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Transcendental Idealism and Naturalism: The Case of Fichte

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the relationship between naturalism and transcendental idealism in Fichte. I conclude that Fichte is a *near-naturalist*, akin to Baker, Lynne Rudder (2017). “Naturalism and the idea of nature,” *Philosophy* 92 (3): 333–349. A near-naturalist is one whose position looks akin to the naturalist in some ways but the near-naturalist can radically differ in metaphilosophical orientation and substantial commitment. This paper is composed of three sections. In the first, I outline briefly what I take transcendental idealism to be, as well as some differences in types of naturalism, and how this maps on to Fichte. In the second, I give an exegesis of Fichte’s key arguments in the Later Jena period, which are important for the question of his relationship to naturalism. In the third, I continue the exegesis with a discussion of Fichte’s conception of God, and conclude that these arguments support a near-naturalist reading of Fichte.

Keywords: Fichte, transcendental idealism, naturalism, metaphilosophy.

1 Outlining the Terrain

The meaning of transcendental idealism is as disputed as the truth of it. Kant tells us that transcendental idealism is both a doctrine about 1) the empirical reality but transcendental ideality of space and time, and 2) the distinction between things in themselves and appearances.¹ Kant is keen to distinguish his own position from

¹ I use the following abbreviations for Kant and Fichte: Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (CJ), Fichte *System of Ethics* (SE), *On the ground of our belief in a Divine Governance of the World* (DG), *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (FTP), *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge* (SK), *Concerning the Spirit and the Letter* (in *Early Philosophical Writings*) (CDSL). When citing Kant or Fichte, I cite the German pages first (where available), followed by the English translation. Furthermore, when citing the FTP, I adopt the convention of citing the K manuscript followed by the H manuscript pages.

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other forms of idealism, mainly on the grounds that transcendental idealism does not, on many standard pictures of the view, reduce the world to our mental contents only.² There has been a wide-ranging debate over the nature of transcendental idealism and whether it has metaphysical commitment or is essentially an epistemic position.³ For the purposes of this paper, I need not take a stance on whether any of these readings are correct about Kant, because Fichte denies (at least, on the standard story) that things in themselves exist – which are necessary for Kant’s version of transcendental idealism.⁴ Instead, Fichte argues that we have no need of such things, because philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre* can help us to see that experience can be explained by reference to the subject – that is, by reference to general conditions on subjectivity only. Fichte is then seen as the ultimate philosophical champion of the freedom and independence of pure selfhood in the face of any and all external factors or influence. In the standard narrative of German Idealism, this account convinced the young Schelling, who, in his early essays was a follower of Fichte, but then Schelling became convinced of the necessity of a philosophical account of nature to complement transcendental idealism.⁵ Soon after this, Schelling turned toward giving his *Naturphilosophie* philosophical priority over transcendental idealism.⁶ This, *inter alia*, led to Schelling and Hegel’s co-operation and eventually the development of Hegelian philosophy.⁷ The rest, as they say, is history.

However, this story, whilst it has much to recommend it, has gaps where Fichte is concerned, leading some to say that Fichte conceives of the world solely as the arena for our moral action. Of course, there is this strongly practical dimension to Fichte, but I will argue that this construes Fichte’s view too narrowly. In my view, Fichte’s position, especially his views on the articulation and organisation of the natural body which the I finds itself possessing, means that he requires a more well-rounded view of nature, even if he himself never found the time to write a treatise on nature. Indeed, as Breazeale notes, Fichte included nature as a subdivision of the philosophical enterprise, though this would have of

² Though there do exist readings of Kant as a phenomenalist, e. g. Van Cleve (1990).

³ Landmark works in this debate include Allison (1983, revised 2004), Guyer (1987), Langton (1999), Allais (2015).

⁴ Rockmore (2010, p. 18), for example, reads Fichte as requiring things-in-themselves in some sense. But I follow Breazeale in thinking that finding any vestige of the thing-in-itself in, e. g. the summons or the *Anstoss* is a misreading of Fichte’s position.

⁵ This is the position of Schelling in the 1797 *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* and the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

⁶ The 1801 *Presentation of My System* and 1902 *Further Presentation of My System* (both reprinted in Vater and Wood (2012)). This story of Schelling’s development is expertly recounted in Beiser (2002), Part IV *passim*.

⁷ Hegel and Schelling co-edited the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, and a few key texts from that journal are reproduced in di Giovanni and Harris (eds.) (1985).

course been different to the way that Schelling conceived of nature in his *Naturphilosophie*. Whilst there have been previous attempts at bringing Fichte and naturalism closer, my account, which focuses on the Later Jena period (roughly 1796–1799), also tries to show how Fichte’s account of nature dovetails with his account of God.⁸ I focus on the Later Jena period for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I take Fichte’s position here to be coherent, if underdeveloped or left implicit. Secondly, Girndt (1992), for example, has developed an account which deals with Fichte’s later philosophy (particularly the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*) and the account of nature there.

I shall now turn to outlining the various kinds of naturalism as they appear in the current literature. Various theses can be comprehended under the label *naturalism*, and so the relationship between naturalism and transcendental idealism is a multi-faceted one. There is a methodological position according to which the explanation of the natural world should contain only natural events, or causes, or constituents. This is a rather weak claim, one that most modern philosophers and indeed medieval philosophers would want to sign up to.⁹ This is a position to which I suggest Kant and Fichte are aligned. At the very least, we can say that for Kant and Fichte, in any explanation of an event there should be a strong *prima facie* warrant for assuming that the event is explicable in natural terms, i. e. in terms that make no commitment to the supernatural. In this sense, even Fichte’s explanation of how consciousness comes to be is “natural” as it makes no commitment to the supernatural – no commitment to God or anything like God.

A second kind of naturalism is what some call *scientism* – the view that natural science provides a model for how all investigations should be done, or the view that any question, if it is a good one, can be investigated along the lines of natural science.¹⁰ This is a view which both Kant and Fichte reject. Both accept that philosophy has a distinctive and ineliminable role to play in our picture of the world and the constituents of that world. Linked to this second kind of

8 Previous authors (in addition to Breazeale 2014 already mentioned) that have tried to bring Fichte and naturalism closer together than commonly imagined include Girndt (1992), Lütterfelds (1992). Lütterfelds, however, thinks that Fichte’s early account cannot have a transcendental doctrine of nature (e. g. 1992, p. 111). In my view, this overlooks the resource that Fichte has in the philosophy of religion.

9 This is not in conflict, as far as I can see, with accepting a view of God’s general concurrence – i. e. that everything happens because of God’s will or with his permission. In fact, one might think that an acceptance of God’s general concurrence would mean one would be more willing to explain things in purely natural processes because the supernatural element is trivial because universal.

10 Moore (2012), chs. 12 & 13 outlines this naturalistic position as held by Quine and Lewis, respectively.

naturalism is a third, which is more substantive. This third naturalism is a theory of the kinds of things there are, not merely the kinds of enquiry there are or should be. On this question, the naturalist claims that all that exists can be described as natural, as opposed to non-natural or supernatural. On this question, Kant and Fichte diverge. In my view, because of Kant's view of the metaphysics of transcendental idealism, most prominently the distinction between things in themselves and appearances, he has to accept that there are at least non-natural (and possibly supernatural) things. Fichte, on the other hand, famously denies that there are things in themselves.

What I want to suggest here is that Kant remains anti-naturalistic, whereas Fichte may be construed along the lines of something more akin to naturalism – a third way between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Hard naturalism just cannot do justice to the things the transcendental philosopher considers,¹¹ but anti-naturalism struggles with the positing of entities which look like it might undermine the good progress of the transcendental philosophy. From contemporary philosophy, we have at least three positions: liberal naturalism, expansive naturalism, and near-naturalism. I suggest Fichte can be best construed as a near-naturalist.¹² Liberal naturalism is a position according to which other kinds of scientific enquiry, notably the social or historical sciences, can count as genuine or self-standing parts of enquiry. Liberal naturalism is therefore an anti-reductionist position. Expansive naturalism is similar in its anti-reductionism, but expansive naturalism, at least in its most prominent form (Ellis 2014) makes explicit room for the supernatural. Near-naturalism differs insofar as it rejects the metaphilosophical assumption behind liberal naturalism that science is an ultimate determiner of what exists and remains sceptical about traditional notions of the supernatural. The near-naturalist therefore accepts scientific conclusions within the scientific domains, but not beyond those. Near naturalism may be partly motivated by a criticism of liberal naturalism such as Gardner (2007). Gardner writes: “Irreducibility arguments, if successful, yield *data* that do not interpret or explain themselves, but call for interpretation: the soft [i. e. liberal] naturalist needs to say something on the subject of *why there should be, in general*, phenomena that have substantial reality, but do not owe it to the hard natural facts” (2007, p. 30). This need then creates the space for sometimes radically different metaphilosophical commitments than the liberal naturalist

¹¹ Hence the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness.

¹² Liberal naturalism is associated with philosophers such as De Caro and Macarthur, for example their (2004). Whilst expansive naturalism could mean something very similar to liberal naturalism, I reserve “expansive” naturalism for a view like Ellis (2014) which remains more open to supernaturalism than De Caro and Macarthur's brand of liberal naturalism. See also Giladi (2014) for a liberal naturalist-friendly reading of Hegel.

might have. I think Fichte can be seen as a near-naturalist – he does not sign up to what Baker has helpfully called a *closure principle* on reality which liberal naturalism does – that science is still the final arbiter of things (a suitably expanded notion of science, which includes the human and social sciences, and their typical forms of explanation).¹³ The only final arbiter on reality is the *Wissenschaftslehre*. This shifting of closure principle is distinctive of Fichte’s anti-naturalist metaphilosophy, but this metaphilosophical commitment does not have any import on whether the realm of nature has an important role to play in the spelling out of his views about God and morality. In other words, it is that Fichte has an anti-naturalistic metaphilosophy but is not anti-scientific. He is not, as Kant is, impressed deeply by the results of empirical science, but he is content to give natural science a place within the WL and then abstain from any deeper input.¹⁴ It is sometimes claimed that the fundamental problem of the philosophy of mind is the placement problem: How does mind fit into the world? Fichte reverses this problem. We can instead see him as asking: How is it that the world fits around the I? In other words, Fichte does not take nature as basic and then ask how it is that minds could arise out of nature. He takes the mind as basic and then asks what kind of world there would have to be. In doing so, Fichte gestures at an account which can give an answer to how it is that we are natural beings as well as rational beings, and so can himself give the answer of how the mind fits into the world. This will begin from abstract transcendental principles, but will then take shape as an account of how rational beings come to be.

2 The Later Jena Argument

I will now outline Fichte’s arguments regarding why the I has to be a physical and natural thing as well as a self-conscious activity.¹⁵ The first thing that is necessary is that the I have a physical aspect, or physical power. In order for self-consciousness to exist, there must be things which resist activity and which can be overcome by activity (because only activity can resist activity). This means that

13 Both Ellis (2014) as an expansive naturalist and Baker (2017) as a near-naturalist explicitly reject such a principle.

14 I abstain, partly for reasons of space, and partly because it concerns the later Fichte, from the very interesting phase of Fichte’s thought regarding animal magnetism, which he thought could give empirical evidence for idealism. Scribner attempts to explain and account for this in his (2010). See also Franzel (2009).

15 It is worth keeping in mind that Fichte is clear that the I is not even an active thing, but an activity itself. For example, in the 1794/5 WL, he says: “The I’s own positing of itself is thus its own pure activity. The *I posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists*”. (I:95, p. 97)

there is a general transcendental condition on the nature of the world – the world must be such that action is possible.¹⁶ This is seen most prominently in Fichte’s striving argument from the 1794/5 WL.¹⁷ The striving argument has a similar aim to one found in the Later Jena corpus, in section 12 of the WLn_m, where Fichte claims that 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”.¹⁸ But our willing involves a felt limitation. In the System of Ethics, Fichte also argues in the following way:

- 1) A free being acts as an intellect – that is, its actions proceed from concepts of ends (or concept of an effect).
- 2) Anything in the concept of an end is intelligible to an intellect.
- 3) Therefore the concepts of ends must in general be such that the ends (or effects) are thinkable, or “What is to be brought about must therefore be so constituted that it can at least be thought of by an intellect”.¹⁹

This needs further amending because Fichte makes it clear that it is not merely the capacity to be grasped by an intellect which is important here, but the capacity to be grasped as contingent. The event or object in question (which is the content of the concept of the end) must be thought of as being possibly existing or possibly not existing.²⁰ One thing that is not an end that we can have, and thus cannot fall under the domain of the moral law, is moving something such that it is not in space. This is not even thinkable. Fichte, as a good Kantian here, says “I cannot, for example, will to posit something outside of space, for I cannot think of anything outside of all space”.²¹ From the preceding we can infer that “if something is a product of freedom, then it is contingent”. The conjecture is then this – is it possible that the reverse is

16 Breazeale (2014) notes that previous accounts of Fichte on nature in the mid-twentieth century tended to stop here – thinking that Fichte only thought of the natural world as the venue of our moral action. In that paper, Breazeale shows why such views are incomplete.

17 This argument is found in the beginning of the practical portion of that presentation of the WL. In Heath and Lachs (1982) translation it is pp. 219–231. Fichte also makes use of the concept of force in section 12 of the WLn_m, e. g. K131/H121, p. 271.

18 *FTP*, K48/H44, p. 142.

19 *SE IV*:66, p. 68.

20 *SE IV*:66–7, p. 68.

21 *SE IV*:67, p. 69.

true; that “if something is contingent, then it is a product of freedom”. There are two senses in which this can be taken. One is the theoretical sense, and the other is the practical sense. In the theoretical sense, it means that “if something is contingent, then it is a result of the productive imagination or the activity of the intellect”. This is true, but not what is meant here – *everything* is a result of the activity or synthesis of the productive imagination,²² and so taking it in this sense would be too weak. The practical sense is to think that what it would mean is that everything is already a result of our real physical activity. But this is just plain false. What we need is some principle that navigates the middle ground here.

This principle is provided by this, reached by an exercise of reflective judgement: “that our freedom itself is a theoretical principle for the determination of our world”.²³ There are again two ways to read this principle, a stronger and a weaker. The weaker is suggested by what Fichte says immediately afterwards. He says “Our world is absolutely nothing other than the Not-I; it is posited only in order to explain the limitedness of the I, and hence it receives all its determinations only through opposition to the I, among other predicates, however, or rather, more than any other predicate, that of ‘freedom’ is supposed to pertain to the I”.²⁴ This suggests the weaker version of the principle: that (given the principle of reflective opposition, or *omnis determinatio est negatio*) if the I is free then the Not-I is not free. This means that the world is “determined” insofar as we have excluded one disjunct of a contradictory pair of predicates from application to it. But this is a very minimal sense of determination.

Whilst it is certainly true that Fichte wants this conclusion, he also, I think, wants the stronger conclusion. This is the conclusion that if freedom determines the world, then we can be sure in advance that the world is in some sense friendly to our moral purposes. In other words, if the moral law demands that things be thus and so, then we can be sure this at least possible.²⁵ Fichte’s language here could have been taken from the *Critique of Judgement* (which he knew well, insofar as he began a commentary upon it).²⁶ In the introduction, Kant talks about bridging the

22 This is of course a transcendental faculty, named for its analogue (the reproductive imagination). Fichte clearly distinguishes the two, like Kant, but does not follow Kant in the detail of how they work.

23 SE IV:68, p. 70.

24 SE IV:68, p. 70.

25 Fichte says “what is commanded by the moral law must fall completely within the sphere of our physical power, and with this we have warded off from the start any objection that it might be impossible to satisfy the moral law”. (SE IV:74–5, p. 76).

26 GA II/1. Of course, Kant claims that there needs to be a way from the supersensible to the sensible, rather than the other way around, so Fichte here doesn’t seem to be substantially disagreeing with Kant, because the sensible is first in the order of discovery but not the order of explanation (at least for the self-conscious agent).

gulf between nature and freedom.²⁷ Fichte also probably refers to the introduction of CJ when he says that Kant “maintains that there is no bridge leading from the sensible to the supersensible world” and that the WL “has no trouble in constructing such a bridge – the intelligible world is the condition for the possibility of the world of appearances; the latter is constructed on the basis of the former”.²⁸

In showing that freedom is at once a theoretical as well as a practical principle for the determination of the world, he has pointed the way to a solution to Kant’s problem which does not involve the commitments of Kantian transcendental idealism (chiefly things in themselves) nor reliance on rational hope given a justification by regulative ideas of beauty and purposiveness, because, as Breazeale notes, if Fichte is right, we can “reject in advance any suggestion that it might ultimately prove to be *impossible* to carry out the (proximate and concrete) demands of the moral law, since this *possibility* is, as it were, hard-wired into the original constitution of nature”.²⁹

That freedom is a theoretical principle for the determination of the world is only a schematic and highly abstract principle, however. What we need is some more determinate way of fleshing out the account in a more perspicuous manner. In order to see this more fully, we should turn to other texts from the same period – the infamous *On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World Order* as well as the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. I shall begin with the latter.

In the final section of the WLnm, Fichte tries to complete his synthesis of the aspects of consciousness, which is designed to answer the question of why we have representations at all. One of these interconnected parts is the consciousness of myself as a body. We have already seen some of the build-up to this from the System of Ethics. Here, we confront this very intriguing claim:

I and my body are absolutely one, simply looked at in different ways. I as “pure I”, in its supreme purity, and I as “body” are entirely the same. The distinction that appears to us is based entirely upon the difference between these ways of looking at [the same thing]. (FTP, K234/H256, p. 458)

Whilst it is probably not correct to attribute to Fichte here a very strong thesis of identity – insofar as the I and the body could differ in modal properties,³⁰ for

²⁷ Kant CJ 5:175–6.

²⁸ FTP (K124/H115, p. 260).

²⁹ Breazeale (2014, p. 36).

³⁰ However it would also be incorrect to attribute to Fichte some kind of “neutral monism” according to which the body and the I would be both modifications of some third thing, neither mental nor physical. This would, in Fichte’s eyes, be a kind of dogmatism, because it would be a version of insisting that the I must be a kind of active thing, rather than activity itself.

example – he clearly thinks that there is a very close relationship between the I considered as subject and the I considered as object, that is, as body. Fichte also explicitly denies that the pure I can be generated by nature, whereas he claims that the body is created by a purely natural law.³¹ However, we can say that Fichte thinks that nature can establish necessary conditions on there being an I, but not necessary and sufficient conditions. As we shall see below, Fichte discusses these necessary conditions at length under the guises of articulation and organisation. Articulation is a property of bodies. We already know (from the *SE* and *FTP*) that in order to be self-conscious a thinker must perceive an act of willing and that this act of willing must be directed outside itself, and that I must be able to see that my activity is efficacious in a world. There are of course conditions on how this must be so. The condition on this activity directed outside itself is that it must come from an articulated body. An articulated body is one that has part–whole relations, such that the parts are movable or modifiable relatively independently of the wholes. Fichte says:

I move my entire body: taken by itself, my body is a whole; in relation to nature [as a whole], however, my body is only a part. I move my arm: this too, taken by itself, is a whole; at the same time, however, my arm is also a part of a larger whole, namely, my body, etc. (*FTP*, K235/H257, p. 459)

A more concrete example will help. It is characteristic of part–whole relations that parts can have properties that the whole does not. I can tap my finger or raise my arm without moving other parts of my body. These basic actions do not require any other apparatus (aside from the necessary biological features such as nerves and so forth, which I do not have voluntary control over). What is characteristic of articulation in bodies is that “it is up to freedom to decide what shall be treated as a part and what shall be treated as a whole”.³² What Fichte means by this is that if I decide to move my arm, I treat my arm as the locus of the action – it is the whole that I willingly move. It has parts, which I willingly move by virtue of willingly moving the whole, but do not willingly move the parts *per se*. I could, of course, willingly move them independently of raising my arm. One worry we may have here is that Fichte’s account seems to make it so that basic actions are individuated by the part–whole relationship. That is to say, if I raise my arm, and thereby treat my arm as the locus of this basic action, and raise a finger on that hand simultaneously with the arm, then I appear to have done one thing, but Fichte seems to

³¹ E. g. in *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation*: when he says that the pure I is not a product of the not-I, a view he names transcendental materialism. (VI:295, p. 147). The “purely natural law” remark is K236/H258, p. 461.

³² *FTP* K235/H257, p. 459.

need to say that I have done two things simultaneously. This worry can be somewhat dissipated by the fact that these putatively different acts are indeed independent of one another – I could raise my arm and raise my finger without doing the other (apart from the sense in which I must raise my finger along with my arm, but willingly raising my finger would be to basically act, and the rising of my finger in virtue of the rising of my arm is not a basic action).

The fact that the I is an articulated body is important in two related respects. The first is that it means that the body has to be a part of nature. The second, and more important, is that a necessary condition on free rational agents (i. e. the body) is created by nature. These are both to be expected. Recall that Fichte’s guiding principle here is that “freedom is a theoretical principle for the determination of the world”, or, as I have put the point, the world (nature) must be such as to allow for the emergence of free beings. As Fichte puts it elsewhere, “...this body is a product of nature. i. e., nature produces itself, in conformity with mechanical laws...since this body is something merely discovered, i. e., is [part of] nature, the articulation [of the same] cannot be anything but the product of a purely natural law”.³³

Linked to the concept of articulation is the concept of organisation. Whilst articulation is a feature of a body that it has in virtue of part–whole relationships, organisation (which a body must have if it is to have articulation) is a label that refers to the fact that the body as a whole is a “real whole”.³⁴ Organisation is said to “follow from” articulation, and by this I take Fichte to mean that one can infer from the presence of articulation to organisation, but not the reverse, i. e., organisation is a necessary condition for articulation and articulation is a sufficient condition of organisation.³⁵ The body, and everything else in nature, is a real whole because the boundaries of the things are “also nature and [are] posited by nature”.³⁶ Nature itself is therefore “[not only] an organising power, it is [also] organized”.³⁷ Fichte also says:

{Nature as a whole} must necessarily be an organized whole, because individual organized wholes are possible within nature, and these are made possible only by means of the entire force of nature. Individual organized wholes are simply products of the organisation of the whole universe. (FTP, K238/H259, p. 463)

In other words, we can say that for Fichte, in these very general reflections on what nature would have to be like given freedom, nature contains within itself the possibility of its immanent mechanical laws producing something with freedom.

³³ FTP K236/H258, p. 461.

³⁴ FTP K236/H258, p. 461.

³⁵ FTP K236/H258, pp. 461f.

³⁶ FTP K236/H258, p. 461.

³⁷ FTP K237/H259, p. 463.

Fichte will not want to go any further in establishing what nature must be like (the issue of consternation between Fichte and the early Schelling).³⁸ Indeed, Fichte even says at the very end of section 19 (after reviewing the results) that:

One must grasp reason as a whole, and then one will find that no conflict is present and that nature is quite absolutely posited by itself as absolute being, opposed to nothing but the absolutely posited *I*. This is the perspective that has to be adopted by natural science. (FTP K240/H261, p. 466)

The philosopher can only progress so far with investigations into nature. The *Wissenschaftslehre*, being the science of science as such, gives a place to all other sciences and their first principles. It does not replace these sciences. Natural science in general then receives its first principle from the *WL* – that nature is absolute being and should be investigated as such – but no determinate result is prefigured by the *WL* itself, apart from the general stipulation that the world must be such as to allow freedom. But even this is not a burden on the scientist. To see why, we should consider that Fichte is very clear that in his mind natural laws are necessary or immutable statements. One job of the scientist is to discover these natural laws. The fact that they have some necessity about them is not something that is going to worry Fichte. As a speculative suggestion, it could be that what Fichte has in mind is something like the following: the statement “Natural laws are necessary” is one that is distributive – it applies to each natural law individually. The statement “Natural laws make room for freedom” applies to collectively. One suggestion that could be used to further determine this is that individually the laws feature in some efficient-causal explanation, but collectively they are teleologically directed. This can be true even if no one particular law is itself teleologically directed. Our suggestion above then can be reworded thus: Nature contains within itself the possibility of its immanent mechanical laws, which are jointly teleologically directed, producing something with freedom.³⁹ There are two questions here. The first concerns what kind of status (regulative or constitutive) the principle might have. The second and related question concerns whether the possibility just indicated requires some kind of guarantee or fact to enable it to obtain, or whether it could be a mere brute fact about the world that it contains the possibility (or actuality) of rational agents.

On the former question, Fichte does indeed think that at least some principles governing organic nature are constitutive, in contrast to Kant. Breazeale explains this well: “Fichte’s deduction of the systematic or organic structure of nature proceeds *from* his deduction of the human body as an articulated tool of the will.

³⁸ These issues are revealed in the texts collected by Vater and Wood (2012).

³⁹ This is in some ways similar to Guyer’s (2005, p. 336) suggestion for Kant’s views on the antinomy of teleological judgement.

We are able to understand our own body only as a self-organising product of nature, which is possible if and only if – by means of our reflecting power of judgement – we conceive nature as a whole not only as capable of *producing* such organized and self-organising ‘real organic wholes’, but as actually *consisting of the same*.⁴⁰ It is key to note that nature itself is a self-organising organic whole.⁴¹ Thinking of nature as constitutive in this way does not commit Fichte to Schellingian views. *Naturphilosophie* as developed by Schelling has two assumptions built-in, to which Fichte is opposed.⁴² The first is a form of transcendental realism regarding nature – that it exists independently of all consciousness. The second could be called, following Beiser, transcendental naturalism, the view that everything is explicable in accordance with the laws of nature, including the rationality of the transcendental subject. Such a view is clearly anti-Fichtean. My account of Fichte preserves this split.

Fichte says, for example, “nature as object is only *thought* by you: it only exists to the extent that you *think* it”.⁴³ This is in keeping with Fichte’s standard line – that there is only an object for a subject.⁴⁴ Fichte rejects transcendental naturalism completely, as he thinks that the only phenomena explicable by natural laws are natural phenomena, whereas when it comes to consciousness the only explanations happen at the level of reasons and mental content. In a letter of December 27, 1800, Fichte says to Schelling that their issues could be resolved once Fichte completes what he calls the “system of the intelligible world”⁴⁵ – and says:

I can only find your assertion to be correct – that the *individual* is simply a higher potency of nature...by finding an intelligible element in it of which the individual as such is the lower potency (the *merely determinable* element) of something that is the higher potency (the determinate). (Fichte to Schelling, 27th December 1800, in Vater and Wood, 2012, p. 49)

As Fichte makes reference in this connection to the third book of the *Vocation of Man* (i. e. “Faith”), it seems that what he has in mind here is the moral-religious side of reason. I read Fichte here as saying that it of course cannot be true that nature is to be explained by finite rational beings, because then the explanation of finite rational beings by nature would result in a vicious circle. Instead, nature has

⁴⁰ Breazeale (2014, p. 21).

⁴¹ I therefore agree with Breazeale and disagree with Beiser (e. g. 2002, p. 495), who seems to regard Fichte as ultimately orthodox Kantian on this issue – thinking that it can only be said to be regulative.

⁴² Beiser (2002, pp. 485f.)

⁴³ ‘Commentaries on Schelling’s Transcendental Idealism and Presentation of My System of Philosophy’ in Vater and Wood (2012, p. 119).

⁴⁴ This is said in many places, including in the notes on Schelling, Vater and Wood (2012, p. 123).

⁴⁵ Fichte to Schelling, 27th December 1800, p. 49. Also the draft reproduced on the previous page.

an “intelligible element” which is “the higher potency” or “the determinate” of which finite rational beings are the “lower potency” or “the *merely* determinable”. The system of the intelligible world would include a system of nature, in the sense that nature as the place of our moral action needs to be fitted into a system of reason becoming self-sufficient and independent, which is a major theme of Fichte’s moral philosophy and of the *Vocation of Man*.⁴⁶ To answer the question regarding regulative or constitutive, then, whilst Fichte does think that some natural teleology can be said to be constitutive of nature (because nature must be the kind of system that produces real wholes and articulated bodies), the speculative suggestion I have raised regarding the teleological direction of the unity of natural laws must in the end be taken to be a part of faith, that is, part of the necessary way we must in the end rationally view the world. The natural world can be seen as a part of the intelligible order, which at once preserves the rejection of transcendental realism and naturalism regarding nature, whilst showing that Fichte has deeper thought regarding nature than commonly suggested.

Recall that we were led here by investigating Fichte’s idea that freedom could be a theoretical principle for the determination of the world. If this is so, and it is true that articulation and organisation are 1) products of freedom, and 2) necessary conditions on self-consciousness, and 3) in some sense identical with (or at least very close to) the I, then, I think, we are landed with the problem of saying how it is that this can come about. The worry I am trying to articulate here is the following. If 1, 2, and 3 are all true, then it could be some kind of cosmic accident that rational agents exist at all. This is worrying not just because of possible tensions with Fichte’s philosophical ambitions, but because of the concern that this might itself make morality a kind of cosmic accident or contingency. Therefore there is a question of what underwrites or guarantees the possibility or probability of the existence of organized beings (thence rational agents) in the first place. We find this already in Kant, as Kant thinks that we need the practical postulates of God and immortality in order to make harmonious our rational commitment to morality. This is why Kant also says that morality “inevitably leads to religion”, because whilst it is true that no individual moral action requires reference to some further end beyond the binding nature of lawfulness, there remains the question of what the moral project is for, or what its end is.⁴⁷ This same thought is in Fichte (though Fichte has a different conception of God to Kant). This is one of the questions which Fichte’s system of the intelligible world might have been trying to resolve. It cannot be a cosmic accident because reason could never be otherwise

⁴⁶ For example, in the *Vocation of Man*, see, (1987, p. 67, p. 71, p. 75, p. 77, p. 78, p. 99).

⁴⁷ Kant (1996, 6:6, p. 59)

than striving or aiming for self-sufficiency, and the faith that rational beings have in that striving is presented in the philosophy of religion.

3 The Role of God

Our main text now is the Later Jena essay “On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World-Order” (DG). This essay can be viewed as a Kantian moral argument for the existence of God. However, it also precipitated an upheaval in Fichte’s professional life – the *Atheismusstreit*. I shall run through what I take to be the main thrust of the argument, before turning to the importance of the text for the question of freedom and the guarantee that nature is purposive in some way. For our purposes, the arguments of the text are 1) the argument from moral constraint to faith in God, 2) The argument that God as Provident Order provides a foundation for the sensible or natural world.

The first argument is roughly as follows.⁴⁸

- 1) I find myself morally constrained.
- 2) I could not distance myself from this moral constraint without alienating myself from myself.
- 3) Therefore I have to posit the end of this moral constraint (call this the Highest Good) as binding on me.
- 4) Positing the end as binding on me means that I have to try to bring it about.
- 5) Trying to bring it about relies on faith that it will be brought about.
- 6) This faith is in the moral world-order itself (the Provident Order).
- 7) This Provident Order is itself God.
- 8) Therefore, in order to posit that the moral end is binding on me and to try to achieve such an end, I am committed to belief in God.

There are a number of controversial steps in this reconstruction, but the most important is the identification of the Provident Order with God. Fichte has a couple of things to say that will alleviate some of this peculiarity. The first is a general principle on the nature of concepts. For Fichte there is a principle to the effect that the possession conditions on concepts constrain the conditions of acceptable use. This is important for the Atheism controversy, because Fichte denies that concepts such as *person*, *substance* can apply to God, at least in the same way that we use them in the ordinary (or even philosophical) sphere. Notoriously, he says that “the

48 This is a reconstruction of just the argument in *DG*. This is an argument according to the order of discovery (that I find myself constrained and this reveals deep facts about what kind of being I am). In *SE*, Fichte seems to argue in a different way, from those deep facts (regarding the moral ends of a rational being) to the fact of felt constraint.

concept of God as a particular substance is impossible and contradictory”.⁴⁹ What motivates Fichte to say this, I think, is the thought that because the genesis of our concepts lies within certain boundaries, it cannot be the case that a concept can legitimately be applied beyond these boundaries. For example, in the *WLn*m, Fichte says that because God alone is “holy”, by which he understands that God alone does not have the desire which, if fulfilled, would contravene the law (a necessary part of the genetic story). He then says that therefore “no consciousness can be ascribed to God, or at least this is incomprehensible to us”.⁵⁰

Secondly, the Provident Order is always an ordering order.⁵¹ That is, it is not fixed in advance, and finite agents can make a difference by acting morally and fulfilling their vocations. We are therefore morally constrained by practical reason – we find ourselves under moral laws – which we recognize as binding on us. Those moral laws require us to posit that a moral end state is possible, which we are committed to. But we can only be committed to it if we can also have reasonable faith that it will come about. That requires the Provident Order, as an object of faith. The Provident Order precedes us (in the sense that we did not create it) but we participate in it (by furthering it and becoming part of it).

I now need to turn to the second of the aforementioned arguments: the notion of the Provident Order and the sensible world.

Fichte says:

My entire existence, the existence of all moral beings, and the sensible world, as the common theatre of our actions, thereby obtain a relation to morality. There thus opens before us an entirely new order, of which the sensible world, with all of its immanent laws, is merely the passive foundation. (*DG* 353/184, p. 146)

This might strike us as somewhat odd. Fichte speaks here of the sensible world being the “passive foundation” of the moral. He also says that the sensible world proceeds along its own path “in order to constitute a sphere for freedom”.⁵² But this seems to put morality and freedom as secondary – emerging from nature. I suggest that these are to be read as only one side of the story. Fichte tells us this much

⁴⁹ *DG* 188, p. 152. This may strike one as odd (especially in light of Spinoza) but it is a common claim amongst Church Fathers and scholastic philosophers that God is not a particular being but is being itself. For example, St. Augustine *Confessions* III. 6.42 & IV. 16.29, St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Pt. 1, Q. 3. Art. 5.

⁵⁰ FTP, K145/H137, p. 295. See also *SK* I:253, p. 224.

⁵¹ Fichte tells us that whenever he uses a noun that ends in *-ung* (like *Ordnung*) he intends this to be taken as signifying action and movement. – and therefore he says “by the term ‘order’ I understand nothing but an *active ordering*” (1994, V:382, p. 161).

⁵² *DG* 353/184, p. 146.

himself when, in the next paragraph, says very different sounding things from the transcendental point of view. That seems to imply that the passage above is to be taken from the ordinary view. From the ordinary viewpoint (or in the order of discovery), it does indeed seem that nature is primary and morality secondary. But from the transcendental viewpoint, the viewpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, we can see that the situation is reversed, hence:

The world is nothing more than our own inner acting, made visible to the senses in accordance with comprehensible laws of reason and limited by incomprehensible boundaries. (*DG* 353/184, p. 149)

And

It 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 all appearance. (*DG* 353/195, p. 150)

The transcendental view (that morality and freedom are somehow constitutive of our world) is not about the order of discovery, but it must come first in the order of explanation, as Fichte suggests with the wording of the passages above.⁵³ However, transcendental philosophy is at liberty to diverge from common sense on individual claims and to trump those common-sense claims with claims of its own, so long as these latter claims do not depart from the spirit of common-sense (whatever that might be).⁵⁴

We need to look at this passage as giving us a multiple relation, rather than two separate relations of foundation or grounding. It clearly is the case that nature can “ground” freedom by being the sphere in which free action and morality can be realized. But there is another sense of grounding at play. This can be found if we focussing on the “passive” rather than the “foundation”. The “goal of reason” Fichte tells us, can only be actualized by the efficacious acting of rational beings – it aims at reason’s self-sufficiency and independence. I think we should interpret Fichte here as saying that nature is not independent of the mind because it is part of the moral order of things. Indeed, Fichte has a long discussion in the *System of Ethics* regarding cognition of the final end of sensible (and *a fortiori* natural) things.⁵⁵ This involves knowing the final end of objects, or what they are

⁵³ This is one way of phrasing Fichte’s fundamental division from Schelling.

⁵⁴ *DG* 348/178, p. 143. See also *CDSL* p. 199 and pp. 214f. for more on the difference between the spirit and the letter in Fichte. This is also a distinction present in Kant, especially the *Groundwork* and other texts which rely heavily on common rational moral cognition.

⁵⁵ *SE* IV:171, pp. 162f. See also Breazeale (2014, p. 33f.).

intelligibly for us. The faith that Fichte supposes us to have means that we need to view the world as part of the moral order. It therefore looks as though the sensible world can be the passive foundation of the moral in virtue of being the only possible candidate for the sphere of moral action, but the moral world provides the basis of the sensible by being the very reason why the sensible exists in the first place. We should read this claim carefully, however. Kinlaw, for example, reads Fichte as thinking that the moral is “more real” than the natural or sensible.⁵⁶ I would prefer to say that it is more basic, rather than more real, because saying that it is “more real” has connotations of illusoriness regarding the sensible world.⁵⁷

If this is right, then we can see why God can be said to guarantee the teleological proposal above. Recall that my final gloss on Fichte’s view about the relation between freedom and nature was this: “Nature contains within itself the possibility of its immanent mechanical laws, which are jointly teleologically directed, producing something with freedom.” Now we can include God and God’s providence in this formula, which could read: “Nature contains within itself the inevitability of its immanent mechanical laws, which are jointly teleologically directed, being part of the Provident Order which is itself God, producing beings with freedom”. I use the word “inevitable” here, because I think Fichte wants to get at the thought that it is in some sense necessary that free beings (those that contribute to the moral world order by living in it and through it) exist, even though there was a time at which free beings did not exist (before the emergence of humankind).⁵⁸

We have therefore begun to see how Fichte’s interplay of the realm of nature and the realm of freedom come together in a way which highlights both his metaphilosophical anti-naturalism and his near naturalism. Philosophy should of course proceed in accordance with its own principles, not as continuous with science. In some way that would be to put the cart before the horse. This is not to say that science should proceed as if it is continuous with philosophy – natural science as such finds its first principle in the *Wissenschaftslehre* but the rest is up to the scientist. But the natural world is importantly the locus of our moral activity, and it is the locus of God’s activity. In claiming the only closure principle on reality for the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte denies natural science’s pretension to have

⁵⁶ Kinlaw (2002, p. 154 footnote 4). See Hoeltzel (2014, p. 294) who argues for a conception of Fichtean faith as “beliefs that are amply and irrevocably justified by reason but on nonepistemic grounds”.

⁵⁷ That the practical or moral, or goodness, is more basic is a key claim of axiarchism, the view that things exist because it is good that they do, or because they ought to, which to my mind is not unlike Fichte’s view. See Leslie (1979, p. 6).

⁵⁸ Thus Girndt (Girndt 1992, p. 76) says that any evolutionary theory in Kant or Fichte must be seen to be part of a more comprehensive conception of development.

everything as its territory. In doing so, he restores it to a proper place as considering that the results of natural science are not to be overridden by philosophy, but no-one is in a position to determine the philosophical importance of science without prior argumentation. This is what Baker expresses when she says that she is naturalistic “in an old fashioned way. Although it [her view] is consistent with the known laws of nature, it is not guided by or derived from science. To say that I accept science is to say that I take any established claim of the sciences to be true. This is not to say that I am beholden to any particular philosophical interpretation of such claims.”⁵⁹ We can therefore see that Fichte’s account requires that nature not be independent of the mind, at the most general level, because nature is incorporated into the moral order of the world, which is itself inevitably subject-involving.⁶⁰

As a final note, we should see that this answer to the Kantian problem of the unity of nature and freedom leaves open the task of bringing nature in accordance with freedom, which is part of the rational and substantive end of agency.⁶¹ This is the task which was expressed in the *Grundlage* as bringing the not-I in agreement with the I, or responding to the demand that they be absolutely alike, which is why all consciousness has striving as a pre-theoretical condition. The account I have given of the moral world order guaranteeing that natural beings will arise which will become rational beings does nothing to answer the issue of how freedom and nature are to be reconciled in this practical sense, which is the task of applied ethics and the practical projects of law and politics.

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⁵⁹ Baker (2017, p. 348).

⁶⁰ Here I think some illumination is given by Kinlaw’s (1992) claim that Fichte’s account is kenotic – it is God’s self-othering that does the work, but this is speculative.

⁶¹ Michelle Kosch (2015) has defended a view according to which self-sufficiency is to be spelled out wholly (or at least mainly) in terms of the domination of nature. But this, to my mind, is incomplete – there are also other kinds of theoretical ends as well as spiritual ends which make up what it is to be self-sufficient, even if the domination of nature is a key part of freeing the rational agent. The same mistake, I think, is made in an essay critical of Fichte by Dryden (2013). Ware (2018) has recently argued that Kosch’s picture is incomplete, and Langlois (2017) presents a picture of Fichte to which I am sympathetic.

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