

FREEDOM, SOCIETY, COOPERATION: FICHTE

Remark 1. Pagination of the *Foundations of Natural Right* follows the German edition (first number on the margins) and our English translation (second number on the margins after the stroke). German page numbers are given in our text in square brackets in bold (e.g., [2]). Pagination of *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation* follows the German edition (Arabic numerals on the margins—e.g., VI,302).

Remark 2. I will refer to the rational subject (rational self, I) with the expression '*Ich*'.

THE RATIONAL BEING. A rational being is defined as something that is both the subject and the object of action. This in effect is a gloss on the Kantian notion of self-legislation. What exists for a rational being, what he has access to, what he can discourse about, is what is given to him (or: what exists in him). But this content is simply the result of his action upon himself. So that the final formula is that the self is 'nothing other than an acting upon itself'.

It follows that all being is a modification of consciousness. Without 'some consciousness' there is no being. A realist about material objects thinks of a self, and of his own self, as a substratum, as a physical object among many. In this he contradicts himself—presumably because he *must* begin with positing himself as a rational being, rather than inert matter.

The acting of self is necessary when it is a condition of the possibility of self-consciousness. It is necessary in the same way as the rational being (and its positing) is. (This is a Kantian formula of the transcendental condition of experience.)

However, *Ich* is not conscious of its own acting. It is only conscious of what emerges in it, that is, of its results. Now the products of the necessary acting are themselves necessary. Their necessity is here explained as 'feeling constrained' in the presentation of these objects. Then we say that these objects have reality. A object is real when there is the *feeling* to present it just as it is. This feeling presumably is not a mere psychological matter. It is, again, a condition for the existence of *Ich*.

Diversity of objects is a result of differences in *Ich*'s acting. So it is possible to reflect on the object and 'abstract' from the way it was produced. When one so abstracts, one has generated a concept. However, Fichte insists, this does not mean that concepts and objects are ontologically different. It is not as though there are concepts waiting to capture objects, or objects waiting to be captured by concepts. The being is one and the same: it can sometimes be seen *as* a concept, and sometimes *as* an object.

Remark 3. Fichte protests here against Kantian things in themselves, if those are understood to 'affect' our sensibility, and so to belong to a separate realm of being. One should also compare this view to Frege's view that concepts and objects should always be kept separate, and note the paradoxes it engenders.

THE EXISTENCE OF OTHER FREE AGENTS. From the foregoing highly theoretical remarks follow some very practical conclusions. *Ich* posits itself necessarily. But it also necessarily posits other beings. This clearly is a central claim of Fichte's doctrine of right, but also of ethics generally. How is it shown? The derivation in the *Foundations* is tortuous and abstract, hence omitted. We instead turn to the *Lectures* where it is much clearer (also more exciting, but perhaps more obviously unsatisfying).

As we have said earlier, *Ich* is not conscious of its own acting, not conscious of its own self, hence not conscious of its freedom. So there is no question that we are not conscious of other free beings. So the existence of other free beings is not given to us in experience. We are at most conscious of the effects that resemble the actions of rational beings. We could then use an 'inference to the best explanation' in order to justify the existence of these beings. Whatever hypothesis explains better the available data will be accepted as true. Interestingly, Fichte refuses to take this route. There has to be an independent justification: our explanations, for them to be genuine, should rest on that justification.

But he immediately admits that no such justification can be offered from a theoretical point of view. We must seek it in a practical perspective. Having adopted this perspective, we will see that *Ich* wills a harmony between concepts and objects (i.e. knowledge). This is his 'highest drive' (*der höchste Trieb*). But not only does he will this harmony in its own consciousness, but also outside of it. We might think of it as a drive toward maximised harmony. For this to happen, there must other

rational beings. *Ich* does not create these other beings, but it hopes to encounter them in the course of his experience. How to recognise them, though? One answer would be, by purposefulness. If phenomena—e.g., biological or social—could be explained only by assuming purposes, then we could say that their creator is a rational being. But Fichte demurs. Purposeful activity can still be explained away by causation. Something else must be cited in addition to purposefulness.

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What is left? Fichte's solution, as I understand it, is that the phenomenon must exhibit a rational, hence free, activity. This activity would be distinguished by the absence of alien causes.

I think this is not a very convincing solution. But let us stress, again, its practical component. The absence of alien causes combined with apparent purposefulness is only a sign, not a proof, of free agency.

RIGHT AND PROPERTY. Having established the existence of free beings, we now define 'society' as a community of such beings. We now have to understand on what principles such a society would operate. The answer is, on the basis of original right. The principle of such right is reciprocal freedom: one free being has to limit his freedom to the extent that another such being can also exist and be able to exercise his free activity.

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Fichte proceeds to derive further characteristics of such a society. For example, one should be allowed bodily freedom (proposition (I)). Then one should be allowed means to exercise his freedom. This means, Fichte argues, to be able to effect a change in the world. Since it works according to eternal laws, nature does not change. The only change possible is due to the activity of a free being. Now this being can rightfully demand that the 'region of the world' where he is active remain unchanged. For any change would disrupt his activity and 'disorient' him. This, Fichte argues, is the abstract justification of property rights. 'Original property' (roughly, property in the state of nature) is interpreted as part of the sensible world used by the subject in the pursuit of his ends. Property in the society will be identified in a similar way.

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It is interesting to note how Fichte eventually formulates the notion of original right. The subject *demand*s there be an undisturbed interaction between his body and a region of the sensible world, circumscribed only by his own activities—the goals and means he sets for himself. This sounds, again, like a gloss on Kant's FH, except that the idea of 'demand' is not always stressed by Kant. More often Kant talks as if the subject just have the right to pursue their goals, and then there is an unclear connection between the fact of them being rational, free etc., and having that right. Here Fichte *begins* with the fact of demand.

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Remark 4. One should also compare here Hobbes' formulation of 'right of nature', similarly passive without the emphasis on demand. On the relation between demand and Kantian respect, see works by Stephen Darwall.

THE FREE SOCIETY. If there are other free agents beside *Ich*, and if the existence of such agents is explained by the practical 'drive' of *Ich*, then every free agent (every *Ich*) should strive, or have a drive, to live in a community of such agents. Only then he can fully realise himself, since by interacting with other free beings he can satisfy his 'drive' for maximal harmony mentioned earlier. Such a society should be based on a free interaction.

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Several claims Fichte derives from this are especially interesting. (a) The man must perfect the skill of *sociability* (*Gesellschaftlichkeit*). Fichte does not say explicitly what it involves, but we can easily guess. The man must learn how to adapt himself to other people, how to maintain his own activities without infringing on the activities of others. (b) From this we infer that interactions between free agents take the form of *cooperation*. People's individual goals should adjusted, 'coordinated', rather than subordinated or eliminated. This, again, may be read as a gloss on FH, but an illuminating one, I think. (c) Rather strikingly, Fichte maintains that the goal of the *state* is to abolish itself. The logic is clear. The state may be thought as an institution designed precisely to ensure cooperation among its members. But since most men, indeed all, have not perfected themselves, have not actualised themselves, as free beings, the state must resort to coercion. Presumably the state should also encourage its citizens to perfect themselves, since this is the best means for ensuring cooperation. However, once this goal is achieved, the state's rationale would disappear.

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