

What is Fichte's Thesis of the Primacy of the Practical and How
Does He Argue for this Thesis?

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I, Rory Phillips, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Fichte is well known for adhering to some version of the thesis of the Primacy of the Practical. There remain questions over the exact nature of this Primacy, and to what extent Fichte is committed. Furthermore, Fichte's arguments for this thesis, which appear across the full range of the Jena period writings, are opaque. This thesis attempts to resolve both issues. I start with an outline of Fichte's positions in theoretical philosophy, and present a sympathetic defence of his version of what has been called the transcendental argument against determinism. By doing so, we can see the force of one sense of the primacy of the practical – a methodological sense. I continue to demarcate various senses of what Fichte might be taken to mean by the Primacy of the Practical, identifying the most important sense as a transcendental interpretation of the primacy of practical reason. In doing so, I reject interpretations of Fichte that have recently been advanced by Breazeale and Zöller. I then attempt to outline Fichte's complex transcendental and dialectical strategies to support this thesis, with special attention to the texts of the 1794 *Grundlage des Gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* and the 1796-9 *Wissenschaftslehre nova Methodo*.

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I: Idealism versus Dogmatism

I intend to give an exegesis, explanation, and defence of Fichte's position with regards to what is known as the primacy of the practical.¹ There are two main types of position that one could designate with this label – one being roughly a metaphysical thesis and one being a thesis about the constitution of reason – and I shall focus on the latter, also known as the primacy of practical reason (PPR). I shall begin by noting that there are various ways one might think that practical reason, the faculty or power of reason to be practical, is primary. For example, one might think, like Kant does, that practical reason is primary on the basis that it can allow the agent to legitimately assent to propositions that theoretical reason must remain agnostic on. But Fichte seems to want to strike at something rather different than this, something that goes into the nature of the architecture of self-consciousness, rather than at the kinds of propositions that we can justifiably believe because we possess such a power of practical reason.

There is also the metaphilosophical sense of the primacy of the practical, which comes to the fore in Fichte's well-known statement that the type of philosophy one espouses depends on the type of person one is. I shall begin with a short detour as to Fichte's theoretical philosophy and its starting point.² It is my contention that the metaphilosophical sense of the primacy of the practical, whilst not the most fundamental sense, is important to a correct understanding of Fichte's project. After clarifying this methodological issue and providing a reconstruction of what Fichte might have thought, I will move on to briefly discuss Fichte's theoretical philosophy to get an understanding of Fichte's overall project, before moving on to PPR.

Fichte's opposition between idealism and dogmatism, the two possible systems of philosophy, enables us to get a grip on some of the fundamental issues. The most fundamental issue between the systems is the correct starting point of philosophy. For Idealism, it is the I, or the self. For dogmatism, it is the thing – the thing-in-itself, as Fichte says.³ However, one issue that comes to the fore, and one that certainly occupied Fichte, is not with the starting points of the systems, but with the results of those systems. Fichte thinks that dogmatism not only characterises the clear majority of other philosophical systems (apart from Kant – only on Fichte's rather unorthodox reading of Kant – and Beck), but also that Spinoza represents the best exposition of dogmatism.⁴ Spinoza's philosophy ends up with a denial of some of the basic and

¹ Whenever I cite works that originally appeared in German, I first put the page numbers of the standard German texts (where available) and then the page numbers of the English translations.

² A similar defence of Fichte on this point occurs in chapter 3 of Allen Wood *Fichte's Ethical Thought* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016). Wood emphasises the normative underpinnings of assent to propositions and choice between epistemic alternatives.

³ J. G. Fichte, '[First] Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*' in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings 1797-1800*, trans. & ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1994[1797/8]) I:427-8, 12-3. It must be noted that Fichte probably does not have the Kantian conception in mind. Fichte's imagined opponent is someone like Spinoza, someone who we would now identify as a naturalist of sorts. Fichte wants to designate all transcendental realists as dogmatists, and Kant *under one interpretation* – one that Fichte does not favour. Fichte uses the locution to highlight that it is about independent objects that the dogmatist is concerned about.

⁴ There are questions, of course, about Fichte's interpretation of Spinoza, and how much his reading was influenced by Jacobi and the "Pantheism controversy", but I leave these aside for now.

most certainly known facts of life – that we are selves, that selves are free, and that we have veridical experience. For Fichte, the dogmatist, if they are consistent, denies these – claiming that self-hood is an illusion, freedom is unreal, and that our ordinary experience of the world does not reflect the reality of things. This is, Fichte thinks, an intolerable position. Fichte appeals to the extreme unintuiveness of such a position, and argues that only idealism can provide the security of selfhood, freedom, veridical experience, and, perhaps most importantly, morality.

Thus, Fichte’s move can be seen to be something of an appeal to intuition regarding the results of a system of dogmatism. Intuition, Fichte thinks, is on idealism’s side. Idealism has never been consistently or fully carried out, so Fichte says that we should wait and see whether it can be carried out, and whether it can deliver on the promises of its intuitiveness to safeguard ordinary thought in a way that consistent dogmatism cannot. We must take care, however, when reading these passages. Though Fichte speaks of ‘idealism’ in contradistinction to ‘dogmatism’ he does not regard ‘dogmatism’ as straightforwardly identical with ‘realism’ (whatever one makes of such a view). There are, we find out, dogmatist idealists (such as Berkeley), and dogmatist realists. Dogmatism is not straightforwardly a view about the existence or non-existence of the external world, or even the independence of the world from the mind, but an account of both the starting point of philosophical reflection and a view of what Martin calls ‘objective reference’.⁵ The dogmatist is fundamentally committed to the view that the principle of causality is ‘a sufficient explanatory resource for the theory of objective consciousness’.⁶ Understanding this point is crucial, because the claim that idealism has greater intuitive appeal than realism is, to both Fichte and our contemporary ears, implausible. Rather, the intuitive appeal of idealism is as opposed to dogmatism, which has as determinate forms of itself some forms of realism. But the intuitive appeal of dogmatism, especially when one considers the end results, is, Fichte contends, lacking.

To return to the main discussion, Fichte’s emphasis on the results of dogmatism and idealism has been said by one commentator on Fichte to be a key part of the doctrine of the primacy of the practical – that ‘everything must be true which is required for duty to be possible’.⁷ Fichte will appeal to intuition, which affirms the existence of moral obligations and so on. On Talbot’s reading, Fichte argues that if there is an X such that moral obligations would not be possible without X, then X must be. Conversely, if there is a theory that denies that X, then they must, to be consistent, deny that there are moral obligations. Such considerations are what, I think, are driving Fichte’s thought when he claims that idealism has more intuitive appeal than dogmatism.

The appeal to intuition, however, is not sufficient on its own.⁸ What Fichte wants is for the audience of the debate between idealism and dogmatism to, as he says: ‘Attend to yourself; turn your gaze from

⁵ Martin *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte’s Jena Project* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997) 18

⁶ Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity* 41

⁷ Ellen Bliss Talbot, ‘The Philosophy of Fichte in its Relation to Pragmatism’ *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (1907) 504

⁸ For example, G. E. Moore (in his review of one of the Kroeger translations of Fichte), *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Oct. 1898) takes the view that dogmatism and idealism are equal, no matter what. Moore says that Fichte ‘has only to say on his side that his presupposition enables him “actually to construct a philosophy”, and “has intuition on its side;” both which advantages may be equally claimed by the other side’ (96-7).

everything surrounding you'.⁹ Fichte claims that if we make a serious attempt at this, to think ourselves alone, then we will come to see that a theory that tells us that we ourselves are illusions, such as Spinoza's, is not the philosophical theory that we wanted.

Thus stated, Fichte's move is simple – he asks the would-be dogmatist whether they are content with a philosophical system that tells them that everything (or almost everything) they think they know is illusory, including, crucially, their own self-conceptions and conceptions of what is moral. Of course, this will not convince the committed dogmatist. Those who already sign up to such a program, and are therefore either aware of these results but uncaring, or aware and think of them as *virtues* are not going to be swayed by Fichte's appeal to intuition. I shall look further at what Fichte might say to the committed dogmatist in the next chapter. For now, I shall concentrate on some of Fichte's basic theoretical positions.

I said above that, in Fichte's view, idealism has not been carried out consistently or fully. Fichte thinks that he needs to try to do so to guarantee our conceptions of ourselves as moral agents. However, this is fundamentally a type of experiment. Whilst Fichte does, as Talbot says, have a metaphilosophical principle that those things that are necessary for duty must be true, it would be more correct to say that they must be thought to be true. Of course, this weakens the claim, but it does more justice to Fichte's view. It would not be right to attribute to Fichte a view on which all the claims that are required for moral obligation to be actual are themselves therefore true, rather that we are *prima facie* warranted in our belief in them. This is because they contribute to a fundamentally normative conception of ourselves and our lives. But the committed dogmatist will claim that the whole conception is wrongheaded. As I will show in the next section, Fichte has his own response to this, but I mention this here because we should understand why Fichte should not be taken to say that these things are therefore true. This shows the experimental character of Fichte's idealism. Fichte claims that because of our *prima facie* warrant in belief in our selfhood and freedom, we have reason to think that idealism as a system is possible. But to show its possibility is to carry the system out.

In other words, Fichte adopts the procedure (as a transcendental philosopher) of Kant, and the natural scientist, by stating his hypothesis and then only after that is stated investigating the relevant phenomena.¹⁰ Only at the end of the *Wissenschaftslehre* will the starting point show itself to be the correct one.¹¹ The truth

⁹ '[First] Introduction' I:422, 7

¹⁰ For a good expression of this as the core of Kant's method, see Norwood Russell Hanson, 'Copernicus' role in Kant's Revolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 20, No. 2, (Apr. 1959), esp. 276-9. See also Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (London, Macmillan, 1990[1781]), B-preface *passim*, for Kant's own statement of his method and the famous comparison with Copernicus and the far less famous, but actually more illuminating comparison of himself with Bacon, Stahl, Toricelli, and Galileo; J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath & John Lachs (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982[1794]), I:92/93, for an example in Fichte, where he states that the laws of logic are tacitly assumed, and their proof is offered later. See also Gunter Zoller, 'An Eye for an I: Fichte's Transcendental Experiment', in *Figuring the Self: Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*, David E. Klemm & Gunter Zoller (eds) (New York, SUNY Press, 1997), pp.73-95, esp. 78.

¹¹ This point is also relevant to the striving argument. See Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity* 135. Martin thinks that the reason why the starting point of the 1794/5 *WL* does not appear in the striving argument is because in a sense it is the conclusion of the argument. Compare also Roderick Chisholm *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study* 15ff where Chisholm says there are certain things which we have the right to take for granted, such as immediate knowledge of ourselves, and that we are really free. Of course Chisholm would want to say that it is possible that rigorous

of Idealism can only be established on the completion of a philosophical system grounded on Idealism's first principle. This section was focused on why we should take Fichte seriously when he states that we should use the principle of Idealism when we begin systematic philosophy. I take it that I have at least shown the motivations for this view, and explained Fichte's method, according to which to require explicit argument for the starting point of one's philosophy is wrongheaded. Now it is appropriate to discuss Fichte's theoretical philosophy to get a general sense of his commitments which will help us orient ourselves towards a theory of PPR. I will also outline briefly why Fichte is so interested in this project. I shall first focus on the early Jena WL, and then look at the later Jena system.

Fichte states that his task is to discover the first principle of all human knowledge.¹² Recall that the standoff between idealism and dogmatism was partly about the correct starting point in philosophy. The dogmatist wants to explain everything by reference to, ultimately, things. The idealist, by contrast, wants to explain everything with reference to the I. The idealist's first principle is that the I posits itself. In other words, a thing is self-conscious to the extent that it is aware of itself as self-conscious. In the simplest terms, Fichte begins with the first immediately known aspect of consciousness – that *I am*. Note, however, that this formulation is misleading insofar as he claims that the act of self-positing occurs outside of experience – it is the ground of experience, and as such cannot be a part of experience, unlike the ordinary judgement that I am.

Fichte begins his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* by stating something that is completely and transparently true, and self-evident, namely, the logical principle of identity, or A is A .¹³ Fichte has a rather idiosyncratic reading of this claim as 'If A is posited, then A is posited'. By virtue of this, Fichte regards the principle of identity as a judgement, albeit, one that does not have existential import – that is, to say that A is identical with itself is not to say that A *is*. But Fichte notes that if this is the right way to construe the principle, then the thinker (or judge) is implicated in the thought.¹⁴ In Fichte's words – 'the I asserts, by means of X that A *exists absolutely for the judging self, and that simply in virtue of its being posited in the self as such*'.¹⁵ In other words, we do not get a philosophical principle out of the content of the logical principle of identity, but we do get a philosophical principle out of the implications of the principle of identity being asserted.

For Fichte, the necessary structure of self-consciousness (the Act of self-positing) is the following. There is an act of self-assertion, of self-positing. There is then a positing of the Not-I. This is because all determination is negation – there cannot be a determinate positing of the I without claiming that the I is not something. The Not-I is opposed to the I insofar as it is everything the I is not (i.e. it is being, not activity).¹⁶ There is then what he calls the mutual limitation of these two posits, so they can be thought

philosophical argumentation could lead to us giving up these beliefs, and Fichte would probably think this is not really possible, for reasons that will become clear in section II.

¹² *SK*, I:91, 93

¹³ *SK*, I:93, 94

¹⁴ *SK*, I:94, 95

¹⁵ *SK*, I:95, 96

¹⁶ When Fichte says 'opposition' he does not usually mean contradiction – at one point in the *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* he explicitly differentiates them. J. G. Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* trans. Garrett Green

together as jointly making up reality. In the later work, Fichte puts the point like this: there are two fundamental actions of the I – the self-positing and the positing of the not-I as one act, and then what he calls the ‘reiterated positing of what has already been posited’. The first action is the ground of consciousness and experience which lies outside experience and cannot be grasped within it. The second action is consciousness itself.¹⁷

He refers to this claim later, when he goes on to claim that ‘A self that posits itself *as* self-positing, or a *subject*, is impossible without an object brought forth in the manner described (the determination of the self, its reflection upon itself as a determinate, is possible only on the condition that it bounds itself by an opposite)¹⁸. He then claims that ‘The self cannot posit itself otherwise than as determined by the not-self (no object, no subject). To that extent, it posits itself as determined. At the same time, it posits itself also as determinant; for the limiting factor in the not-self is its own product (no subject, no object)¹⁹ and that this is a ‘primordial fact occurring in our mind’.²⁰

Fichte’s goal therefore is to show how the idealist can explain everything about the mind and the world and their interaction in a more satisfactory manner than the dogmatist. In doing so he begins with what is a certainly known fact – that I exist, and am aware of this existence, and proceeds to unpack what is implicated in this notion. In doing so he deduces knowledge of the world and representation. In the later work, Fichte attempts a different strategy. Rather than starting from a first principle, Fichte gives his audience (students of his lectures) a task - Postulate: ‘Construct the *concept of the I* and observe how you accomplish this’.²¹

In the earlier work, Fichte thought of his task this way. To show that the I and the not-I could be simultaneously posited (which is necessary if either are to be posited at all – as the I requires determinacy, which requires the Not-I, but the Not-I cannot be independent of reason, as that is dogmatism) then they must mutually limit or determine each other. The task of theoretical philosophy is then to show how the Not-I can determine the I.²² By contrast, the task of practical philosophy is to show how the I can determine the Not-I.²³ If the relations are co-instantiated, which they must be, then Fichte will have succeeded in his task.

The later work also investigates how we are to understand experience. Fichte says that certain philosophers have been one-sided and only asked whether some of our representations have corresponding realities, like God. But, he says, the real philosophical question is: do any?²⁴ It starts with an indeterminate concept (the I) and then ‘observes the way in which reason becomes determinate when it is limited; and, by means of

(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010[1792/3]) 63, 48. It is more appropriate to think of opposition as a claim regarding the different natures of the things in question.

¹⁷ J. G. Fichte ‘Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy: *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*’ trans. Daniel Breazeale (Cornell, Cornell University Press, 1992) K10, 84

¹⁸ *SK* I:218, 195

¹⁹ *SK* I:218, 195-6

²⁰ *SK* I:219, 196

²¹ FTP, Dictata 1, 65

²² *SK*, I:127, 123

²³ *SK*, I:247, 249

²⁴ FTP, K4, 79

this act of determination, he [the idealist] allows a rational individual to come into being – an actual rational being, which is something quite different from the indeterminate concept of the I.²⁵ In other words, we begin with the most indeterminate or abstract structure of self-consciousness – the self-positing of the I – and then trace out a developmental (or ‘genetic’ in Fichte’s words) story of how such a self-positing becomes a rational, free agent. I take it that this is not in conflict with the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre*. Like Breazeale, I take the difference to be primarily pedagogic, or one of emphasis.²⁶

Both versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* then attempt to deduce ordinary empirical consciousness via exhibiting the contradictions that arise in consciousness. The first contradiction has already been hinted at – the contradiction between the positing of the I and the not-I, both in the I. Fichte resolves this contradiction by claiming that both principles are limited. It is the task of the theoretical portion of the 1794/5 *Wissenschaftslehre* to exhibit the interplay of these principles and to deduce facts about the imagination as a synthesising activity, time and space of forms of intuition, and so on. The practical section attempts to bring the work to a close by showing how the principle that the not-I is determined by the I can co-exist with the principle that the I is determined by the not-I.

In doing this, Fichte tries to demonstrate the unity of reason. We can think of it like this. Kant has shown that theoretical reason has certain limits and has postulated the faculty of practical reason as a way of making good on those limits (regarding the objects of traditional metaphysics, for example). But he has not proven that we really do have such a faculty.²⁷ This is problematic because it provides no answer to sentimentalists over the source and nature of practical reason. Kant has, in effect, assumed that we have practical reason, but in doing so begs the question against the sentimentalist. Without an account of the unity of reason encompassing both its theoretical and its practical employments, we are not in a better position than before. In other words, if reason cannot extend its claims over the practical domain then it seems that we have no warrant for making the sorts of universally binding practical claims that Kant wants to make. Therefore, Fichte is motivated to search for the principle which will guarantee the unity of reason. His answer, which he thinks to be the only possible account, is that practical reason is itself the basis of theoretical reason.²⁸

Before I move on to the major arguments that Fichte gives, I shall turn my attention to Fichte’s justification for his starting point as against the committed dogmatist, which I think is characterised by what has been more recently called the transcendental argument against determinism. So far, we have seen that Fichte starts with various controversial theses about freedom and the self, but we have not seen much argument for it. It is to this that I now turn.

II: The Transcendental Argument Against Determinism

²⁵ FTP, K24/H27, 105

²⁶ Daniel Breazeale ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to Fichte, FTP, 13.

²⁷ I do not intend these remarks to be an interpretation of Kant, but as an interpretation of Fichte’s view of Kant.

²⁸ This concern of Fichte’s goes back to at least the Gebhard review. See J. G. Fichte, ‘Review of Friedrich Heinrich Gebhard, *On Ethical Goodness as Disinterested Benevolence*’ trans. Daniel Breazeale *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2001[1792]) 297-310, esp.305

The transcendental argument against determinism (TAAD), is a cluster of arguments which purport to show that determinism can be proved to be self-defeating.²⁹ I intend to show here that Fichte is committed to such a position, and that this position can help us to get a grip on the major argument of the later Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, the *WLnm*. I shall sketch out what I take to be Fichte's view, and then compare it with some more recent formulations.

Fichte argues that a correct account of consciousness would have to answer the question of how I know I am different from other objects. In other words, Fichte thinks that a good account of consciousness needs to take into account the fact that self-conscious thought picks out something distinct and determinate. If we had no account of the way in which this works, then we would not be able to distinguish where I end and where nature begins. We can think of the problem that Fichte sets out to address first as the problem of how selves as a distinct kind of thing are individuated. The key to this is found in action, but we need more background to Fichte's argument first.

One variant of the TAAD is given by Fichte in the Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. This argument which comes toward the end of Fichte's exhibition of the dilemma between idealism and dogmatism, states that the dogmatist is contradictory in presupposing mechanism. He says:

'What they say stands in contradiction with what they do; for, to the extent that they *presuppose* mechanism, they are the same time elevate themselves above it. Their own act of thinking of this relationship is an act that lies outside the realm of mechanical determinism. Mechanism cannot grasp itself, precisely because it is mechanism. Only a free consciousness is able to grasp itself'.³⁰

This seems to be a bad argument. It clearly begs the question against the dogmatist. The argument, in effect, concludes that determinism (which is the only game in town for dogmatism) undermines itself because it uses a free act to claim that there are no free acts. But of course, whether there are free acts is exactly what is in question. Fichte, however, shows cognisance of this. He says that this is 'just where the difficulty arises, because this is an observation that lies completely outside of their field of vision', and furthermore that it 'must necessarily be incomprehensible to them'.³¹ So, Fichte would be begging the question if he intended the argument to refute the dogmatist, but he does not do so; instead, he intends the argument for 'others who can see and who stand watch'.³² Fichte is aware of the type of argumentative strategy used in the

²⁹ Variants of the argument are given by J. M. E. McTaggart, 'Introduction to the study of Philosophy' in his *Philosophical Studies*, ed. S. V. Keeling (London, Edward Arnold, 1934), 183-210, J. B. S. Haldane 'When I am Dead' in *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London, Chatto & Windus 1927), 204-210, J. R. Lucas, 'Minds, Machines, and Godel' *Philosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 137 (1961) 112-127, J. R. Lucas, *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), Warner Wick 'Truth's Debt to Freedom' *Mind* Vol. 73, No. 292 (1964) 527-537, William Hasker, 'The Transcendental Refutation of Determinism' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 11, No. 3 (1973) 175-183, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000)

³⁰ J. G. Fichte, 'Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*' in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings 1797-1800*, trans. & ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1994[1797/8]) I:510/95 emphasis original.

³¹ 'Second Introduction' I:510, 95

³² 'Second Introduction' I:510, 95

TAAD, but refrains from deploying it against the dogmatist, insofar as he recognises that the actual argument he runs begs the question against the dogmatist.

However, there are resources, I think, in the texts of the later Jena period, namely the *WLnm* and the *System of Ethics*, to construct a better version of the argument.

Fichte begins by claiming that consciousness rests upon the distinction between what is subjective and what is objective, and that the goal of philosophy (or at least, one goal) is to show how the unification is possible. One way in which unification is possible is if subjective becomes like objective (representation, or in the words of the *GWL*, objective activity), and the other is if objective becomes like the subjective, in action.³³ Fichte claims that this unobjectionable distinction between the subjective and the objective can only be made if the efficacious activity of the self is recognised.³⁴ The only condition under which I can distinguish myself from the world, as a representor of that world and not merely as a consequence of the world is if I recognise that representation is a type of activity. As Guyer says ‘Fichte’s thought is that if I were entirely passive, just a mirror for changes going on in an entirely objective world, I would have no way of distinguishing myself from that world...’³⁵ It is ‘only by conceiving of itself as acting on the world that the self can distinguish itself from the world’.³⁶

The upshot is that to think of one’s self as entirely determined by the world is to think of oneself as not a self at all. The argument is often taken, as we shall see below, to establish that to believe determinism is to believe that there are causally sufficient conditions for any given belief, which make any justifying reasons epiphenomenal to that belief. Fichte’s addition to the TAAD is to claim that to think of oneself that one is fully determined by the natural world is to deny the distinction (at least, any deep distinction) between the objective and the subjective, which is a condition of making the judgement that one is wholly part of the natural world in the first place, because this is a condition of the possibility of any consciousness and therefore any given belief.³⁷ We can see here that Fichte is committing himself to the principle that Kant gives in the third chapter of the *Groundwork*, that reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles, independently of alien influences.³⁸ On this line of thought, Wood says that the dogmatist has ‘faith...adopted wilfully and contrary to experience’.³⁹ Acting (and indeed judging) requires myself to think of myself as free, as ‘even as a theorist I must take it insofar as I deliberate about what hypotheses to test, how to test them, and what conclusions to draw from the evidence’.⁴⁰ It is fitting that Wood mentions deliberating about what hypotheses I should test, because *that* is exactly what Fichte does. In following the transcendental method in Kant, which in turn is modelled on the scientific method, Fichte deliberates what

³³ J. G. Fichte *System of Ethics* (SE) trans. Guenter Zöllner & Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge, CUP, 2005[1798]) IV:1, 7.

³⁴ Paul Guyer, ‘Fichte’s Transcendental Ethics’ in Sebastian Gardner & Matthew Grist (eds) *The Transcendental Turn* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015) 142

³⁵ Guyer, ‘Fichte’s Transcendental Ethics’ (2015) 142

³⁶ Guyer ‘Fichte’s Transcendental Ethics’ (2015) 142

³⁷ SE, IV:5, 11

³⁸ See Immanuel Kant, ‘Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals’ in *Practical Philosophy* ed. & trans. Mary Gregor, (Cambridge CUP, 1996) 4:448, 96

³⁹ Wood, *The “I” as a Principle of Practical Philosophy*, in Sally Sedgwick (ed) *The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 100

⁴⁰ Wood, ‘The “I” as a Principle of Practical Philosophy’, 100

hypothesis to test, and that is something that is only possible because we should take what Idealism holds seriously.

Fichte goes on to argue that the activity must be governed by a law, which cannot itself come from nature, otherwise the agent would merely be, albeit in a more sophisticated manner, a mirror.⁴¹ But we should consider the value of the TAAD first. It seems to me that Fichte is taking a TAAD-like step as his first step in the *WLnm* and *System of Ethics*, and that this can function by way of a more complex motivation for idealism as opposed to dogmatism. Fichte's version of the TAAD is that belief in the truth of determinism is self-defeating because such a belief would mean a denial of the necessary conditions for the possibility of the belief being valuable *qua* judgement of the true, as opposed to, for example, *qua* production of a mechanism which reliably increases reproductive success. This necessary condition is the direction of fit from subjective to objective. I shall now look more closely at canonical formulations of the argument and criticism of it.

Hasker takes the key claim in the argument to be 'For a person to be rationally justified in accepting a conclusion, his awareness of reasons for the conclusion must be a necessary condition of his accepting it'.⁴² So, he asks, if my awareness of these reasons is not necessary for the belief, then that is saying 'that I would believe just the same *whether or not* I knew of any supporting evidence – and how could a belief held in this manner be rationally justified?'⁴³ Determinism then claims that 'my acceptance of any conclusion has its sufficient explanation in a chain of physical causes which determine the state of my nervous system'.⁴⁴ So, determinism claims that the awareness of the reasons is irrelevant, because the sufficient condition for any belief is given by causally prior antecedents. The awareness of the reasons is therefore not necessary, and so the belief cannot be rationally justified.

We can phrase this in terms of epistemological luck, as Allison does, in one version of the argument he presents.⁴⁵ According to the epistemological luck argument, 'if materialism were true, then, although we might still have true beliefs, and even good reasons for these beliefs, the contingency of such a state of affairs would be enough to prevent these beliefs from counting as knowledge'.⁴⁶ For all we know, Allison continues, we might, like badly constructed machines, 'be wired to churn out false "beliefs" without any possibility of correcting them'.⁴⁷ This last way of putting the point shows the obvious flaw of this version of the TAAD. We can account for the so-called 'luck' by merely explaining it as a result of the evolutionary

⁴¹ We shall see below that this makes an appearance as the pure will.

⁴² William Hasker, 'The Transcendental Refutation of Determinism' *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1973) 178

⁴³ Hasker 'The Transcendental Refutation' 178

⁴⁴ Hasker 'The Transcendental Refutation' 177

⁴⁵ Henry Allison 'Kant's Refutation of Materialism in *Idealism and Freedom: Essays on Kant's Theoretical and Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, CUP, 1996[1989]), pp.92-106' 99-100. Whilst Allison speaks of materialism, it is fair to say, I think, that Kant and Fichte would have regarded the one as entailing the other, and the transcendental argument in question here can be made to work against both.

⁴⁶ Allison, 'Kant's Refutation' 99

⁴⁷ Allison, 'Kant's Refutation' 100

process.⁴⁸ Allison tells us that what he terms the ‘Recognition argument’ is the stronger variant of TAAD. This is broadly the argument used by Hasker. In Allison’s words ‘if, as materialism assumes, there are causally sufficient conditions for my belief that p , then my reasons (whether or not they are good, i.e., justifying, reasons) are not necessary conditions’.⁴⁹ This provides a nice counter to the evolutionary challenge to the epistemological luck argument. That challenge claimed that we could make sense of the truth-tracking sense of our beliefs by virtue of certain applications of the theory of natural selection. But the problem now becomes the following: if that is the case, then it seems as though any value our beliefs may have *qua* states of mind that aim at truth and not *qua* products of well-functioning and well-adapted mechanisms that increase reproductive success seems to be entirely epiphenomenal. *That* is what is so problematic.

The upshot of this is that an argument that purports to show the truth of determinism necessarily fails because belief in the conclusion of the argument has causally sufficient conditions, which do not mention the reasons or awareness thereof. So, determinism cannot be rationally believed to be true.⁵⁰

One general criticism is the criticism raised against all transcendental arguments, made famous by Stroud.⁵¹ Stroud argues that at most, a transcendental argument can give merely what we must think to be the case in order to be coherent, but not what actually is the case. This criticism is sharpened if we consider the Quinean view that any belief can be held come what may as long as we are able and willing to make radical enough changes elsewhere in our system of belief.⁵² If we have to believe something only to be coherent, and we can accommodate the lack of this belief by making other changes which also maintain coherence, then it looks like transcendental arguments, and *a fortiori*, the TAAD, is invalid.

The obvious response to this challenge is that what is sought by the argument is not that determinism is false, because to establish claims of that nature, of the ‘inner nature of things’ is not the goal of transcendental philosophy. What the argument claims to establish, and, if sound, would establish, is that there is something self-defeating in belief in determinism. It is surely possible that determinism is in some way true, and Fichte would want to uphold this possibility, but what the TAAD purports to show is not

⁴⁸ Such an explanation might take the form of the view defended by Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Language, Thought, and other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ Allison, ‘Kant’s Refutation’ 100

⁵⁰ Lucas occasionally states the conclusion much more strongly than this, that it shows that determinism is necessarily false. But that is because his version of TAAD is based upon considerations arising from the correct application of Gödel’s incompleteness theorem to a logistic system that models a perfectly determinate human being. Examining this particular argument in detail would take me too far afield. See Lucas, ‘Minds, Machines, and Gödel’ and *The Freedom of the Will*, sections 21-29, esp. 24-26. Though, having said that, he admits at the end that his argument fails if it can be shown that the physical system is essentially inconsistent, but that this is ‘complete conceptual nihilism’ 163, because it would mean that human beings are fundamentally inconsistent in some way, as this is the only way to escape the Gödelian argument. But see Daniel Dennett ‘The Abilities of Men and Machines’ in *Brainstorms* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1981) 256-266 for a critical response.

⁵¹ Barry Stroud, ‘Transcendental Arguments’ *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 65, No. 9 (1968) 241-256

⁵² This is found in Quine’s ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ in *From a Logical Point of View* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1980), esp. 42-43

that it is false (either necessarily or actually), but that it cannot be coherently believed, even if we take into account the Quinean point that we can in principle accommodate any belief within the system of beliefs.⁵³

One argument that is raised more specifically against the TAAD can be found in Armstrong. Armstrong says that we should just identify the causes of my belief with my reasons for holding that belief. He claims that ‘the premiss of my inference must be the cause (in the appropriate way) of the belief that I arrive at’⁵⁴ and in so identifying the reason (in this case a premise in an inference) we actually guarantee at least some reasonableness of one’s beliefs, because they can be rationally explained, or as he puts it ‘causality is in fact a logical precondition of the possibility of inferring’.⁵⁵ There are two basic strategies for defending the TAAD here. One is to claim that the type of explanation in why one believes as one does is not a causal explanation. A variant of this strategy is found in Wick. Wick claims that when we ask questions of the reasonableness of belief, we never want to inquire as to the generation of the belief-state, instead, our question concerns the content of the belief.⁵⁶ The former, he says, would only make sense if we asked a question of the form ‘why do you know that’, which he says seems to imply that we regard some sort of malfunction of a psychological mechanism has occurred.⁵⁷ Wick’s position is to try to show that the type of explanation we seek in explanation of why someone holds a certain belief just is not amenable to causal explanation in the way Armstrong requires.

The other way of responding to this challenge is to try to show that this identification may be fine, but then the determinist has merely pushed back his self-defeat one step further. This is shown in the following example. If the determinist accepts the identification of reasons with causes, or at least, the right kind of causes, then presumably there is going to be a neural structure of some kind which realises the content of the belief. There is then one item in question with neural properties and content properties. But the question is now that it seems that the determinist wants to say that the item in question is causally efficacious by virtue of the content properties. But this is, as Plantinga points out, ‘extremely difficult’.⁵⁸ This leaves the determinist in the position of a semantic epiphenomenalist, which would equally establish the conclusion of the TAAD. The argument still stands in the face of this objection. Recall, however, that the argument never pretends to establish the falsity of determinism, merely the self-defeating nature of the claim. One

⁵³ Presumably these Quinean considerations would lead one to the state of complete conceptual nihilism that Lucas wants to avoid, it would be like the cognitive equivalent of Ivan Karamazov’s famous line in *The Brothers Karamazov* that since God does not exist everything is permitted; so the conceptual nihilist will say that since all the norms of belief are flexible everything is permitted.

⁵⁴ David M. Armstrong *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, revised edition (London, Routledge, 1993[1968]) 200

⁵⁵ Armstrong *A Materialist Theory*, 200

⁵⁶ Wick, ‘Truth’s Debt’ 533

⁵⁷ Wick ‘Truth’s Debt’ 532. Gilbert Harman ‘Knowledge, Reasons, and Causes’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 67, No. 21 (1970) 841-855 claims that explanation by reasons is not explanation by causes (849). For Harman, we can conceive of a psychologically indeterminate thing instantiated in a physically deterministic thing, and reasons may be identified with causes (851), but the explanatory work is not done by the causes. This is one of the central thoughts to the strategy that is taken here.

⁵⁸ Alvin Plantinga, ‘Evolution, Epiphenomenalism, Reductionism’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2004) 603. Plantinga makes his remark in the connection of beliefs being causally efficacious in the production of action, but I think that the case can be assimilated to the case of the production of beliefs.

more criticism must be looked at, one which is particularly pertinent to Fichte – that of the argument begging the question.

This objection is formulated best by Churchland.⁵⁹ Churchland argues against one specific instance of the TAAD, found in Popper. She claims that the argument presented assumes the truth of what it tries to prove, and thus is question begging. A supposedly parallel argument from a biological vitalist (one who believes that life is essentially different from non-life) is designed to show this. The vitalist argues that the anti-vitalist cannot be right because in order to be right they have to have vital spirit, which is just what they deny.⁶⁰ Similarly, the indeterminist is thought to argue that the determinist cannot be right because they use their freedom to claim or think that they are not free. Notwithstanding whether or not this argument works against the variant of the TAAD found in Popper (Churchland's immediate target), it cannot be said to work for the version that Hasker or Allison present. This is because the Recognition Argument does not assume the truth of what it tries to prove, but assumes the truth of determinism instead. Fichte's argument in the Second Introduction seems to indeed beg the question in this way, though Fichte is, as shown by what he says after stating the argument, aware of that. This means that there must be some other reason that he states it, especially as the argument appears in the second introduction, which is directed to those who already follow a philosophical system. I suggest that as well Fichte is using the TAAD not as an argument *per se* but as an apposite occasion to invite the dogmatist to reflect. Only that will be sufficient for the dogmatist to change their minds. This answers any questions we may have regarding the exegetical worth of attributing this argument to Fichte. As we have seen, Fichte claims that neither dogmatism nor idealism can be proved or refuted. My reading here preserves that claim. But we should remember that the TAAD will not argue that determinism can be shown to be false, but that it is self-defeating, or in Lucas' phrase, ends in 'complete conceptual nihilism', albeit only from Idealism's vantage point.

But there is still the issue of how this comes to be an argument against the dogmatist. Wood views Fichte as giving a TAAD-like argument but emphasises that Fichte's insistence on faith shows that Fichte never meant this to be a conclusive anti-dogmatist argument. Faith in this context does not mean anything of a question that cannot be decided by reason or belief against evidence.⁶¹ What it does mean is that the idealist is always aware that they can only reasonably engage with the dogmatist as the idealist conceives them, and not as they may actually be. As Wood says, 'there is nothing in the grounds for this conviction that dogmatists would have to acknowledge as providing *them* with a convincing reply to the thought that the appearance of freedom is only an illusion'.⁶² What this means is not that the dogmatist could never change their mind at all, but that they must be the ones to change their own minds. This is true to some extent for all philosophical changes – I may indeed change my mind based on an argument that you present to me,

⁵⁹ Patricia Churchland, 'Is Determinism Self-Refuting?' *Mind* (1981) 99-101

⁶⁰ Churchland 'Determinism' 100

⁶¹ See for example, Wood, *Fichte's Ethical Thought* (FET) (2016), 72

⁶² Wood, *FET*, (2016) 76. See also Daniel Breazeale 'The Problematic Primacy of the Practical' in *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013[1996]) 19-20.

but I would first have to consider the argument myself, independently of your presenting it. In the present case, however, the choice between a dogmatic and an idealist philosophical outlook is inextricably linked with selfhood and personal choice, such that it becomes a more complex change. Not only do I have to convince myself of a view that I was previously not convinced of, but I have to perform some kind of act of will in order to fully realise the view. This latter is why this change of heart is different from others. One can present me with an argument that I later assent to on the basis of my own thought, but one cannot present me with an act of will. I need to perform such a feat myself. I would suggest that this may be one reason why even sophisticated presentations of the TAAD might well end up falling prey to criticisms that they beg the question.

There only remains the question of the advantage in explanatory power that idealism is supposed to have over dogmatism. Because Fichte thinks that there are only two first principles available to any philosopher (the thing-in-itself and the I-in-itself), there are only two philosophical systems possible. As stated above, it is clearly question-begging for the idealist to assert that the I-in-itself explains something that the dogmatist cannot, because on the dogmatist's picture, the thing (freedom, or the self) does not need explaining, but explaining *away*. But one might appeal to considerations of faithfulness to experience (or intuition), and point out that the feeling of ownership of actions, *inter alia*, is a desideratum for a theory of the self, and any theory that can sufficiently accommodate this feeling without turning it into a sort of delusion or falsehood has the advantage, *ceteris paribus*. Fichte would probably say that the dogmatist's view of the self as a kind of delusion reflects poorly on the fact that they reify the self – in effect, if a theory tells us that the most certainly known facts about ourselves are falsehoods, then so much the worse for that theory. We have now seen Fichte's argument for idealism both directed toward the beginner and the convinced dogmatist. Fichte's view is that there are reasons to pursue the idealist programme. A major feature of this programme, one which is certainly in the background of the TAAD and the quarrel with the dogmatist is the primacy of the practical. It is to this that I now turn.

III: The Different Senses of the Primacy of The Practical

Commentators on Fichte are agreed that Fichte does in some sense affirm the primacy the practical, or the primacy of practical reason at least in the Jena period, which is my focus here. Disagreement revolves around the question of 1) to what sense Fichte is so committed, 2) to what extent he is committed, and 3) what philosophical work PPR is supposed to do. There are also two separate doctrines of Fichte that one might wish to designate by the phrase 'the primacy of the practical'. There are also several senses of PPR, some of which can be jointly affirmed. It is necessary both to disambiguate the two separate doctrines, though they are connected, and to disambiguate the various senses of PPR. I start with the former task.

The 'primacy of the practical' can mean a thesis in philosophy of mind regarding the structure of the mind, or the ordering of our mental faculties, which is PPR. It is important to dwell for a moment on Fichte's conception of a mental faculty. They are (as in Kant) not separate "institutions" relating to one another,

but only different applications of the same power.⁶³ For Fichte, it is very important that we do not reify or objectify these faculties. They are not things, but acts. It is helpful to consider the context in which Fichte was developing this view. Aenesidemus had raised sceptical objections to Kant and Reinhold and their putative usage of an inference from the application of a power of X-ing to a thing's having the power to X. In Reinhold this came to the fore in the guise of the faculty of representation. Aenesidemus raises the challenge: how is this inference different from the dogmatic inference from one's having an idea of an object to there being an object in the world?

In order to avoid this challenge, Fichte conceives a middle path. On the one side, we have the realists, represented by Reinhold, who will claim that the inference from a power to a thing that realises the power is legitimate. On the other, we have phenomenologists like Aenesidemus, who claim that a faculty is nothing other than its manifestations. The crucial move that Fichte makes, as I see it, is to agree with the phenomenologist that the faculty is nothing over and above its manifestations, but then argue that the phenomenologist's counterfactual – 'were there to be no manifestations, there would be no faculty' is true, but never satisfied, because the antecedent is always false. This gives Fichte a conception which is at once non-reifying but also non-phenomenalist.⁶⁴ This is hinted at when Fichte claims that if one thinks that I have to exist in order to do things is 'maintaining that the I exists independently of its actions', which is to treat consciousness as a type of object.⁶⁵ Thus a claim about the relative primacy or non-primacy of one faculty to another is regarding the fundamentality of one or other of the manifestations of the powers of the I.

The primacy of the practical can also mean the ontological thesis that is most explicit in the essay that appears at the close of Fichte's time at Jena in the essay *On the origin of our belief in a Divine Governance of the World-Order*. The thesis appears in that work when Fichte famously says the 'only kind of reality that pertains to you or exists for you... is the ongoing interpretation of what your duty commands, the living expression of *what* you ought to do, just because you ought to do it. Our world is the material of our duty made sensible. This is the truly real element in things, the true, basic stuff of appearance'.⁶⁶ As I said, this is the most explicit, and striking, presentation of the thesis.⁶⁷ But Fichte has also affirmed this thesis in the *System of Ethics*, in which it again takes a more assertive tone, as he says '...all of the I's cognition is determined by its practical being – as indeed it has to be, since this is what is highest in the I. The only firm and final foundation of all my cognitions is my duty. This is the intelligible "in itself", which transforms itself by means of the laws of sensible representation into a sensible world'.⁶⁸ This statement actually contains both theses that could be thought of under the rubric of primacy of the practical. The first part of the passage, i.e. the phrasing 'since this [practical being] is what is highest in the I' is the thesis that practical reason, or

⁶³ Kant says that 'there can, in the end, be only one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application'. *Groundwork* 4:391, 47.

⁶⁴ See also Breazeale 'The Problematic Primacy of the Practical', 408.

⁶⁵ *FTP*, K29/H29, 112.

⁶⁶ J. G. Fichte, *On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World-Order (DGWO)* trans. Daniel Breazeale, in Fichte, *IW* 185, 150

⁶⁷ This is certainly one of the prominent passages that is often cited in characterising Fichte as an 'ethical idealist'.

⁶⁸ *SE* IV:172, 164

something about our natures as active or practical beings, is more fundamentally constitutive of our essence. The later part of the passage is very similar to the phrasing of the DGWO essay.

This position also seems to survive the atheism controversy, as we see in Schopenhauer's lecture notes from Fichte's 1811-2 Berlin lectures – 'How generally is a knowledge possible? For knowledge is intuitive perception of the absolute. The absolute becomes visible through the action of the I which indicates that underlying it there is some clear concept of arrangement which is directly accompanied by approval through the law; the feeling of this approval is in ordinary language called conscience. Therefore is there an intuitive perception of true being? Does such a perception enter into knowledge? Yes, by means of action according to the moral law. *Therefore there is nowhere any truth and reality except in moral action*'.⁶⁹ It must be said, however, that the correct interpretation of these lectures is controversial and will depend on many factors which I will not discuss here. *Prima facie*, however, it seems as though this ontological sense of the primacy of the practical is a view that Fichte is committed to throughout his philosophical career. I will leave discussion of this thesis here, as I am primarily concerned with the correct interpretation of the view regarding the order of our faculties.

As Fichte is a transcendental philosopher, it is plausible that any claim to primacy will turn out to be a transcendental one. We should take a moment here to review what a transcendental version of the theses would be. With the ontological thesis, a transcendental interpretation would appear to be something like this: It is a necessary condition of the possibility of the natural world that there be moral properties (oughtness). For PPR, the thesis would be: it is a necessary condition of the possibility of our having theoretical reason that we have practical reason. There are other senses, such as a temporal priority, thinkability priority, legislative priority, and methodological priority. I shall examine each sense in turn.

Perhaps the most obvious sense of PPR is the temporal sense – that practical reason is primary because it appears at an earlier stage in a thinker's lifespan than theoretical reason. Whether or not this is true is plausibly a matter for empirical psychology. Fichte is not interested in this sense of PPR. He is interested in transcendental conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness, not the development of a person's mental life. In any event, it seems clear that Fichte thinks that there is no time at which a rational agent or a person is manifesting the practical power but not the theoretical power.

It appears that Fichte thinks that it is because we have a practical power of reason that we have theoretical reason. In other words, we are not primarily orientated to the world as knowers, but actors. As Kinlaw says, 'theoretical reason is subordinate precisely because theoretical knowledge of the world is simply one way – and not the primary way – of relating to the world'.⁷⁰ Fichte says that whilst his investigation, the 1794/5 *Wissenschaftslehre*, begins with the exposition of theoretical reason and then proceeds to an exposition of

⁶⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Facts of Consciousness and the Doctrine of Science' in *Manuscript Remains Vol. 2: Critical Debates (1808-1818)* ed. Arthur Hubscher, trans. E. J. F. Payne (Oxford, Berg, 1988), 37, 83. Emphasis original

⁷⁰ C. Jeffrey Kinlaw, 'Reflection and Feeling and the Primacy of Practical Reason in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*' in Daniel Breazeale & Tom Rockmore (eds) *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2002) 142. Interestingly, Kinlaw thinks that this position commits Fichte to the ontological thesis of the primacy of the practical – that the moral world is 'more real' (as he puts it) than the natural world (154n4). I am not sure that such an entailment holds, though the positions are no doubt related in some way.

practical reason, this is not a reflection of their respective positions in our mental architecture. He says ‘reflection must set out from the theoretical part; though it will appear in the sequel that it is not in fact the theoretical faculty which makes possible the practical, but on the contrary, the practical which first makes possible the theoretical’.⁷¹ Firstly, this is a pretty clear statement of an unequal relationship between the practical and theoretical faculties. Secondly, it appears this is a transcendental claim, as he says that the practical faculty *makes possible*, that is, is a necessary condition for, the theoretical faculty. But straight after this, Fichte says that the theoretical must come first in the order of explanation because the thinkability of the practical depends on that of the theoretical.⁷² It is, however, unclear as to what exactly he intends to mean here. Obviously there is one sense in which the thinkability of anything depends on the theoretical power of reason – theoretical reason just is the ability to think things, including reason and its powers. Though this is not true for Kant, who has a distinction between various theoretical powers – reason, the understanding, and judgement, it is not clear that Fichte wishes to retain this division. Or, if he does, it is downstream from Fichte’s concerns here, I think.⁷³ But this is true with or without a philosophical investigation of the fundamental principles of theoretical reason. Merely by having theoretical reason would this be the case.

There is another, less literal, sense of how one thing can make another ‘thinkable’. This is the philosophical sense in play whenever it is asserted that an account of X depends on a prior account of Y. The description and explanation of Y give the conceptual tools necessary to give an account of X. Here the account of Y would provide the thinkability of X. For Fichte, then, if this is what he means, theoretical reason must come first in the order of philosophical explanation because a correct account of the nature of theoretical reason and the I’s acts insofar as they are theoretical provides the correct conceptual framework for analysing practical reason and the I’s acts insofar as they are practical.

A more specific, and characteristically Fichtean, way we might cash out the thinkability dependence in this way is the following. In philosophy, according to Fichte, it is necessary to start with absolutely certain first principles and then work from there. It may be that the thinkability priority is merely a re-statement of this view. The highest principle of Fichte’s system is the I’s self-assertion or self-positing – this is the unconditioned and absolutely necessary act.⁷⁴ Fichte begins the theoretical portion of the 1794

⁷¹ SK I:126, 123 All reference to this text have the translation amended from ‘self’ to ‘I’, as it is both less misleading and a better translation of Fichte’s words (*Das Ich*). Also, in the first (and only published) chapter of the *Attempt at a new presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte explicitly says that although the word ‘self’ ‘presupposes the concept of the I, and everything that is thought to be absolute within the former is borrowed from the concept of the latter’, that ‘it seems to me that in a scientific exposition one should employ the term that designates this concept in the most immediate and proper way’. See ‘Chapter One: All consciousness is conditioned by our immediate consciousness of ourselves’, in *Introductions and other Writings*, I:530n, 115n.

⁷² SK I:127, 123

⁷³ See Fichte’s remarks at SK, I:282, 248ff where he seems to claim a very broad sense of theoretical reason. The marks for something’s being related to the theoretical faculty are that the thing is ‘subjected to its [theoretical reason’s] laws of presentation’ and that in the theoretical part of the *WL*, we are ‘concerned with knowing’ SK I:285, 251. See also Breazeale’s remark ‘Two Cheers for Post-Kantianism: A Response to Karl Ameriks’ *Inquiry* Vol. 46, No. 2 (2003), that Fichte is not trying to ‘reinvent the wheel’ with regard to Kant (257). It is therefore possible that Fichte does not feel as though he needs to, at this fundamental stage in the *WL*, to divide the theoretical faculties into more fine-grained powers, as Kant does, even though he accepts that division at some more determinate level.

⁷⁴ SK, I:95, 96

Wissenschaftslehre by giving this principle. It would be unphilosophical to begin with anything else. So the thinkability of practical reason depends on the thinkability of theoretical reason because that is the path that philosophical reasoning must follow.

A parenthetical remark we can draw on from the same page complicates the issue. Fichte says that ‘reason in itself is purely practical, and only becomes theoretical on application of its laws to a not-I that restricts it’.⁷⁵ Here it is necessary to point out that Fichte’s overall project at this stage is to exhibit the consequences of the highest principle of philosophy – that ‘I am I’.⁷⁶ The not-I is a principle that Fichte draws out. The I determines itself, and in doing so, posits something which is completely opposed to it, a not-I.⁷⁷ Fichte’s claim regarding the relative priority of theoretical and practical reason here is therefore that theoretical reason is only a relational property of reason itself, and it only has this relational property in virtue of positing a not-I. But the positing of a not-I is a necessary act of the I.⁷⁸ Reason does not, then, become theoretical, it is always theoretical. This is because reason, the I, always stands opposed to a not-I. There is no time at which reason is not opposed to a not-I. We can say, as a way of making sense of Fichte’s parenthetical remark, therefore, that theoretical reason is a necessary, though still fundamentally relational power of reason, whereas practical reason is a necessary and essential (or intrinsic) power of reason. But this is compatible with Fichte’s claim that theoretical reason must come first in a philosophical account of reason.

We then see that there are two senses of PPR (temporal and thinkability) that Fichte denies. However, he affirms a transcendental primacy of practical reason – it is a necessary condition for theoretical reason. We can give some textual support for distinguishing necessary and essential. In the *System of Ethics*, Fichte says: ‘The theoretical powers pursue their own course until they hit upon something that can be approved. They do not, however, contain within themselves any criterion for the correctness of the latter; instead, this criterion lies in the practical power, which is what is primacy and highest in human beings and constitutes their true essence’.⁷⁹ According to what Fichte says here, practical reason is a rational agent’s true essence, but he does not commit himself to any statement regarding the non-necessity of theoretical reason. Indeed, throughout the section from which this passage is taken, Fichte reaffirms that theoretical reason is necessary because the practical power by itself has no power of cognition.

But the point must still be clarified. Fichte later warns us that it is possible to think of the relation between the I and the not-I in the wrong way, and end up with what he calls ‘intelligible fatalism’. This is the position according to which what Fichte calls ‘pure activity’ relates to an object ‘in itself and as such’.⁸⁰ Pure activity is the theoretical power of positing oneself and thinking of oneself. – it is the type of thinking where the object of thought and the thinker are identical.⁸¹ For Fichte, in order to guarantee the freedom of the I

⁷⁵ *SK* I:127, 123

⁷⁶ *SK* I:95, 96

⁷⁷ *SK* I:97, 123

⁷⁸ As will become clearer, the acts of the self in this context are non-temporal transcendental stages.

⁷⁹ *SE* IV:166, 157

⁸⁰ *SK*, I:263n, 232

⁸¹ See for example *SK*, I:96, 97

(which is non-negotiable), the pure activity must remain at some distance from the not-I. This is because, Fichte tells us, if the pure activity were to relate to an object, then it would be finite, because objects are finite. Pure activity is infinite, because the I is infinite. Such is needed to guarantee the freedom of the I. So the theoretical power of the I cannot relate necessarily to a not-I, indeed, it needs a ‘special absolute act of connection’,⁸² which is only given to us by the positing of the not-I, which happens, as Fichte tells us, absolutely, or without any ground; by this I take Fichte to mean that the positing of the not-I is a free act of the I. This also means that the positing of the not-I is an unprovable assumption, that nobody can prove to one another on rational grounds.⁸³ The fact that I posit a world distinct from myself, or opposed to myself, is a ‘fact of consciousness’.⁸⁴ So whilst the positing of the Not-I by the I in some sense *must* occur, it is not the case that it is *constrained*.

To sum up, it seems that practical reason is identical with ‘reason as such’, and theoretical reason is a power that is involved only upon a certain condition being fulfilled, but that condition (i.e. the positing of a not-I) is always fulfilled. But the fact that it is always fulfilled does not mean that it is a directly necessary connection between the positing of the I and the not-I – there are other types of activity that provide that connection.

A fourth sense of ‘primacy’ comes to the fore when Fichte is reviewing the argument that he makes in section III of the 1794/5 *WL*. The argument, which I shall provide an exegesis of below, is intended to show that we have practical reason, as Fichte thinks that this is something that has only ever been assumed. Fichte thinks that the only way to prove that we have practical reason is to prove that practical reason is the basis of theoretical reason. He says such a proof ‘must be carried out agreeably to theoretical reason itself, and the latter should not be ousted from the case by mere decree’.⁸⁵ In other words, Fichte is telling us that his thesis of the primacy of practical reason is a *theoretical* one, by which I mean that the thesis is by no means meant to lead to practical considerations *overriding* theoretical ones. So, what we get is this: Theoretical reason maintains the role of the legislator – theoretical reason maintains full jurisdiction over what is acceptable and unacceptable – and what is acceptable is acceptable on rational or theoretical grounds *alone*. Therefore, there is another sense in which Fichte denies PPR – the sense in which practical reason is thought of as the legislator in the domain of theory – which is a quasi-pragmatist thesis. So, Fichte affirms the transcendental sense of PPR, and denies the temporal, thinkability, and legislative senses.

Some passages from the later work seem to be ambiguous on the legislative sense, however, so it requires more attention. For example, let us consider the passage from the *System of Ethics* quoted above, namely: ‘...all of the I’s cognition is determined by its practical being – as indeed it has to be, since this is what is highest in the I. The only firm and final foundation of all my cognitions is my duty.’⁸⁶ One issue that arises is that to say that cognition is to be ‘determined’ by my practical being, and that the ‘only firm and final

⁸² *JK*, I:263, 232

⁸³ *JK*, I:252-3, 223

⁸⁴ *JK*, I:252, 223

⁸⁵ *JK*, I:264, 233

⁸⁶ *SE*, IV:172, 164

foundation' of my cognition is 'duty' seems to put in jeopardy my hypothesis that for Fichte, theoretical reason maintains the role of legislator, as well as the coherency of Fichte's doctrine. Another issue is that later in *SE*, Fichte appears to say that the practical faculty is not what is highest, but the cognitive faculty is, thus reversing his position earlier in the text. He says: 'What is primary and highest in a human being – though not what is most noble in him – is cognition, the primordial matter of his entire intellectual life.'⁸⁷ So it appears that Fichte in one passage claims that the practical faculty is highest, and in another claims that the cognitive faculty is the highest. This, I suggest, is due to the fact that at this point in the *SE*, Fichte has changed from thinking of transcendental conditions to empirical human beings in situations of empirical willing, theoretical cognition of objects come first, and so present what is 'highest' or 'primary' – as an empirical episode of willing has to be preceded by cognition of its object.⁸⁸

That suffices for a reply to the latter of the two criticisms noted, but what of the former? Firstly, we should note that by 'determine' Fichte by no means intends that practical reason can override theoretical reason. He says that theoretical reason is 'formally' determined insofar as practical reason (or the ethical drive) set theoretical reason in motion to search for the concept required for any action.⁸⁹ Theoretical cognition is also determined 'materially' but only insofar as Fichte thinks that all cognition, even the most abstract is 'at least indirectly related to our duties' and carries with it cognition of the objects 'purposiveness' (though not necessarily for *me*) or the objects 'final end'. Whatever we think of this doctrine, i.e. that all cognition is indirectly related to our duties, it makes perfect sense for Fichte. If reality is fundamentally moral, as he seems to think, then of course cognition of objects is related to my duty, because the objects that my cognition refers to are but my duty made manifest, as he says. What practical reason does not do is intercede in a theoretical decision. This would happen if, in Fichte's words, practical reason 'provided the material' for theoretical reason, which it cannot do. Confusion may arise regarding 'being materially determined by' and 'providing the material for', but as long as we keep those firmly separated, as Fichte does, we should not be misled into thinking that Fichte thinks that our practical reason in some sense tells us what to believe.

Further support for my view here comes from Fichte's normative views. For Fichte, it would be immoral to let one's practical reason override one's theoretical reason; he says: 'A material subordination of the intellect to the moral law is therefore impossible....Though I may not give in to certain inclinations and pleasures because this runs counter to my duty, it is not the case that I must will not to cognise certain things because this might perhaps run counter to my duty'⁹⁰, though cognition is 'formally subordinated' insofar as the highest end is self-sufficiency, or freedom. All this means, however, is that Fichte conceives it as a duty to further our cognition, and to never 'subordinate your theoretical reason as such, but continue to inquire with absolute freedom, without taking into account anything outside your cognition'.⁹¹ So

⁸⁷ *SE* IV:344, 325

⁸⁸ *SE* IV:255, 244

⁸⁹ *SE* IV:172, 163

⁹⁰ *SE*, IV:217, 206

⁹¹ *SE* IV:218, 207

theoretical reason maintains, within its domain, primacy in the legislative sense, though practical reason, by virtue of its transcendental primacy, determines, both formally and materially, theoretical reason to this domain.

An issue connected with this is how to interpret Fichte's view that philosophy must begin with the I and its free act of self-positing because I 'ought' not to begin anywhere else. It is not, he says, that I cannot think further, but that I ought not to. I would suggest that this assertion is a result of what Wood calls the 'requirement that our conception of ourselves and our activity must be a systematic conception, self-consistent, not self-undermining, and capable of being presented in a coherent transcendental system. Such an incoherence is not merely something we (psychologically) *can't* believe; it is something we (normatively) *must not* believe'.⁹² Whilst Wood says this in the context of a theory of freedom, I believe it is equally applicable here. Likewise, Breazeale says that I have the ability to doubt the validity of the moral law and question my belief in my freedom, but 'I could do this only if I were willing "to destroy my own inner self" that is, only if I were willing to sacrifice what I hold dearest'.⁹³ Breazeale calls this a methodological primacy of the practical, as practical reason here provides the warrant for the choice of philosophical starting point.⁹⁴ Even though Fichte does seem to claim that there is at least one case in which moral claims or practical claims may override a theoretical claim (inasmuch as I ought not to proceed beyond the free act of the self-positing I), I take it that this represents an extension of, and a further motivation for, his TAAD step. We could call this a methodological primacy of practical reason, as Breazeale does, but only if we keep firmly in mind that once the project (that is, of the system of idealism) has been started, it is a wholly theoretical exercise – which Breazeale also emphasises. By way of an interim summary, Fichte affirms the transcendental and methodological senses of PPR, and denies the temporal, thinkability, and legislative senses.

Consideration of these points leads to a criticism of interpreting Fichte according to my view. Namely, that he insists, especially in the *WLn*, but also in the earlier *WL*, that thinking and willing, or real activity and ideal activity, or theoretical and practical reason, are necessarily bound together, as we have seen. But having them necessarily bound together does not mean that there cannot be a priority in some other sense. Fichte does claim at numerous points, for example in section 4 of the *WLn*, but also in other portions of the text, that the I is a unity of practical and theoretical powers. For example, 'The I is neither the intellect nor the practical power; instead, it is both at once...If we want to grasp the I, we have to grasp both of these; separated from each other, they are nothing at all'.⁹⁵ Zöllner, for example, claims that the ideal and real powers of the subject form a 'structure of intricately related *co-original* moments that collaborate in the constitution of subjectivity'.⁹⁶ Similarly, Breazeale claims that accounts that stress Fichte's primacy of practical reason thesis obscure 'what is arguably his single most important accomplishment as a

⁹² Wood, *FET*, 35

⁹³ Breazeale, 'Two Cheers' 255

⁹⁴ Breazeale, 'Two Cheers' 254

⁹⁵ *FTP*, K54/H46, 152

⁹⁶ Gunter Zöllner, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73.

transcendental philosopher: namely, his demonstration of the *inseparability* of knowing and willing, theory and practice, within the original constitution of the I and at every moment of empirical consciousness'.⁹⁷ This is the so-called equiprimordiality thesis. Whilst it is clear that Fichte does indeed think that the two are both required for I-hood and empirical consciousness at all, it seems to not take into account the subtlety of his position, and indeed his many other remarks, to say that they are on an equal footing. Indeed, as I have attempted to show above, Fichte can think that they are equally required, but in different senses, thus maintaining a priority.⁹⁸ That disparity rested on a distinction between a thing's being necessary, and a thing's being essential, or constitutive. I suggested that it is because theoretical reason is necessary but not essential that Fichte maintains the disparity.

The line that Breazeale, and Zöller take on PPR seems to stem, at least partially, from Aenesidemus. At the very least, there is an interesting parallel with Aenesidemus to be considered. At the end of the review of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte explains that Aenesidemus objects to Kant's moral theology. Fichte says:

'Aenesidemus' protests against this mode of inference are based upon his deficient grasp of the true difference between theoretical and practical philosophy. These protests are summarised approximately in the following syllogism: Until we decide *whether* it is *possible* to do or to refrain from doing something, we cannot judge *that* we are commanded to do it or to refrain from doing it. But whether an action is possible or impossible is something that can be decided only according to theoretical principles.

Therefore, even the judgement *that* something is commanded is based upon theoretical principles. That which Kant first infers *from* the command has got to be already shown and decided *before* any command at all can be rationally accepted. It is far from being the case that the recognition of a command can provide the basis for the conviction that the conditions for its fulfilment actually do exist. On the contrary, that recognition can only follow upon this conviction. One can see that Aenesidemus is assailing the actual foundation of Kantian moral theology, namely, *the primacy of practical over theoretical reason*⁹⁹

To summarise, Aenesidemus objects to Kant's usage of the principle that "ought implies can", because in order to know whether we should do something, we need to know that we can do it, or as Fichte says, that we have the conviction that the conditions for its fulfilment actually obtain. Fichte is probably alluding to Aenesidemus again when he says, in the *WLM*, that 'One commonly says, "I cannot will unless I first possess a cognition of the object I am willing."' This, however, is not true, for there is also another kind of willing, one that provides itself with its own object and to which, therefore, no object is given in advance'.¹⁰⁰ I shall discuss this passage and the context in which it appears later, in section V. For now, I want to note the similarity in Aenesidemus' criticism and the interpretations of Zöller and Breazeale. Both Aenesidemus

⁹⁷ Breazeale, 'The Problematic Primacy of the Practical' 406

⁹⁸ This is also seen by Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) 8

⁹⁹ Fichte, 'Review of *Aenesidemus*' (RA) in *Early Philosophical Writings* trans. Daniel Breazeale (Cornell, Cornell University Press, 1988[1794]) I:21-2, 74-5, final emphasis added, all others original.

¹⁰⁰ *FTP*, K143/H135, 293

on the one hand, and Zöllner and Breazeale, on the other, seem to commit the error of thinking that there is only one sort of willing. Zöllner and Breazeale claim that practical reason cannot have primacy in any real sense because all the exercises of practical reason require a use of theoretical reason. Fichte claims that this is only true for a restricted sphere – of empirical willing. I therefore submit that Zöllner and Breazeale are incorrect to say that there is no significant sense of the primacy of practical reason in Fichte. I shall examine their claims in more detail now.

The review of Aenesidemus also contains a condensed argument for the primacy of practical reason against the charge that has been raised. Though the argument appears in an extended and fuller format in the 1794/5 *Wissenschaftslehre*, it is helpful to look at Fichte's early attempt to solve the problem. The problem is that the primacy and indeed the very existence of practical reason in any substantive sense is in question if it is true, as it seems to be, that we need to know what we are willing in order that we will it. We can call this the 'knowledge condition' on willing. So the problem is that the knowledge condition seems to render indefensible any account of the primacy of practical reason, which is necessary for the Kantian enterprise.

Fichte attempts to resolve this problem here by claiming that practical reason and the moral law are not primarily aimed at producing actions, but only producing endeavours or strivings towards action.¹⁰¹ Fichte then elects to represent 'the elements of this mode of inference in their highest abstraction', and says that 'If, in intellectual intuition, the I *is because* it is and *is what* it is, then it is, to that extent, *self-positing*, absolutely independent, and autonomous. The I in empirical consciousness, however, the I as intellect, *is only* in relation to something intelligible, and is, to that extent, dependent.'¹⁰² There has been an opposition set up between two elements of rational beings. There is the I *qua* reason in general, and the I *qua* my own empirical consciousness. These two, however, are supposed to be in some way united. 'Since, however, the I cannot relinquish its absolute independence, a striving is engendered: the I strives to make what is intelligible dependent upon itself, in order thereby to bring that I which entertains representations of what is intelligible into unity with the self-positing I.'¹⁰³ We should note that Fichte here probably intends to use 'intelligible' to refer to the Not-I, insofar as it is an object of thought. My own empirical consciousness is dependent upon the not-I – Fichte has said previously that the correct interpretation of Kant's refutation of Idealism is that 'the consciousness of the *thinking* I...is possible only under the condition that there be a not-I which *is to be thought*'.¹⁰⁴ This striving to bring the self-positing I in harmony with the empirical I is 'what it means to say that *reason is practical*. In the pure I, reason is not practical, nor is it practical in the I as intellect. Reason is practical only insofar as it strives to unify these two.'¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ 'RA', I:22, 75. Fichte probably has in mind the opening pages of Kant's *Groundwork*, where Kant makes numerous claims regarding the good will, among them the claim that the good will is good independently of whether it is efficacious or not.

¹⁰² RA, I:22, 75

¹⁰³ RA, I:22, 75. Fichte uses the word '*entsteht*' which Breazeale translates as 'engendered'. It has a temporal meaning, but it seems clear that Fichte is here trying to argue that this is a logical order not a temporal one.

¹⁰⁴ RA, I:22, 75

¹⁰⁵ RA, I:22, 75

Fichte's response to Aenesidemus is then that practical reason can exist and be primary insofar as the I in any of its finite determinations (i.e. individual persons) is *not* in harmony with the core of subjectivity, the pure I. It is the nature of Reason to give grounds for things, and thus the unity would be one in which the I determines itself and thus determines all that is not-I. However, Reason finds that this is unfulfilled, and thus demands its fulfilment. So, Fichte tells us, practical reason is founded 'on the *conflict* between the self-determining element within us and the theoretical-knowing element. And practical reason itself would be canceled if this conflict were eliminated'.¹⁰⁶ This last way of putting the point can be misleading, however, as it sounds very much like practical reason is consequent on theoretical reason. Indeed, this is Breazeale's interpretation of this passage. Breazeale says: 'From this it is surely obvious that practical reason always presupposes theoretical reason, inasmuch as the very task of practical reason is to overcome the conflict between the intellect and the pure I'.¹⁰⁷ But this is peculiar, as Fichte's words seem to imply that he is thinking that this is compatible with thinking of practical reason as primary in the transcendental sense. He says 'far from practical reason having to recognise the superiority of theoretical reason...'¹⁰⁸ Another peculiarity is the absence of discussion of the knowledge condition – that was Aenesidemus' primary criticism, which Fichte set out to rebut, but he seems to have forgotten it; at least, it is not clear how this conclusion relates to the knowledge condition.

In answer to the latter, Fichte seems to think that the knowledge condition is successfully rebutted when he draws a distinction between what the moral law immediately directs itself to and what it mediately directs itself to. The former is 'the constant endeavour toward an action', and the latter is an action. Fichte regards actions as 'of course something which must be governed by the laws of this world', presumably because they involve the movement of natural bodies. Fichte's response is to grant to Aenesidemus that the knowledge condition holds for actions, but not for the 'constant endeavour toward an action'. Because Fichte seems to conceive of the knowledge condition, which is opposed to the principle that "ought implies can" as an attack on PPR (at least as it is found in Kant), then a rejection of the knowledge condition is a defence of PPR.

With regard to the former problem – that of whether Breazeale's view is correct, it must be said that when Fichte says 'Reason is only practical insofar as it strives to unify these two [the self-positing independent I and the intelligent dependent I]', he would not assent to the view that there is a time at which the conflict, which must be resolved by unifying these two, is non-existent. From this it follows that reason is always practical. But the question remains as to whether Fichte here assents to the transcendental sense of PPR. That is, does Fichte in the review believe that practical reason is a necessary condition for theoretical reason? In other words, is it the case that without there being a conflict then I would not be able to know anything at all? Fichte speaks of the 'intelligent I', which would suggest a negative answer. If that is the case, then we

¹⁰⁶ RA I:23-4, 76

¹⁰⁷ Breazeale, 'The Problematic Primacy of the Practical', 411. Whilst Breazeale takes this as evidence of his view – that theoretical and practical are equiprimordial or co-original, it is not clear that this passage actually does that. If practical reason, if as this passage seems to suggest, is consequent upon a conflict of theoretical reason, then that would not amount to equiprimordiality either.

¹⁰⁸ RA I:23, 76

see that at this stage, Fichte had only saw himself as setting out a defence of PPR insofar as it appears in the guise of “ought implies can” – a denial of Aenesidemus’ knowledge condition. But, as we shall see below, the argument in the *WL* also claims that practical reason exists only because of a contradiction between the independent and dependent aspect of the I. The argument in Aenesidemus has a more limited scope, and there are no claims regarding the transcendental nature of the primacy, but the mere fact that Fichte claims that practical reason is a result of a conflict in the I does not mean that it cannot be so prior.

The equiprimordiality thesis may be interpreted in different ways. At its most basic, it is possibly a ‘formal’ sense – the result of the joint assertion of ‘if P then Q’ and ‘if Q then P’ where P is practical reason and Q is theoretical reason. This rather bare conception is acceptable, and as far as I can see, what Fichte thinks. The problem is that this seems to come too late. When Fichte asserts this equiprimordiality, it appears to be in the context of discussions of the powers of real empirical agents. That is to say that it appears primarily in the context of acting. Breazeale does note this, but he does not think it is an issue. For example he says ‘If thinking is to be “real”, it must have an object, which can be grounded only in *feeling*, and hence in some hindrance to the practical power of the I. If willing is to be rational (i.e. if it is to be the activity of an I), it presupposes a theoretical acquaintance with the world within which one strives, as well as a determinate goal provided by “ideal thinking”. The I must posit – i.e., know – itself as willing’.¹⁰⁹ This is all correct, as far as I can see, but it comes too late in Fichte’s program. Of course in order to will that the world be X I must have a concept of X. But this assertion of the knowledge condition is not sufficient to establish the falsity of PPR. This would only establish the falsity of the temporal sense of PPR, which we have already rejected as not capturing Fichte’s meaning.

However, there is a sense in Fichte that what he calls ‘real activity’ (i.e. doing) is prior, and then ‘ideal activity’ (representing) is posterior. The only sense that I can make of this is that ideal activity is to some extent ‘parasitic’, as it were, on real activity – Fichte calls ideal activity ‘constrained and arrested and can occur only subsequently to a real activity’.¹¹⁰ Whilst it is true that Fichte says that the I only is what it posits itself to be (a position which Breazeale takes as establishing the equiprimordiality thesis), it is not clear what Fichte is supposed to mean here.¹¹¹ That is, it could be that there is some bodily movement or act of will which occurs *prior* to my thinking of it, because I do not self-ascribe such a bodily movement. Then, and only after this movement occurring, I self-ascribe it, and thus it becomes mine. In Fichtean spirit, this should not be thought of as an analysis of constitutive conditions for something to count as an action, but rather a genetic account of how agents are formed. It is quite possible that this is what Fichte has in mind as an account of how the powers of real and ideal activity work.¹¹² It is analogous to Fichte’s account of intuition and concept. Fichte, like Kant, affirms that we cannot have intuitions without concepts and cannot have concepts without intuitions. But intuitions do in a real sense come first. It seems as though Fichte’s view is that we have an intuition of an object brought to us by a feeling and then by self-ascribing that

¹⁰⁹ Breazeale, ‘The Problematic Primacy of the Practical’ 411

¹¹⁰ *FTP*, K52/H47, 148

¹¹¹ For example, see *FTP*, K48/H44 141.

¹¹² I am thus in sympathy with Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity*, who presents a similar view (134).

intuition we conceptualise it. The self-ascription is not *optional*, but is certainly secondary. I believe that something akin to this is what Fichte has in mind when he says that ‘...the ideal activity would be a product of the practical power, and the practical power would be the existential foundation of the ideal activity... [the ideal activity] is that which witnesses the practical’.¹¹³ But if something like this is right here, then we have rejected the equiprimordiality thesis in the strong sense that Breazeale and Zöller affirm.

I now turn to an examination of what I take to be the canonical form of Fichte’s major argument, and the ramifications of the argument, and Fichte’s position on PPR, for how his theory of how consciousness of freedom and consciousness of the world are linked.

IV: “Without a striving, no object is possible”

The most famous passage where Fichte seems to affirm PPR has become known as the expression of the ‘striving thesis’ Fichte says ‘...*in relation to a possible object*, the pure self-reverting activity of the self is a *striving*; and as shown earlier, *an infinite striving* at that. This boundless striving, carried to infinity, is the *condition of the possibility of any object whatsoever*: no striving, no object’.¹¹⁴ Fichte appears to be stating that the condition of the possibility of objects is the striving of the I. This thesis is actually the result of a lengthy argument which I shall attempt to reconstruct below. Briefly, the idea is that the I as infinite activity demands that all reality should be posited absolutely through itself. Fichte, soon after enunciating the striving thesis claims just this, and says that this demand ‘is called – and with justice – practical reason’.¹¹⁵ So it seems that Fichte affirms PPR because he affirms the striving thesis, which states that objects are conditional upon there being a striving of the I, and this striving of the I is an expression of reason’s practical interests.

The striving argument blends together transcendental and dialectical strategies.¹¹⁶ Broadly, a transcendental argument is one that argues from a premise that is generally committed to, then to necessary conditions for that premise. A dialectical argument is one that argues from what appears to be a contradiction to a synthesis of the propositions in the contradiction. I take it that Fichte is interweaving these methods in this argument, and there are portions of the argument that are dialectical.¹¹⁷ On the whole the argument is a transcendental argument because it is designed to show a necessary condition for the possibility of X – though it is dialectical because the condition for the possibility of X is a synthesis of two contradictory assertions. Before I begin exegesis of the stages of the argument, I should say that whilst Fichte talks about an antithesis or a contradiction, it is not clear what this contradiction or antithesis is at this stage. Matters are further complicated because Fichte mentions two antitheses. The first contradiction is between roughly the propositions that A) “The self is independent of the not-I” and B) “The self is

¹¹³ *FTP*, K49/H45, 142.

¹¹⁴ *SK*, I:262-3, 231

¹¹⁵ *SK*, I:264, 232

¹¹⁶ I am in partial agreement with Martin in *Idealism and Objectivity*, who claims the argument to be transcendental. (134) But Martin does not, as I do, view the detail of the arguments for the major transitions as dialectical.

¹¹⁷ Fichte regards this method as different from what he calls the ‘synthetic method’ of the theoretical sections. The synthetic method is outlined at *SK*, I:115, 113

dependent upon the not-I".¹¹⁸ For convenience, I shall from now on refer to this as the Dependence Contradiction. We are told soon after that this contradiction can only be resolved by thinking of the relation between the self *qua* independent activity and the not-I as one of cause to effect.¹¹⁹ We are also told that this causal relation itself contains a contradiction, but it is the only way possible to resolve the Dependence Contradiction, so Fichte sets himself the task of resolving what I shall call the Causal Contradiction: A) The I is to exert causality on the not-I, and B) The I can exert no causality on the not-I.¹²⁰ There is yet a third contradiction, between A) The I is infinite and unbounded, and B) The I is finite and bounded.¹²¹ This is actually more like a re-statement of the Dependence Contradiction, but in terms of finitude, because for Fichte, only an infinite thing can be independent. Fichte tells us that such a contradiction, were it to hold, would reveal a contradiction in the very nature of the I – that it posits itself absolutely and posits itself as opposed to a not-I, which are supposed to be mutually exclusive. With the different contradictions laid out, I shall now proceed to an exegesis of the proof-structure of the argument.

The key to the proof is given when Fichte says ‘Merely by positing something, it [the I] posits itself...in this something, and ascribes the latter to itself. Thus we have only to find a difference in the mere act of positing in these two cases [positing itself as infinite or finite], and our problem is solved.’¹²² Thus Fichte’s first premise is that there is a sense in which the I is finite, and a different sense in which the I is infinite, or, that the I posits itself as in some sense limited, and in some sense not. This is just the second half of the third principle of the whole *Wissenschaftslehre* – that the I posits itself as partially limited by a not-I.¹²³

There is a slight peculiarity to this premise. The peculiarity is connected with what I said above in section III regarding intelligible fatalism. Fichte tells us that the positing of the not-I is ‘a mere hypothesis; *that* such a positing occurs, can be demonstrated by nothing other than a fact of consciousness, and everyone must demonstrate it for himself by this fact; nobody can prove it to another on rational grounds.’¹²⁴ The *Wissenschaftslehre* tells us that *if* experience is actual, then certain conclusions regarding the structure of human knowledge and cognitive architecture follow. The *Wissenschaftslehre* does not tell us *that* experience is actual.¹²⁵ Fichte tells us that there might be an attempt to ‘trace some admitted fact to this highest fact on grounds of reason; but such a proof would do no more than persuade the other that by admission of some such fact he had also conceded this highest fact’.¹²⁶ Indeed, earlier in the theoretical part of the work, this is exactly what we find Fichte doing. He says that the positing of the not-I must be an original act of the I because in order to make any knowledge claim or representation of the world whatever there must be

¹¹⁸ This is explicitly stated in terms of a dependence relation at *SK*, I:249, 220

¹¹⁹ *SK*, I:250, 221

¹²⁰ *SK*, I:254, 225

¹²¹ *SK*, I:254, 225

¹²² *SK*, I:255, 226

¹²³ *SK*, I:106-7, 106-7

¹²⁴ *SK*, I:252, 223

¹²⁵ Note the similarity between this formulation of the procedure of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and Niethammer’s formulation of Kant’s philosophy (that Kant says, ‘if experience is, then...’) – that Ameriks is very sympathetic to. It thus seems peculiar that Ameriks finds Fichte to be too dogmatic and not critical enough. See Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 64ff

¹²⁶ *SK*, I:252-3, 223

something ‘whereby it [the object of my knowledge-claim or representation] discloses itself as something to be presented’.¹²⁷ But, he says that is ‘something that no object can teach me; for merely in order to set up something as an object, I have to know this already; hence it must lie initially in myself, the presenter, in advance of any possible experience’.¹²⁸ In other words, this premise, as is appropriate for a transcendental argument, is assumed to be acceptable to all.

The second premise (of the transcendental portion of the argument) is (roughly) that if the I posits itself as limited by a not-I, then the limitation takes the form of resistance. By resistance Fichte means that the I’s activity is bounded by something. In order to explicate Fichte’s thinking here, we need to look at the distinct types of activity that the I engages in. The first type of activity is called pure or infinite activity. This is the activity that the I engages in when it thinks of itself or posits itself. This activity is also called self-reverting activity. Fichte calls this activity ‘infinite’ because it is inherently self-reflexive. There is also objective activity, in which the I thinks something that is not itself. Objective activity is activity of the I that is intentional, and the intentional object is the not-I (or some determinate part of it). Objective activity is characterised by a resistance, what Fichte would later describe as a ‘feeling of necessity’.¹²⁹ In other words, thought does not have the same power that it has over pure activity. Thinking about objects is constrained in various ways – I must respect various aspects of the object’s form, structure, and content, in order to represent it faithfully. Fichte notes with a certain satisfaction that even the etymologies of the (German, but the same point applies to the English) words prove his point – they *object* to my activity.¹³⁰ Therefore to say that the limitation that the I posits as applicable to itself via the not-I takes the form of resistance is to say that the activity of the I is resisted in various ways; the activity (when directed toward objects) is not infinite. In other words, the positing of the not-I as limiting the I limits only because it resists the I’s activity. To sum up slightly more formally:

- 1) The I posits itself as limited, that is, the I posits a not-I
- 2) The limitation on the I takes the form of resistance to the I’s activity

The move after this is not clear. This is where the dialectical work of the argument begins. We have seen that the relevant contradictions (Dependence and Causal) have been stated, and now that Fichte has got this far with the transcendental method, he needs to switch to a dialectical method. The dialectical sub-argument motivates the move from premise two to three. Indeed, without this sub-argument, the

¹²⁷ *SK*, I:104-5, 105

¹²⁸ *SK*, I:105, 105

¹²⁹ ‘[First] Introduction’ I:424, 8. The distinction between the representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity and those accompanied by a feeling of freedom means that for Fichte, experience must be something thicker than mere apprehension of sense data. Experience is identified with the representations that are accompanied by a feeling of necessity. This means that Ameriks is wrong to criticise Fichte on the grounds of starting with the Cartesian ideas and trying to argue outwards. In fact, Fichte follows Kant’s strategy (which Ameriks thinks is the superior) of starting with empirical judgements.

¹³⁰ *SK*, I:256, 227

transcendental argument would be straightforwardly invalid. It is now therefore necessary to clarify the line of argument that guarantees the move from two to three.

Recall the two types of activity (pure and objective) that we have just considered – the I is supposed to be absolutely self-determining and infinite, but at the same time is the mirror of the world and is thereby determined, not determinant. These two types of activity are distinct, but in Fichte's words, there must be a 'bond of union, whereby consciousness is conducted from one to the other...'¹³¹ Fichte is here noting that of course we have consciousness of ourselves (infinite activity) and consciousness of objects (objective activity). The problem is therefore how to reconcile these two. The I must have both activities, but it will not do to, as Kant did, merely state that the powers of the mind might be joined in a 'common root' but that is a question that we can and should ignore.¹³² That is not systematic, not scientific, and ultimately, for Fichte, not philosophical.

We must therefore find what joins these two activities as modifications of the same self (which is itself a type of activity). Fichte claims that the bond of union that links the finite and infinite activities is the causal connection – the causal connection asserted in the thesis of the Causal Contradiction. The pure activity of the self should be the cause of the objective activity of the self, or 'the self should determine itself to the second activity by means of the first'.¹³³ It would then follow, by transitivity, that pure activity would be mediately causally related to the not-I. Clearly, however, he is not thinking of a temporal causal relation. For one thing, time is, according to orthodox transcendental idealism, a form of intuition by which parts of the not-I is represented (to use a mixture of Kantian and Fichtean terminology). The positing of the not-I must precede, in a non-temporal sense, any temporal relation (such is a consequence of the statement above – that no object can teach me what it is to be presented). So when Fichte here says 'cause and effect', it would be better to think of the logical 'ground and consequent' or 'determinant and determined' relation. Fichte follows this by unpacking how this is to be, by 'enter[ing] more deeply into the meaning' of the positing of the not-I.¹³⁴ Fichte then recalls the Causal Contradiction. We can formalise this somewhat with the following:

- 3) The pure activity of the self and the objective activity of the self must be 'one and the same...there must...be a bond of union'.
- 4) This can only happen if the pure activity of the self and the objective activity of the self are related as cause to effect.
- 5) But the Causal Contradiction holds.

Fichte therefore attempts to resolve this contradiction by focusing more deeply on the meaning of the proposition that the not-I is the only candidate for the content of the act of positing the not-I, or

¹³¹ *SK*, I:256, 227

¹³² See for example, Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:391, 47, also *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:91.

¹³³ *SK*, I:256, 227

¹³⁴ *SK*, I:258, 228

counterpositing, as he sometimes puts it. One paragraph represents an attempt to do this in terms of limitation in general – without any determinate limits. He says that so long as a mere object in general is posited (i.e. the whole not-I), the requirements (that the pure and objective activity be related in the right way) are satisfied. This is because there are boundaries, but the boundaries are determined by the absolute spontaneity of the I. Thus Fichte claims that on this view, the self ‘is finite, because it is to be subjected to limits; but it is infinite within this finitude because the boundary can be posited ever farther out, to infinity. It is infinite in its finitude and finite in its infinity’.¹³⁵ If this sounds self-contradictory, that is because Fichte intends for us to take it that way – he is not actually asserting this. This is a consequence of a proposed solution to the antithesis that Fichte will (shortly) reject. He says that this leads to an ‘absolute confinement’ which is in contradiction with the ‘absolute infinite nature’ of the self. In short, it will not do if we merely think of the positing at such an abstract level as ‘object in general’ because this leads us to think of the I as finite and infinite in the same senses, and this is contradictory.¹³⁶

Fichte then tells us that not only does the I posit a not-I in general, but it posits objects, that is, it posits determinate parts of the not-I which are thought by virtue of our objective activity. Our objective activity that has as its intentional object the not-I needs to have specific parts of the not-I as its object. In other words, the I posits activity (found as resistance) in objects. The resistance found in the objects of objective activity is itself a type of activity. This activity must be opposed to some activity of the I, but an activity which is non-identical with the activity of positing the object in the first place, otherwise they would annul each other, cancel each other out.¹³⁷ Fichte then claims that ‘therefore, as an object is to be posited, and as a condition of the possibility of such positing, there must be another activity (=X) occurring in the self, distinct from that of positing’¹³⁸ The thought behind it being a transcendental condition seems to be that if there were not a second activity of the self then there would be no positing, because the object and the positing would cancel each other out. This seems actually quite right if we transpose it into non-Fichtean language, but we have to bear in mind that objects (at this abstract level) are essentially bundles of resistance. If I had a certain intentional content, and the object of that content resisted my intentional activity, I would not get any content in the first place, and therefore I would know no object.¹³⁹ It might be said that here Fichte has just got the picture inverted. It is not, we might think, that insofar as the I’s activity is resisted is there an object, but only insofar as there is an object is the I’s activity resisted. The latter seems like a more natural

¹³⁵ *SK*, I:258, 228

¹³⁶ It seems that this is a charge which Hegel raised against Fichte, perhaps taking Fichte’s final position to be identical to the position rejected in this paragraph. For example, he says ‘The ego clearly posits an object, a point of limitation, but where the limitation is, is undetermined. I may transfer the sphere of my determination, and extend it to an infinite degree, but there always remains a pure Beyond, and the non-ego has no positive self-existent determination’ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Vol. 3* trans. E. S. Haldane & Frances H. Simson (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 498

¹³⁷ *SK*, I:258-9, 228

¹³⁸ *SK*, I:259/228 emphasis Fichte’s.

¹³⁹ It seems plausible to regard a paradigm case of this a case of the object resisting conceptualisation. Then of course Fichte would have to deny the existence of non-conceptual content. If there is no non-conceptual content, then resisting conceptualisation is a case of not knowing an object at all, and so the positing would never happen in the first place. It would take me too far afield to get into the question of Fichte on non-conceptual content; all I needed to show here was that sense can be made of this claim.

standpoint. In Fichte's defence, I can say two things. The first is to reiterate the point above that the concept of an object is something that no object can teach me; the second is that this is less of an argument and more of a re-statement of the position that Fichte wants to defeat: i.e. dogmatism (or any form of naturalism).

So, we get:

- 6) In positing the not-I, the I posits an activity in objects.
- 7) This activity is opposed to some activity of the I, which is non-identical with the act of positing the object, and this is a condition of the possibility of such positing.

Fichte then tells us that the only candidate for the other activity of the I is the pure activity of the I. He gives three requirements that the other activity must satisfy – it must be not eliminated by the object, or co-positable with it; secondly, it must be 'absolutely grounded' in the I, because it is independent of any object and all objects are independent of it. Thirdly, it must be infinite, because objects are capable of being posited 'out to infinity', and the activity must match this.¹⁴⁰ That is to say that the object must be opposed to the pure activity of the I.

- 8) The object is opposed to the pure activity of the I.

From this, Fichte concludes that the objective activity of the I is made possible by, that is, is caused by (in the special non-temporal sense outlined above) the pure activity of the I. He says 'Only *insofar* as this activity is resisted, can an object be posited; and so far as it is not resisted, there is no object'.¹⁴¹ Fichte now takes himself to have shown that (5) is false – that is, it is not contradictory that the pure activity of the I be related to the objective activity of the I, and thus to the object itself, as cause to effect – he has resolved the Causal Contradiction. There must be a connection between the infinite activity of the I and the object that is posited by the objective activity of the self. This connection is mediated by the objective activity of the self, which is related immediately to the object, and the object in turn is related mediately to the pure activity of the self. Indeed, this point could be drawn out with an analogy with Kant's transcendental unity of apperception (which Fichte draws a parallel with as well). For Kant, the transcendental unity of apperception means that something can only be mine if it is possible that the phrase "I think" accompany the judgement. If we view Fichte's problem here through the lens of this Kantian vocabulary, the problem is that the objective activity of the self could only be the intentional activity of the I if it were shown that there is a real connection between that activity and the pure activity of self-consciousness.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ All of this is in the same paragraph, *SK*, I:259, 229

¹⁴¹ *SK*, I:259, 229

¹⁴² Kant might object to this parallel by claiming that Fichte's investigation into the 'real connection' or the 'common root' of the powers of the mind is illegitimate, and even unnecessary, on the basis that we know already that it is at least possible that there is a connection, because the power of self-consciousness and consciousness of objects are two types of consciousness of the same mind. Be that as it may, and Fichte has no need to disagree, it could equally

So now Fichte has resolved the Causal Contradiction, he now turns to this pure activity in its relation to the object. Recall that the resolution of the Causal Contradiction was supposed to yield the key to the resolution of the Dependence Contradiction, which is the overall aim of the striving argument – to eliminate the dependence of the I *qua* intelligence. The Dependence Contradiction is resolved via the Causal hypothesis because the I *qua* intelligence is dependent upon the not-I, but if it were shown that the not-I were to be in turn dependent upon the I, then the I would be, by transitivity, wholly self-determined and independent. In order to show this, Fichte examines the connection between the pure activity of the I and the object (or the activity of the object). He first notes that they are ‘perfectly independent of each other and utterly opposed’, but ‘they must nonetheless be connected’.¹⁴³ This again is a necessary condition on the object being posited (which we know to be true without argument), which, as Fichte says, happens absolutely, without any ground, or as he says ‘by the act of positing merely as such’, rather than, say, positing it *as* thus and so. In other words the positing of the not-I is non-inferential. In this sense the positing is ‘absolute’. There is, however, a different, though related, sense in which the positing of the not-I is absolute. It is absolute because is based on a connection that depends ‘entirely on the I’.¹⁴⁴ I take it that he means by this that there would be no connection if the I was not active and resisted by the object, or that the I is the keystone in the connection, and without it no other element can play its role.

9) The object is absolutely connected to the infinite activity of the self.

For Fichte, to say this is to say that they are ‘posited as absolutely alike’.¹⁴⁵ It is not clear what this is supposed to mean. One way of thinking about it is this: To say something is absolutely connected is to assert its identity, but to assert identity just is to assert absolute likeness. But the activities in question – the activity of the object, and the pure activity of the I thinking itself, are obviously not the same. So, Fichte says, we can only say that their likeness is demanded – they ought to be absolutely alike.¹⁴⁶ Fichte moves on rather quickly to discuss the derivative question of which should conform to which. However, the notions of likeness and absolute connection require more explanation. It clearly cannot be that to assert absolute connection is asserting identity which is further to assert likeness. If this were right then the absolute connection would be cancelled entirely by the observation that the I and not-I are not alike. But the absolute connection is maintained, albeit in a different form. Fichte does not renounce the claim of absolute connection, only the claim of (actual) absolute likeness. So the ‘likeness’ needs to be thought of in a different way. I suggest that we look closer at Fichte’s claim that absolute connections are to be thought of as connections that depend entirely on the I. This means that for relations of likeness there is a sufficient

will be said in response to Kant here that (using Kant’s own conception of philosophical deductions) we are not answering the *quid facti* (the question of fact – does a connection exist?) but the *quid juris* (the question of right – with what justification do we think such a connection?).

¹⁴³ SK, I:259-60, 229

¹⁴⁴ SK, I:260, 229

¹⁴⁵ SK, I:260, 229

¹⁴⁶ SK, I:259, 229

ground of such likeness in the I. All the relata have their distinct parts to play, and none can be reduced to the other, but the relation is absent unless the I is present. It is clear that the not-I should conform to the I; his words are that ‘what is required is the conformity of the object with the I’.¹⁴⁷ In a footnote Fichte claims this is the key insight of Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative – that all reality should be like the I.¹⁴⁸

There is also a slight ambiguity in the text. In this section, which forms the latter half of the dialectical argument, Fichte speaks about an absolute connection between the pure activity of the self and the object, or not-I. Before, however, he spoke about an immediate relation between the object and the objective activity of the I, and a mediate relation between the object and the pure activity of the I.¹⁴⁹ I do not think this is any real inconsistency. It is not obviously contradictory to say that the relation between the I and the not-I is mediated, but absolute. It is mediated insofar as it has a third term which the relation must pass through, as it were, but it is absolute because the relata form a unity, albeit one that is not actual, but ideal. It is to say, at least in this context where the relata are not absolutely alike, that the connection is mediated, and the relata ought to be absolutely alike, and one should conform to the other.

10) The object which is posited absolutely (and related mediately to the pure activity of the I) should conform to the pure activity of the I.

11) If the object does not conform, then the conformity is demanded.

Here we are at the end of the dialectical portion of the argument. Fichte takes himself to have shown that the pure activity of the I is the necessary condition for the objective activity of the I. He also then takes himself to have shown that the object that is posited must conform to the pure activity of the I, as the likeness between them is ‘absolutely demanded’. But we got to this position by a dialectical argument showing the various oppositions that are present, between pure and objective activity; between pure activity and the object. Fichte therefore concludes with the third transcendental premise, the thesis that only a striving being is capable of finding the resistance required for the act of counterpositing (positing the not-I), or that the necessary and sufficient condition of this resistance is that the subject is a striving subject. This is to say that without a striving, no object is possible. This is because we have shown how the object must be absolutely related to the I, in order for the positing of the not-I to be possible. This requires that the I and the not-I be absolutely alike, which they are not. The demand that they are absolutely alike, and the awareness that this demand is not fulfilled, is the striving. This striving is in turn a condition on the possibility of objects in the first place, because were we not striving beings, there would be no resistance, and objects are only related to us by resistance. Striving is what makes possible my theoretical faculty, and

¹⁴⁷ *SK*, I:260, 230

¹⁴⁸ My reading of the argument therefore differs from Seidel, for example, who takes Fichte to mean the Absolute I by ‘possible object’ in the phrasing of the conclusion. This is, in my view, not borne out by the text. See George J. Seidel, *Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre of 1794: A Commentary on Part 1* (Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1993) 112f

¹⁴⁹ *SK*, I:257, 227

my agency. It is, as Martin says, not the content of any action, but a ‘pre-intentional condition on intentional action’ and indeed on knowledge.¹⁵⁰

12) The necessary condition for the possibility of limitation by resistance (and all positing of a not-I, that is, all intentional experience of a world) is that the I is a striving I.

C) Therefore, the I is a striving I.

It is interesting to note that Fichte says, ‘in relation to a possible object, the pure self-reverting activity of the self is a *striving*’.¹⁵¹ What he means is that the relation or connection between the pure activity of the I and the object, is one in which the I is striving to make the object like itself. In other words, the I seeks that the world be fundamentally the mirror of itself. Pure reason seeks that the world be reasonable, and in seeing that it is not, strives to make it so. As Fichte says in an essay contemporary with the 1794/5 lectures, ‘Since he is a being that represents and, from a certain perspective...must represent things as they are: so, through the fact that the things which he represents do not harmonise with his drive, he falls into a contradiction with himself. Thus the drive to work on things so that they agree with our desires, so that actuality corresponds to the ideal. Man necessarily proceeds to make everything, as well as he knows it, reasonable’.¹⁵² Fichte warns us that this should not be taken as an argument for the proposition that the pure activity of the I is necessarily related to an object, without any special act of connection. To take it as so would be a mistake, and would mean ‘intelligible fatalism’.¹⁵³ We should instead take it as saying that ‘if it is so posited [as in relation to an object] it is posited as a striving’.¹⁵⁴ Let us now take stock of the position so far.

The major import of this is that this practical relation to the world is primary. Fichte has argued back from the fact of conscious intentional experience to a necessary condition of this experience being that finite human agents are striving beings, that is, are primarily orientated toward the world in practical, not theoretical terms. He has shown this by relating our intentional activity to our self-consciousness, and then by relating our self-consciousness essentially to consciousness of resistance, and a striving to overcome that resistance. In Fichte’s words, a proof that reason can (and must be) practical ‘can be achieved no otherwise than by showing that reason cannot even be theoretical, if it is not practical; that there can be no intelligence in man, if he does not possess a practical capacity; the possibility of all presentation is founded on the

¹⁵⁰ Wayne M. Martin, “Without a Striving, No Object is Possible” Fichte’s Striving Doctrine and the Primacy of Practice’, in Daniel Breazeale & Tom Rockmore (eds) *New Perspectives on Fichte* (New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1996) 30.

¹⁵¹ *SK*, I:261, 231

¹⁵² J. G. Fichte, ‘On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language’ in *Language and German Idealism: Fichte’s Linguistic Philosophy* (New York, Humanity Books, 1996[1795]), 122. This contains the vocabulary of drives which is missing from the presentation of the striving argument given in *SK*.

¹⁵³ *SK*, I:263n, 232n

¹⁵⁴ *SK*, I:263, 232

latter?¹⁵⁵ The most pressing questions now are these: firstly, to what extent do the striving argument and the resulting thesis support PPR? Secondly, does the striving argument work?

The way of putting the point seen in the essay on language is helpful, because it allows us to see what is on the one hand the biggest problem with the argument and at the same time allow us to make more sense of the argument. As it stands the argument is not valid because the move Fichte makes from (9) to (10) is illegitimate. Why does Fichte assume (other than his general methodological position) that the object should conform to the subject?

There are at least two possible answers to this.¹⁵⁶ One is given by the Kantian notion of the interests of reason. The other comes by reflection on Fichte's usage of the word 'absolute' to describe the connection. I shall start with the latter. I said above that Fichte conceives of absolute connections as connections that depend entirely upon the I. If a connection depends entirely on the I then it seems that there must be something about the I that makes the connection hold. This might mean something along these lines: if the object lies outside the scope of the infinite or pure activity, then it is not an object at all. This is the familiar transcendental idealist point that something must be knowable in order for it to count as an object. In Fichtean terms, knowable would here be perhaps cashed out in terms of resistance. Being knowable is not, one might think a 'real property' of objects, but it is a function of their possible relationship to the I. In this sense, the whole connection, and the relata of the connection, rely fundamentally on the I. If this is right, then to be in an absolute connection is to be in a unity whose character derives from the I, so it would indeed be natural to posit the relata as 'absolutely alike'. I take it that by this Fichte means something like that the objects would be fundamentally reasonable, or made in reason's image, as it were. However, as Fichte swiftly points out, this is not the case, and thus, as Breazeale says, reason's original pretensions are turned into an injunction, to make the world reasonable.¹⁵⁷

The other avenue to make Fichte's inference at the end stronger is perhaps a more speculative detour through his views on the interests of reason. In the section on interests of reason in *SE*, Fichte begins by noting a fact – that some occurrences interest us, and others do not.¹⁵⁸ This interest is immediately related to what I want and 'cannot be produced through any rational grounds'.¹⁵⁹ This is the non-inferential character of interests. Interests arise with a feeling of harmony or disharmony of the subject with the thing in question. However, given that interests are felt, and I can only feel myself, the harmony or disharmony would have to lie within myself.¹⁶⁰ That is, I feel myself to be harmonious or disharmonious. Fichte then claims that all interests are mediated through my interest in myself, and this interest in myself has its origin in a drive. This drive is the drive toward harmony between the original and the actual I.¹⁶¹ This is called the

¹⁵⁵ *SK*, I:264, 233.

¹⁵⁶ The answers are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Breazeale, 'The Interests of Reason', in *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013[1994]) 345-6

¹⁵⁸ *SE*, IV:143, 136

¹⁵⁹ *SE*, IV:143, 136

¹⁶⁰ *SE*, IV:143, 136

¹⁶¹ *SE*, IV:143, 137

pure drive – the drive to ‘activity for activity’s sake, a drive that arises when the I internally intuits its own absolute power’.¹⁶²

The general idea is that the conditions for self-consciousness are found in human action, and the conditions for action as such are to be found in freedom, and freedom is to be understood as a law that governs the subject independent of the object.¹⁶³ It must be, for Fichte, that the moral law itself is a condition for action, although, to avoid denying the obvious existence of immorality, Fichte must also maintain that the moral law cannot cause our actions.¹⁶⁴ The highest form of the moral law is the categorical imperative, which Fichte restates as ‘Always act as if you were to give laws to yourself for eternity’. In other words, the categorical imperative demands unity of the self.

I think we can reconstruct the argument that yields the needed inference as follows.

- 1) Reason has interests (as proven by the argument in SE)
- 2) One of these interests is the interest in unity, which is because of a drive for unity
- 3) The drive for unity is a result of the moral law, as unity is the moral law’s highest command
- 4) Therefore, unity is morally demanded
- 5) Unity requires the determination of the not-I by the I
- 6) Therefore, the determination of the not-I by the I is morally demanded

This argument is somewhat speculative and controversial, and may not be what Fichte intended. However, it could be said that these conceptions of the interests of reason and the drive for unity supplement the striving argument, by showing how it follows from the beginning of the WL that reason issues an injunction to itself to be unified. In other words, persons are essentially striving, and this is because all persons, *qua* rational beings, feel the force of the conflict between the disunity of their self and the drive for their self to be unified – and the drive to be unified is prompted by tacit recognition by Reason itself of its being subject to the moral law.

V: Pure Willing and the Circle of Knowing and Doing

Here I will give an exegesis of the sections of the *WLn* that are most pertinent to the topic at hand. I shall be concerned mainly with the account of how we come to know our freedom and the role that cognition of freedom, by virtue of PPR, plays in Fichte’s account. I will not primarily be concerned with reconstructing Fichte’s views on free action, but rather explicating the role that is given to freedom because of the primacy of practical reason. We shall see that Fichte draws out some consequences of PPR, including the notion of a willing without a prior cognition.

¹⁶² *SE*, IV:144, 137

¹⁶³ Paul Guyer, ‘Fichte’s Transcendental Ethics’ in *The Transcendental Turn*, 139

¹⁶⁴ Indeed, he must also say this if his account is going to fit in with his account of human existence as fundamentally striving.

For our purposes, a very important claim is the one that Fichte asserts when he says that ‘What is actually first, *realiter*, is freedom. But freedom cannot come first in the order of thinking, and that is why we had to begin with the investigations undertaken so far, which lead us to [an investigation of] freedom’.¹⁶⁵ So in the real order (recall the two series of positing), freedom comes first, but in a philosophical investigation of this real order, freedom cannot come first in the order of discovery. What comes first in the order of discovery is the postulate to think about the thinker. I take it that by asserting that *realiter* freedom comes first, that Fichte is asserting a version of PPR.

So now Fichte’s aim is an extended discussion of freedom, to make good the claim that *realiter* freedom comes first. Given that an exercise of freedom is always accompanied by some concept, or some rule, the main focus of the next sections is to answer the question of how I construct a concept for myself. As Guyer said above, it has to be that the concept is constructed, rather than given to me from outside, as this would fail to properly separate the I from the not-I.

I shall start by looking at section 4 of the *WLnM*, where Fichte first introduces the notion of the construction of the concept of a goal as a condition of freedom; as he says at the beginning of the section ‘Acting is always guided by some concept; thus I act freely whenever I spontaneously construct for myself a concept. Our present task, however, is to obtain a clear understanding of the foundations [of this process]’.¹⁶⁶ The line of thought appears to be this: the real activity of the I, and its absolute freedom, have to be cognised determinately, if they are to be cognised at all. To be determinate is to be intuitible. So real activity has to produce something determinate from something determinable. Note that Fichte here is talking within the realm of the mental – he is not, though it may appear so – talking about the production of real objects by one’s activity.¹⁶⁷ That comes later. For now, he is explicating the mechanism of one aspect of freedom – the spontaneous construction of a concept, which is paradigmatically a form of self-affection. He says ‘I take hold *of myself*; I *wrench myself* away from a state of indeterminacy and *transform myself* into something determinate [or intuitible] = X’.¹⁶⁸ But this real activity presupposes the concept of a goal. The interplay of the ideal activity and real activity that Fichte sketches in order to accomplish this is as following: the ideal activity (as the power that is involved in representing, or forming images), posits the practical power, or real activity, as itself. It therefore projects an image for the practical power. But because the practical power is a power of initiating action, not representing, the image must be a prefiguration, or a model.

This, I suggest, is an attempt by Fichte to (in keeping with his method) give a genetic account of this phenomenon in our cognitive apparatus. He says that spontaneous construction of a concept of a goal is involved in the meaning of freedom.¹⁶⁹ So, at this stage, Fichte is involved in a conceptual analysis of

¹⁶⁵ FTP K51/H46, 146

¹⁶⁶ FTP K51/H46, 147

¹⁶⁷ I would argue that this is a misunderstanding present in Tom Rockmore, *Fichte, Marx, and the German Philosophical Tradition*, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1980) ch. 2 *passim*, esp.20-21

¹⁶⁸ FTP K52/H47, 148 emphasis added

¹⁶⁹ FTP K53/H48 149-50

freedom, but, as always, wishes to be more systematic and show the cognitive mechanisms that underlie this conceptual analysis.

What we learn from this section is that the theory of freedom involves a notion of spontaneous construction of a concept of an end, as a type of self-determination, or self-affection. I shall break off from the text at this juncture, as Fichte develops at length a theory of what is involved in perception, feeling, and concepts, which are not immediately relevant to the task at hand. To this end, I will skip ahead to section 13, which contains a discussion of freedom. In this section of the *WLM*, Fichte summarises his results of the preceding sections and points to a circle that has arisen in the exposition of the relation between practical reason and freedom on the one hand, and theoretical reason and positing on the other. This circular reasoning is important for understanding the overall argument of the work, which is to show that consciousness of freedom and the moral law is necessary for consciousness as such.

He begins with this summary: ‘Consciousness of acting is possible only on the condition of freedom...Freedom is possible only on the condition of a concept of a goal; a concept of a goal is possible only on the condition of cognition of an object; cognition of an object is possible only on the condition of acting’.¹⁷⁰ Consciousness of acting depends on a series of conditions which includes cognition of an object – but cognition of an object is possible only on a condition of acting. This is the circle. Fichte recognises it as such, and claims it can only be eliminated by thinking of a relationship of dependence between cognition of acting and cognition of an object, and moreover, ‘in such a way that feeling and acting would be thought of as united in the same state and would both constitute integral parts of a single whole’.¹⁷¹ Given that cognition of acting is a condition of freedom, and cognition of an object is a type of limitation, Fichte expresses the same thought by saying that we need a synthetic connection between freedom and limitation – ‘a kind of freedom that would not be freedom unless it were limited and a kind of limitation that would not be limited unless it were free’.¹⁷²

Fichte tells us that he has shown in the previous section that cognition of an object is made possible by means of our acting and consciousness of acting. We should therefore halt for a moment to consider the argument of section 12. The stated goal of 12 is to give an answer to various questions related to the concepts of energy and force. Because the questions require an understanding of the concept of force, Fichte says that we need to become familiar with how the concept arises in the intellect. The first claim is that the representation or concept of force ‘can be derive only from our consciousness of willing and the causal power that is united with willing’.¹⁷³ Clearly, then, we must proceed to an exposition of willing. Willing is a phenomenon that Fichte does not think can be really defined or shown through concepts, but it must be intuited by oneself – one only ever has (what we might call) knowledge by acquaintance of willing,

¹⁷⁰ *FTP* K138/H128 283

¹⁷¹ *FTP* K138-9/H130 286

¹⁷² *FTP* K139/H130, 286

¹⁷³ *FTP* K123/H113, 258

which is non-reducible to knowledge by description.¹⁷⁴ Willing is a concentrated striving upon a single point, normally preceded by deliberation between alternative options.¹⁷⁵ Because the I contains nothing which it does not posit, there must be consciousness of willing in order for there to be willing – we possess ‘an immediate consciousness’ of it and ‘I will something only insofar as I think of myself as a willing subject’.¹⁷⁶

To clarify the nature of willing, Fichte opts to compare it with what he thinks is a similar state – wishing. Both willing and wishing have a determinate object – one wishes for a certain state of affairs to obtain, and one wills that the state of affairs obtain. The difference is that in willing, the object of willing is demanded unconditionally; in wishing, the wished-for object is demanded conditionally. Fichte explains: ‘Wishing always involves a conditional form of thinking: were certain conditions to disappear, then I might well will the same object’.¹⁷⁷ On the contrary, when I will something, ‘I simply abstract from everything except what I have willed; I renounce everything else’.¹⁷⁸ Fichte also tells us what the object of willing always is: a ‘determinate series of acting and sensing. “I will something”: this means that the present state of my feelings, or the object that is presently in a certain condition, ought to become other than it is’.¹⁷⁹

Fichte claims that willing is conceptually linked with causal power, it is an act of affecting oneself. This is called an ‘intelligible feeling’. Fichte is quick to clarify – it is not a feeling in the ordinary sense (as that would involve limitation), but it is a feeling of ‘breaking down the limitations that arise in the course of deliberation’. It is to be called intelligible because it limits or constrains the activity of the imagination. This constraining of the imagination is the feeling of force. The key thought seems to be this: insofar as willing involves a concentration of the intellect upon a single point, this involves consciousness of that concentration. So, we have the concentration of thought, but also the feeling thereof, which is a feeling of force.

Fichte then moves on to discuss the causal power of the will. He claims that the unity of the manifold of feeling requires the causal power of the will. But the claim is really stronger than this – he also claims ‘*only* if we think of the manifold as unified in this way are we able to think of the will as exercising causality’.¹⁸⁰ The unification of the manifold requires a series of counterfactual dependence of feelings upon other feelings. He says ‘Every possible *B* one grasps must be viewed as conditioned by some *A*. (Conversely, *A* might well exist even if *B* did not...’.¹⁸¹ From this arises temporal succession of feelings. The line of argument here might be the following: The object of a willing is always a determinate series of acting and sensing, or to change the present state of my feelings. This means that there must be a gradual movement

¹⁷⁴ This is one reason why Fichte would say the dogmatist needs to perform an act themselves in order to understand the idealist’s arguments. The knowledge by acquaintance of the will cannot be imparted from one person to another.

¹⁷⁵ *FTP* K124/H114, 259

¹⁷⁶ *FTP* K124/H114, 260

¹⁷⁷ *FTP* K126/H117, 263

¹⁷⁸ *FTP* K126/H117, 263

¹⁷⁹ *FTP* K126/H117, 264

¹⁸⁰ *FTP* K128/H119, 267 emphasis added

¹⁸¹ *FTP* K128/H119, 267

from this state of feeling (call it A) to the willed state (B). But a gradual movement from A to B requires a manifold of feeling. A manifold of feeling requires that there be no two contiguous feelings that are opposed to one another.¹⁸² So a manifold of feeling requires a relationship of dependence of the state of my feeling at one moment, B, to another moment, C, and so on, right back to the starting point, A. This requires that our ideal activity produce something objective and persisting. But this is to posit temporal succession. So the knowledge that we have of all persisting and actually existing objects is on the basis of feeling, but we only have connected feelings insofar as we have a will. After this genesis of the concepts within the I, there arises an objective and sensible world. Fichte says:

‘The concept of force is {the mediating concept,} the bridge between the intelligible world and the sensible world, and it is by means of this concept that the I goes outside of itself and makes the transition to a sensible world. By means of this concept, the I represents itself to itself as an object and connects its own consciousness to an objective world. In this way, I become an object for myself, an object of perception, and a sensible world is connected for me with this object that I become.’¹⁸³

Note that the argument is not supposed to establish that all feelings we ever have are conditioned in this way. That would be to assign too much to the domain of the willable. What Fichte takes himself to have shown is that the way experience and consciousness of a sensible world arises is by the will extending over time and the ideal activity bringing feelings of that duration into a unity – recall that the stated goal of the chapter was to show how the concept of force originates in the mind, not the concept’s application conditions. This is the argument that Fichte alludes to in section 13 as the argument which shows how feeling is dependent upon willing. After this excursus, Fichte returns to the stated problem of 12, which is to show how it is possible to give measurements to exertions of force or energy. This issue is not directly connected with my concerns, and so I leave section 12 and return to 13.

One issue that arises with 12, which deserves consideration, is to what extent this differs from the striving argument given in its canonical form in the 1794/5 WL. That argument was to support the claim that practical reason can only be proven to be real if it is shown that it is the foundation of theoretical reason, and that it is the foundation of theoretical reason, because a world of objects arises for us only on the condition that there is a striving of the I. The argument of 12 is similar insofar as this section claims that a world of objects arises for us only on the condition of our cognition of our willing. The willing must come first, and then is represented by the ideal activity of the I. Fichte acknowledges this disparity in the relationship between real and ideal activity when he says that ‘if there is no real activity, then there can be no self-intuition of the ideal activity. Without the real activity, the ideal activity would have no object, nor would it be anything if the real activity had not placed something before it’.¹⁸⁴ Further on he says: ‘the ideal activity would be a product of the practical power, and the practical power would be the existential

¹⁸² Recall that when Fichte says ‘opposed’ he most often means ‘of a different kind’ or ‘different in nature’.

¹⁸³ *FTP*, K131/H121, 271

¹⁸⁴ *FTP*, K48/H44, 142

foundation of the ideal activity'.¹⁸⁵ However, Fichte has already said that 'one should not think of these as separated from each other' and also that there can be no real activity apart from ideal activity 'for it is of the essence of the I to posit itself'.¹⁸⁶

The issue of whether these arguments are more fundamentally similar is whether Fichte intends to identify practical reason with the will here. Kant indeed did identify the will with practical reason. For example, Kant says in the *Groundwork* that 'Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will'.¹⁸⁷ Again, a few pages later, 'The will is thought as a capacity to determine itself to acting in conformity with the *representation of certain laws*'.¹⁸⁸ And in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says that '...the will, which is directed to nothing beyond the law itself, cannot be called either free or unfree, since it is not directed to actions but immediately to giving laws for the maxims of actions (and is, therefore, practical reason itself)'.¹⁸⁹ Fichte, I would suggest, follows Kant in this identification, though Fichte would more often speak of real activity. This becomes clear in the later part of section 13. Fichte says that the ground of sensible consciousness is the will, for 'it alone is the immediate, real activity of the I', and says that 'Real efficacy is possible only in accordance with a concept of a goal; a concept of a goal is possible only on the condition of a cognition; and such a cognition is possible only on the condition of a real efficacy' this is viciously circular, so there must 'be something that simultaneously is an object of cognition and is efficacious'.¹⁹⁰ The argument of section 12, then, is fundamentally similar to the argument of the earlier WL, insofar as it attempts to give a ground of theoretical reason in practical reason. We must bear in mind, though, that as Fichte warns us, this is not to say that there can be beings with practical reason without theoretical reason – the two terms are coextensive.

In order to find out how our cognition depends on our freedom, Fichte needs to tell us how our freedom works, albeit in a high level of abstraction from action in the world. The essence of freedom, we are told, is the absolute movement from determinable to determinacy. The limitation that is required lies in the fact that the determinability with which the movement begins would be a 'finite quantum', and 'in the fact that freedom could never express itself without reflecting upon this quantum'.¹⁹¹ In other words, in reflection on my options prior to action, I have many avenues to choose from and pursue. Freedom consists in electing for one. This is a movement from determinability to determinacy. But the limitation is already present insofar as the original options are not an infinite quantity or variety. It also seems plausible of him to say that freedom could never express itself unless the determinable options were limited – otherwise, one might never act, and continually reflect in hope that there would arise another option.

¹⁸⁵ *FTP*, K49/H45, 142

¹⁸⁶ *FTP*, K48/H44, 141

¹⁸⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:412, 66, emphasis original

¹⁸⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:427, 78, emphasis original.

¹⁸⁹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, 6:226, 380.

¹⁹⁰ *FTP*, K152/H145, 306-7

¹⁹¹ *FTP* K139/H130, 286

The next stage in the synthesis is to show that the limitation is expressed through an ‘original feeling’ or what is called the ‘system of sensibility’ (which Fichte has discussed in prior sections of the work). If this system of sensibility is the limitation, which expresses itself through a feeling, then, because there can be no such thing as a feeling that is not felt, this would be a feeling that I would have only if I were free. We have gone from a synthesis of limitation and freedom to an identification of limitation and feeling, and then to say that this feeling is one that can only occur if freedom obtains.¹⁹² Fichte then identifies this system of sensibility with the body. Though he does not say so explicitly, he probably intends to use the term ‘body’ to mean what he elsewhere calls the ‘articulated body’. This is the body that I have immediate willing control over. It is non-identical with, though realised in, an organic body.

Then the argument takes a different turn. Fichte summarises by saying that a limitation that is ‘impossible without freedom is a limitation of freedom itself. It is a direction; more precisely, it is the original direction of freedom upon a single point’.¹⁹³ But he points out that this concept is different from the concept of freedom that has been previously used in the work. This other concept is that of a movement from determinability to determinacy. He claims that this concept was used as a condition that makes other things possible, among them, the ideal activity of the I to intuit anything. But this means that we have not isolated freedom as such, or as he says, there is a foreign element. He reminds us of the goal – ‘to present freedom in advance of all intuition and to establish it as the condition for the possibility of all consciousness and of all intuition’.¹⁹⁴ The thought here seems to be that the definition of the freedom of the I is unsatisfactory because it does not capture freedom by itself, but mixes it with other factors. But then the next move is puzzling in the light of this. He says that if we remove all the foreign elements, we will be left with something absolute. But what is absolute can only be thought with reference to the concrete, but ‘though this cannot be anything that would in any way detract from the purity’ of the concept. The something concrete here is the temporal series. Why is it that the one definition is unsatisfactory but this new proposed definition: ‘the power to initiate an absolute beginning’ is not? I would suggest that Fichte finds the former definition unsatisfactory as it does not provide an intrinsic property of freedom, but rather a relational or accidental (though, to be sure, a properly accidental) property of freedom. The new definition, that of the power to initiate a series, is an intrinsic property of freedom. Moreover, the new definition concords with the result of the prior synthesis of freedom and limitation – ‘It is freedom, insofar as an {absolute} beginning is made; it is determinacy, insofar as a beginning can be made only in this particular way’.¹⁹⁵

All of this, Fichte tells us, must be connected with what he has previously said with regard to the manifold of feeling and how it is related to our exercise of causality. Because we have connected the temporal series to freedom, by claiming that freedom is the power to initiate a series of events, there needs to be an examination of the state ‘in which I grasp a manifold by relating it to my single act of willing, and thereby

¹⁹² *FTP*, K139-40/H131, 287

¹⁹³ *FTP*, K140/H131, 287

¹⁹⁴ *FTP*, K140/H131, 288

¹⁹⁵ *FTP*, K141/H132, 289

posit it within a temporal series'.¹⁹⁶ This has two different elements, a sensible element (which has been discussed in section 12) and an intellectual element, which needs to be discussed now. Intellectual intuition is a 'sheer act of intuiting my own determinate state', or 'a simple act of intuiting myself as something determinate'.¹⁹⁷ The claim then is that this intuiting must appear to myself, but appearance is a concept connected with sensible intuition, not intellectual intuition. The intuition of myself then appears sensibly as 'an act of willing'. But given that willing can only be characterised as an ought or a demand, or as he has said in the previous section, it means 'that the present state of my feelings, or the object that is presently in a certain condition, *ought* to become other than it is'.¹⁹⁸ So, the determinacy that is intellectually intuited appears as 'a determinate, absolute ought, as a categorical demand'.¹⁹⁹ It could also be called 'pure will'.

Let us take stock for a moment. Intellectual intuition is an intuition of a determinate state of myself, and it is the way I originally am given to myself. This determinate state is a state of willing. But a state of willing *ipso facto* expresses an ought or demand. Given that I only ever find myself or am only given to myself as willing, that means then that I am only ever given to myself as expressing an ought or a demand. This state of determinacy, this state of willing, can be given the name of 'pure will'. Fichte's next task is to tell us how the pure will is related to the feeling of limitation and freedom. But first, I wish to pause to give what I believe to be a structurally similar account, which is found in the second edition of the *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation*. In this, Fichte introduced a chapter dealing with a theory of the will and its relation to religion and the postulates of practical reason. This chapter contains what seems to be an anticipation of the pure will. Fichte says that there are two senses of freedom. One is the freedom of choice the faculty of choosing between a moral and a non-moral choice, and choosing different versions of these.²⁰⁰ This is distinguished from the second sense of freedom, which is the 'absolutely first expression of freedom through the practical law of reason, where freedom does not mean choice at all, since the law allows us no option but rather commands by necessity'.²⁰¹ He says of this that reason gives itself a law 'independently of anything external'.²⁰² Similarly, the pure will is an aspect of reason which gives itself a law independently of anything external, insofar as it carries its object within itself and is not based on any act of deliberation.

Pure will is the object of an act of thinking – the act of thinking which connects the manifold of feeling to my own willing. This is a necessary act of thinking, in the sense that it is a condition on consciousness that the act of thinking occurs. Fichte claims that since everything necessary is grounded in a feeling, the link between the act of thinking and willing must be a feeling. What available candidates are there for such a feeling? The feeling of 'prohibition, of not being permitted to go beyond this sphere' is the desired relatum. Fichte concludes 'Thus we find that freedom and limitation [or cognition of acting and cognition of an object] are originally united within a categorical demand'.²⁰³ The key is that this act of willing (the pure will)

¹⁹⁶ *FTP*, K141/H133, 290

¹⁹⁷ *FTP*, K142/H134, 291

¹⁹⁸ *FTP*, K126/H118, 264 emphasis added

¹⁹⁹ *FTP*, K142/H133 291

²⁰⁰ *ACR* 31, 21.

²⁰¹ *ACR*, 31, 21

²⁰² *ACR*, 32, 22

²⁰³ *FTP*, K143/H134, 292

‘already contains within itself cognition of an object’. In opposition to normal willing (empirical willing), which presupposes cognition of an object and is based on deliberation, pure willing ‘carries its object within itself’.²⁰⁴ In other words, the claim is that there is a type of willing which does not require the familiar deliberation and wavering between possibilities. Normal willing (empirical willing), does require this. It requires cognition of the object that I will. This was the source of the difficulty – if we assume that this willing is the only type of willing, and then claim that it is on the basis of willing that we find ourselves in a world (as per the argument of section 12), then we are embroiled in a circle. Fichte has chosen to escape the circle by positing a pure will – that is, a will that is determinate ‘without any assistance from us as empirical beings’; a willing that does not require our cognition. Fichte then identifies the pure will with the categorical imperative. This is the crux of Fichte’s argument that consciousness of an ought (which will later turn into consciousness of morality) is a necessary condition of consciousness at all – a paradigmatic instance of PPR. Let us look more closely at what Fichte makes of the pure will in the remaining parts of section 13. Although we have seen that Fichte has indicated the solution to the circularity, he has neither solved the circularity nor shown us how pure will can explain ‘consciousness in general’ as he claims that it can.

He says ‘freedom and limitation are originally united within a categorical demand...and which must necessarily be assumed if consciousness is to be explained. Freedom [is present here], inasmuch as a new beginning has to be made; limitation [is present here as well], inasmuch as we are here obliged not to go beyond a specific sphere [the sphere determined by pure willing]’.²⁰⁵ Earlier in the text, as we have seen, Fichte elects to try to solve the circularity by claiming that a certain quantity (a determinable) is present as possible options, and the choice must be made from among this selection (the determinacy). Here we have a similar thought. The freedom is the ability to begin a temporal series. The limitation is the prohibition to only begin those that are within the sphere of the pure will. Note that as yet the sphere of the pure will is undetermined, but later Fichte does identify it with the categorical imperative.

As an explanatory ground of consciousness, however, the pure will is not something sensible – the ground of experience as such cannot lie within experience. Fichte tells us that it does not appear within consciousness at all. The pure will, he says, is supersensible, ‘yet something sensible is supposed to follow from it’ How then is the pure will mediated with sensible consciousness?’.²⁰⁶ This, he says, is accomplished by the feeling of prohibition that was brought into the account earlier. But, he says, feeling, *qua* an expression of limitation is impossible without a complementary expression of striving, since what is limited in feeling is striving. The object of the feeling of prohibition would be one’s striving, or, as Fichte says, ‘a disposition toward willing, which, because of the limitation, is unable to become an act of willing – i.e. a desire’.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ *FTP*, K143/H134, 292-3

²⁰⁵ *FTP* K143/H134, 292

²⁰⁶ *FTP* K144/H136, 294

²⁰⁷ *FTP*, K144/H136, 294

One might think that it is only a psychological peculiarity of some people that they feel themselves to be limited in the way that Fichte claims. However, this would only be the case for Fichte if a person had no desire. Desire is a basic aspect of human consciousness. It ‘applies to all finite reason...every finite, rational creature is conscious of a desire that strives in opposition to the above mentioned law’.²⁰⁸ We must remember that Fichte does not yet have in mind any particular moral or ethical doctrine that gives us the feeling of prohibition. Rather, the feeling of prohibition is designed to call to mind an indeterminate feeling of wrong-in-some-way. Therefore, Fichte’s claim is not that everyone has a feeling that some particular act is forbidden (which may indeed be left up to historical circumstance) but that there is a particular feeling that some act is forbidden. The determinacy applies to the feeling, not to the object of that feeling.²⁰⁹ Fichte remarks that the union of pure willing and desire, as has just been displayed, produces the feeling of an “ought”. This, he says, arises from ‘the unification of pure willing, insofar as this exercises an influence upon our power of feeling, and thus upon some desire’.²¹⁰ Now this feeling of ought is supposed to be able to completely resolve the contradiction that I began this section by outlining.

The most important claims for the argument after this come when Fichte compares the thinking of the ‘ought’ and the Kantian claim that “ought implies can”. Fichte says ‘Something determinable must necessarily be posited, and, from this, all the objects of consciousness will be derived, as mediated – that is, as produced by means of an immediate consciousness of the “ought”’.²¹¹ He then says that this is to say that ‘I think of my “ought”, and, as surely as I think of this, I think of my transition from determinability to determinacy; thus, in addition to the “ought”, I must also think of what is determinable’.²¹² We are told that this is identical with Kant’s dictum that ought implies can. But what is Fichte’s argument here? The wider argument of the section hinges on this paragraph. Fichte does suggest a 3 stage deduction on the following page, but it is less than fully explicit. He says ‘(1) We must think discursively. (2) We must presuppose something determinable for everything determinate. (3) This determinable something we have to presuppose {and which precedes my act of self-determining} acquires the character of objectivity’.²¹³ Premise 2 in this argument is an essential characteristic of discursive thought, that is to say: discursive thought is characterised by the transition from the determinable to the determinate. However, the transition from premise 2 to premise 3 is opaque. It requires bringing in claims that Fichte certainly had in mind, but are absent from the presentation. We can therefore supplement the argument as follows:

²⁰⁸ *FTP*, K145/H136, 295

²⁰⁹ It seems plausible that this is the theoretical origin of conscience. Fichte seems to hint as much when he says that ‘Consciousness also confirms the presence within us of such a drive, and it does so through the unease that arises within us when we neglect to do enough to comply with and to heed this drive’ (K146/H138, 296). See also the commentary on the short work *Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre*, where Fichte says ‘As we have seen, my *activity* is *limited*. This original limitation is a limitation which occurs through duty; every other limitation is, in turn, only a *sensible* presentation of the former, that is, a presentation of it through the imagination’. Fichte, II,4:360, quoted from Fichte *EPW*, I:331, 244. Here also we see the dovetailing of the doctrine of the pure will and the ontological version of the primacy of the practical. I leave this unexplored here.

²¹⁰ *FTP*, K145/H136-7, 295

²¹¹ *FTP*, K146/H138, 297

²¹² *FTP*, K146/H138, 297

²¹³ *FTP*, K147/H139, 298

2a: The feeling of “ought” is a determinate feeling (established by the intellectual intuition of the pure will and the synthesis of pure will and the limitation of desire).

2b: Any determinate feeling of an ought expresses that the state of my feelings in total should be different than it currently is (this is part of the concept of ‘ought’).

2c: If a determinate feeling expresses that the state of my feelings ought to be different than it currently is, then it expresses that the determinable become determinate.

2d: If it is so, then there must be something determinable.

Given that Fichte has shown in the previous section that consciousness of a temporal succession arises from consciousness of willing, it seems that he needs the results of that argument here. In its most basic and intuitive form, the inference is: I ought to do X to A in order that it become B, therefore A must exist. But this is somewhat misleading, as Fichte is still within the domain of self-affection. This is why Fichte includes the clause about the determinable preceding the act of self-determining in his three stage proof. Even with this argument, however, Fichte has not succeeded in his task. If the argument is sound, he will have shown how, in some cases, different experiences can have as their ground or explanatory base a feeling of an ought. But this is not the stated goal. The goal is to show how sensible experience in general is grounded on something intelligible, or ‘supersensible’.²¹⁴ Thus, Fichte asks ‘How is the movement of transition of my pure willing from its determinability to determinacy related {to consciousness}?’²¹⁵ Fichte firstly tells us that the transition of pure willing from determinable to determinate is the origin of ourselves, how we come into being. It follows then that the transition from determinable to determinate cannot occur by our own means.²¹⁶ But the I as it is discovered is originally determinate – I do not discover myself as a thing in general, but this very thing. Furthermore the I ‘in the context of the fundamental concept of its original determinacy’ is an intelligible thing.²¹⁷ This means that predicates pertaining to outer sense – i.e. those of space, shape, size, and so on – do not pertain to the I, *qua* subjectivity.

What is determinable in the case of the pure will is ‘reason as a whole (my generic essence)’ and what is determinate is ‘I myself...I as an individual’.²¹⁸ If we apply the general principle that whatever is determinate implies something determinable, this means that I only exist insofar as there exists many possible rational beings. The movement of transition in the pure will, then, is one from reason as such, to individual reason.

One might think that this is a diversion, and is not adequately connected to the prior parts of the chapter. Whilst it is true that Fichte has covered a lot of ground in section 13, the reason for him introducing the problem of other minds (and criticising Kant for failing to address this problem) is that in order to show

²¹⁴ Fichte often uses the word ‘supersensible’ in this section, though a better word to capture his intended meaning might be non-sensible, as supersensible is too connotative of religious phenomena.

²¹⁵ *FTP*, K148/H140, 300

²¹⁶ I take it that this sets Fichte up for the doctrine of the “summons” – that I am called by another to be an agent. This is put forward in the later sections of the *WLn*, but most developed in the Foundations of Natural Right.

²¹⁷ *FTP* K149/H140, 301

²¹⁸ *FTP*, K149/H141, 302

us how our knowledge of our freedom and the ought that accompanies that freedom ground the knowledge of the world, he needs to show us how the “ought” and the world are related, which involves showing us that our reason is determinate of a determinable – and if this is right, then it follows that a correct solution to the one issue leads to a correct solution of the other issue. Fichte also thinks that the thought of rational beings outside of myself is a discovery of an intelligible world – but only in the sense that it is discovered, not made, and that it can only be thought of.²¹⁹ Fichte says “The world of experience is erected upon the intelligible world. Both worlds...occur simultaneously; neither can exist without the other... {Precisely because I think of the world of experience, I must also think of the intelligible world, in order to introduce unity into the manifold of our experience – and vice versa.}’.²²⁰ The proof of other rational beings outside of me is a necessary part of the proof that knowledge of the world is based upon knowledge of my freedom and its accompanying “ought” because it serves to give a unity to the manifold that was lacking previously. Presumably the unity in mind is the basic agreement amongst all rational beings that things are thus and so when confronted with certain experiences. In other words, Fichte seems to be asking the question: how is it that I could distinguish reality from fantasy if there were no other beings to confirm or disconfirm my judgements? This is why other rational beings are needed. Later, Fichte says ‘{I and the realm of rational beings surrounding me constitute the first object of our consciousness, and the rest of the objects of our cognition now follow without difficulty}’.²²¹ The use of the pronoun ‘our’ here again supports my hypothesis that Fichte requires the correct solution to the problem of other minds as a critical part of the original problem, as it allows us to make distinctions between reality and illusion. I shall conclude my overview of this section by going through Fichte’s conclusions, before turning to some criticism and analysis.

The goal of 13 was to resolve the vicious circle between acting and feeling. The circularity arises when we follow Fichte’s argument that consciousness of acting is possible only on the condition of freedom, whilst freedom is only possible on the condition of the concept of a goal, which is only possible on the condition of cognition of an object, which is possible only on the condition of an action. Fichte regards this as soluble by virtue of the denial that all willing or all action must rely on a prior cognition of the object that one is willing. In other words, we have seen that Guyer is right. Fichte does endeavour to show that cognition of the world is based fundamentally on cognition of my willing (that this is possible is shown by the argument of 12). Fichte argues that no sensibly constructed concept of a goal could do the work required. In Guyer’s terms, no sensibly constructed concept of a goal could show that I am a self and not merely a part of the world. This is because it could not explain consciousness. The circle is still in place at the level of sensible consciousness. We might be able to explain one or other individual events of willing, but that is a different explanatory task to the task that Fichte is currently engaged in.

In order to escape the circle, then, we have to postulate a ‘pure will’ which we are aware of through intellectual intuition, as a determinate intelligible thing. This is the immediate and first object of

²¹⁹ *FTP*, K151/H143, 304-5

²²⁰ *FTP*, K151/H144, 305

²²¹ *FTP*, K151/H145, 306

consciousness, through which all other objects of consciousness are mediated. This makes more sense of Fichte's prior exposition of perception: 'The object is not felt to be sweet; instead, what I actually feel to be sweet is myself. I feel that an object is present only insofar as I am engaged in intuiting'.²²² Similarly: 'If activity were not cancelled or limited, then we could never perceive or intuit any object'.²²³ I am conscious of the sweet thing insofar as I am conscious of the pure will. Section 13 of the work concludes here, and the next section of the work is devoted to showing how pure willing becomes empirical willing, but whilst a full account of Fichte's theory would need to examine this section, I shall further look at section 13, in order to make Fichte's account there as intelligible as possible.

I contend that section 13 supports my hypothesis, which is that Fichte maintains a strong commitment to the transcendental primacy of practical reason. Above I have related the argument of section 12 to the striving argument, claiming that they argue for similar conclusions. If this is right, then what Fichte attempts to do in section 13 is resolve a contradiction that arises out of the thesis of the primacy of practical reason. We therefore see that Fichte realises that the thesis of PPR is in conflict with the order of explanation in an episode of willing. So, in order to maintain the thesis, Fichte postulates the pure will and the accompanying denial of the statement that all willing requires prior cognition of its object. Thus Fichte rejects what I have above called the knowledge condition on willing.

If we return to Breazeale's equiprimordiality thesis, we see that Breazeale has a difficulty here. Fichte's strategy appears to be: 1) there is a circularity – thinking requires willing, and willing requires thinking. 2) therefore there must be some prior element 3) this prior element is a different form of willing. Notice that 1) here is very similar to an assertion of the equiprimordiality thesis. But Fichte does not stop there – indeed, he regards it as a defect of his account that it has reached this point. He then resolves this by determining the propositions more precisely (as he does in *SK*) and finds that not all willing requires thinking in the sense of 1). This appears to me to be a rejection of the equiprimordiality thesis. It is clear that Fichte thought that there would not be a difference in time between the surfacing of practical and theoretical reason in thinkers, but that does not suffice to commit him to the thesis of equiprimordiality. Rather, Fichte is committed, at least in the Jena period (and possibly beyond) to a transcendental primacy of practical reason. Furthermore, Fichte's commitment to PPR, as we have seen, leads him to articulate his well-known views on intersubjectivity, that I only become an I among others. The argument, as I have reconstructed it here, shows that these issues were, in Fichte's mind, tightly connected, and so a correct account of PPR should help us illuminate other aspects of Fichte's thought.

In this paper, I have shown several things. Firstly, I have shown that there are different senses that may be applied to the phrase 'the primacy of the practical' and 'the primacy of practical reason' in Fichte. These are, roughly, a view about the fundamental nature of reality (sometimes called ethical idealism) and a view about the architecture of self-consciousness. Whilst these views are clearly related in some way, I have

²²² *FTP*, K83/H75-6, 196

²²³ *FTP*, K87/H79, 202

chosen here to focus on the latter in relative isolation. I distinguished between various senses in which 'priority' or 'primacy' can be taken, namely: methodological, transcendental, temporal, legislative, and thinkability. We have seen that the transcendental and methodological senses of the primacy of practical reason are the best interpretative fit, and that Fichte explicitly disavows the legislative and thinkability priority, whilst his project operates at a different level to the temporal priority (the level of conditions on self-consciousness vs the level of empirical psychology). One important part of my view is the distinction between essential and necessary when it comes to reason and its powers. I have given reasons for thinking that Fichte has in mind some sort of distinction such that whilst there is no possible world in which there are actors who are not also knowers, we have grounds for saying that acting is the 'essence' in a way in which knowing is not.

I have argued that though the equiprimordiality thesis is right to assert that there is some sense in which practical reason is not primary, that we should reject that thesis in its strong forms, as argued for by Breazeale and Zöller. Fichte therefore argues for a position on which whilst there is no time at which we are practical but not theoretical beings, there is a relation of primacy of the former over the latter. This primacy is important to Fichte primarily because he sees it as the only way to guarantee in any sense the unity of reason. This is important for many reasons, not least of which the fact that only on the supposition of such a unity, Fichte thinks, will the practical claims of morality have rational import. The unity of reason can be thought of analogously with the unity of the self. If I have a deeply divided self, it is not clear which desires or projects I should give priority, and it is not clear how this priority could ever have rational import. Similarly, if reason is in some way disunified, then it is not clear how the claims of one part of it could ever have rational import for the other. The problem is more intricate for Fichte, however, because he wants to say that in an important respect we are disunified. That is what gives the impetus to the striving, and the moral demand. We might be able to say something like this. Reason is unified insofar as it derives from a single principle or power. But reason is not 'united', it has very different ways of responding to things, and competing claims that need to be adjudicated. We could see the philosophical theory that Fichte gives as being designed to show the inevitable truth in this dual sense of disunity and unity.

I have also provided an exegesis of the major exposition of the argument for PPR in the 1794/5 *WL*, as well as a later version (*WLnm* 12) and Fichte's attempt to finally resolve the circularity that arises because of his theory of how theoretical and practical reason interweave (*WLnm* 13). Both arguments are important for understanding Fichte's position, as well as how it intertwines with various other aspects of the transcendental project. Perhaps most important is the aspect that Guyer brings out. That is the idea that if there were nothing on the basis of which I could distinguish myself from the world, then I could not be an I at all. This thread is present through both the proofs that Fichte gives, culminating in the pure will, which represents a denial of the knowledge condition on willing – the pure will is a type of willing that does not rely on a prior cognition. The pure will is one aspect where Fichte's ethical idealism and his views on PPR are very close. Further work needs to be done on the exact relationship between these two and to what extent it may constitute a departure from early views. I can conclude now by saying that in these arguments

Fichte develops a strong conception of PPR, which is used, *inter alia*, to prepare the way for his theory of free and moral action.

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