cognition so as to clear the ground for philosophy as a systematic science and to indicate how such a science might be made actual (KrV A xxi, B xxxv-xxxvii.[1] Fichte saw his task as that of bringing Kant's work to completion by turning the new Kantian philosophical standpoint into a science by constructing the system to which Kant's critiques were merely preparatory.

In order to accomplish this task, Fichte thought he had to overcome several obstacles remaining in the standpoint of Kantian critique itself. Kant had seen that skepticism must be answered by starting from the conditions for the possibility of cognition and providing a transcendental justification of knowledge by grounding it in those conditions. But he had undertaken this project using an account of cognition which was not sufficiently fundamental, because it already assumed some things which were likely objects of skeptical doubt. Or as Fichte puts it, Kant had incorporated into the standpoint of transcendental critique a good deal that belongs to "metaphysics", which operates within the "ordinary point of view" and tries to explain it (SW 1:33). The task of a genuinely scientific system of transcendental philosophy, however, must be to purify itself both of metaphysics and the ordinary standpoint, so as to derive both from a wholly transcendental standpoint.

To begin with, Kant took for granted the division of our cognitive capacities into passive sensibility and active understanding. Regarding the former, he left unanalyzed the presupposition that we are affected by objects external to us, thereby assuming a realism about those objects which was not only open to question but even inconsistent with his own basic insight that a transcendental theory of cognition must show how our own representation of its objects make those objects possible. Regarding the latter, he arrived at the categories of understanding by taking the traditional formal logic and its theory of judgment as his guiding thread, without exploring the transcendental grounds of this received theory, as was again required, in Fichte's view, by a consistent application of Kant's own transcendental standpoint. The scientific system of transcendental philosophy could not be content merely to reorganize the contents of Kant's critiques and work out the applications of the a priori principles they had uncovered.

From transcendental critique to critical system of transcendental philosophy

In order to turn the critical philosophy into a scientific system, we must provide this system with a more fundamental grounding. Kant's methodological inquiries had won a new standpoint for philosophy: the transcendental standpoint. Those who would build on this must start this standpoint, but display the transcendental ground even of what Kant had, for critical or methodological purposes, taken for granted. Fichte coins a new name for a systematic philosophical science which grounds all human cognition transcendentally in this way: he calls it a "doctrine of science" (*Wissenschaftslehre*).

A doctrine of science must begin with a single "first principle", which is wholly certain, and it must proceed to other propositions in the system through rigorous transcendental argument that communicates this certainty to them (SW 1:40-42). Thus Fichte thinks that Reinhold had been on the right track in seeking for the fundamental elements of transcendental philosophy, and in grounding the system on a single, self-evident first principle from which the entire system might be derived. But the skeptical attacks of G. E. Schulze convinced Fichte that Reinhold's "principle of consciousness" -- which takes as its starting point the representation which relates subject to object while distinguishing itself from both -- is inadequate as the starting point for a transcendental system.

The first principle of Fichte's doctrine of science is the 'I'. Fichte states this principle in a variety of ways, as "I am" (SW 1:20, 1:95, 1:425, 6:295), or "I am I" (SW 1:69, 1:93-95), or "the I posits itself (absolutely)" (SW 1:22, 1:69, 1:96, 2:441). From these different formulations, as well as the different uses Fichte makes of his first principle, it is anything but self-evident what precisely this first principle is supposed to assert. But the 'I' evidently recommends itself to Fichte as a first principle for the doctrine of science on several compelling grounds. Since Descartes, the assertion of one's own existence appeared to even the most skeptical as possessing both the greatest and the most immediate certainty, even if there is considerable room for dispute about what the assertion means. The I also seems eminently qualified to serve as a principle grounding human knowledge as a systematic whole, since there is no cognition except for an I, and the I seems to be equally present in all modes of consciousness, whether sensitive or intellectual, active or passive, and whether they are concerned with knowing the world or with agency in it. This ubiquity of the I, which Kant had seen as the ground of the synthetic unity of all possible experience, also seems closely tied to the I's function of providing whatever unity, coherence and systematicity our knowledge may acquire. Fichte attributes the certainty of his first principle to the absolute unity of content and form, the total coincidence of what is cognized in the principle and what is known about it (SW 1:49). For in the act of self-awareness, when it is considered purely for itself and unmixed with any other awareness which may accompany it, the self of which we are aware is nothing different from the awareness we have of it. In this way, self-awareness is also unique in that it is a kind of knowledge whose object is immediately identical with the subject of that

same knowledge. The I is, in Fichte's famous phrase, the "subject-object" and the content of self-awareness is nothing but the knowledge of the identity of subject and object (SW 2:442). It 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.

The I also possesses a unique kind of certainty, in that it is a certainty always available to us however much or little knowledge we may have about anything else. Both the I itself and our certainty about it are, moreover, entirely at our disposal, and depend at every moment solely on our choice. For we are always free to become aware of ourselves, and even in cases where something outside us occasions our becoming self-aware we never become aware of ourselves without performing a free act through which the self-awareness comes about. This is due to another noteworthy fact about the I -- that not only the certainty but even that of which we are certain -- the I itself -- is something generated entirely through our own free act. Fichte's formula: "the I posits itself absolutely" refers to the remarkable fact that the subject-object of self-awareness is something whose very existence depends on its own free agency. Consequently, in self-awareness the subject stands in an active cognitive relation to its object, or is an *intellectual intuition.*

This feature of the I was for Fichte the key to solving a second problem presented by Kant's way of carrying out his critical project: Kant's fundamental division of philosophy into theory and practice.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant himself had recognized a problem here, and had attempted to bridge the "great gulf" between theoretical understanding and practical reason through reflective judgment. But once it is accepted that transcendental philosophy as a doctrine of science must begin with a single fundamental principle, it becomes unacceptable to bridge the gulf between theory and practice through the use of any mediating faculty. Instead, the only way to deal with the problem is to discover a first principle which can serve simultaneously as the ground of both theoretical and practical philosophy. No doubt even for Kant the I can be recognized as the ground of both our theoretical cognition of nature and our practical awareness of moral duty. For in his account the unity of experience rests on apperception, just as the possibility of obligation rests on autonomy. But in the Kantian system it remains enigmatic how the theoretical I whose understanding synthesizes the contents of experience relates to the practical I whose reason gives itself the moral law. The I which is to serve as the first principle of a doctrine of science must in some way be simultaneously theoretical and practical. Further, the entire possibility of a doctrine of science will have to depend on the way this identity is understood in the first principle and then worked out in the structure of the system.

What is the I?

Before we can deal with the unity of the theoretical and the practical in Fichte's first principle, we must get clearer about the meaning of the principle itself. Fichte holds that every consciousness involves an awareness of the I (SW 1:435, 1:526-527). At the same time, Fichte denies that the I, in the sense in which it is a first principle, is ever anything actual as an appearance or object of experience (GA 4/2:26). Rather, it is the first and most original of a series of necessary acts which make experience possible (SW 1:91). We reach the first principle by becoming self-aware and noticing how we do it. This involves an act of abstraction, in which we must be careful to think only what is required, and not mix this thought with other aspects of experience which are generated only by other acts whose necessity for experience is to be established only subsequently (SW 1:91, 1:338, 1: 501, 1:521).

When he claims that the I is present in every consciousness, Fichte seems to have in mind here what Sartre was later to call the "pre-reflective" or "non-positional" self-consciousness we have even when our attention is focused on objects entirely distinct from the self.[2] If I am reading a novel, for example, my attention is not on myself (or my reading activity) but on the characters in the story, and what they are doing. But if my reading is interrupted by someone asking me what I am doing, I reply immediately that I am (and have for some time been) reading; and the self-awareness on the basis of which I answer the question is not something acquired at just that moment but a consciousness of myself which has been present to me all along.

For Fichte what is crucial about this awareness is not only its ubiquity and certainty, but equally the fact that it is an awareness of *activity*, which is present even in our most passive states of perception. In every thought "you directly note activity and freedom in this thinking, in this transition from thinking the I to thinking the table, the walls, etc. Your thinking is for you an *acting*" (SW 1:522). What Fichte means by 'I', regarded as the absolute principle of all philosophy, is nothing but this awareness of our own activity, which is an inevitable ingredient in any awareness and provides us with an ineluctable consciousness of our freedom.

If Fichte derives the ubiquitous certainty of the I from pre-reflective self-awareness, that does not mean that he intends to exclude *reflective* self-awareness from the first principle. For the free activity in which pre-reflective awareness consists is precisely the source of the constant possibility I have of reflecting on myself, and making myself an object of a concept. Fichte often describes the awareness through which we grasp the first principle as the one I achieve when I construct a concept of myself and notice how I do this (SW 1:491, 1:521, 2:441, 4:16). In pre-reflective activity the I "posits itself absolutely"; but in reflection it "reiterates this positing" or "posits itself as self-posited" (SW 1:274, 276).

In forming a concept of itself, the I necessarily distinguishes itself from something else, since every act of conceptualization involves distinguishing the item brought under a given concept from those excluded from it. This means that the primary act of the I, through which it posits itself,

necessitates a second act in which it "counterposits" that which is distinct from it, the "not-I" (SW 1:101-105). This means that the activity of the I must be twofold: that of the I, directed toward a not-I and that of a not-I, directed back against the I as a "collision" or "check" (*Anstoss*) of the I's activity (SW 1:208-219). Since both are conditions of the I's existence, Fichte regards both as activities of the I: the former is "ideal" activity, the latter "real" activity (SW 1:267-270).

By exhibiting the necessity of positing a not-I as a condition of the I's own self-awareness, Fichte transcendentally deduces the distinction between passivity and activity, sensibility and understanding, which Kant had merely taken for granted, and has done so without the need to assume dogmatically a thing in itself which acts on our faculties. At the same time, he has provided a ground for the distinction between the theoretical and practical functions of the I. In reflecting on itself, the I is aware of the opposition of ideal and real activities, whose boundary point separates the I from the not-I. This awareness, Fichte says, is what Reinhold meant by "representation" -- that which relates subject and object to each other by distinguishing them (SW 1:227-228). Reinhold's principle too, therefore, has been transcendentally deduced from the first principle of the doctrine of science. And the I which represents is the I as "intelligence", or the theoretical I (SW 1:248).

But the condition of this awareness of the I's real activity is that the ideal activity of the I should meet with a check or resistance. From a transcendental standpoint, therefore, this makes ideal activity the ground of real activity, and exhibits the "absolute I" as the ground of the "not-I" (SW 1:250). It also enables us to determine the ideal activity itself more precisely. It must be an activity which opposes the real activity posited in the not-I, yet without ever abolishing this activity, since to do so would at the same time abolish a necessary condition of the I's own existence. The ideal activity of the I must therefore take the form of a "willing" or "striving" which is directed against the not-I (SW 1:261-262, 4:18-21). This reveals the I as practical, and also shows that the theoretical I, or intelligence, is grounded on the practical I, or the will (SW 1:263-265). In this way, Fichte claims to have demonstrated what Kant had only postulated, that reason can be practical (SW 1:264).

Theoretical and practical science

The sketch of Fichte's argument which I have just presented unfortunately still does not tell us very much about how he conceived the difference between theory and practice as parts of philosophy. Thus it does not tell us about the distinct manner in which he conceived of the I as a first principle in relation to each. This question is complicated by what Frederick Neuhouser has shown, that Fichte adopted one view of the matter in the 1794 *Foundation of the Doctrine of Science*, but then changed his views significantly by the time he wrote the two Introductions of 1797 and the *System of Ethics* of 1798.[3]

According to the earlier view, presented in the *Concept of a Doctrine of Science* and the *Foundation* of 1794, the doctrine of science is supposed to ground all other particular sciences, including both theoretical and practical sciences (SW 1:63-66). Fichte intends this not in the sense that other sciences are each grounded on some particular principle or principles belonging to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, but rather in the sense that they are each grounded on the fundamental principle itself. The boundary between the doctrine of science and particular sciences is marked by the way the first principle is taken. "As soon as an action which is in itself entirely free has been given a specific direction, we have moved from the domain of the general doctrine of science into that of some particular science" (SW 1:63-64). The division of theoretical from practical science is therefore based on considering the two ways in which the I can relate to the not-I. If the I adopts a dependent relation to the not-I, then it is determined as "intelligence" and the science is theoretical. If we consider the I as independent in relation to the not-I, then its relation is one of *striving* and we are dealing with the practical part of the doctrine of science.

This is the way Fichte presents things in the practical part of the *Foundation* of 1794 (especially § 5, SW 1: 246-285). Neuhouser argues that Fichte's deduction of practical reason is supposed to consist in grounding the theoretical use of reason and then showing that reason can be theoretical only if it is also practical.[4] That he is correct is clearly indicated in the following remark: "Up to now a practical faculty of reason has been postulated, but not proved. Such a proof... can be achieved in no other way than by showing that reason cannot even be theoretical unless it is practical; that there can be no intelligence in the human being unless he possesses a practical faculty" (SW 1:264).

Fichte's subsequent argument in the *Foundation* is that this practical faculty, in order to be able to limit its distinct practical drives by one another and to bring them into harmony through "interdetermination", must include a drive to absolute activity for its own sake, or a "drive for drive's sake", that is, a capacity to give itself "an absolute law or categorical imperative" (SW 1:327). The I as practical principle is transcendentally deduced from the theoretical I.

By 1797, however, Fichte had changed his mind both about the strategy for justifying practical reason and about the relation between the doctrine of science and its theoretical and practical parts. In the *First Introduction to the Doctrine of Science* of 1797, he famously maintains that there are only

two consistent philosophies, dogmatism (or materialism) and idealism (or criticism). Philosophy before Kant was based entirely on the principle of dogmatism, that of the thing in itself, which leads necessarily (Fichte insists) to determinism, fatalism, authoritarianism, the denial of human dignity and resignation to the unfreedom and injustice which has reigned in human society up to now; the new or critical philosophy is grounded on the principle of idealism, the I, which leads necessarily to the affirmation of freedom, morality and the unlimited possibility of progress in human history. The principle one follows, the philosophy one chooses, depends on the kind of person one is. Neither philosophy can refute the other, because each begins with a different principle, and each of the two principles from the outset excludes the other (SW 1:425-435). Idealism and dogmatism, therefore, each begin with a faith in which their respective systems resolve to persevere (SW 4:25-26).

Such remarks may lead us to think that Fichte has simply abandoned the whole idea of establishing a doctrine of science on the basis of an absolutely certain first principle, and is resorting instead to a blind leap of faith as the ground of his system of idealism. But a closer look at what he says will remove this impression. For the apparent strength of dogmatism, its ability to withstand the challenge of criticism and maintain itself as a faith in the minds of its adherents, is due not to any evidence in its behalf or to any weakness in the evidence for criticism. Instead, it is due entirely to the freedom-fearing closed-mindedness of the dogmatic mindset, and in the end to either the weakness or viciousness of character on the part of the dogmatists themselves.

Fichte regularly ascribes to idealism two advantages, each decisive from the standpoint of reason, which it has over dogmatism. In the first place, whereas the dogmatist's principle -- the thing in itself -- is a mere presupposition, a thought which can never be given in intuition, the principle of idealism -- the I's freedom -- is at every moment directly exhibited in consciousness, given to us as an intuition in our most inward feeling (SW 1: 428, 445-446, 4:44, 54, GA 4/2:20-21). We can take the practical standpoint only insofar as we ascribe freedom to ourselves, and this standpoint is unavoidable -- even as a theorist I must take it insofar as I deliberate about what hypotheses to test, how to test them, and what conclusions to draw from the evidence. To be sure, the dogmatist consistently rejects its own self-generated awareness of freedom -- on the authority of dogmatism's principle -- as a delusion. But dogmatism can neither deny the experience of freedom which is inseparable from the practical standpoint, nor offer any comparably self-evident experience in evidence of its principle. Dogmatism's faith is therefore adopted willfully and contrary to experience, where idealism's faith is nothing but a confidence in what it directly experiences (SW 4:26). This is a faith born of the fear to use one's own reason, a fear reinforced by social traditions and hierarchies which depend on the denial of the fundamental freedom and equal dignity of every rational being.

Idealism's second advantage, according to Fichte, is that it can be completed as a philosophical system, whereas dogmatism cannot. Thus

idealism's starting point can be demonstratively guaranteed, whereas dogmatism's cannot (SW 1:466). Idealism can even explain how we come to ascribe the representations of consciousness to a thing in itself. But dogmatism is unable to explain our consciousness of freedom on its principles, and it therefore can only reject this consciousness as an illusion (SW 1:435-440). The dogmatist, moreover, is "unable to offer a clear account of how representations could be produced within any creature by the influence of things" (GA 4/2:20). For, once again, the standpoint from which we have representations is the practical standpoint of a free agent, and to regard oneself as free is incompatible with regarding oneself as a thing.

The contest between idealism and dogmatism is not, therefore, an epistemic stalemate, to be settled merely by an arbitrary decision or act of faith. Fichte's claim is rather that a consistent dogmatist is someone who has on principle cut himself off both from immediate evidence and scientific demonstration through a stubborn denial of both immediate experience and scientific reason. Dogmatism, in Fichte's view, is a philosophical attitude which expresses a morally corrupt character and corresponds to an unfree social order which rests on mental servitude, vanity, dishonesty, self-deception and complacent despair over the power of reason (SW 1:434). People are drawn to dogmatism either because they benefit from the system of unfreedom or because they are victims deluded and intimidated by it who are afraid to throw off their chains. It is in this sense only that Fichte holds that dogmatists cannot be "refuted," but can only be "cultivated," "educated," or "cured" (SW 1:136, GA 4/2:21).

The fundamental change in Fichte's method between 1794 and 1797, however, is that whereas the earlier system made the practical power of reason into an object of demonstration, the later system grounds itself directly on the original Act (*Tathandlung*) through which the free I posits itself. This is why Fichte repeatedly asserts that no one can be compelled to adopt idealism. Fichte cannot demonstrate his starting point but can only invite his readers to initiate it for themselves (SW 1:429, 1:458, 4:8, GA 4/2:32). It is in this sense that Fichte, reversing what he said in the *Foundation* of 1794, now claims that his first principle is a "postulate": "The reader or student of philosophy must begin by doing something" (GA 4/2:29). According to Fichte, in 1794 he began with self-awareness as a fact (*Tatsache*), something found in experience, and attempted to demonstrate from this the practical freedom, the original Act (*Tathandlung*), which made it possible. But after 1797 he begins directly with the Act and the doctrine of science is to show how it generates the fact: "Here we began with the Act and arrived at the fact; but the method of the book [of 1794] was just the reverse" (GA 4/2:33). This means that now the first principle of the doctrine of science is directly a practical principle; practice is not only the ground of theory but even the starting point of philosophy as a whole.

This change reflects itself in the way Fichte conceives of the relation of the doctrine of science to the theoretical and practical sciences. In 1794, Fichte began with a general grounding of the entire doctrine of science (Part I: §§ 1-3, SW 1:91-122) then proceeded to the theoretical part of the

doctrine of science (Part II: § 4, SW 1:123-246) and finally to the practical part (Part III: §§ 5-11, SW 1:246-328). In the *System of Ethics* of 1798, however, theoretical and practical sciences are presented as simply two equal parts of a single unified doctrine of science, neither taking systematic precedence over the other (SW 4:15). That this is an intentional change is documented in a transcript of Fichte's lectures of 1797:

"[These lectures will] follow a method of presentation that is just the opposite of that followed by the author in his compendium of 1794, where he proceeded from the theoretical portion of philosophy (i.e. from what had to be explained) to the practical part (i.e. to what was meant to serve *as the basis* for explaining the former). In the present lectures, however, the hitherto familiar division between theoretical and practical philosophy is not to be found. Instead, these lectures present philosophy *as a whole*, in the exposition of which theoretical and practical philosophy are united. This presentation follows a much more natural path, beginning with the practical sphere, or whenever it would contribute to the clarity of the exposition to do so, inserting the practical into the theoretical, in order to explain the latter in terms of the former: a liberty for which the author was not yet sufficiently self-confident at the time he published his *Doctrine of Science*" (GA 4/2:17).

Fichte apparently *always* regarded the practical as the foundation of the theoretical, so that his earlier procedure is not to be understood as founding the practical on the theoretical but, on the contrary, as a regressive method, moving from what is grounded back toward the ground. The I, therefore, was always regarded as fundamentally a practical rather than a theoretical principle. The new presentation of the system merely makes this explicit.

The I as practical standpoint and practical principle

But what does it mean to say that the I is fundamentally a practical principle? A practical principle is one according to which we guide or direct our action, in other words, an 'ought'-principle. To say that the I is fundamentally a practical principle is to say that 'I' refers fundamentally not to something a person is, but something a person ought to be, or more precisely, to a way a person ought to act. What could this mean?

The 'first person standpoint', as philosophers usually call it, is typically interpreted by them as a *cognitive* standpoint, a standpoint from which things are *known* -- typically, a standpoint from which people know things about their own mental states. It is the existence of this standpoint, for instance, that makes knowing 'I have an itch behind my left ear' a different piece of knowledge from knowing that Allen Wood, or the only native of Seattle in this room, has an itch behind his left ear. For I would be equally certain that I have an itch behind my ear even if I forgot my birthplace or even my name. Philosophers such as Gareth Evans and Sydney Shoemaker point out that first person knowledge of mental states has a distinctive dimension of certainty or infallibility, in that it is immune in principle to errors of misidentification of the subject of those states.[5]

These philosophers are not wrong to think of the first person standpoint in this way as a cognitive standpoint with certain distinctive features. But their account is importantly incomplete if they do not realize that the first person standpoint is distinctive, and perhaps even has these special cognitive features, only because it is not originally and fundamentally a cognitive standpoint at all, but instead the standpoint of an agent, so that what is most distinctive about it is not the way it enables us to know certain things, but rather the fact that it is that unique viewpoint on the world from which things can be done.

There is no space here to develop this point as fully as it deserves,[6] but we may get the idea if we begin by reflecting on why it is that I cannot misidentify the subject of my explicitly avowed conscious intentions or purposes in the very act of avowing them. For the ascription of such intentions to myself is not fundamentally a matter of theoretical observation but an act of self-definition, which I take to be normative for my own conduct. In the avowal I am defining myself as a person with this intention or aim, and as long as I continue to do so, when my behavior fails to correspond to my aim I should criticize the behavior rather than disavow the aim. To be a person with an intention or aim is in this way to be an agent acting under self-given norms. And if, as Fichte maintains, this is what it fundamentally is to be an I, then the I's identity is more fundamentally tied to those norms than to anything else. This is the reason why I cannot, from such a standpoint, misidentify the subject of my aims or intentions: for, from a practical point of view, I am directly constituted by them. We may see how this account might be extended to more passive first person states (such as sensations or feelings) if we follow Fichte in understanding these as constituting not the properties of a thing, but merely the passive aspect of our practical field, regarded from the standpoint of a free agent (see *Foundation,* §§ 7-10, SW 1:287-322). Feeling, in other words, is only the

passive side of a willing or striving in which I am engaged. Hence from the practical standpoint its subject is self-defined through the self-givenness of the norms through which I define my own willing or striving.

Christine Korsgaard has emphasized that it is essential, when we are considering the standpoint of agency, "not to confuse *being engaged in a conscious activity* with *being conscious of an activity*."[7] The latter provides us only with a theoretical or cognitive viewpoint *on* our own agency, whereas only the former is a truly practical viewpoint, and it alone is actually the standpoint of agency itself. Korsgaard argues that the unity of the person and its identity through time is grounded not, as Derek Parfit and others would have it, on a "deep metaphysical fact" (whether genuine or bogus), but rather on practical requirements of agency. Thus my identity with the self who will inhabit my body in the future is not based on the persistence through time of my self as a metaphysical substance, but instead on the fact that my body is the fundamental vehicle of my agency and meaningful action through this body requires a relation to a future which I actively define as mine. Korsgaard notes that "to the extent that you regulate your choices by identifying yourself as the one who is implementing something like a particular plan of life, you need to identify with your future in order to be *what you are even now*. When the person is viewed as an agent, no clear content can be given to the idea of a merely present self."[8]

The even more fundamental point here is that no clear content can be given to the idea of a self understood only theoretically, that is, as a set of events or psychological processes cognitively available (whether by empirical observation or theoretical inference). If the identity of an I is determined by the practical requirements of its agency, then what constitutes the I, from the standpoint of its own agency, is less the set of processes known to have gone on in it than the project it is engaged in implementing, regarded (again from the practical point of view) as a practical or 'ought'-principle which it regards itself as engaged in following (whether or not it turns out actually to obey this 'ought'-principle).

Fichte calls attention to this fundamentally practical character of the I in many ways, but one of the most interesting of them concerns his use of it in the *System of Ethics* to derive the *intersubjectivity* of the I. Fichte argues that reflective or conceptual awareness of the I must represent the I as "determinate" or "limited"; this implies that the I must not only posit its own activity, but "counterposit" the activity of a not-I. Insofar as the I is a practical principle, however, its determinacy has to be understood normatively as well. Fichte puts this by saying that "true determinacy" cannot be merely "found" in me, but "I must give it to myself" through "ideal activity" (SW 4:220). Some activity, that is, must be thought of as determinately mine not merely in the sense that I observe myself engaged in it, but in the more fundamental sense that I demand or require it of myself, so that activity excluded by the requirement is not properly mine, even if (by failing to comply with this self-demand) I actually do it. Fichte then argues that the I can acquire the concept of such a requirement only by internalizing a requirement addressed to it from outside, which presupposes an external being capable of making such a demand on me, in other words,

another I (SW 4:218-221). For our present purposes, the conclusion of this argument is of less interest than its premise: namely, that being a determinate I means subjecting oneself to a requirement, an 'ought'-principle.

The I as principle in Fichtean ethics

Of course Fichte insists on the fundamentally practical character of the I from quite early in the *System of Ethics*. But the point we have been trying to explicate, that as practical the I is a normative or 'ought'-principle, is harder to grasp owing to the extremely abstract and formalistic character of this principle as Fichte expounds it. Fichte, like Hegel after him, regards Kant's formula of universal law not as "constitutive" but "merely heuristic", since it requires other grounds of moral judgment to determine its content (SW 4:233-234). The I as practical principle is formulated variously as a "tendency to absolute self-activity" (SW 4:39), "self-activity for the sake of self-activity" (SW 4:29) or "freedom for the sake of freedom" (SW 4:153-154), or as a "drive toward the whole I" (SW 4:40) or, finally as a drive to "self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*)": "Always fulfill your vocation (*Bestimmung*)" (SW 4:150-151, 184-185).

Recent accounts of Fichte's normative ethics have been less than lavish in their praise of its accomplishments. In his treatment of Fichte's I as a substantive practical principle, Neuhouser distinguishes a 'universalist' from an 'individualist' account, judging the former to be fundamentally unsuccessful, and the latter, though more promising, to be insufficiently developed. Günter Zöller has more recently concluded that Fichte's system of ethics does not aim so much at presenting a prescriptive or normative ethics as at providing "a sustained reflection on the conditions of moral knowledge and action".[9]

Such assessments seem to me vastly to underestimate the normative content of Fichte's *System of Ethics*. It is true that Fichte approaches normative ethics through extensive and detailed reflection on the formal features of free agency and moral epistemology, but his account of moral duties is much more far-reaching and specific, for example, than the contemporaneous account given in Kant's doctrine of virtue.

In considering the application of the practical principle, Fichte distinguishes between the standpoint of a science of ethical duties and that of the actual agent, the I itself as it lives and enacts the struggle for its own freedom. Regarding the former he develops a complex taxonomy of duties, he distinguishes "conditioned" (or self-regarding) duties from "unconditioned" (or other-regarding) ones, and "universal" duties (which apply equally to everyone) from "particular" duties which apply to people in virtue of social relationships -- either within the family or in regard to one's estate, profession or vocation. Here his account involves a moral theory of society (a topic on which Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* officially demurred), and anticipates a great deal for which Hegel's conception of ethical life has usually been given the credit.

Fichte progresses from the I as practical principle to this scientific theory of duties through consideration of the standpoint of the I as agent. This discussion certainly does deal, as Zöller says, largely with matters that could be considered under the heading of 'moral epistemology'. But Fichte's approach itself involves some quite distinctive and views about how we should consider moral questions in our lives. These views are substantive

enough, I think, to be counted as genuinely normative and not merely 'epistemological'.

Fichte insists that what it is our duty to do in a given situation is not given through the practical principle itself but is a matter for theoretical inquiry (SW 4:166). The correctness of a conviction about our duty is something that must be given through a feeling of necessity conjoined with the conviction (SW 4:167). Fichte likens this theoretical inquiry to the activity of reflective judgment (in the sense of Kant's third Critique); it seeks a harmony, analogous to aesthetic feeling, between the pure and the empirical I, when found, it results in the cessation of doubt and a state of peace and satisfaction (SW 4:166-168). Fichte's moral epistemology here is formally coherentist in that it regards the search for a state of certainty as the quest for a systematic agreement among moral conceptions (SW 4:172).

This feeling of immediate certainty about our duty is called 'conscience' (SW 4:173). Because in this as in every other theoretical inquiry there is no objective criterion which can be given externally (SW 4:170), duty is never known by deriving it from an objective rule or set of rules, but is to be found only through conscientious inquiry directed to one's situation and resulting in a felt conviction. The most Fichte thinks we can specify in general is the *form* of every moral conviction: that it involves ascribing to a thing a "final end" (*Endzweck*), and gives the moral law for each thing as the injunction to use it according to its final end (SW 4:171-172).

Fichte insists that moral convictions are worthless unless they result from one's own free thinking, and that the reliance on any form of moral authority compromises the morality of one's convictions (SW 4:173-174). Here Fichte's theory strongly anticipates twentieth century existentialist conceptions of a 'situation ethics', except that it utterly rejects the metaethical noncognitivism and normative agent-relativism with which such views have typically been conjoined. The substantive point here is that nothing can be morally authoritative for an I except its own free thinking about what it ought to do, measured by the feeling of certainty as a principle of reflective judgment. This amounts to a rejection of any system of casuistry which proposes to derive what I ought to do from a 'universal principle of morality' such as the principle of utility or Kant's formula of universal law together with a set of facts to which such a principle is applied. Actions are to be directed at final ends, but these are not to be conceived according to some general conception (such as 'pleasure' or 'happiness') or derived (as Kant would have it) from a formal categorical imperative, but determined as good by the I's reflective judgment on its situation in its full and concrete complexity and particularity. But for Fichte, as we shall see in a moment, this point in no way puts in question the objectivity of ethical values or the universal validity of ethical norms.

What is normatively distinctive in Fichte's position here is its rejection of general moral principles and its insistence on the subject's own reflective judgment as the only authoritative criterion. In this respect, the very features of Fichte's theory which make it look merely 'formal' and 'epistemological' may be seen as grounded in a rejection of certain assumptions about the sort of thing that a practical principle would have to be in order to have 'content'

or 'substance'. And this rejection itself involves substantive issues of value, since it asserts the I's autonomy as the sole possible source of practical authority, and draws possibly controversial conclusions from this about what counts as an acceptable manner of forming our practical convictions.

What has just been said, however, may still give the impression that Fichte's moral epistemology is excessively subjectivistic or individualistic. This impression needs to be corrected by supplementing our sketch of Fichte's account of the "formal" conditions for moral action with a look at his account of its "material" conditions. Here Fichte's discussion focuses on the way in which practical inquiry must take account of the thinking of others. In other words, the subjective certainty of the I's convictions must be arrived at through a social or dialectical process, and if the formal criterion of a conviction's certainty is a feeling of reflective judgment, its material criterion is rational agreement with others through a free and rational communication aiming at objective truth.

Fichte approaches this point by arguing that action which is materially free must simultaneously meet two conditions: first, that whatever limits me must be subjected to my final ends; second, that certain things in the world should limit my final ends, namely the freedom of others (SW 4:230). Then he argues that these two apparently contradictory requirements can be reconciled only if all free beings necessarily have the *same* final end, so that the free action of each simultaneously liberates all (SW 4:230-231). This can happen only on the basis of a reason which is identical with each individual I and simultaneously one single reason for all I's. Hence if there is moral disagreement between different I's, it is the strict obligation of each to enter into a process of communication aimed at a common rational conviction concerning their moral principles and ends (SW 4:232-233). This involves both the duty to influence others through rational argument and the duty to be open to a like influence from them (SW 4:245, 6:308-311). The certainty of my own conviction about the content of the I as a practical principle is therefore something that can be attained only through communication with others establishing it as universally rational and valid (SW 4:246-247). What is substantively normative here is not only the idea that we cannot form rational convictions apart from a communicative interaction with others, but also Fichte's insistence on certain conditions which such communications must meet, such as their freedom from constraint, as by any authority or creed and the continuous openness of the participants to being convinced by the rational arguments of others (SW 4:175-177, 235-238). In this respect, what is substantive in Fichte's view could be seen as anticipating Habermas's ethics of domination-free communication.[10]

This means that for Fichte the I as a principle of philosophy has a content which is open-ended in two senses. First, the I is not some sort of fixed truth whose content is there to be theoretically apprehended; instead it is a practical principle, whose content is not what the I is observed to be but what it determines that it ought to be. But second, even as a practical principle the I is something whose content is the projected result of an active process of self-determination, relating the I to itself through reflective

judgment and feelings of doubt or certainty and to others through the reciprocal activity of rational communication. In both respects, what or who the I is is determined by what it ought to be; and what it ought to be is what it projects from the practical standpoint as the ideal result of a process of self-reflection and communicative interaction. The system of philosophy grounded on the I can therefore be nothing but the experience of a world as it must be constituted for a being which seeks simultaneously to actualize itself and to discover, through such relations to itself and others, the final ends it ought to actualize. Even the I itself, regarded as an object of cognition, has only those properties or contents determined for it by the contours of the entire practical project through which it constitutes its identity.

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Word count of "The 'I' as Principle of Practical Philosophy": Approximately 7000.

Notes

1 Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* will be abbreviated as KrV and cited according to A/B pagination. Other writings of Kant will be cited in the Berlin Academy Edition (abbreviated 'AK') by volume:page number. Fichte's writings will be cited according to the following system of abbreviations:

GA *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad

Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann, 1962-. Cited by part/volume:page number.

SW *Fichtes Sämmtliche Werke*, edited by I. H. Fichte. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1970. Cited by volume: page number.

2 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 11-15.

3 Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Ch. 2.

4 Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, pp. 41-53.

5 See, for example, Gareth Evans, "Self-Identification," in J. McDowell (ed.), *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 205-235, and Sydney Shoemaker, "The First Person Perspective," Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* Vol. 68, No. 2, November, 1994, pp. 7-22.

6 I am grateful to Henry Allison for pressing me to clarify this point as much as I can in the present context.

7 Christine Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989), p. 118.

8 Korsgaard, *ibid*., pp. 113-114.

9 G. Zöller, "Changing the Appearances: Fichte's Transcendental Theory of Practical Self-Determination", *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant-Congress* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995) I/3, pp. 929-942).

10 See, for example, J. Habermas, *Moralbewubtsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).