

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762—1814)

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d. Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre

In the 1794/95 *Foundations* Fichte expresses the content of the *Tathandlung* in its most general form as "the I posits itself absolutely." Fichte is suggesting that the self, which he typically refers to as "the I," is not a static thing with fixed properties, but rather a self-producing process. Yet if it is a self-producing process, then it also seems that it must be free, since in some as yet unspecified fashion it owes its existence to nothing but itself. This admittedly obscure starting point is subject to much scrutiny and qualification as the *Wissenschaftslehre* proceeds. In more modern language, and as a first approximation of its meaning, we can understand the *Tathandlung* as expressing the concept of a rational agent that constantly interprets itself in light of normative standards that it imposes on itself, in both the theoretical and practical realms, in its efforts to determine what it ought to believe and how it ought to act. (Fichte's indebtedness to the Kantian notion of autonomy in the form of self-imposed lawfulness should be obvious to anyone familiar with the Critical philosophy.)

Given the difficulty of the notion, unfortunately, Fichte's *Tathandlung* has perplexed his readers from its first appearance. The principle of the self-positing I was initially interpreted along the lines of Berkeley's idealism, and thus as claiming that the world as a whole is somehow the product of an infinite mind. This interpretation is surely mistaken, even though one can find passages that seem to support it. More important, though, is the question of the epistemic status of the principle. Is it known with the self-evident certainty that Fichte, following Reinhold, claims must ground any attempt at systematic knowledge? Furthermore, how does it serve as a basis for deducing the rest of the *Wissenschaftslehre*?

Fichte's method is sometimes said to be phenomenological, restricting itself to what we can discover by means of reflection. Yet Fichte does not claim that we simply *find* the fully formed *Tathandlung* residing somewhere within us; instead, we *construct* it in order to explain ourselves to ourselves, to render intelligible to ourselves our normative nature as finite rational beings. Thus the requisite reflection is not empirical but transcendental, i.e., an experimental postulate adopted for philosophical purposes. That is, the principle is presupposed as true in order to make sense of the conditions for the possibility of our ordinary experience.

Such a method leaves open the possibility of other explanations of our experience. Fichte claims, however, that the alternatives can actually take only one form. Either, he says, we can begin (as he does) with the I as the ground of all possible experience, or we can begin with the thing in itself outside of our experience. This dilemma involves, as he puts it,

choosing between idealism and dogmatism. The former is transcendental philosophy; the latter, a naturalistic approach to experience that explains it solely in causal terms. As Fichte famously said in the first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1797, the choice between the two depends on the kind of person one is, because they are said to be mutually exclusive yet equally possible approaches.

If, however, such a choice between starting points is possible, then the principle of the self-positing I lacks the self-evident certainty that Fichte attributed to it in his earlier essay on the concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. There are, in fact, those who do not find it at all self-evident, namely, the dogmatists. Fichte clearly thinks that they are mistaken in their dogmatism, yet he offers no direct refutation of their position, claiming only that they cannot demonstrate what they hope to demonstrate, namely, that the ground of all experience lies solely in objects existing independently of the I. The dogmatist position, Fichte implies, ignores the normative aspects of our experience, e.g., warranted and unwarranted belief, correct and incorrect action, and thus attempts to account for our experience entirely in terms of our causal interaction with the world around us. Presumably, however, those who begin with a disavowal of normativity — as the dogmatists do, because they are that kind of person — can never be brought to agree with the idealists. There is thus an argumentative impasse between the two camps.

Fichte's remarks about systematic form and certainty in "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" give the impression that he intends to demonstrate the entirety of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from the principle of the self-positing I through a chain of logical inferences that merely set out the implications of the initial principle in such a way that the certainty of the first principle is transferred to the claims inferred from it. (The method of Spinoza's *Ethics* comes to mind, but this time with only a single premise from which to begin the proofs.) Yet this hardly seems to be Fichte's actual method, since he constantly introduces new concepts that cannot be plausibly interpreted as the logical consequences of the previous ones. In other words, the deductions in the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* are more than merely analytical explications of the consequences of the original premise. Instead, they both articulate and refine the initial principle of the self-positing I in accordance with the demands made on the idealist who is attempting to clarify the nature of the self-positing I by means of reflection.

After Fichte postulates the self-positing I as the explanatory ground of all experience, he then begins to complicate the web of concepts required to make sense of this initial postulate, thereby carrying out the aforementioned construction of the self-positing I. The I posits itself insofar as it is aware of itself, not only as an object but also as a subject, and finds itself subject to normative constraints in both the theoretical and practical realms, e.g., that it must be free of contradiction and that there must be adequate reasons for what it believes and does. Furthermore, the I posits itself as free, since these constraints are ones that it imposes on itself. Next, by means of further reflection, the I becomes aware of a difference between "representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity" and

"representations accompanied by a feeling a freedom" — that is, a difference between representations of what purports to be an objective world existing apart from our representations of it and representations that are merely the product of our own mental activity. To recognize this distinction in our representations, however, is to posit a distinction between the I and the not-I, i.e., the self and whatever exists independently of it. In other words, the I comes to posit itself as limited by something other than itself, even though it initially posits itself as free, for in the course of reflecting on its own nature the I *discovers* limitations on its activity.

Our understanding of the nature of this limitation is made increasingly more complex through further acts of reflection. First, the I posits a check, an *Anstoß*, on its theoretical and practical activity, in that it encounters resistance whenever it thinks or acts. This check is then developed into more refined forms of limitation: sensations, intuitions, and concepts, all united in the experience of the things of the natural world, i.e., the spatio-temporal realm ruled by causal laws. Moreover, this world is found to contain other finite rational beings. They too are free yet limited, and the recognition of their freedom places further constraints on our activity. In this way the I posits the moral law and restricts its treatment of others to actions that are consistent with respect for their freedom. Thus, by the end of Fichte's deductions, the I posits itself as free yet limited by natural necessity and the moral law: its freedom becomes an infinite task in which it seeks to make the world conform to its normative standards, but only by doing so in an appropriately moral fashion that allows other free beings to do the same for themselves.