Idealism and infinity in Fichte's Jena system

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Abstract

Johann Gottlieb Fichte was one of the key German Idealist philosophers and an important intermediary between Kant and Hegel. Yet his philosophical system has always been at the centre of fierce debate. Some dismiss Fichte as a rampant subjectivist; some cast him as an almost mystical theologian of the absolute; others claim he is a straightforward epistemologist in the Kantian tradition. This essay sketches an approach to Fichte that tries to build upon the epistemological insights of recent anglophone scholarship while restoring some of the grandeur and speculative ambition of his work. It uses this approach to examine two issues in detail: the relationship between Fichte's idealism and rival "dogmatic" philosophical systems; and the role played by infinity in the systematic articulation of theoretical and practical reason.

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1 Will the real Fichte please stand up?

1.1 The trouble with Fichte

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) was a perplexing and troublesome philosopher during his lifetime and has remained so ever since. A key figure in the German Idealist movement that sprung up in the wake of Kant's critical philosophy, he was hugely influential and controversial throughout the 1790s – but then his star waned almost as rapidly as it had risen.

For many years, in anglophone circles at least, Fichte's reputation remained in the doldrums. His historical role as an intermediary between Kant and Hegel was acknowledged, but his philosophical work was typically dismissed as at best idiosyncratic and at worst downright dangerous. Bertrand Russell exemplifies the latter tendency. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, he rails against Fichte's system as a subjectivist "insanity" where "everything

is only an emanation of the ego". This anxiety is compounded by Fichte's alleged role as a philosopher of "nationalistic totalitarianism" that would develop by "logical stages" into Hitler. Elsewhere Russell writes:

> In all this I feel a grave danger, the danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of "truth" as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness – the intoxication of power which invaded philosophy with Fichte, and to which modern men, whether philosophers or not, are prone. I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of vast social disaster.[1]

Frederick Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* offers a far more sympathetic and intelligent account of Fichte. But there is still an abiding concern over Fichte's *extravagance*, the feeling that he throws a certain Kantian moderation to the wind and takes things in an uncomfortably speculative and metaphysical direction. Systems such as Fichte's "possess a grandeur that can hardly be called into question", Copleston writes, but they are also "capable of exerting on some minds at least a peculiar power of fascination".[2]

In particular, Copleston argues that by abandoning Kant's "thing-in-itself", Fichte and his idealist successors have no choice but to treat reality as entirely produced by creative thought. This in turn forces a turn towards absolute subjectivity:

> But we must go further than this and recognise that the production of the world cannot be attributed to the individual self at all, even to its unconscious activity. For if it were attributed to the individual

[1] Russell 2004, p762

[2] Copleston 1965, p15

> finite self as such, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid solipsism, a position which can hardly be seriously maintained. Idealism is thus compelled to go behind the finite subject to a supra-individual intelligence, an absolute subject.[3]
>
> For Kant the metaphysics of the future is a transcendental critique of human experience and knowledge. We can say in fact that it is the human mind's reflective awareness of its own spontaneous formative activity. In metaphysical idealism, however, the activity in question is productive in the fullest sense (the thing-in-itself having been eliminated); and this activity is attributed, not to the finite human mind as such, but to absolute thought or reason.[4]

This picture of a dangerous Fichte, forever teetering on the verge of solipsism and saved only by a turn towards theological and/or totalitarian speculation, has come under sustained criticism of late. A new generation of primarily US-based Fichte scholars such as Daniel Breazeale, Tom Rockmore and Frederick Beiser, reject the notion that Fichte propounds extreme subjectivist metaphysics and instead recast him as an epistemologist concerned above all with the nature of human knowledge and representation. Beiser, for instance, writes:

> Against the subjective idealist interpretation, I argue that the central purpose of Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* was to avoid the charges of subjectivism that had been levelled against Kant's philosophy in the 1780s. For Fichte, no less than Kant, transcendental idealism had to explain empirical reality, the existence of an external world... Although Fichte's idealism has often been read as the very epitome of modern subjectivism, the truth of the matter is that Fichte radically broke with this tradition.[5]

[3] Copleston 1965, p18
[4] Copleston 1965, p21
[5] Beiser 2002, p219

The strategy adopted by this epistemological reading revolves around reinterpreting Fichte's "I" in anthropological rather than theological terms, as Wayne Martin puts it.[6] The extravagant claim that the I engenders reality is thus transformed into the considerably more reasonable (if not trivial) claim that the I engenders its own sense of reality. Instead of tracing how the self-movement of a quasi-divine absolute subject brings forth the entire universe, philosophy has the more modest task of merely giving a systematic account of how we as finite individual human beings construct our representations of the outside world.

This shift in interpretation is accompanied by another turn, away from Hegel and towards Kant. Much of recent Fichte scholarship has focused on a meticulous reconstruction of the relationship between Kant and Fichte as mediated by various post-Kantian figures such as Reinhold, Schulze and Jacobi. This is often accompanied by a thinly veiled anti-Hegelianism. Breazeale's Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Fichte, for instance, complains:

> For much of the nineteenth century, beginning with Hegel's self-serving interpretation of the history of modern philosophy, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* was generally assimilated into the larger history of German Idealism. Criticised by both Schelling and Hegel as a one-sided, "subjective" idealism and a prime instance of the "philosophy of reflection," Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* was almost universally treated as a superseded rung on the ladder "from Kant to Hegel" and thus assigned a purely historical significance.

This desire to "liberate Fichte's philosophy from the shadow of Hegel", as Breazeale puts it, typically goes hand-in-hand with an attempt to consider Fichte as a philosopher in his own right, rather than as a mere exemplar of German Idealism, interpreter of Kant, or influence upon Hegel. The implication here seems to be that Fichte's future effect upon Hegel exerts a distorting retroactive effect upon our interpretation of him: we read Fichte

[6]Martin 1997, p15

with an eye to what he would become for Hegel rather than what he had been for himself. The scholarly focus on the passage from Kant to Fichte thus acts as a counterweight to this distorting tendency, granting us access to a balanced and measured picture of Fichte, stripped of false teleological determinations.

What are we to make of this radical revision of Fichte's philosophical standing and meaning? It is undeniable that the "New Fichte" laid out by Breazeale et al is a vast improvement on previous readings, in terms of both its overarching account of Fichte's project and the scrupulous attention it pays to the details of Fichte's argument. It rescues Fichte from both Russell's phobic reaction and Copleston's theological inclinations. If nothing else it is simply more productive to read Fichte as a sensible if provocative theorist of subjective experience than to denounce him as a dangerous madman or recast him as an essentially religious thinker.

But one cannot help suspect all this comes at the price of *domesticating* Fichte's thought. Treating Fichte as a reasonable liberal epistemologist might render his prose legible, but the very same gesture blocks off any consideration of *why* he wrote in such a rebarbative and hyperbolic fashion. For all its wanton stupidity, Russell's reading at least acknowledges something excessive and troubling in Fichte – dimensions of his work that are studiously played down in the modern epistemological interpretation.

Problems also arise with the move to decouple Fichte from Hegel and focus instead on his relationship to Kant and the post-Kantians. As Rockmore notes, between Kant and Fichte comes a world-historic rupture, the French Revolution, that had a profound and transformative effect on German intellectual culture in general and Fichte in particular. That is one reason why even the most casual reader of Fichte is primarily struck, not by his affiliation to Kant, but by his similarity to Hegel. The emphasis on systematicity, the sense of urgency, the concern with the absolute, the methodological use of dialectical contradtiction; the grand speculative ambition: all of these traits of German Idealism are born with Fichte, not Kant.

Furthermore, while the scholarly reconstruction of the arguments, influences, letters and rows between the post-Kantians is undoubtedly impressive (and necessary if we are even to begin making sense of Fichte), it at times threatens to drown the specificity of individual thinkers in a sea of context. The effect of this historical approach is to hypostatise German Idealism into a matrix of competing positions on issues such as the thing-in-itself, intellectual intuition or the primacy of practical knowledge. This in turn construes individual thinkers as points in that matrix, be they static or moving. The general "problematic" is foregrounded over the systematic unity of any particular philosophical project. Ironically, far from granting us access to Fichte as a philosopher "in his own right", the tendency here is to historicise his singularity away altogether.

1.2 Objectivity, epistemology, ontology

So can we approach Fichte in a manner that builds upon the insights of recent scholarship while also restoring the ambition and radicalism of his work, reasserting the speculative metaphysics and ethico-political stringency that Russell found so troubling? One possible avenue is suggested by Wayne Martin's interpretation as laid out in his book *Idealism and Objectivity*, cited above. Martin begins by contrasting the Copleston and Beiser readings of Fichte and endorsing the shift from the former to the latter as "a move in the right direction". But he adds that it is a "mistake" to think of Fichte as "a classical epistemologist, setting out to provide a rational justification of our claims to empirical knowledge"[7]

Martin cites Fichte's introductory remarks from the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* lectures, where Fichte proposes a "formula" that encapsulates the task of philosophy: "How do we come to suppose that something outside of us corresponds to the representations in us?" Fichte goes on to note that "we have consciousness" and that some of our representations "are accompanied by the feeling of necessity". This, he states, is an undeniable fact,

[7]Martin 1997, p15

and moreover "one should note how the fact is presented: by it one does not maintain that things are or exist, but only that things correspond to our representations". Martin comments:

> The degree of Fichte's divergence from traditional epistemology is most strikingly evident in his insistence here that correspondence [of things to representations] is a *fact* – moreover, a fact beyond doubt and proof, a fact that provides "the impetus and task" of philosophising. For the traditional epistemological project (and, indeed, for Beiser's "Kantian" version thereof), correspondence is all too dubitable. Indeed, it is this very dubitability of correspondence that serves as the impetus to the epistemologist's philosophising. Clearly, Fichte is here travelling quite a different path.[8]

So what is the precise difference between Fichte's project and the traditional Cartesian epistemology set in motion by doubt? For Martin it is Fichte's narrow focus on "objective conscious states" (those accompanied by the feeling of necessity) as opposed to a broader concern with intentionality as such (which also encompasses imaginings or flights of fancy, states accompanied by the feeling of freedom). Martin writes:

> What is special about objective conscious states, in contrast to this second class, is that in objective consciousness I experience the world as a constraint on my representational activity. For Fichte this provides the opening for a strategy of investigation; we can investigate the subject's relation to the world by investigating this experience of constraint. Such an investigation in turn holds out the promise not only of a theory of objectivity but of a much more general account of the structure of man's place in – and relation to – the world. It holds out the promise, we might say, of a general philosophical anthropology.[9]

But there is another differentia marking out Fichte's project from general epistemology that Martin mentions in passing but does not explore (perhaps

[8]Martin 1997, p18

[9]Martin 1997, p21

because it undermines the thesis that the project can be kept within epistemological confines in the first place). The point here is that Fichte's gesture of firmly grasping the indubitable correspondence between things and representations is necessarily accompanied by a letting-go of ontological concerns regarding the extramental existence of those things: "one does not maintain that things are or exist".

Again, the comparison with Husserlian phenomenology is instructive. At first glance, Fichte's insistence that the fact of correspondence does not entail the existence of things resembles the phenomenological *epoché*, whereby questions about the existence of contemplated objects are "bracketed", ie suspended and set aside. But one can only set aside a question that has been raised in the first place. With Fichte, the question of extramental existence is not even raised. He simply notes that correspondence does not imply existence, and serenely moves on, letting go of the question rather than suspending it. Consider this passage, for instance, from the 1797 *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*:

> The question now raised – viz, how is a being for us possible? – abstracts from all being. This does not mean that one must think, so to speak, of a non-being; for by doing so one would succeed only in negating the concept of being, not in abstracting from it. Instead, the concept of being is here not of thought at all – either positively or negatively.[10]

But at this point an objection naturally arises. What licences Fichte's indifference to the existence of things "out there"? Can he really get away with simply not raising these questions? Does that not in fact mean *ducking* the question by means of a wanton (and therefore illicit) philosophical negligence on Fichte's part? For the epistemological Fichteans the answer to this charge is ultimately a Kantian one: that way madness lies. Any step outside the confines of epistemology is transgressive, in that it involves speculative

[10] *IW*, p39

assertion about things-in-themselves (or more accurately, things-outside-us) that necessarily lapses into dogmatism. Far from being obliged to raise these questions, philosophers have a duty to be prudent, disavowing such excessive ambitions and contenting themselves with the more modest goal of merely mapping out the insides of our heads.

Of course, it is undeniable that Kant frequently deploys these sorts of arguments – see, for instance, the injunction against Lockean fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*'s Transcendental Deduction. And in this sense, perhaps Fichte is just radicalising a Kantian position. But isn't this also Kant at his most conservative and prissy, forever setting up boundaries and warning of the dire consequences of crossing them? Are we really to believe that it is *this* Kant that Fichte takes up, intensifies and evangelises? Surely the point of Fichte is that he is neither negligent nor timid. And if this is the case, we are back to the problem of licensing his indifference to the extramental existence of things.

The "absolutist" approach to Fichte, however, can perhaps shed some light here. If Fichte is so deliberately indifferent to the existence of things-outside-ourselves, this can only be because such things are conceptually incoherent in the first place. Fichte is not ignoring what may or may not be "out there", he is denying that there is an "out there" at all. Being, insofar as it is meaningful, is always already being-for-us. The philosophical negligence lies, if anywhere, with those who fail to fully think through this insight.

And consequently, the relationship between subjects and objects should not be thought of in terms of an interiority of consciousness ranged against an exterior universe. This naive picture – which is itself a "for us" representation – is adequate for ordinary sciences, but not for the *Wissenschafteslehre* that grounds those sciences. On the contrary, the task of the philosophy is to show how this picture of being arises out of the more primordial self-activity of the absolute I. As Copleston puts it, in a passage that draws similar conclusions to Martin while maintaining the absolutist reading of Fichte:

> It is obvious that from the point of view of ordinary consciousness

> there is a distinction between presentation (*Vorstellung*) and thing. We have the spontaneous belief that we are acted upon by things which exist independently of the ego. And to all appearances this belief is fully justified. Hence it is incumbent upon Fichte to show, in a manner consistent with the idealist position, how the point of view of ordinary consciousness arises, and how from this point of view our spontaneous belief in an objective Nature is in a sense justified. For the aim of idealist philosophy is to explain the facts of consciousness on idealist principles, not to deny them.[11]

To summarise: if, as Martin maintains, Fichte should be read as a radicalised epistemologist, one concerned with grounding objectivity and unconcerned with any kind of Cartesian doubt regarding the existence of an external world, then this very same picture can be "turned inside out", so to speak, and seen as an absolute idealism concerned with the ontology of objects that are constituted as subject-facing, as beings-for-us. All we have to do is discard the Kantian injunction that we must not speak of things-outside-ourselves and replace it with a deconstructive hypothesis that there is no outside ourselves (or inside, for that matter). This step, one that transfigures transcendental idealism into absolute idealism, comes at the price of common sense and perhaps takes us out of a materialist "comfort zone". But it is essential if we are to make sense of Fichte's systematic ambition and liberate his philosophy from the confines of a narrowly epistemological reading.

1.3 Reconstructing Fichte's system

The preceding remarks are, I hope, enough to at least motivate an approach to Fichte which I shall endeavour to explore in the remainder of this essay. And in line with the general emphasis on those aspects of Fichte that prefigure Hegel, my aim is to read Fichte unapologetically as a systematic idealist philosopher. The essay therefore tries to reconstruct, in outline, Fichte's

[11] Copleston 1965, p72

overall system, paying special attention to two dialectic relationships: that between idealism and realism, and that between the infinite and the finite.

Of course, any attempt to reconstruct Fichte's overall thought faces the basic obstacle of attempting to hit a moving target. As is well known, Fichte constantly tweaked and reconfigured the *Wissenschaftlehre* throughout his life, producing a number of different versions of his system (estimates vary between 13 and 16). Only one of these versions, the 1794 *Grundlages der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, was published during his lifetime. It remained by far his most influential work, despite being rapidly superseded. This situation is further complicated by a break between Fichte's early and later work characterised by the shift from the absolute I to absolute being as the grounding principle of philosophy.

In this essay I shall focus exclusively on Fichte's Jena period, stretching from his arrival at the University of Jena in May 1794 to his enforced departure to Berlin in the summer of 1799 following the so called "atheism controversy". This period is bookended by two works, the 1794 *Grundlages* (also known by the rather misleading English title *The Science of Knowledge*) and his popular introduction to philosophy *The Vocation of Man*, which was published in 1800 but conceived and composed in Jena the previous year. This latter work has traditionally been thought of as prefiguring Fichte's later period, but Ives Radrizzani argues, to my mind convincingly, that it is in fact a continuation and development of Fichte's previous Jena work, in particular the *nova methodo* lectures.[12]

I've divided my overview into two sections. The first looks in detail at the relationship between Fichte's idealist system and that which he declares to be its only worthy rival: dogmatism. In doing so I hope to tease out the contours of Fichte's relationship to realist and materialist thought, and in particular understand which aspects of such thought he rejects, and which he takes up in sublated form within his idealist system. The second section continues this theme by examining Fichte's treatment of theoretical reason,

[12]Radrizzani 2002, p317

focusing on the impasses that unaided theoretical reason finds itself in. It ends with a brief look at how Fichte deploys practical, ethico-political reason as a means of breaking through these impasses and thereby leaping to the infinite.

Lurking in the background here are recent arguments from two French philosophers, Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou. In his book *After Finitude*, Meillassoux launches a "speculative materialist" critique of what he calls "correlationism" – the idea that "we only have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other".[13] In Meillassoux's terms, Fichte is a strong correlationist, perhaps even the strongest. A close critical engagement with Fichte read as an absolute idealist might, therefore, shed light on the nature of speculative materialism as a rival project. The fact that Meillassoux explicitly posits speculative materialism as situated beyond both idealism and dogmatism only adds to the suggestion that Fichte might be an interesting and relevant case study of correlationism.

The second guiding set of background arguments comes from Badiou's insistence that the mathematical conception of the infinite developed by Georg Cantor effectively "desacralises" the infinite and brings to and end the "romantic" epoch in philosophy inaugurated by Hegel.[14] This suggests it is worth examining in detail exactly how the finite and infinite are deployed in German Idealism – especially given that disputes over the nature of infinity are some of the key reasons Hegel gives for differentiating his system from that of Fichte.[15]

A detailed engagement with either of these recent philosphical arguments is, however, beyond the scope of the current study. I mention them only in order to "show my working", as mathematicians say, and to explicitly acknowledge some of the more obvious influences on the philosophical approach taken here.

[13]Meillassoux 2008, p5

[14]Badiou 2008, p93

[15]Seidel 2001

2 Fichte's critique of dogmatism

2.1 Dogmatism versus idealism

Fichte's 1797 *First Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* boldly declares that there are only two possible philosophical systems – *dogmatism* and *idealism*. These rival systems proceed from fundamentally opposed premises. They are consequently thoroughly irreconcilable (any admixture of the two leads to inconsistency) and mutually irrefutable:

> Neither of these two systems can directly refute the opposing one; for the dispute between them is a dispute concerning the first principle, ie, concerning a principle that cannot be derived from any higher principle. If the first principle of either system is conceded, then it is able to refute the first principle of the other. Each denies everything included within the opposite system. They do not have a single point in common on the basis of which they might be able to achieve mutual understanding and be united with one another.[16]

The decision between the two rivals is ultimately a moral one, a test of the philosopher's character. As Fichte notoriously puts it:

> The kind of philosophy one chooses thus depends upon the kind of person one is. For a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; instead, it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it. Someone whose character is naturally slack or has been enervated and twisted by spiritual servitude, scholarly self-indulgence and vanity will never be able to raise himself to the level of idealism.[17]

Yet despite these harsh words, dogmatism is not simply a dead dog. Fichte concedes that dogmatism is the predominant philosophy of his age, and

[16] *IW*, p15
[17] *IW*, p20

grudgingly admits that Kant's work is at least superficially ambivalent on this crucial question – hence the need for a systematic reformulation of Kantian philosophy that clarifies matters, saving Kant from himself by purging his residual dogmatism:

> Kant's system and the *Wissenshaftslehre* are both *idealistic*, not in the ordinary imprecise sense of this term, but in the precise sense just indicated. Modern philosophers, however, are as a whole *dogmatists* and are firmly resolved to remain so. The only reason that they put up with Kant at all is that it was possible to make him out to be a dogmatist. But these same sages necessarily find the *Wissenschaftslehre* to be unbearable.[18]

But there is a more fundamental reason why dogmatism has to be taken seriously: it is a necessary stage *en route* to idealism. As Fichte puts it: "One becomes an idealist only by passing through a disposition toward dogmatism – if not by passing through dogmatism itself." Daniel Breazeale notes there is a certain "autobiographical pathos" at work here: Fichte is referring to his own conversion to Kantian philosophy in 1790.[19]

The necessity of the passage through dogmatism is presented even more vividly in Fichte's 1800 work *The Vocation of Man*, whose first section puts forward a lyrical and seductive exposition of the dogmatic perspective. Only towards the end of the section do we realise we are being led into a trap. It is this realisation that paves the way for a shift to the higher standpoints that occupy the remainder of the work.

Consequently, and as a prelude to a consideration of Fichte's idealist system, it is worth working through the details of his critique of dogmatism as outlined in the 1797 *First Introduction* and in *The Vocation of Man*. In the remainder of this section we will do just that, paying attention to how the themes of finitude and freedom play out in Fichte's understanding of the material and spiritual worlds.

[18] *IW*, p15
[19] *IW*, p19

2.2 The fate of fatalism

The 1797 *First Introduction* begins with the injunction to "attend to yourself... this is the first demand philosophy makes upon anyone who studies it". This process of introspection reveals two contrasting species of representations (ie, "immediate determinations of consciousness"): those "accompanied by a feeling of freedom" and those "accompanied by a feeling of necessity". The former arise out of our imagination and will; they are autonomous productions of the I that require no further explanation. The latter, however, appear to impose themselves upon us and form a system we call *experience*. The task of philosophy is to ground this experience by "displaying a basis or foundation" for it.[20]

But displaying such a basis *for* experience necessarily involves stepping *outside* experience, beyond the material realm that Fichte consistently associates with finitude. To this end Fichte invokes the philosopher's (implicitly transfinite) ability to engage in abstraction, an ability which separates the experiential manifold into *things*, the independently existing objects of our cognition, and the *intellect*, the subject that does the cognising. The abstracting philosopher then proceeds in one of two directions:

> If he abstracts from the thing, then he is left with an intellect in itself as the explanatory ground of experience; that is to say, he is left with the intellect in abstraction from its relationship to experience. If he abstracts from the intellect, then he is left with a thing in itself (that is, in abstraction from the fact that it occurs within experience) as the explanatory ground of experience. The first way of proceeding is called *idealism*; the second is called *dogmatism*.[21]

It should be noted that this terminology is peculiarly Fichtean. As Daniel Breazeale points out, Kant contrasted the "dogmatic" philosophy of his predecessors to his own "critical" enterprise, distinguished by its examination

[20] *IW*, pp7–8
[21] *IW*, p11

its own presuppositions; while Schelling described opposed systems of "idealism" and "realism", arguing that both were partial and one-sided from the perspective of the "absolute" philosophy which unites and overcomes them. Fichte, however, speaks of idealism versus dogmatism, "a formulation that cleverly conflates both of the preceding juxtapositions" in a new opposition that suggests "the equivalence and inseparability of, on the one hand, idealism and criticism, and on the other, realism and dogmatism".[22]

But is a"clever conflation" really what Fichte is up to here? Others have questioned this interpretation. Tom Rockmore, for instance, has argued that Fichte overstates the opposition between dogmatism and idealism. He cites passages from the 1794 *Grundlage* to show that Fichte's system is in fact "a hybrid", "an attempted synthesis of both idealism and realism", and that "Fichte's public opposition to realism is mainly rhetorical".[23] Yet this view seems hard to square with the insistent emphasis on the centrality of the idealism-dogmatism distinction one finds in Fichte's work.

Wayne Martin proposes what is to my mind the most plausible solution to this dilemma. The mistake lies in the assumption that "dogmatism" and "realism" are synonyms. Far from conflating the the two terms, Fichte's concern is to *separate* them, thus enabling the idealist philosopher to unequivocally reject the former while taking up and absorbing the latter:

> If, as I have argued here, dogmatism should not be equated with realism, then there is no inconsistency in Fichte's claiming *both* that idealism and realism must be synthesised *and* that idealism and dogmatism are wholly incompatible... These two dichotomies take place, so to speak, in different dimensions.[24]

In fact we can go further. Not only does Fichte reject dogmatism while claiming realism for his own, he argues that it is the dogmatist that is ultimately incapable of dealing with a realist ontology, of grasping the world

[22] *IW*, pxxx
[23] Rockmore 1975, p195
[24] Martin 1997, pp 53-54

conceptually. We see at work here Fichte's "strong correlationism", to use Meillassoux's terminology. Being is always already being for thought, and thought is necessarily directed out of itself towards being. By refusing to think these two terms together, dogmatism ends up thinking neither.

Fichte spells out the consequences of dogmatism in §5 of the *First Introduction*. If things-in-themselves that exist and operate independently of the I are the ground of experience, it follows that consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of the interaction of these external entities. In particular, the I's sense of freedom must be illusory. We are only "free" insofar as we are ignorant of the material forces that inexorably determine us. "Every consistent dogmatist must necessarily be a fatalist," writes Fichte. Moreover, if the I's autonomy is an illusion, then strictly speaking the I does not exist, or exists only in a secondary and inferior mode. The I is merely a product of things, an accidental feature of the world. "A consistent dogmatist is also necessarily a materialist," Fichte concludes.[25]

This ontological relegation of the I is responsible for imbuing dogmatism with its "dogmatic" character in the first place. In a curious and remarkable argument that anticipates Marxist and Freudian themes, Fichte describes how dogmatist subjectivity becomes alienated in a network of objects. Dogmatists cling tightly and stubbornly to their precious things-in-themselves out of fear they may lose themselves:

> Some people... discover themselves only in the act of representing things. Their self-consciousness is dispersed and attached to objects and must be gleaned from the manifold of the latter. They glimpse their own image only insofar as it is reflected through things, as in a mirror. If they were to be deprived of these things, then they would lose themselves at the same time... The dogmatist's principle is belief in things for the sake of himself.[26]

Fichte's point here is that dogmatism necessarily involves an element of what

[25] *IW*, p16
[26] *IW*, p18

Sartre would later call "bad faith". It rests on an abdication or abnegation of personal autonomy that is ultimately untenable. And the resentful passion that typically accompanies the defence of dogmatism is a symptom of this underlying weakness:

> When the dogmatist's system is attacked he is in real danger of losing his own self. Yet he is not well prepared to defend himself against such attacks, for there is something within his own inner self which agrees with his assailant. This is why he defends himself with so much vehemence and bitterness.[27]

Fichte's critique of dogmatism is thus twofold. Insofar as it exists in the world, the I remains imprisoned by materiality – "nothing whatsoever but a product of the interaction between things" – and therefore unfree. But insofar as the I can be posited as autonomous and free being, it is necessarily located *at a distance* from the material world and unable to affect it: "Thus the intellect and the thing are direct opposites of one another. They lie in two different worlds, between which there is no bridge." Dogmatism thus ends up producing a combination of fatalism *and* solipsism: the things and the I marooned in their separate realms, with the very possibility of the subject's practical engagement in the world ruled out in advance.[28]

2.3 Jacobi's dilemma

This reading of Fichte's critique of dogmatism – that he locates the fundamental failing of dogmatism in its inability to bridge the gap between the I and the world – sheds light on an interpretative puzzle concerning the first section of *The Vocation of Man*. In this section, titled "Doubt", Fichte sketches out two systems, a materialist one that reduces the I to an effect of nature, and a voluntarist one that asserts the dominance of the I over nature. The section ends with its unnamed protagonist torn between the two

[27] *IW*, p19
[28] *IW*, pp21–23

systems, unable to decide "whether love should be subordinated to knowledge or knowledge to love".[29]

Ives Radrizzani notes that many commentators – including some of Fichte's contemporaries – interpreted these two systems as setting out the dogmatist and idealist stalls respectively.[30] It follows from this reading that *The Vocation of Man* sees Fichte moving beyond either of these positions, in contrast to the wholesale endorsement of idealism and rejection of dogmatism found in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. In this reading *The Vocation of Man* represents Fichte breaking with his earlier radical idealism and moving towards the more pious position championed by FH Jacobi's "philosophy of faith", perhaps in response to the "atheism controversy" that ended his Jena career.

However, I'd contend that an alternative reading of the "Doubt" section is possible, one that fits with Radrizzani's thesis that *The Vocation of Man* does not represent a significant departure from Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* position. The key is in noting the twofold nature of Fichte's critique of dogmatism, as mentioned above: insofar as the I is a prisoner of nature it remains unfree; insofar as the I can be posited freely it remain at an impotent distance from the world. From this perspective we can identify the two systems as representing these two aspects of dogmatism, the fatalist and the solipsist respectively. The "doubt" of the section's title – the impossibility of deciding between the two systems – thus turns out to be a structural weakness within dogmatism and a motivation for the move to an idealist standpoint, rather than evidence of the unsatisfactory nature of both dogmatism and idealism.

Evidence for this alternative reading can be found by examining Fichte's argument in the light of the fact that *The Vocation of Man* was conceived and executed as a response to Jacobi's criticism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The first system set out in "Doubt" is recognisably drawn from the reading of Spinoza popularised by Jacobi in his 1785 work *Letters on the Doctrine*

[29] *VM*, p26

[30] Radrizzani 2002, pp319–321

of Spinoza. Jacobi's argument was a conservative and sceptical one. The logical conclusion of scientific rationality was, he maintained "Spinozism" – a system of strict material causality with no room for morality, freedom or God. The path of Enlightenment led inexorably to nihilism and atheism; it should consequently be renounced.

Frederick Beiser describes how Jacobi's work became a "sensation" on its publication, albeit one that "backfired". The letters were "avidly read by the young", but "rather than heeding Jacobi's warnings [about Spinozism], the new generation was drawn to it".[31] As indicated above, one of the young readers drawn to Spinozism was Fichte himself, a spell broken only by his 1790 encounter with Kant.

Given this, it is unsurprising that Fichte presents Spinozism as the spontaneous philosophy that emerges in untutored minds the moment we recognise our philosophical vocation and set forth on the quest to systematically ground our representations of the world. The Spinozist worldview unfolds in a chain of common sense arguments seemingly as ironclad as the causal connections of the Spinozist universe itself. It is only *as* this worldview unfolds that its implications (ethical and otherwise) are spelled out regarding the position of the I:

> I am an expression, determined by the universe, of a self-determined natural force... I don't act at all but nature acts in me. I cannot will the intention of making myself something other than what I am determined to be by nature, for I don't make myself at all but nature makes me and whatever I become... Strict necessity has me in its inexorable power; if it determines me to be fool and to be given to vice, then without doubt I will become a fool and be given to vice; if it determines me to be wise and good, then without doubt I will be wise and good. It is neither that necessity's fault or merit nor mine. It is subject to its own laws and I to its.[32]

[31] Beiser 2002, p362

[32] *VM*, p19

So just as in the 1797 *First Introduction*'s description of dogmatism, the I turns out to be a mirage, an epiphenomenon of the material network. And this realisation is necessarily traumatic, inducing an irresolvable conflict between the dogmatist's desires and convictions, between heart and head, between love and knowledge:

> Oh these recalcitrant wishes! For why should I any longer deny the anguish, the revulsion, the horror which gripped my innermost being as soon as I saw how the investigation would end? I had solemnly promised myself that my inclination was to have no influence on the direction of my reflections; and indeed I did not consciously allow it any influence. But may I therefore not admit to myself in the end that this conclusion contradicts my deepest innermost intimations, wishes and demands? And how can I believe in an explanation of my existence which conflicts so decisively with the innermost root of my existence, with the purpose for the sake of which alone I care to live and without which I deplore my existence, despite the correctness and strict precision of the proofs which this reflection seems to me to have?[33]

This feeling of "revulsion and horror" impels the protagonist of *The Vocation of Man* to outline the second of the two systems found in the "Doubt" section. In many respects this second system resembles the idealism of Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* – for instance, it sets out from a self-positing I rather than from beings outside ourselves. But in other crucial respects it falls short, betraying its origins as a desperate and romantic reaction to the brutal austerity of Spinozist materialism. For instance, the second system is overtly voluntaristic, simply inverting the subordination of will to nature and replacing it with a subordination of nature to the will:

> I want to be the master of nature and it is to be my servant; I want to have an influence on nature proportional to my power, but nature

[33] *VM*, pp19–20

is to have none on me.[34]

Most importantly, the second system is marked by its thoroughly hypothetical character: it represents a system *desired* by the protagonist, in contrast to the materialist one that emerges from rigorous and dispassionate consideration. It is "the content of my wishes and demands", but a content that is "utterly repudiated" by rational investigation.[35] It is, in other words, a *fantasy*, one that complements the unwanted dogmatic worldview with a dream of total self-determination – a dream that is incapable of acting in reality, and incapable of genuinely displacing the materialist worldview:

> But the opposite system steps up, cold and insolent, and mocks this love. If I listen to it I neither exist nor do I act. The object of my most ardent affection is a figment of my brain, demonstrably a rude deception. Instead of me there is and acts an alien force quite unknown to me; and I become quite indifferent to how it may develop... What is most holy to me is delivered up to mockery.[36]

We now see how the first and second systems in the "Doubt" section correspond not to dogmatism versus idealism, but to the two aspects of Jacobi's philosophy: the unrelenting presentation of the Spinozist universe, followed by its rejection through a religious leap of faith that cannot be rationally grounded. Fichte acknowledges Jacobi's dilemma, but refuses to be satisfied by his sceptical and irrationalist response to that dilemma. Instead, he develops an idealist position that rejects Jacobi's dogmatism while accepting and absorbing his realism. This idealism involves a tight dialectical link between thought and being, between the I and the world, one that operates in distinct but related ways at both the theoretical and practical level. It is to this dialectic that we now turn.

[34] *VM*, pp21–22
[35] *VM*, p22
[36] *VM*, p25

3 Theoretical and practical reason

3.1 Theory before practice

We saw in the previous section how Fichte sees dogmatic materialism and dogmatic idealism as two sides of the same impasse. The dogmatist is incapable of sustaining the connection between the I and the world, between thinking and being. Consequently Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* will be an idealist project, but one that differs from a dogmatic idealism that merely reacts against its Spinozist cousin by inverting that system's premises. This new idealism will set out from the self-positing I, but do so in a manner that maintains a tight correlation between the I and its other by fundamentally constituting being as being-for-us.

Throughout the Jena period Fichte experiments with different ways of introducing and developing the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s idealist system. One of the key variations concerns whether to present theoretical and practical reason successively or simultaneously. The 1794 *Grundlage* takes the former of these two options, spelling out in detail the limits of theoretical reason before moving on to practical reason in the third part of the book. But Fichte drops this approach in his presentations of the late 1790s, preferring instead to introduce his system by urging his students to carefully consider themselves in the act of thinking the world. This process draws upon an "intellectual intuition" that catches the self-positing I in action, and thereby introduces the absolute directly:

> There is a type of consciousness in which what is subjective and what is objective cannot be separated from each other at all, but are absolutely one and the same. This, accordingly, would be the type of consciousness that is required to explain consciousness at all.[37]
>
> All possible consciousness, as something objective for a subject, presupposes an immediate consciousness in which what is subjective and

[37] *IW*, p112

> what is objective are simply one and the same. Otherwise consciousness is simply incomprehensible. Unless one has grasped the subject and the object in their unity form the start, one will forever seek in vain to discover and bond between them.[38]

Nevertheless I feel it would be mistaken to place too much emphasis on these tactical variations in the presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte himself acknowledges a certain methodological pluralism in the opening pages of the 1794 *Grundlage*. After explaining how he will take "the laws of common logic" as his starting point, Fichte writes:

> In proceeding to the required reflection, we must set out from some proposition that everyone will grant us without dispute. And there should doubtless be many such. Reflection is free; and it matters not from whence it starts. We choose that which offers the shortest road to our goal.[39]

In *The Vocation of Man* Fichte returns to his device of presenting theoretical and practical reason successively. Again, his justification for this methodology is tactical and polemical: Fichte wishes to refute the charges of atheism and nihilism laid against him by Jacobi and others. To this end he separates theoretical from practical reason in order to underscore the failure of the former when decoupled from the latter.

In this section I aim to follow Fichte's thread by considering what happens when he considers theoretical reason as a prelude to practical reason. I'll examine some of the arguments he deploys in the 1794 *Grundlage* and *The Vocation of Man* in order to draw out the key distinctions between the two forms of reason: in particular, how theoretical reason is *finite* and *potential*, while the practical reason that grounds it is *infinite* and *actual*.

[38] *IW*, p114
[39] *SK*, p94

3.2 Vicissitudes of the I

One of the crucial differences between Kant and the German Idealists that followed him, Fichte included, lies in the emphasis placed by the latter thinkers on the systematic character of philosophy. The roots of this turn to systematicity lie in Reinhold's attempts to defend Kant's critical philosophy from charges of contradiction and incoherence. Setting out the critical philosophy in systematic form, developing it out of a small number of first principles, would, it was hoped, iron out any remaining contradictions and give justifications for aspects of the Kantian corpus that looked suspiciously arbitrary (such as Kant's table of 12 categories, which are somewhat abruptly introduced on the basis of Aristotlean logic). A system would complete the task set by Kant of putting philosophy on a properly scientific basis.

The 1794 *Grundlage* is in many ways exemplary of this systematic ambition. Wayne Martin notes that it was by far the most influential and widely read work of Fichte's among his German contemporaries. It was, he writes, "the text that propelled Fichte, at least for a time, to the forefront of the noisy philosophical revolution that followed Kant's critical project and the political upheaval in France".[40]

The first section of the *Grundlage* sets out three "fundamental principles" that the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* is based upon, principles that concern the I but are drawn from more general logical rules. The first of the three is modelled upon the law of identity, A = A, which Fichte is careful to note says nothing on the question of A's existence:

> The proposition "A is A" is by no means equivalent to "A exists" or "there is an A"... On the contrary, what we are saying is: "if A exists, then A exists". Hence there is simply no question here as to *whether* A actually exists or not... Thus in claiming that the above proposition is absolutely certain, what is established is that between that "if" and this "then" there is a necessary connection; and it is

[40]Martin 1997, p6

> the *necessary connection between the two* that is posited *absolutely* and *without any other ground*. To this necessary connection I give the preliminary designation X.[41]

Note the parallels here with the discussion of Fichte's ontological approach above. The question of the existence of a thing-outside-us is not simply suspended – it is not even raised ("there is simply no question here"). Instead Fichte holds fast to an indubitable and necessary connection, one that starts as one between "if" and "then", but is rapidly transformed into a necessary connection between the representing I and the represented A:

> *Whether* and *how* A is actually posited we do not know: but since X is supposed to designate a connection between an unknown positing of A and an absolute assertion of that same A, on the strength of that first positing, then *at least so far as this connection is posited*, A is *in* the I and posited *by* the I, just as X is... Thus the I asserts, by means of X, that A *exists absolutely for the judging I, and that simply in virtue of its being posited in the I as such*; which is to say, it is asserted that within the I – whether it be specifically positing, or judging, or whatever it may be – there is something that is permanently uniform, forever one and the same; and hence the X that is posited absolutely can also be expressed as I = I.[42]

It should be noted that the copula in this fundamental proposition – which Fichte variously denotes by an equals sign or by a word ("A is A", "I am I") – plays a dynamic role, rather than merely asserting a static and symmetric identity between the terms on its left and right. It would perhaps be better denoted by an arrow to bring out this asymmetric character: I $\rightarrow$ I, I posit I. Moreover, Fichte goes further and claims that the I's being is exhausted by this self-assertion: an I is an I only insofar as it asserts itself, and this coincidence of being and self-assertion is what characterises and defines the I.

[41] *SK*, pp94–95
[42] *SK*, pp95–96

> The I *posits itself*, and by virtue of its mere self-assertion it *exists*; and conversely the I *exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing. It is at once the agent and product of action, and what the activity brings about; action and deed are one and the same, and hence the "I am" expresses an Act [*Tathandlung*], and the only one possible, as will inevitably appear from the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole.[43]

But this seemingly innocuous proposition, I → I, in fact harbours a fundamental dialectical paradox that animates the bulk of the *Grundlage*'s argumentation. For insofar as the copula is *asymmetric*, to that extent there is a *difference* between the first I and the second I. And insofar as there is that difference, to that extent there must be something other than the I, some kind of not-I, that the I travels through in the course of its self-positing. Fichte brings out point explicitly and concretely in *The Vocation of Man*:

> That I want to be free, in the way indicated, means: I myself want to make myself whatever I will be. I would, therefore – and this is what is most puzzling and apparently totally incoherent in this conception – I would already have to be, in a certain sense, what I am to become, so that I could make myself be it; I would have to have a double kind of being, of which the first would contain the basis of a determination of the second.[44]

The principle of identity therefore leads us to "a second basic principle of all human knowledge", the "principle of opposition" and its corresponding "category of negation". This sets out from the logical principle "not-A ≠ A", which is recast in a similar manner to before as the principle that "a not-I is opposed absolutely to the I".[45]

But this introduction of the not-I brings with it a whole series of problems that revolve around the tension between the not-I as something posited by

[43] *SK*, p97
[44] *VM*, p22
[45] *SK*, p102–105

the I, and therefore derivative of it, and the not-I as something absolutely opposed to the I. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say the rest of the *Grundlage* is devoted to repeatedly traversing this paradox, producing new concepts, refinements and adjustments with each iteration. The arguments are frequently crude and repetitive, but nevertheless we see in Fichte the rudimentary form of a dialectical style of thinking that would come into its own with Hegel. And this *productive* use of contradiction marks an important break with Kant, for whom dialectical contradiction is only ever a limitative technique designed to demonstrate the perils of transgressing some boundary or other. As Martin puts it:

> When we think of the antinomies as a precedent for the use of contradiction in dialectical method, what is most striking is just how conventional Kant's use of contradiction is... At each level, the role of contradiction is the familiar and logically unexceptional one of providing grounds for the *rejection* of the source of contradiction. It is at this most fundamental level... that we find the point of divergence between the Kantian and idealist uses of contradiction. For in contrast to the conventional use of contradiction as a tool for rejection or refutation, idealist dialectic uses contradiction as a positive tool in an explanatory project – as a strategy for *retaining* the source of contradiction.[46]

Fichte deals with the initial contradiction between the I and not-I by considering them as mutually limiting each other. This in turn throws up the concept of divisibility, of partial negation, of "the *capacity for quantity* in general, not any *determinate* quantity". From this we obtain the third basic principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: the I posits a divisible not-I and a divisible I as mutually opposed and limiting each other.[47]

This so called "grounding principle" encapsulates a synthesis of opposites that Fichte takes as the template for his argumentative methodology. A series

[46]Martin 1997, pp102–103

[47]*SK*, p108–110

of successive syntheses will carry us from these basic principles right up to the point where no more syntheses are possible, systematically generating metaphysical categories and concepts on the way. And the terminal point we eventually reach is precisely the frontier between the realms of theoretical and practical reason:

> In the I and not-I thus united, and to the extent that they are united thereby, we have therefore to seek out opposing characteristics that remain, and to unite them through a new ground of conjunction, which again must be contained in the highest conjunctive ground of all. And in the opposites united by this first synthesis, we again have to find new opposites, and to combine them by a new ground of conjunction, contained in that already derived. And this we must continue so far as we can, until we arrive at opposites which can no longer be altogether combined, and are thereby transported into the practical part of this work.[48]

3.3 The limits of theoretical reason

The second part of the 1794 *Grundlage*, devoted to the foundations of theoretical knowledge, begins by splitting the "grounding principle" into two components: "the I posits the I and not-I as mutually limiting each other" becomes, on the one hand, "the I posits the not-I as limited by the I", and on the other, "the I posits the I as limited by the not-I". The former of these two statements is put aside – it will later be the starting point for practical reason – while the latter is set to work as the foundation of theoretical reason. Fichte remarks that "reflection must set out from the theoretical part... because the *thinkability* of the practical principle depends on that of the theoretical". Nevertheless, he adds, it will later transpire that it is the practical faculty "which first makes possible the theoretical", rather than vice versa. The order in which we deduce the faculties is the opposite of

[48] *SK*, p113

their actual dependencies.[49]

What follows is by any standards a convoluted and repetitive series of arguments and syntheses that progressively unwrap the contradictions of an I that is determined by something other than it, but nevertheless fundamentally posits that same something. In the process various metaphysical categories emerge, such as relation, activity, passivity, substance, accident, causality, quality, quantity and so on. I do not propose to give a detailed commentary on this dialectic here, nor would I claim to have understood all its twists and turns. I will, however, make three general comments about the overall shape and direction of Fichte's argument.

First, we should note Fichte's concern to maintain an element of realism at the heart of theoretical reason. While theoretical reason clearly proceeds from an idealist standpoint – it is primordially the I that posits itself as limited, as opposed to a non-I primordially limiting the I – Fichte takes pains to distance himself from any kind of ultra-idealism that relegates or dismisses the effect of the not-I. On the contrary, the problem is precisely to puzzle out how the I can posit itself as affected, how it can and must decide to limit its own freedom.

So for instance, in one important aside Fichte states that he is aiming at a Kantian style of "critical idealism" that unites idealism and realism while differentiating itself from the "dogmatic" versions of both schools:

> If the explanation of presentation, that is, the whole of speculative philosophy, proceeds from the premise that the not-I is posited as the cause of presentation, and the latter is an effect thereof, then the not-I is the real ground of everything... Even the I is a mere accident thereof, and not a substance at all, and we arrive at materialistic Spinozism, which is a form of dogmatic realism... If, on the contrary, the explanation of presentation proceeds from the premise that the I is the substance of presentation, and the latter an accident thereof, then the not-I... has no sort of reality apart from presentation, is not

[49] *SK*, pp122–123

> a substance... but merely an accident of the I. In this system no kind of ground could be given for the limiting of reality in the I, for the affection whereby a presentation arises. Inquiry into the question is here entirely cut off. Such a system would be a form of dogmatic idealism.[50]

Fichte adds that theoretical reason cannot resolve the question of whether to take the idealist or realist road in explaining presentation – all it can answer is that:

> Both roads are correct; under a certain condition we are obliged to take the one, and under the opposite condition we must take the other; and by this, then, all human, that is, all finite reason is thrown into conflict with itself and embroiled in a circle. A system in which this is demonstrated is a critical idealism, of the kind most fully and coherently set forth by Kant.[51]

Second, we should note a couple broad trends as Fichte's argument unfolds in this section. The first is characterised by the not-I becoming progressively more abstract and attenuated, passing through determinate objecthood until it becomes a mere check [*Anstoss*] on the I, the lightest of touches:

> The objective to be excluded has no need at all to be present; all that is required – if I may so put it – is the presence of a check on the I, that is, for some reason that lies merely outside the I's activity, the subjective must be extensible no further... It will at once be apparent that this mode of explanation is a realistic one; only it rests upon a realism far more abstract than any put forward earlier; for it presupposes neither a not-I present apart from the I, nor even a determination present within the I, but merely the requirement for a determination to be undertaken within it by the I as such, or the *mere determinability* of the I.[52]

[50] *SK*, p147
[51] *SK*, p147
[52] *SK*, pp189–190

Running parallel with this attenuation of the not-I is the increasingly prominent role played by the *imagination* as the faculty responsible for the synthetic resolution of contradictions. Ultimately the imagination comes into its own as the power capable of uniting the finite and the infinite through a kind of momentary "wavering" that works in tandem with theoretical reasoning:

> This interplay of the I, in and with itself, whereby it posits itself at once as finite and infinite – an interplay that consists, as it were, in self-conflict, and is self-reproducing, in that the I endeavours to unite the irreconcilable, now attempting to receive the infinite in the form of the finite, now, baffled, positing it again outside the latter, and in that very moment seeking once more to entertain it under the form of finitude – this is the power of *imagination*.[53]

This leads to my third comment, which concerns the role of the opposition between the finite and the infinite. This opposition emerges as the ultimate deadlock in the theoretical section of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. The gap between the positing absolute I and the posited limited I turns out to be the gap between the infinite and the finite. And the impossibility of straddling that gap from the finite side turns out to be the chief limitation of the theoretical realm, the reason why it needs an appeal to an infinite practical reason in order to actualise it.

For instance, the section that introduces the imagination credits it with the ability to undertake a higher order synthesis whereby "the activity (of the I) in conjoining opposites and the clash of these opposites (as such, and apart from the I's activity) are to be united and become one and the same"[54]. But Fichte adds:

> The opposites here referred to must be absolutely opposed; there must be no point of union whatever between them. No finite things, however, are absolutely opposed to each other; they are alike in respect

[53] *SK*, p193
[54] *SK*, p191

> of determinability; they are determinable throughout by one another. That is the common characteristic of every finite thing. And so too is every infinite thing (so far as there can be more than one) alike in respect of indeterminability. Hence there are no things whatever that are flatly opposed and alike in no respect at all, save the finite and the infinite, and these must therefore be the opposites that are alluded to here.[55]

In summary: the dialectic of theoretical reason carefully balances and intertwines its idealist and realist aspects. This leads to a kind of abstract realism that recasts objectivity as a check on the I, a check that theoretical reason alone cannot account for. The theoretical dialectic thus ends in an ultimate antithesis – the opposition between the finite and the infinite. Synthesising this absolute opposition involves invoking the power of the imagination, which is grounded by an appeal to practical reason that can bridge the gap between the infinite and the finite, and thereby actualise a potentially existing objective world.

3.4 Practical reason and the infinite

It remains to be seen how this picture is filled out once the transition to practical reason takes place. As noted earlier – and flagged up on several occasions by Fichte during the course of the *Grundlage*'s theoretical section – this transition is not simply a matter of moving on to a new stage, but one that retrospectively undergirds theoretical reason and thereby resolves certain aporias left hanging over us.

The practical section of the *Grundlage* begins by returning to the two components of the grounding principle and picking up on the as yet undiscussed one: "the I posits the I as determining the not-I", or equivalently, "the I posits the not-I as determined by the I". The key to analysing this statement, Fichte argues, is the implicit split it sets up within the I itself:

[55] *SK*, p192

> For within this proposition there lies a major antithesis, which spans the entire conflict between the I as intelligence, and to that extent restricted, and the I as an absolutely posited and thus unrestricted entity; and which compels us to adopt as a means of unification a practical capacity of the I.[56]

The nature of this split is spelled out a few paragraphs later as a causal chain. The absolute I is the cause of the check, the transcendental not-I, which in turn is the cause of the intelligent I that is the seat of representations of the empirical world. The former aspect of the I is "infinite and unbounded", the latter aspect is "finite and bounded". Moreover, the former corresponds to the I's activity returning upon itself, while the latter corresponds to the I's activity as object-directed. Or, as Fichte later calls it, the I's self-reverting activity is an "infinite striving" that acts as "the condition of the possibility of any object whatsoever", as opposed to finite objective activity. This in turn underlines the dependence of theory upon practice: "There can be no intelligence in man if he does not possess a practical capacity; the possibility of all representation is founded on the latter."[57]

Fichte adds a remark to this general picture of practical reason that harks back to some of the issues discussed above regarding his equidistance between idealism and realism. He insists that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is both "realistic" and "transcendental". In a passage that brings to mind Meillassoux's discussion of the "correlationist circle", he declares:

> This fact, that the finite spirit must necessarily posit something absolute outside itself (a thing-in-itself), and yet must recognise, from the other side, that the latter exists only *for it* (as a necessary noumenon), is a circle which it is able to extend into infinity, but can never escape. A system that pays no attention at all to this circle is a dogmatic idealism; for it is indeed the aforesaid circle which alone confines us and makes us finite beings; a system that fancies itself to have escaped

[56] *SK*, p219
[57] *SK*, pp224–233

> therefrom is a transcendent realist dogmatism. The *Wissenschaftslehre* assuredly occupies the mean between the two systems, and is a critical idealism, which might also be described as a real-idealism or an ideal-realism.[58]

Another remark looks ahead to the ethical, political and religious questions that would come to preoccupy Fichte over the next two decades. He notes that "the juxtaposition of the *infinite* and the *objective* is itself a contradiction" since "anything that relates to an object is finite; and anything finite relates to an object". But he adds:

> Nevertheless, the idea of an infinity to be thus completed floats as a vision before us, and is rooted in our innermost nature. We are obliged, as it enjoins us, to resolve the contradiction; though we cannot even think it possible of solution, and foresee that in no moment of an existence prolonged to all eternity will we ever be able to consider it possible. But this is just the mark in us that we are destined for eternity.[59]

This curious passage suggests that despite the boldness of Fichte's deployment of infinite practical reason to cut through the Gordian knot of theoretical knowledge, there is still something amiss. He has not quite managed to unify our theoretical and practical faculties except as an ideal, or a limiting case. The infinite soul inhabits the finite body, but always remains at a certain distance from it – the uncrossable distance between the finite and the infinite. This traditional association of the finite with the actual and the infinite with the potential runs counter to the more radical vein in Fichte's work that asserts the converse association. Hegel would later take up these unresolved issues surrounding the infinite as his point of attack on Fichte's system.[60] If the infinite cannot ever be realised in a finite material world,

[58] *SK*, p247
[59] *SK*, p238
[60] Seidel 2001

what does that tell us about the actuality – and hence the rationality – of religious belief as conceived by Fichte?

The pious tone in the claim that "we are destined for eternity" is unusual in the 1794 *Grundlage*, which has relatively little to say about religious or theological matters. But religious issues have a much more explicit presence in *The Vocation of Man* – unsurprisingly, given that the latter work was written to refute charges of atheism laid against Fichte. With this in mind, I'll conclude with a short examination of how the transition from theory to practice plays out in that later work.

The first thing to note is that the transition is far more dramatic – melodramatic even – than previously. Throughout the *Grundlage* Fichte repeatedly warns us in advance that theoretical knowledge alone will not suffice, and looks forward to concepts that will be introduced in later sections. The transition from theory to practice is consequently relatively smooth.

In *The Vocation of Man*, however, the section titled "Knowledge" that deals with questions of theoretical reason ends with the protagonist cursing the mysterious Spirit that has so far guided him, and whose systematic epistemological reflection has ended up dissolving the world into a flux of images:

> All reality is transformed into a fabulous dream, without there being any life the dream is about, without there being a mind which dreams; a dream which hangs together in a dream of itself... You are a malicious spirit. Your knowledge itself is malice, and derives from malice, and I cannot be grateful that you have brought me along this road. [61]

The Spirit replies by revealing his intentions were not quite as straightforward as the protagonist had imagined:

> I wanted to free you from your false knowledge, not to teach you the truth. You wanted to know about your knowledge... But all knowledge is only a depicting and in it something is always demanded which

[61] *VM*, p64

> would correspond to the image. This demand can be satisfied by no knowledge, and a system of knowledge is necessarily a system of mere images, without any reality, meaning and purpose. Did you expect something else?[62]

Ives Radrizzani raises a question mark over whether the Spirit's system corresponds to the theoretical section of the *Wissenschaftslehre* at all. Certainly the notion of images *detached* from reality, of knowledge *cut off* from its referent, is quite foreign to Fichte's position and suggests that he is in fact critiquing some form of dogmatic idealism here. Radrizzani adds:

> Contrary to the commonly accepted interpretation, the Fichte of *The Vocation of Man* remains, on this point at least, faithful to the lesson of the *Grundlage*, the most remarkable outcome of which was to demonstrate that the theoretical part only confers upon the principles of the system the modality of possiblity, not that of actuality, which they first receive in the practical part.[63]

Whatever the details of this question, it is certainly the case that the final book of *The Vocation of Man*, titled "Faith", begins with a sharp return to the practical. The despairing protagonist mulls over the Spirit's cryptic lessons before deciding to accept the authority of the "inner voice" that tells him: "Your vocation is not merely to know, but to act according to your knowledge." This is experienced as a moment of enlightenment:

> Now I understand you, sublime Spirit. I have found the means by which to take hold of this reality and with it probably at the same time all the rest of reality. Knowledge is not this means... It is faith, this voluntary acquiescence in the view which naturally presents itself to us because only on this view can we fulfill our vocation... Faith is no knowledge, but a decision of the will to recognise the validity of knowledge.[64]

[62] *VM*, pp64–65
[63] Radrizzani 2002, p324
[64] *VM*, p71

And in a passage brimming with contemporary resonances, Fichte writes:

> What unity and completion in itself, what dignity of human nature! Our thinking is not founded on itself, independent of our drives and inclinations; a human being does not consist of two parts running parallel to each other, but is absolutely a unit. All our thinking is founded in our drives, and as an individual's inclinations are, so is his knowledge. These drives impose a certain way of thinking upon us only as long as we don't see the compulsion. But the compulsion disappears as soon as it is seen, and now it is no longer the drives which shape our way of thinking through themselves, but it is we ourselves who, in keeping with our drives, shape our own way of thinking. [65]

Or as Freud put it over a century later: "Where it was, there I shall be."

[65] *VM*, p73

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