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Fichte, Marx, and the German Philosophical Tradition

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The present study is the result of several years of reflection, during which my understanding of Fichte, Marx, and their relation has matured. A small portion of the discussion has already appeared in print in article form. I refer to the following two papers: "Activity in Fichte and Marx," in *Idealistic Studies* 6 (May 1976) and "Fichte's Idealism and Marx's Materialism," in *Man and World* 8, no. 2 (May 1975). I thank the editors of these journals for permission to reprint the very few passages I have not seen fit to rethink or at least to rewrite.

T. R.
NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT
JANUARY 1980

Chapter 1

On Comparing the Positions of Fichte and Marx

Mir hilft der Geist! Auf einmal seh ' ich Rat. Und schreibe getrost: im Anfang war die Tat.
Goethe, *Faust I*

Tätig zu sein, sagte er, ist des Menschen erste Bestimmung, und alle Zwischenzeiten, in denen er auszuruhen genötigt ist, sollte er anwenden, eine deutliche Erkenntnis der äusserlichen Dinge zu erlangen, die ihm in der Folge abermals seine Tätigkeit erleichtert.

Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, bk. 6

My intention in this book is to compare aspects in the positions of Fichte and Marx, two thinkers often but mistakenly viewed at opposite ends of the intellectual spectrum, in order to disclose an important and largely unsuspected parallel. The discussion of this parallel will develop in two ways, thematically in terms of analysis of several related concepts in the two positions, and historically with respect to the genesis of the parallel in the wider context of the nineteenth-century German tradition.

The presence of a relation between the two positions is by no means obvious. Fichte was a professional philosopher, writing in the Kantian tradition, and interested in the epistemological concerns which constitute a major strand of the modern philosophical tradition. Although Marx received extensive philosophical training, he was not a professional philosopher. His thought cannot be labeled as philosophy without further qualification, since after an early brush with Hegelianism he professed to abandon the realm of abstract thought for the more concrete terrain of political economy. It further seems difficult to relate Fichte and Marx in terms

of the usual classificatory schemes. As an idealist, Fichte has been thought to oppose all forms of materialism. Conversely, it has been held that Marx was at odds with all kinds of idealism. In fact, from the Marxist perspective a perhaps stronger point has often been made concerning the relation of Marx to the philosophical tradition. Since the publication of Engels's *Anti-Dühring* (1878), followed by his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1888), the tendency has been to regard philosophy as nonscientific ideology and Marxism as nonideological science, although there are signs that a revision in this attitude with respect to Marx's position is now under way.¹

Perhaps for these reasons, although there are some exceptions to be mentioned, for the most part there has been little attention to the possibility of a relation between the two positions. Books on Fichte rarely mention Marx. Discussions of Marx, if they mention Fichte at all, usually go no further than to stress that although Fichte's influence is perceptible in the thought of the Young Hegelians, it is absent from the Marxian position.²

If the usual view of the positions of Fichte and Marx were to be accepted, it would indeed be difficult to argue for a relation between them since there would not be any relevant common ground. To be sure, both thinkers were interested in socialism, social progress, and radical social change, but this limited area of common concern is hardly sufficient to suggest an important relation between two of many others in the nineteenth century who held similar views. But a stronger indication of the presence of a relation, if not a parallel, between Fichte and Marx, is given by the same person who did so much elsewhere to suggest that Marxism makes a clean break with the philosophical tradition. In the foreword to the first German edition of *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*, Engels writes "that German socialists are proud to be descended not only from Saint Simon, Fourier, and Owen, but from Kant, Fichte, and Hegel as well."³

Although Engels does not state that Marxism is philosophy, he suggests here that German socialism, including Marxism, is in part indebted to three of the most important German philosophers. But for the most part, this suggestion has been followed up in a selective manner only. In the early part of the century, attention was directed to the relation between Kant and Marx by a number of writers.⁴ And since the appearance of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), there has further been wide discussion of the genesis of Marx's position in relation to Hegel and the Young Hegelians. But although Engels also indicates the rela-

tion between Fichte and Marx, this aspect of the Marxian debt to the philosophical tradition has been mainly passed over in silence.

The presupposition of any comparison is that there is a resemblance between the positions to be studied. In general the existence of a parallel can be established in at least two main ways, although variations are possible. One procedure is simply to juxtapose all facets of the positions in question. But unless the contention is that the views in question are at least partially alike in all relevant aspects, a claim which will not be made here, there seems little reason to employ such a cumbersome method. Another procedure, to be utilized here, consists in the comparative analysis of one or more concepts. An approach of this kind is useful for the determination of the nature and limits of a parallel in terms of a central point or points, thus focusing the discussion more than might otherwise be possible. Further, since concepts are interrelated within a position, analysis of any concept, especially a central one, permits additional comparison of related ideas within the positions under study.

In the present study, I shall concentrate on the concept of activity, since this concept is, I believe, central to the positions of both Fichte and Marx. The discussion will develop in the following manner. The initial task is to outline the role of activity, and in particular of the concept of man as an active being, in the respective positions through consideration of each separately. Once this has been done, it will be possible to demonstrate a parallel between the respective views of activity, and then between the concepts of man which follow from these views. But theory corresponds to and exemplifies theory of theory, or metatheory. Accordingly, the third stage in the discussion will be to extend the analysis to the metatheoretical level in order to exhibit the parallel between the two views of metatheory. After the thematic analysis of the parallel has been studied on the levels indicated here, its origin in the development of the modern German philosophical tradition can be discussed. As a final stage, two problems arising out of the discussion will be considered: the apparent tendency to interpret nineteenth century German philosophy in a manner which obscures the parallel to be analyzed here, and the intrinsic philosophical worth of the approach to man as an active being as exemplified by both Fichte and Marx.

The parallel to be discussed turns on the concept of activity. This term, including its homonyms and related concepts, is used in different ways in numerous contexts. We speak, for instance, of active versus passive, action versus inaction, activity in the sense of radioactivity, *actus purus*, an act of Congress, and so on. Even

superficial inspection reveals that although there may be a family resemblance in the intended meanings of these terms and others which might be added to the list, the precise denotation is not always the same. It is hence useful to differentiate in a preliminary manner the concept of activity, as here understood, from other similar terms, but at the same time it seems unnecessary to anticipate more than the general lines of the discussion to follow.

This inquiry is based on the Aristotelian concept of activity (*energeia*). In simplest form, in this view activity is distinguished from passivity as that which acts is distinguished from that which suffers or is acted upon. Activity is understood as providing the unity which underlies and relates together certain concepts often held to be separable and separate, such as potency and act, ends and means, subjectivity and objectivity. In activity, potentiality is transformed into actuality. But as actuality and potentiality are inseparably conjoined within the activity through which the transformation takes place, this form of change is to be differentiated from that in which ends and means cannot coexist. Activity further presupposes an agent or active subject, which develops through its activity and which can be understood as an active being. As I shall presently show, the approach to man as an active being in a quasi-Aristotelian sense is fundamental to the positions of Fichte and Marx.

A final point concerns terminology. A word needs to be said in support of the decision to employ "activity" as a neutral term to designate the views of both thinkers. This choice is, I think, an obvious one for Fichte's thought, since he is explicit in his use of derivatives of the term "Act" (*That*), such as activity (*Thätigkeit*) and active (*thätig*) to describe the self. Marx is however less explicit in the selection and use of his terminology, and not altogether consistent. But in consequence of the frequent employment of the word "praxis" (*Praxis*) in the "Theses on Feuerbach" it has become the custom, at least since the end of the nineteenth century, to describe Marxism as a theory of praxis.⁵

I intend to resist the tendency to refer to Marx's own position, as distinguished from Marxism, as a theory of praxis for several reasons. In the first place, Marx never formulates an explicit view of praxis, even if it is possible to piece together a Marxian concept of praxis from his writings.⁶ Nor does he designate his own theory by this term, so one should be careful in making the designation for him, although this has often been done.⁷ Further, even if the term "praxis" does occur frequently in the "Theses on Feuerbach," there is no evidence that Marx ever employs it systematically, so its occurrence in a single short text does not seem

to justify its application to his entire theory. Far more likely is that Marx is here making use of Feuerbach's term against the latter's view, as was Marx's practice, in effect attempting to hoist Feuerbach with his own petard. But praxis is merely one form of activity and activity in several forms is a major theme in Marx's thought. For these reasons, to avoid misunderstanding, it seems preferable to utilize the wider and less prejudicial term "activity" to refer both to Marx's position as well as Fichte's.

Chapter 2

Fichte's Theory of Man as Active Self

My intention in this chapter is to state Fichte's view of activity in the context of his wider position. In Fichte's thought, the concepts of activity and man are inseparable, although neither is well understood. Accordingly, my task here will be to outline as clearly as possible Fichte's understanding of man as an active being. Although I shall refer to the relevant literature as the need arises, the primary emphasis here will be less on a definitive discussion of Fichte's concept of man as an active being than on the general exposition of this view in order to permit its analysis below.

There is good reason to believe that Fichte understood man as the central concern both in his own philosophy and in all human thought. In an early text, Fichte writes, "All philosophy, all human thought and teaching, its entire study ... can be directed toward nothing other than the answer to the questions posed, especially to the last and highest: What is the vocation [*Bestimmung*] of man in general, and through what means can he best attain it?"¹ But somewhat paradoxically, aside from this single passage, Fichte only rarely mentions man. Rather, he formulates his position in terms of a concept of the self (*Ich*), which has no obvious connection with man. Perhaps for this reason, Fichte's contribution to the problem of man has received only scant attention.² It follows that, if we are to understand his view of human being, our immediate task is to grasp the concept of the self as Fichte's response to the problem of man.

Although this aspect of Fichte's thought has not attracted much notice, there is an interpretative tendency which should be indicated, since for the most part my own discussion will run counter to it. Fichte's thought begins from an analysis of the contents of consciousness in terms of a theory of the self. There are basically two schools of interpretation in the literature devoted to Fichte. One school, certainly the majoritarian tendency at the present time, holds that Fichte's thought is limited to the level of con-

consciousness and self-consciousness, since it is unable to make the transition from subjectivity to objectivity. According to this view, which is largely but not wholly inspired by Hegel's reading of Fichte, the external world is no more than the result of the individual's mind. The German poet Friedrich Schiller's comment in a letter, that the individual is the complete source of all reality, is an early, but representative instance of this interpretative tendency.³

Needless to say, this way of reading Fichte is closely related to a widespread, but, in my opinion, unfair view of idealists in general, in which Fichte is frequently singled out as a chief offender, as purveyors of a patently ridiculous theory in which each individual plays the role of the divine creator. On the other hand, there is the less frequent tendency to interpret Fichte's view of the self as a theory of man. This can be represented by Dilthey's comment that what is new in Fichte is his grasp of the self, not as a being, but as an active principle.⁴ My own sympathies lie with this second approach. It will be my task here to indicate how, from an analysis of the contents of consciousness, Fichte develops a continuous argument which include such areas as ethics and social organization, as different aspects of the problem of man.

Prior to beginning the exposition, a textual matter should be mentioned. Fichte developed his theory of the self primarily in the *Wissenschaftslehre (WL)*,⁵ and in other texts related to this book. Fichte published several different and only partially compatible editions of this work during his lifetime, and there are several additional versions in his *Nachlass*. Since this book exists in different and in part incompatible editions, it will be necessary to choose one as a source of his views. In the following discussion, I shall rely heavily on the first edition of the *WL*, which appeared in 1794. Although to some extent arbitrary, this decision is not merely so, for this text is widely recognized as Fichte's major contribution and, despite subsequent revisions, it remained the fullest version of his view. It further continued to play a central role in the later development of his thought, since Fichte made abundant use of the position developed here as the theoretical basis from which to address other, more practical questions.

Although the theory of the self arguably receives its most ample discussion in the *WL*, this text is not sufficient by itself. It will need to be supplemented by others in order to reveal the full scope of Fichte's view of man as an active being. The justification is Fichte's apparent intention. Shortly after the appearance of the first edition of the *WL*, in a semipopular article Fichte wrote, "On the basis of the current [form of the] *WL* next Easter a detailed theoretical and practical science of knowledge will follow."⁶ In

fact the proposed publication took the form of a series of works addressed to related questions in terms of the analysis already developed in the *WL*. Just as in the *Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel moves from an analysis of consciousness and self-consciousness to society, morality, and history, so Fichte's thought ranges outward from a theory of consciousness to related problems. The difference is that while Hegel is able to state the related aspects of his theory in a single, encompassing work, Fichte develops his own view in a number of interrelated writings. But to isolate the *WL* from these related texts, as is sometimes done, is in effect to consider merely a fragment of the position.⁷ For this reason, I shall emphasize the manner in which selected, later writings complete the view of the self first sketched in the *WL*.

Historical Background

To understand Fichte's thought, it is helpful to place it in historical perspective. In the period following Kant's elaboration of the critical philosophy, a number of thinkers, among them Beck, Maimon, Schulze, and Reinhold, subjected it to criticism, often in view of its amelioration. Although there were others who shared his desire to reformulate the Kantian doctrine, Fichte was distinguished by his belief that he was the legitimate successor to Kant.

Fichte's identification with Kant easily surpassed a mere academic interest. His first publication, the *Kritik aller Offenbarung* [Critique of all revelation], through accident appeared anonymously. When published in 1792 it was almost immediately mistaken for the long-awaited Kantian work on religion. This instance of mistaken identity brought Fichte immediate fame when he was identified as the author. More to the point, Fichte thought of himself as a Kantian, indeed as the only one who really understood the critical philosophy, a claim he clearly carried to indefensible lengths. For instance Fichte even goes to the extreme of alleging that he understands Kant better than the latter understands himself, although the excessive immodesty of the remark is perhaps moderated if we recall that Kant made a similar comment about his relation to Plato. Kantian premises are further everywhere present in Fichte's thought. Indeed there seems to have been some confusion in Fichte's mind concerning the relation between Kant and himself, such as when in a letter Fichte suggests grandiosely that the critical philosophy in fact follows from his own

premises. "It is the same with Kant, whose writings I firmly believe I have understood. It seems more and more likely that he reasons on the basis of my basic principles." ⁸

But there is a touch of irony in his assertion that his own view is the completion of the critical quest. Kant, of course, prided himself on the painful architectonic form in which he couched his thought as necessary to its rigorous exposition, although it is precisely this side of the critical philosophy which numerous post-Kantian thinkers, including Fichte, found least appealing. For if he could agree with Kant's conclusions, Fichte found the manner in which they were stated to be lacking in systematic form. Fichte's task, as he saw it, was to give rigorous structure to the Kantian theory by restating it in systematic form.

The source of Fichte's revision of Kantianism can be understood through his relation to K. H. Reinhold and G. E. Schulze. Reinhold is important in the post-Kantian tradition as the first to suggest that a philosophical theory should be based on a single, self-evident principle. He developed this view under the title of Elementary Philosophy (*Elementarphilosophie*) in a number of works. Schulze was a skeptic who, writing under the pseudonym Aenesidemus, objected to the attempt to develop an epistemological theory in this manner on the grounds that no such principle could be found.

The immediate occasion for Fichte to state the first version of his theory was provided by his review of Schulze's study of Reinhold. In his *Elementarphilosophie* Reinhold had attempted to formulate the Kantian position through the introduction of a principle of presentation (*Vorstellung*). "In consciousness the presentation is distinguished by the subject from subject and object, and related to both."⁹ Schulze properly objected to this proposition on the grounds that Reinhold had failed to observe the asymmetry in the relation of presentation to the subject and object of experience. Although the presentation occurs in and is in this sense identical with the subject, it differs from the object which it represents. In his review, although Fichte endorses Schulze's criticism, he rejects the skeptical conclusions the latter attempts to draw.

With Schulze's objection in mind, Fichte reformulates Reinhold's principle in his own language, as the claim that the "presentation is related to the object as an effect to its cause, and to the subject as an accident to its substance."¹⁰ This statement is significant, because it gives, in the compass of a single sentence, the outlines of an ontology of consciousness in terms of two elements,

subject and object, and their interrelation. It is this same ontology which Fichte further develops in the *WL* and which is the basis of his entire position.¹¹

Philosophy, Experience, and Man as Self

Fichte's reworking of Kantian thought in terms of Reinhold's principle of presentation can be introduced through a comment on the aim of philosophy. If, as has been said, idealism is characterized by a simultaneous effort at total explanation and internal unity, then Fichte is an idealist.¹² In Fichte's view, philosophy must explain all experience, and an authentic or rigorous explanation can only be advanced on the basis of a single principle or hypothesis from which the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced. The concern to formulate a total explanation of experience in terms of a single concept is a constant theme in Fichte's thought. To grasp the attempt at total explanation in terms of a single underlying idea is to understand the intent motivating Fichte's position.

Like many philosophers, Fichte holds that the task of philosophy is coextensive with the explanation of experience. Fichte draws a basic distinction between two attitudes, that of philosophy and of life. According to Fichte, ordinary experience is insufficient to furnish its own explanation, which can only occur on a meta-experiential or philosophical level. The purpose of philosophy and indeed its only *raison d'être* is to run parallel to and to render everyday life intelligible. "The first standpoint is that of pure speculation; the second that of life and scientific knowledge [in a sense contrasted with that of the *Science of Knowledge*]. The second is intelligible only on the basis of the first" (*WL*, p. 31).

Fichte develops his theory in quasi-phenomenological fashion.¹³ If we turn our attention away from the world and toward ourselves, we can see that our experience consists in the contents of consciousness, or presentations (*Vorstellungen*). Our presentations include two general classes. On the one hand, there are those presentations which are accompanied by a feeling of freedom. In contemporary terminology, perhaps the closest analogy would be imagining or free phantasy. Presentations accompanied by a feeling of freedom are contents of consciousness solely dependent on the individual, although in the post-Freudian world it seems doubtful that one would concede that anything occurs in consciousness for which the subject is wholly responsible. On the other hand, there are presentations accompanied by a feeling of

necessity. These are contents of consciousness which, to an extent variable with the particular situation, may be said to have their origin in an external world. It is this latter form of presentation for which philosophy is to account. "The system of presentations accompanied by a feeling of necessity is also called *experience*.... Philosophy, in other words, must therefore furnish the grounds of all experience" (WL, p. 6). But since by virtue of his restriction of experience to these contents of consciousness accompanied by a feeling of necessity, Fichte has sharply limited the scope of his task it is apparent that, at least initially, to explain experience is equivalent to accounting for one among the possible classes of the contents of consciousness.

If we take into account that Fichte conceives of the problem of experience in terms of a theory of consciousness, his approach has a certain plausibility. Just as, it has been argued, an infant can be aware of his surroundings as such only through the differentiation of the world from himself, so from the perspective of consciousness everything must be understood from the vantage point of the subject. The result is what might be called, in contemporary terms, a first-person ontology, or theory of being from the point of view of the experiential subject.

How is experience to be explained? According to Fichte, the ultimate constituent of reality, through which experience is to be understood, is the self (*das Ich*), a term chosen to designate the human individual as the conscious subject of experience. Using the interaction between subject and object as his basic experiential model, Fichte further distinguishes four kinds of self. From the perspective of the subject, Fichte recognizes both finite self and absolute self. Finite self is the human being as limited and hence defined through his interaction with the surrounding world. Fichte is unfortunately not entirely consistent in his use of this term, for which he frequently substitutes the word "self," but some misunderstanding can be avoided if it is realized that he apparently has in mind the finite human individual considered as the subject of conscious experience.

Absolute self, on the contrary, is Fichte's term for the individual considered in theoretical abstraction from the man-world interaction that is the setting of all human experience. Since the absolute self is not accompanied by a feeling of necessity, it can never be an object of experience. It follows that to the extent that it can be thought and hence present in mind, absolute self is a free presentation. More to the point, the concept of absolute self, or absolute being, is invoked as a theoretical construct only in order to explain the possibility of experience.

Since the absolute self has often been misconstrued, it is useful to note that Fichte's understanding of this concept underwent revision in his later writings. Schelling reformulated the Fichtean concept of the absolute as the *Indifferenzpunkt* in his *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800). Beginning in 1801, in large part, one may speculate, as a reaction to the celebrated *Atheismusstreit*, Fichte redefines the absolute in a manner closely similar to Schelling's concept of the absolute harmony between subjective and objective forms of activity.¹⁴ But it must be emphasized that earlier, and certainly in the initial version of the *WL*, this term refers merely to a speculative concept devoid of any religious overtones, as Fichte makes clear. "The *Science of Knowledge* makes a careful distinction between absolute being and real existence, and employs the former merely as a basis, in order to explain the latter" (*WL*, p. 245).¹⁵

From the side of the object, Fichte distinguishes not-self and absolute not-self. By the term "not-self," he refers to man's world as it is perceived in experience. Fichte also occasionally employs the term "absolute not-self" or even "thing-in-itself," although in a causal manner Kant could not sanction, to designate the surrounding world as that which does not appear in experience, but which may be thought of as the ground of experience. From this perspective, the absolute not-self can be said to provide the ontological underpinnings for experience in general.

It seems clear that Fichte's theory of the world, at least on the epistemological plane, is anything but detailed. In part for this reason, it was accorded a chilly reception by his contemporaries. Indeed, Fichte's failure to provide a more than highly abstract theory of the natural world is one of the reasons which led Schelling to develop his *Naturphilosophie*, and hence an important source of the controversy that separated Fichte from his contemporaries, Schelling and Hegel.¹⁶

Self and Activity

So far we have seen how Fichte developed an ontology in terms of concepts of self and not-self. He further attempted to comprehend man, understood as a self, as an active being. Since Fichte's aim is to understand the self in terms of its activity, it is to the latter view that one must turn in order to grasp his theory of man. The self's leading characteristic is that it is active or activity, and that this is so is the single presupposition to which Fichte will admit. "The self is absolutely active and merely ac-

tive that is our absolute presupposition" (WL, p. 221). For Fichte, selfhood and activity are synonymous terms. If we remember that in his view the term "self" stands for "human individual," it follows that, in a fundamental sense, one is not a human being except as one is active and to be active is to be a human being.

The claim that the self is active arises from the regressive nature of the discussion. The problem at hand is to explain the contents of consciousness accompanied by a feeling of necessity, or facts of experience, in terms of the self or experiential subject. Fichte's argument is based on the presupposition that experience can only be understood in terms of an active self. But it should be emphasized that Fichte's theory of activity is more than an assumption which he is constrained to make by the logic of his argument. For he claims that each of us can immediately verify our own activity in what he terms "intellectual intuition" on the level of self-consciousness.¹⁷

Fichte further develops a theory of the interactions between self and world, and self and other selves. In terms of his basic interactionist model of experience, he differentiates several forms of activity. According to Fichte, subject and object stand in a relation of interdetermination, which may be understood as a restatement of Kant's concept of relation. Each element of the relation determines and is determined by the other. But since self is defined as activity, only three basic forms of activity are possible. Either the subject acts to limit the object, or it is limited by the object, or it acts independently of the object. These three kinds of activity are called respectively positing, striving, and independent activity. To posit (*setzen*) literally means to set, to place, or to put (something). Positing is a positioning of something in regard to something else, and the verb suggests opposition. To strive (*streben*) means to struggle or aspire to, for, or after. Striving implies a perceived lack as well as an attempt to rectify it. Independent activity (*unabhängige Thätigkeit*) is in no sense determined by the subject-object relation, although it takes place within the bounds of this setting.

Positing is the form of activity through which Fichte accounts for consciousness. Fichte employs this concept in the sense of the necessary condition. "It is intended to express that *Act* [*Thathandlung*] which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible" (WL, p. 93). Fichte's point here is that although positing cannot be experienced, it must nevertheless be thought.

In a manner that recalls Kant's Copernican Revolution, Fichte further maintains that if the object of experience is to be known, the act through which it arises must be ordered according to the laws of the mind. Positing occurs according to three fundamental principles. The three fundamental principles, that is, identity, opposition, and grounding or quantitative limitation, should not be confused with the first principle, the hypothesis that the self is activity. The three fundamental principles may be characterized as quasi-logical laws in terms of which all experience must occur and hence can be explained. These principles invariably limit the manifestation of positing, and hence all experience, to a single paradigm of dialectically rational development. It follows that conscious experience must conform to laws of the mind, and there is no limit to our knowledge of the content of consciousness accompanied by necessity.

The regressive character of the inquiry resembles Kant's analytic approach in the *Prolegomena*. In this work Kant makes the key assumption that there is synthetic a priori knowledge and argues backward, or regressively, to its conditions. In the *WL* Fichte similarly argues from known facts to antecedent conditions or, in his terminology, from conditioned to condition. But since Fichte's theory presupposes that experience is limited to the contents of consciousness, he is obliged to proceed in terms of a specific fact, and not the existence of knowledge in general.

The problem which immediately arises is the selection of an appropriate fact from which to begin the analysis. Fichte begins in what can only be called pseudo-phenomenological fashion. To initiate the discussion, he proposes that we select any one fact of empirical consciousness "that everyone will grant us without dispute" (*WL*, p. 94) and, through abstraction, remove its empirical features. The difficulty is, of course, the specification of any such fact upon which general agreement could be obtained. But the problem is really no more than apparent, since it is patent that in his discussion Fichte is not so much interested in arriving at agreement regarding an initial fact, as in utilizing it as an example for the development of his analysis. In this sense, it makes no difference at all from what fact one begins, since the argument in no sense depends upon it.

The proposition advanced is none other than a form of the law of identity, which Fichte states as "A is A" and as "A = A" (*WL*, p. 94). Fichte uses this proposition to make a number of points in a very murky discussion, which can perhaps be summed up in two principal points. On the one hand, in a manner which partially echoes Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, Fichte main-

tains that a subject must be invoked as a necessary condition of any and all experience. From this perspective, the subject is no more than a quasi-logical concept which can and indeed must be thought of as accompanying all consciousness. With this quasi-Kantian point in mind, Fichte writes that the subject or absolute self is "a ground of explanation of all facts of empirical consciousness, that prior to all postulation in the self, the self itself is posited" (WL, p. 96). Thus, at least from the epistemological perspective, one must consider the subject qua logical principle as a prior and necessary condition of experience.

But Fichte has another, less Kantian card up his philosophical sleeve, a card which derives from his view of logic. It has been the usual practice, at least since Aristotle, to assume the validity of logical laws as a condition of all discussion. But Fichte parts company with the tradition by holding that the *Science of Knowledge*, which can in part be regarded as a logic of experience, is prior to logic *tout court*. This has certain consequences. For one thing, it means that, since the rules of logic must be assumed in all discourse, as Aristotle argues and Fichte concedes, philosophy is necessarily a circular enterprise, a conclusion Fichte readily acknowledges. But there is the further consequence that logical laws, which in Fichte's view can be derived only through abstraction from the content of experience, contain an implicit ontological reference. Applying this point to the concept of an epistemological subject, it follows that this concept is capable of an ontological interpretation.

Kant, as is widely known, laid great stress on the fact that the transcendental unity of apperception is mere logical condition, in other words an epistemological subject only, to which no psychological interpretation can be attached. But Fichte argues that the logical concept at the base of experience is underlain by an actual subject, or finite human being. This can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, the proposition $A = A$ is a judgment of personal identity, the validity of which can be confirmed by the subject in reflection. For in every case a condition of consciousness is that the subject can, through reflection, be self-aware. Further, the assertion of identity occurs through the coupling of subject and predicate in a judgment. Hence, the logical relation of identity must have as its basis the real subject which brings about the relation through mental activity.

The first orthetic principle, $A = A$, refers solely to the concept of the experiential subject. Fichte next introduces an antithetic principle, also called the principle of opposition. If there is to be consciousness, there must be something of which the subject is

aware, something which stands out over against and opposes it and hence can be known. Now the principle of opposition cannot be deduced from the principle of unity. Accordingly, Fichte goes through a quasi-phenomenological analysis similar to that already described in order to deduce the concept of the object.

So far we have discussed concepts of thesis and antithesis, each of which was supposedly derived from the study of the conditions of consciousness. Now dropping any further pretensions to define his position from conscious experience, Fichte urges that if there is an antithesis, there must be a synthesis. As he puts it, analysis is the process of discovering the sense in which like things differ, and synthesis is the converse process of identifying the sense in which unlike objects resemble one another. Proposing that subject and object can be regarded as composed of scalar quantities, Fichte suggests that antithesis, or opposition between subject and object, can be overcome through a postulated mutual divisibility in which both poles of the subject-object relation limit and define their opposites through interaction. The advantage of this third principle is that it provides for the unity between subject and object requisite for the occurrence of consciousness.

After identification of Fichte's three fundamental principles, we can understand the use to which he puts them. In Fichte's hands, these principles are not a collection of logical rules, but the tools of a dialectical method, better known in its restatement in Hegel's thought. In Fichte's version of the dialectical method, the synthesis requires the antithesis and the antithesis the synthesis. The method applied by developing two alternative ideas or propositions, both of which are shown to be true, but which are incompatible with one another. The synthesis of what, on closer inspection, is seen to be only apparently contradictory propositions, is achieved through the introduction of another proposition which "contains" the compatible elements of the other two propositions. This enables one to proceed to another synthesis, and so on. As a methodological device, the use of dialectic enables Fichte to generate his *Science of Knowledge* from the three principles discussed by constantly discovering new antitheses which require the introduction of new syntheses.

The topic to which Fichte immediately applies his dialectic method is the problem of consciousness. The argument here is too intricate to follow in detail, and I shall attempt to do no more than to summarize its main points. But if the discussion is to be understood, it must be borne in mind that Fichte's purported solution of this problem depends on the legitimacy of the analysis of the conditions of consciousness from both realistic and idealistic stand-

points. Now this is perhaps a move which, on reflection, one may not want to grant Fichte, a decision which would rule his approach to the question out of order on strictly procedural grounds. But one must at least be aware that this is the method Fichte wants to follow if his argument is to be comprehended.

Fichte approaches the problem of consciousness through a quasi-visual image. Consider the following schema. The activity of the self streams outward until it is subjected to a check, at which point it is reflected back into the self. To the extent that its activity is hindered, the self is limited by the not-self, which may be considered as active in relation to a passive self. As passive, the self undergoes, or suffers, the activity of the not-self, of which it is the original cause. In more familiar terms, the relation between subject and object is that of cause to effect. What occurs in the subject is the result of the limitation of its activity due to the interaction with the world. The relation is an opposition between self and not-self, which corresponds to the second principle. The opposition is in a sense overcome by the result of the interaction, the effect of which is the awareness by the subject of its surroundings. In the substance-accident terminology sometimes employed by Fichte, the subject is a substance in which accidents, which correspond to modifications of consciousness, occur as the product of the subject-object interaction. This latter relation is one of synthesis, in which subject and object unite as a condition of consciousness. Synthesis corresponds to the third principle. But the possibility of synthesis is guaranteed by free or unhindered imagination. For although the subject is limited to the extent that it is determined by its interrelation with the object, to the extent that it is undetermined it is free to act. Imagination, or independent activity, is the absolute power by which subject and object are united within a single consciousness. But this unity is made possible by the original thetic subject (the active being or finite person), that is, the first principle which underlies both antithetic and synthetic subject-object relations.

The theory just outlined errs perhaps by attempting to account for too much. Even if one grants Fichte his assumption that the self is the sole source of activity, a presupposition which seems as highly improbable as it is necessary for his attempt to explain experience through a single proposition, at best Fichte can account for the facts of consciousness. What he cannot explain is the ontology underlying his theory, a fact of which he seems occasionally aware. He is unable, for instance, as he is well aware, to cast any light on the source of either self or not-self. In this spirit he notes that his theory is limited "in that it shows how neither does the

mere activity of the self provide the ground of the reality of the not-self, nor the mere activity of the not-self provide the ground of passivity in the self " (*WL*, p. 164), as do other views, which he, however, characterizes as dogmatic forms of idealism and realism. Fichte's point here is that at best a theory can describe and interpret the interaction which in fact occurs, but must leave unexplained the source of the elements of the interaction. The latter is a problem whose solution falls outside the scope of philosophy, as he defines it. But this momentary modesty is not only uncharacteristic of Fichte's writings. It is also incompatible with his ascription of activity to the not-self and entire explanation of presentation, since his initial assumption concerns the activity of the absolute self. For as Fichte writes, in a somewhat clearer statement of his position, "The absolute self must therefore be cause of the not-self, insofar as the latter is the ultimate ground of all presentation; and the not-self must to that extent be its effect" (*WL*, p. 22).

At this point, we might pause to evaluate what seems to be a patently circular argument. Fichte's explanation of consciousness makes use of both idealistic and realistic perspectives. From an idealistic perspective, the self is completely autonomous, and there is hence no need to appeal to an external force or principle. Self and not-self are merely determinations within the unity of the self, and self as activity is cause both of itself and not-self. But this idealistic view of self as activity does not "solve" the problem of consciousness, since it fails to demonstrate how the self can be determined by the not-self, as required by the theory of consciousness. This can only be done from a realistic perspective, on the assumption of the reality of the not-self. For consciousness is explicable only if we assume that there exists an external force which reflects the activity of the self back into the self. No self determines self, since it provides the real opposition necessary for the reflection of the self's activity. This is the realistic side of the argument.

As a result of the dual perspective, Fichte's position is both realistic and idealistic. Fichte relates this dual perspective to a necessary circle proper to the finite individual. His approach to this circle consists in an attempt to understand it within the context of his theory, rather than in an attempt to explain it away. On the one hand, he acknowledges the impossibility of a complete account of consciousness and experience without the assumption of an independent given. However, whatever is only is for the individual as a presentation on the level of consciousness, not as it is in itself. Since the self as active is self-determining, it can be re-

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