

RETURNING TO ITSELF, IN ITSELF

ON THE META-HERMENEUTIC DIMENSION OF FICHTE'S

PRINCIPLE OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

Despite its general omission, the “Aenesidemus-Review” stands among a pair of fundamental texts for the initial conception of Fichte’s philosophy. The present article intends to show just how fundamental the “Aenesidemus-Review” is in this scope; namely, we intend to prove the key role the “Aenesidemus-Review” has in establishing a theoretical dialogue, as well as a positional confrontation, between Fichte, Schulze, and Reinhold; how the main problem from thence arisen is a problem of a hermeneutic nature, inasmuch as it deals with the language and the communicability between concept and idea, as well as idea and human spirit (or lack thereof); and hence, how the “Aenesidemus-Review”, and its main problem, subsequently stimulate Fichte for further reflection on the topic: how, from this small writing,

Fichte sets out to acquire a new first, uninterpretable, and hence universally communicable principle for all philosophy: the principle of identity.

Keywords: Fichte, hermeneutics, philosophy, identity, absolute.

Vračanje k sebi, v sebi. O meta-hermenevtični dimenziji Fichtejevega načela identitete

Povzetek

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Kljub splošnemu prezrtju, je »recenzija Aenesidemusa« vsekakor eno izmed temeljnih besedil za zgodnje zasnovanje Fichtejeve filozofije. Pričujoči članek skuša pokazati, kako resnično temeljnega pomena je v tem oziru »recenzija Aenesidemusa«; želimo namreč dokazati njeno ključno vlogo pri vzpostavitvi tako teoretskega dialoga kot soočenja stališč med Fichtejem, Schulzejem in Reinholdom; da je na tej podlagi razprti poglobitni problem hermenevtične narave, kolikor obravnava govorico in medsebojno sporočljivost med pojmom in idejo ter med idejo in človeškim duhom (ali njegovim umanjkanjem); in da sta, torej, »recenzija Aenesidemusa« in njen osrednji problem Fichteja kasneje spodbudila k nadaljnji refleksiji o tematiki: da se je na osnovi tega majhnega spisa Fichte podal na pot doseganja novega prvega, nerazložljivega in potemtakem univerzalno sporočljivega načela za vso filozofijo: načela identitete.

Ključne besede: Fichte, hermenevtika, filozofija, identiteta, absolutno.

I. Brief introduction

Looking at the different versions of Fichte's *Doctrine of Science*, most of them bear that very name and focus on the issue therein expressed. Prior to the latter, however, there are others still, the most ancestral of all the attempts at a Doctrine of Science, which do not yet bear that name, and therefore tend to go unnoticed, though they may be regarded as the living essence of Fichte's philosophy.¹ Among these, two moments truly explain the *defining moment in Fichte's conception of an absolute identity*; the text "Eigne Meditationen", a long group of reflections composed between October 1793 and February 1794,² and the "Aenesidemus-Review,"³ also composed during the winter of 1793, in response to G. E. Schulze's work *Aenesidemus* (1792).⁴ For the sake of economy, we shall deal with only one of these moments: the one that, rather unfairly, is held as the less decisive of the two, namely, the theoretical dialogue between Fichte, Reinhold, and Schulze in the "Aenesidemus-Review". Through this brief analysis, we hope to understand Fichte's *need for a doctrine of science*; which, in turn, may help us discern the contours of a question whose solution would be Fichte's last design, and would occupy all German (idealist) philosophy as a whole: that is, the question of the possibility of philosophical apodicticity, or the

1 Apart from the two writings mentioned, I refer, among other possible examples, to "Über die Würde des Menschen", in 1794, or to the first version of what was to be the writing "Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre", in 1794, namely Fichte's Lectures in Zürich (still in 1793), attended by J. B. Erhard or J. I. Baggesen, and transcribed by J. K. Lavater.

2 "Eigne Meditationen über Elementar-Philosophie", in: Fichte GA, II.3, 21–177.

3 "Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Hrn. Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie. Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaßungen der Vernunftkritik", in: Fichte W I, 1–25.

4 Cf. Schulze Aen.

possibility of an absolute principle of philosophy, a philosophy of principles.⁵

II. The “Aenesidemus-Review” and the hermeneutic problem of Reinhold’s principle of consciousness

The “Aenesidemus-Review” is something of a three-voiced argumentation, now consonant, now dissonant, on the validity of Reinhold’s principle of consciousness⁶—and, therefore, on the possibility of a supreme principle of philosophy.

The fundamental idea that presides over Reinhold’s thought, and that would bring about this controversy, is in a way akin to the one that would preside over Fichte’s and Schelling’s theories. According to the Austrian philosopher, *philosophy lacked a fundamental ground, an absolute principle that would unite its theoretical and practical parts*,⁷ which were then divided due to the *over-interpretation* to which philosophy had been subjected by the various sects forming around Kant’s critical edifice. To Reinhold, then, *the problem was of a hermeneutic essence*; and hence, peace among sects would have to involve the acquisition of such an absolute principle, free from all erroneous interpretations, which would protect the critical edifice from any possible attacks and gather the different sects around *a single critical language*; otherwise, Reinhold concludes, one would forever neglect the regulative

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5 Because the theme of the onset and constitution of Fichte’s philosophy is vast, I prefer to underscore the much more unknown, and yet no less important contributions towards acknowledging the role of the “Aenesidemus-Review” in the aforementioned process. Amongst these, much less in number, I would stress: Breazeale 1981; Baum 1979; Wood 1991; Druet 1973; Lauth 1971; Fincham 2000; Franks 2016. For a more comprehensive study of the theme, however, I would recommend the inevitable works by Henrich 2004 I and Frank 1998.

6 Although Reinhold’s theoretical views on his principle of consciousness extend from his *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (1786) to *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* (1791), it is in the first volume of the *Beiträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Missverständnisse der Philosophen*, in 1790, that the aforementioned principle is established as Reinhold’s own absolute principle.

7 See Reinhold 2003, 3: “[...] den Mangel eines ersten und allgemeingeltenden Prinzips aller Philosophie überhaupt.”

enterprise of reason, and subject it to the heteronimity of the latter.

As for Fichte, the problem was of a similar nature. For, on the one hand, Fichte too was “intimately convinced that no human understanding could go beyond the limit where Kant had stood, especially in his Critique of the Faculty of Judgment” (Fichte W I, 30);⁸ but, on the other hand, it was Fichte’s belief that Kant had never determined that limit, nor had he indicated it as the final frontier of all finite knowledge;⁹ and hence, both to Reinhold and Fichte, *philosophy was not yet science, the language of philosophy was not yet scientific, and, in a word, the task was to construe a system of reason which embraced all philosophy, as well as consummated the philosophical faculty of judgment*, thus completing the critical procedure with which Kant had imbued philosophy in general.

But if Fichte was profoundly influenced by *Reinhold* as to the incontrovertible necessity of an absolute principle of philosophy, and the elevation of philosophy to science, however, he was even more overwhelmingly so by *G. E. Schulze*. For, according to Schulze, never could language aspire to be as certain as an apodictic philosophy, just as philosophy could never be so apodictic as to call itself science; and hence, Reinhold’s principle of consciousness was not an absolute and apodictically certain principle, as was not its language, and therefore Reinhold’s was *not the answer to Kant’s problem*.

Now, Fichte certainly agreed with Schulze’s opinion regarding Reinhold’s principle; for, indeed, Reinhold’s principle of consciousness was not the absolute principle of philosophy.¹⁰ But, conversely, Fichte *did not believe in the impossibility of an absolute principle, nor that this principle was unattainable*

8 All citations will be presented in a traditional manner (abbreviation of work, volume of work, number of page(s)). The abbreviation of each work cited finds correspondence in the final bibliographical section. All citations have been translated from their original German language into English. The citations are of my own translation.

9 Which is why Fichte concludes the previous sentence by saying: “[...] which he never determined for us, nor indicated as the last limit of finite knowledge” (Fichte W I, 30).

10 See Fichte’s letter to Vloemer, dated November 1793: “[...] it came to be that, through the lecture of a resolute skeptic, I was immediately led to the clear conviction that philosophy is still very far from the state of a science, and was forced to renounce to my own previous system and to think of a more sustainable one” (Fichte GA III.2, 14). See also Fichte’s letter to Flatt, dated November or December 1793 (Fichte GA III.2, 18).

through language. Quite on the contrary, such a hermeneutic problem was solvable—just not through Reinhold’s principle of consciousness; and, as such, the need for such a principle persisted, and to attain it was now philosophy’s most sacred task; and language, the voice of such a principle, was that which forged it as an hermeneutic problem, and that which would ultimately provide its solution. And so, although the sense and final aim of Reinhold’s philosophy are notably similar to the ones of Fichte, and contrary to those of Schulze, it cannot come as a surprise that, while the “Aenesidemus-Review” is first and foremost a defense of Reinhold against Schulze’s heteronomy, at the same time, it is also a verification of the validity of Reinhold’s principles, and, whenever necessary, an attempt to surpass them, without ever adhering to Schulze. The aim in Fichte’s philosophy, one could say, is then to attain the consummation of the faculty of philosophical judgment, and thus build a “Vernunft-System” (Fichte W I, 45) that would embrace all philosophy, thereby furthering Kant’s critical enterprise, resuming and supplanting Reinhold’s principle of consciousness and consciously subduing to Schulze’s opinion—at least, only to the point when Reinhold’s opinion was proved to be wrong, and Fichte’s own opinion correct.

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Now, as is natural, the “Aenesidemus-Review” emerges as an important moment in the context of such an ample debate. Fichte ascribes it a triple formulation, so as to answer the three main objections Schulze raises against Reinhold in his *Aenesidemus*. Schulze’s objections were as follows. 1) “Reinhold’s principle of consciousness is not an absolutely prime proposition, for as a proposition and a judgment, it is below the supreme rule of all judgment, the principle of contradiction.” (Fichte W I, 5; Schulze Aen, 46) 2) “The proposition of consciousness is (a proposition) not permanently determined by itself.” (Fichte W I, 6; Schulze Aen, 48). And, 3): “The proposition of consciousness is neither a universally valid proposition, nor does it express a fact that is not associated to a determined experience or a certain reasoning.” (Fichte W I, 6;

Schulze Aen, 53).¹¹

As to the *third objection*, I shall deliberately leave it unmentioned.

As to the *first objection*, I shall very briefly say that Fichte draws from it *two distinct conclusions*: first, that Reinhold's principle of consciousness is indeed supreme within a theoretical sphere, not because it is *logically* superior to the principle of contradiction (which it is not, as had been pointed out by Schulze), but because it is *in reality* superior to it; but second, that although the principle of consciousness is in reality supreme in a theoretical plane, however, it was not completely so; for by proclaiming itself as such, the principle of consciousness had to neglect the principle of contradiction, which meant that the principle of consciousness cocooned itself in the theoretical domain, and so unilaterally did it do this, that it made its transition—or union—with the practical domain of philosophy impossible. Hence, Reinhold failed in uniting theoretical and practical through an absolute principle, and thus only reinforced the objections to the possibility of a first principle of all philosophy.

According to Fichte, then, though it is forged in the theoretical, and though it is theoretically supreme, the new principle will always have to address *the practical*; and hence, a new principle will always have to relinquish the exclusively theoretical primacy, and yet, *at the same time, it cannot but depart from one such plane towards the practical*. In other words, something had to be thought that transcended the mere laws of reflection, something that went *beyond pure speculation; something beyond Reinhold's principle of consciousness*.

I now approach the *second* objection. It deals with the decisive aggravation of the problem, namely, the fact that the principle of consciousness cannot be the supreme principle of all philosophy, for it is neither *absolutely autonomous* nor *necessary*: “The proposition of consciousness is (a proposition) not permanently determined by itself.” (Fichte W I, 6)

11 In Fichte's (and Schulze's) original words: 1) “Dieser Satz sey kein absolut *erster* Satz; denn er stehe als Satz und Urtheil unter der höchsten Regel alles Urtheilens, dem Satze des Widerspruchs.” 2) “Der Satz des Bewusstseyns sey kein *durchgängig durch sich selbst bestimmter* Satz.” 3) “[Endlich sey] der Satz des Bewusstseyns weder ein allgemein geltender Satz, noch drückte er ein Factum aus, das an keine bestimmte Erfahrung und an kein gewissen Raisonement gebunden sey.” (Fichte W I, 5 and 6)

Schulze had had good reason to raise this objection; and, in our opinion, so did Fichte. The reason for such an objection is as follow. Reinhold's principle of consciousness deems itself supreme. But, as any principle, its efficacy lies not just upon itself, but more specifically upon *the reflection dedicated to the meaning of the concepts that compose it* (in this case, Reinhold's concepts of differentiation and reference)—which requires the presence of the principle of contradiction, to regulate a perfect consonance between concepts and reflection. Now, since to Reinhold his principle of consciousness is greater than the principle of contradiction, then it must also deny the latter's validity, and if it does, and if the discriminating power inherent to the principle of contradiction is lost, then one is bound to lose sight of a correct order between species ["Arten"] and genus ["Gattung"], and subsequently lose track of what should be a materially apodictic, non-contradictory principle. For now, instead of a correct, there could be an *incorrect* determination of the concepts (species) that compose the principle (genus). And so, for Schulze (theoretically and practically), as for Fichte (practically), the principle of consciousness surely could not be superior to the one of contradiction, and precisely for that reason, it could not be apodictic. *But that is not all.* For what these two censors of Reinhold hereby suggest is much more important, and yet much graver than this, namely: that if the principle of consciousness is practically inferior to the one of contradiction, then it is not just Reinhold's principle, but also *his concepts of differentiating and referring that are not apodictic*, inasmuch as, since they are not regulated by the principle of contradiction, they do not have the same *meaning* to all men, rather they might contain either insufficient or excessive characteristics¹²—quite ironically, the same hermeneutic error that Reinhold had attempted to eradicate with his theory. And so, in a word, whatever the position of this principle of consciousness, it is impossible for it to conform to, to communicate, to render itself intelligible and interpretable to its parts. That is, in Reinhold's theory there prevails *a critical hermeneutic problem*, for the content of the critical concept is not consentaneous with the

12 In Fichte's own words: "[...] then these differentiating and referring must be at least complete, and hence be so determined, that they do not allow for more than one interpretation." (Fichte W I, 6)

form of that concept, which meant that the reflection generated by the meaning of the concepts that compose the concept of consciousness cannot be apodictic either—which, in turn, ultimately meant that Reinhold’s philosophical language did not avoid confining with experience, thus corrupting its real interpretation, and preventing its progression from theoretical to practical (as is stated in Fichte’s third objection to Reinhold).

That is why—to resume Fichte’s aim—, philosophy lacked a principle that truly united its two parts, namely, his own *principle of identity*;¹³ and to Fichte, if there was a way to solve this problem, it was precisely by thinking beyond the principle of consciousness, towards a legitimate and infallible union between theoretical and practical. In a word, it was necessary to ponder on the aforementioned concepts that composed the I, as well as their possible relations: namely, the resistance between the two opposite halves of the I, *feeling* (the ideal, the objective) and *reflection* (the real, the subjective); to question their differentiation and/or reference, and the possibility of bringing them together, thus solving Reinhold’s hermeneutic problem; and finally, to acquiesce the subsequent possibility of an absolute principle of philosophy.

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The following chapter is therefore devoted to analyzing Fichte’s proposal of his own absolute principle, focusing on his resolution of the question of the opposites (“Gefühl” and “Reflection”), and the subsequent legitimation of his endeavor. This I shall do in the form of three general reflections on Fichte’s principle of identity; as it were, three proofs of the absolute infallibility of Fichte’s principle of identity, as well as three parts of Fichte’s resolution of the main problem in our article.

13 “How now, if precisely the indeterminacy and indeterminability of these concepts indicated the need to investigate for a superior principle, for a real validity of the proposition of identity and opposition; and if the concepts of differentiating and referring are to be determined only through that of identity and opposite?” (Fichte W I, 6)

III. Fichte's meta-hermeneutic alternative (A triple reflection on the absoluteness of the principle of identity)

III. 1. *The problem of the union between feeling and reflection*

The problem as raised in Fichte's "Aenesidemus-Review" was not dealt therein; rather, it was gradually solved later, throughout other versions of Fichte's Doctrine of Science. According to it, all depended on the perfect correspondence between meaning and concept; which, according to Fichte, translated into the need for an absolute principle, that is, a supreme example for this infallible correspondence. Hence, Fichte repeatedly approaches the problem of *a union between opposites*, the union between feeling and reflection; for only through this union may the original action (the "Urhandlung") of the I occur; only then may the I arise, be conscious and perceive itself, understand itself, reflect upon itself; and, of course, only through it may the absolute principle, if not exist, at least become discernible to the human spirit—and thus solve the problem enunciated in the "Aenesidemus-Review".

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Now this, of course, is not just *any* union; for the union as such, a union in general, occurs as many times as feeling and reflection come into contact throughout one's life; but because those are contact points between opposites, and therefore, feeling and reflection cannot be united—and because, nonetheless, feeling and reflection are recurrently intertwined in human life—, this constitutes a problem more conveniently analyzable not in those fortuitous contacts, but *in the first, the most original of those contacts: precisely in the original action*, which opens for the circle of man's existence. There, for the first time, feeling and reflection have the need to come into contact, which happens because feeling must become reflection and reflection must come from feeling—and both generate the I.

Now, the problem exists because the two of them—feeling, *the original activity* ("ursprüngliche Tätigkeit"), the I before being I, and reflection, the I that is already I—have incompatible properties, impossible to unite without their acknowledging themselves contrary to that which merges with them; and even if a brief, almost imperceptible contact between opposites were possible; even if we succeeded in conciliating part of them, what to do of their remaining

properties, which would nonetheless still oppose one another? Hence, in light of this problem, Fichte finds himself before a forked path: either the I *accepts* this mix between opposites, or he *denies* it, and must subsequently search for another platform, another perspective of the problem. Now, facing the need to think two irreducible opposites, Fichte, knowing that the first path would force him to abandon the autonomous character of the I, opts for the second path, and does so the only way he can, namely, by finding a *third plane* between A and –A. Fichte commonly designates it as C:¹⁴ *the point where the original action occurs, and the fate of the I is sealed*. Hence, what is C? The answer is self-evident: if the opposites are irreducible, and they must not suffer *real* union between themselves; and since, in a word, only one of them can exist in reality (otherwise, the I would not have identity, and consciousness would be so thwarted that its infallibly reciprocating movement would not reflect the apodicticity of an absolute principle of all philosophy), then Fichte must see C not as a field of affirmation, but as *a field of gradual, at last maximum negation between opposites*. That is, to Fichte, the original action is a maximum point between opposites, but only the maximum point of their *mutual limitation*, and therefore really *a minimum point between opposites*, and the course towards it as one of a gradual decrease in intensity between the latter. And ultimately, what does this mean? It means *an approximation, and a quite singular one, between the opposites of feeling and reflection*, ideal and real. For since the original activity is purely ideal; since C and with it reflection have the need to be real, thus forever letting go from the ideal original activity; and since, in other words, the I has the need to exist, for the “Trieb zum Ich” determines that he must come to be I, and that he can only be so once he reflects, then surely *ideal and real must come to be one in C*. That is, the properties of the one must surely *wane* to allow for the properties of the other; but this in such a way that, instead of a transition, feeling, surely real in the original action (but minimally real), yields to the real, surely minimal, but already growing properties of the reflection, and what might seem a mere transition is rather

14 See “Eigne Meditationen” (1793), and above all the *Grundriss des eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre* (1795), where Fichte addresses C as “the determinate point of limitation” (Fichte W I, 352).

an encompassment, an incorporation of feeling by reflection. And it is from this unique embrace that the original action, the first reflection is born, and with it the I, which shall henceforth exist as such, and follow its natural course; that is, the I shall grow, cumulatively potentiate itself, always reassuming the shape of the original I that is born from this concession, and yet progressing with it towards the comprehension of the absolute I, in a course not only attainable, but also necessary to the fulfillment of man's destination.

III. 2. The problem of the orientation(s) of the circle of existence

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Here lies the core of our understanding of Fichte's original action, which is already discernible from the words in the section III. 1. The fact from which we set off is this: the original action consists of an encompassment of feeling by reflection, or, in other words, a minimal contact between opposite parts, and the subsequent concession of an opposite ["Gefühl"] in favor of the other ["Reflection"], according to which feeling assumes the form of reflection. This results in a circle of existence endowed with a single direction, eternally rotating upon itself, eternally set in its necessary uniformity.

Now, the image of a circle, and no less a circle departing from an original action of the I, raises an important doubt. The doubt is this: if, in a circle with *a single* direction, the original action is a contact between minimum points, can one expect—if at all—a contact between maximum points? That is: if in such a circle reflection, as was said, encompasses feeling, and if its course must be directly opposite to the one of the original activity, then towards what point does reflection tend? For if the original action is a contact between the minimum points of the opposites, then it would be expectable that, in the antipodes of the circle, a maximum point would occur; namely, a point in which reflection, and philosophy, once taken to its extreme consummation, would once again dissolve into the original activity.

This question, we think, is of a rhetoric nature for Fichte; for its mere consideration would conflict with some of Fichte's most primary assumptions. And it is so for three erroneous reasons.

First, *regarding feeling*, the notion that *there was ever a maximum in the original activity*; for, according to our current understanding of the problem,

although the original activity proceeds through a decrease in intensity, that only happens because it itself seems to have to derive from a maximum of reflection, and not because there is a maximum of original activity.

Secondly, *regarding reflection*, the notion that reflection, since it departs from a minimum, immediately promotes its transformation (which is true), and that such a transformation appears under the guise of an intensification, a maximum that is *superior or even unattainable to it* (which to Fichte is false, for *it is attainable*, and we shall see why).

And third, *regarding the original action*, the notion that because the original action is an encounter between the minimums, it can only be legitimated by a different, maximum arrival point, as if this were dictated by *a different direction* of the same circle.

Let us then consider such coordinates, and further analyze their respective issues.

According to Fichte, the original action is an encounter between the minimum intensities of feeling and reflection; a gradual decrease in the intensity of feeling, its minimum, originates another minimum—the first reflection—, which is the same as saying that *in the original I the union between feeling and reflection occurs through a cessation of the feeling of inactivity of the I, which is replaced by the original action of the I, in reflection*—and never the opposite. Hence, feeling comes from no maximum, rather strives to decrease in intensity, thus being a waning vehicle of reflection; the first reflection does not tend towards a maximum, but rather prefers to be confined to the model of its first manifestation; and finally, the original action too is encapsulated in itself, due to the necessary neglect of another maximum contact point: which means that, according to Fichte, *the circle of the self-understanding of the I must have but one, and only one orientation; the one of its infinite, eternal return to itself*. That is, inasmuch as Fichte accepts but *a single* direction of the circle—and we acknowledge this fact as being fundamental in Fichte's theory of the I—, then, retroactively, this means that to Fichte the minimum points exist not only to, but *precisely* to re-generate the very same minimum points, and so forth, forever; which, in turn, explains why Fichte's original activity cannot depart from a maximum point; simply because, in a circle of a single direction, any encounter only promotes a further—and necessary—separation in

relation to that point, that is, a determination increasingly contrary regarding the origin, *but never a different contact point*; which is why, to Fichte, *this pure passiveness was never superior or inferior to what it always was, rather it was always equal to itself, since its inception*. Therefore, I would answer the first doubt as follows: *according to Fichte's circular comprehension of the I, one simply must not expect a second contact point, a maximum point between feeling and reflection, rather a single minimal encounter point, in the original action*; and once this is assumed, the original action surely means a minimum of original activity, but not because this minimum is a result of a *real decrease in intensity*, but rather because it is the result of an *ideal decrease in intensity* that consists of a simple disappearance of feeling, now embraced by real reflection. And so, Fichte says, if the original activity ceases in a minimum, if the original action is something of a minimum, and reflection arises from a minimum, then, from reflection to feeling—that is, in the other half of the circle, which once again is opened between the opposites—, there cannot be a replica of this encounter between minimums, only something completely different from this.

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Furthermore, according to Fichte, the original action is a contact point between the minimum intensities of feeling and reflection; a gradual disappearance of the feeling occasions a first reflection, which means that in the original I the union between feeling and reflection takes place with the appearance of a reflection of oneself, to the detriment of the original activity. So now we ask: where does such a reflection tend to? Surely it tends towards knowledge, towards the self-consciousness of man, towards the I's real activity; and apparently, also towards an accentuation of this knowledge, to the extent of an absolute knowledge of oneself. However, let us stress two aspects: first, that the course of Fichte's reflection must be directly opposite to the one of feeling; and, secondly, that, although feeling tends towards its minimum (which means that something has to change in feeling so that it becomes reflection), that does not mean that feeling comes from a maximum, nor does it mean that its waning happens only as a repercussion of this fact. Instead, there is no encounter between maximums, the original activity has always been the same, and feeling does not simply diminish, rather it is truly decomposed, deconstructed, and incorporated into reflection. Now, if this is the case with feeling, then also reflection is born from a minimum of itself; but neither is it

born of *any* minimum, nor does its course consist of a genuine accumulation, nor does it therefore tend towards its maximum (for that encounter between maximum points simply does not exist). Quite on the contrary, if there is something that emerges from Fichte's theory, it is that in the original action the I is born not as a simple minimum, *but already deeming itself absolute*; for what the real fusion between feeling and reflection suggests is that, since it is impossible for the opposites to subsist, and since reality *is* ideality, then real reflection prevails over ideal feeling, and embraces it, instead of trying to harmonize their properties. And so, the I who is born with reflection is already "A=A", it is already absolute identity, the same identity that provides an absolute principle of philosophy; and although much is yet to be done, much is yet to be conquered so as to consummate such a system, however, that course is not at all one of accentuation or intensification; instead, it consists of a minimization, and a minimization whose sole task is to obey the golden rule of the doctrine of science, according to which *the principle precedes the system*. Therefore, this is not the case of a quantitative, but rather only of a *qualitative evolution*; a change, an act of infinite perfection, an infinite and yet attainable perfectibility of the I in the cognition of himself. And so, regarding the second doubt, I would say that in Fichte reflection does not tend towards any superior point, towards any maximum (on the one hand, because it is inexistent, on the other hand, it is inexistent because it is initial, and not final), rather progresses through an attainable perfectibility, in a manner completely opposite to this. We shall now see how.

III. 3. The problem of self-consciousness

This third point shall serve as an answer to Fichte's ultimate problem, namely, the possibility of acknowledging an identity of the I, and hence, the possibility of elevating this I to the condition of a supreme principle of philosophy.

The "Urhandlung" is the original action of the I; it is its first action and, therefore, as in Fichte, it is the determiner of all its remaining actions, for it defines how the I is, how it relates to the world, what course it will henceforth take. In a word, the original action is the axis that defines the direction of the relation between feeling and reflection, that is, the course of the I as composed

of these two opposites; and what Fichte's original action determines is that, at the time of the first reflection, it sets the tone, or the direction, of the whole subsequent (practical) course in a way directly opposed to what was the course of the feeling.

Yet, let us see what this image of the original action really means. In my opinion, it suggests a triple layer of significance, and as such it must be understood in three phases.

A first phase of the understanding of the original action tells us what is visible: that reflection closes upon itself, and this is the reason of its perfectibility. To Fichte, the "Urhandlung" is the original action of the I; it is the birth of the I, the first and most solipsist acknowledgement of the I. However, since this moment of supreme intimacy of the I with itself arises from a minimum encounter between feeling and reflection; since this circle has but one direction, and this is a minimum encounter devoid of any sort of *union in disunion*—rather, it is *pure homogenization, a union despite of, and beyond disunion*—and has no maximum point where to tend, then this means two things: first, that Fichte deliberately leaves reflection—not the original reflection, but reflection in general—to delve in itself, to progress, yes, but only *in* itself, to have its own horizon, its own ideal, and its progression towards that ideal in itself, its advances and retreats always inside its own circle; and, secondly, that although it seems not to have an exterior, reflection does have an interior and an exterior, but in itself: and this is the reason for its perfectibility. In Fichte, reflection works towards its own perfection, but in such a way that this means a deeper evolution in itself, of its own speaking about itself, and also of its own interpretation of itself.

A second phase of the understanding of the original action is a consequence of the latter: that *the "Urhandlung", or the original reflection of the I, is absolute and prior to all systems, which is why a philosophy that wishes to become science may only perfect itself if it progresses retroactively.* Hence, if we only wished to keep track of the progress of this absolute self-absorption of reflection, all we needed to do was to understand that such a comprehension of the original action, as is the one of the doctrine of science, does not allow reflection (nor the I) to leave its own boundaries; for a circle is always closed in itself, it is incorruptible. But surely, we need *something else* to perceive the ultimate

reason for this absolute alienation. Here, as in other cases, the final cause requires us to go back to the first act. And if we do so in Fichte, and think that, according to the Professor of Jena, the first reflection is a model, and sets the standard and the procedure for all others, this might be the cause why reflection in general always isolates itself and does not tolerate any contact with the outside. For, to Fichte, the reason why the original action is the model of reflection in general, is that the principle arises before any other part of the system; the absolute principle, which to Fichte is apodictically certain, is acknowledged prior to the propositions subordinated to it (the genus is prior to the species, as in Reinhold), and only that may endow the system with validity, absoluteness, and a certainty as expectable as the fact that one such system is always returning to that which originated it (*it is returning to itself, in itself*). Well, this being so, and if the first reflection, thus born from the original action, extends its influence to the whole system of reflection, then there is no other solution for reflection in general but to progress, to accentuate itself, to perfect itself: but not in despair, as something that is lost, or imagines it progresses towards something illusory, but rather in possession of a coordinating point, thus trudging an infallible course, not a progressive, but a regressive one, back to the absolute principle and the original I. Hence, what this means is that Fichte's reflection does not progress forwards ("hin"), as if its ideal were in front of it, but backwards, retroactively ("her"), as if its ideal were—and is!—behind it; and this is the ultimate reason why reflection does not progress towards a maximum—for that maximum is not outside of it, rather is *in it, in germ*, and to progress correctly, all it takes is for it to pursue this path, that is, to know that it was born, and that it must continue in this path. For when it is born, or better still, in order to be born, Fichte's I declares itself absolute; this is its origin, its first word, its original positing of itself ($A(=A)$); and therefore, in being born this way, the I gives itself a consummate image of itself, in light of which the empirical I shall come to perfect itself. In other words, the fact that the I is absolute is something of a first instruction of the reflection of the I; it is the first proposition of the consciousness of the I; and so commences its philosophy, and all that is beyond it is precisely this philosophy, which, as a system that wants to preserve its true apodicticity, must proceed in return to it—for this return is the purest justification, the purest absolutization of that system!

A third and last stage of the comprehension of Fichte's original action, perhaps more secluded, but precisely for that reason more relevant, could be stated as follows: that which, like the original action, returns to itself, admits no contradictions, neither in its origin nor in its procedure, and, therefore, where there are no contradictions there is also no fracture of an original unit, *only and always that very same original unit*. Hence, we ask: if the original action marks the birth of a total I, of a single direction from which the foundations of an apodictically certain philosophical system are laid, then *how*, or rather, *what does the I live for?* Surely, Fichte would say, the I is born as an absolute I; and that is now visible through the original action, inasmuch as one accepts an absolute limitation between opposites, until they come to be united; for if we thus understand the I, it is simultaneously ideal and real, and, therefore, once the object is overcome, once the subject is left to its totality, it is autonomous and therefore apodictically certain. But the question here is: and does the I *live* as an absolute I? Surely not, Fichte himself would say; but since the I departs from its absoluteness only not to find any arrival point *but its own absoluteness*; that is, since the I is born absolute *only to consummate itself as absolute* (the core of Fichte's doctrine of science), then the I that philosophizes—the I that lives—has no solution but to think this relation, to understand it, and *to accept this as its own life*; and once it understands the whole extension of the course that is its destination, once it understands the unavoidable need that this is the fate of all philosophy, as well as the fate of the I that thinks and lives—*only then will it once again become that very absolute I*. Therefore, this means that the reclaiming of absoluteness depends not so much on attaining a final, absolute point of the I, but rather on a *constant aspiration of this point*, that is, in knowing itself in the retroactive path in search of the absolute I, but, at the same time, *in knowing itself absolute only because one is involved in this search*, that is, returning to itself in itself. And this, *this returning to oneself in oneself is the hermeneutic nuance of the I's consciousness to Fichte*, and this eternal, yet momentary circular movement: this is the I's identity, Fichte's A=A: knowing that, once the object is embraced by a total subject, and the subject is but object of itself, the I progresses towards itself, perfecting itself in the understanding of itself, and knowing that this is its own consciousness. Yes, for the I that departs from the absolute in order to arrive at the absolute does not *progress*, nor does

it *regress*; he just perfects itself in the consciousness of knowing itself eternal between the walls of its own absoluteness; and likewise, Fichte's I does not accept opposites, nor any further expectations; it is already *everything*, and in a certain sense one could say that he never really left its own absoluteness (for that would oblige reason and reflection to resort to understanding, and even to imagination, so as to carry through one such return), as it will never arrive anywhere else but itself, through reflection, through reason.

To sum up, it is my conclusion that Fichte's I is and was always whole. It *never really experiences the loss of an original unit between opposites*—he simply does not perceive it, he forgot it and must now remember it—, and, therefore, it never really loses its *own* original unit. Quite on the contrary, it anticipates the creation of a unit between it and itself, and therefore it does not live to claim anything, and its philosophy only lives to affirm and reaffirm the fact that, in knowing itself eternally absolute, the I maintains its own unit intact. In other words, and to resume Reinhold's hermeneutic problem, Fichte elected his own absolute principle of philosophy as the eternal union of two opposites—and hence, by uniting these two opposites under the roof of an absolute consciousness of the I, Fichte suppresses the problem of any inconsistencies between principle and parts, genus and species, subject and object. In a word, Fichte aims at promoting an apodictic, infallible connection between all the parts of the philosophical system of knowledge, and thus to ensure the apodictic mutual interpretation of all these parts, thus resuming his intent in the “Anesidemus-Review”, and ultimately suppressing Reinhold's hermeneutic problem. As such, then, the I writes its own history, it writes its history with its own words, its own language, and it does so from the original action and until the consummation of the philosophical faculty of judgment—and in doing so, he ensures its much needed *practical nature*: namely, that this history, that is, this philosophy, is acknowledgeable or understandable by all individuals in all eras.

Hence, and to sum up, Fichte's philosophy is a philosophy of the strengthening and intensification of the image of the I. Fichte's philosophy, one could say, glorifies the life of the subject, but not in the voluble personality of a system, nor in the casual construction of that system, variable between individuals, nor in its inconstant language, that is, nor in the scope of a genuine appreciation

of the philosophizing individual; quite on the contrary, it is glorified in the universality, the universal applicability, the universal communicability and comprehensibility of a philosophy that claims its merit, its justice, and its strength precisely because it belongs to all, and yet is independent from all, a philosophy that ascribes everyone its own course, that makes everyone speak through its own language, but does so because this is the philosophical course and language innate to men.

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