

Fichte's Position: Self-Awareness and the Space of Reasons

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I: Introduction

Of all the famous figures in the history of philosophy, Johann Gottlieb Fichte may perhaps have the worst reputation. Others have been accused of equivocations, inconsistencies, non sequiturs and other blunders. But Fichte's view has the distinction that it has regularly been described as verging upon *insanity*, sometimes even as attaining it.

Here, for example, is Bertrand Russell: "Kant's immediate successor, Fichte, abandoned 'things in themselves' and carried subjectivism to a point which seems almost to involve a kind of insanity. He holds that the Ego is the only ultimate reality, and that it exists because it posits itself; the non-Ego, which has a subordinate reality, also exists only because the Ego posits it. . . . The Ego as a metaphysical concept easily became confused with the empirical Fichte . . ."ⁱ Later, I will cite Jean Paul, a contemporary of Fichte's, who also associates Fichteanism with a literally crazy subjectivism. Now I want to note that a view of Fichte surprisingly like Russell's -- and indeed a view of the development of modern philosophy somewhat similar to Russell's -- can also be found on what we Englishmen quaintly call the continent. Thus Heidegger, like Russell, sees the development of philosophy since Descartes as the ascent of subjectivism, and, again like Russell, Heidegger regards Fichte's philosophy as a high-point of a regrettable journey.ⁱⁱ

For all their differences, both Anglo-American and continental traditions of twentieth century philosophy have shared a common enemy: subjectivism.ⁱⁱⁱ By subjectivism, I think it is fair to say, both traditions have meant the extension of the Cartesian view of the mind to the whole of reality. That is to say, any philosophy is subjectivist if it regards every possible thing as capable of existence only within a mental realm, a realm to which philosophy has a privileged access akin to the privileged access we are said to have to our own minds. Early twentieth century realists, whether Anglo-American or continental, could easily blame Kant for taking a step from Cartesianism to subjectivism, because of the Kantian doctrine that we can only know

appearances, not things in themselves. And the same realists could easily blame post-Kantian idealists for taking the final disastrous step, because those idealists are said, in Russell's words, to have "abandoned things in themselves". On this view of the history of philosophy, whose legacy is still very much with us, Fichte, the first great post-Kantian idealist, is perfectly suited to play the part of villain.

However, since the mid-sixties, some Anglo-American philosophers have revised the subjectivist interpretation of Kant's idealism, finding it to be of persisting contemporary significance. More recently, the subjectivist interpretations of various post-Kantian idealists have been revised. And most recently, there has been a remarkable revival of interest in Fichte himself, not only as a crucial figure in the historical transition from Kant to Hegel, but as a philosopher in his own right. While Robert Nozick asks whether the self might "really be a Fichtetious object",^{iv} Allen Wood takes Fichte to provide the key to unlock the mysteries of contemporary continental philosophy,^v and Dieter Henrich^{vi} and Manfred Frank^{vii} find a Fichtean bridge from classical German philosophy to analytic philosophy of mind.

This Fichte revival is obviously a bad idea if Fichte is indeed a subjectivist verging on insanity. To be sure, there have been many contributions, both scholarly and philosophical, to the development of non-subjectivist readings of Fichte. Yet I find that these contributions tend to leave intact the temptation to a subjectivist reading of the sort given by Russell. In part, this is because Fichte says some very misleading things. And in part, it is because the sources of the subjectivist temptation have not been adequately diagnosed and addressed. In this paper, I want to discuss the three main bases on which subjectivist interpretations of Fichte rest, and I want to develop a non-subjectivist reading of those bases. This will enable me to present a philosophically intelligible sketch of Fichte's project. I don't seek to show that Fichte's project is philosophically *compelling*. I am not myself a Fichtean. But I do think that there is much to be learned from Fichte and from the recent revival of interest in his work. We cannot begin to learn even from a philosopher's errors until we are able to interpret him with some degree of charity.

II: Positing: Is Fichte a Creativist?

There are three pillars on which subjectivist interpretations of Fichte rest. The first I will call *creativism*: it is the view that the mind creates the objects of its awareness. The second is *conflationism*: the view that consciousness is always *self-consciousness*. The third has in recent debates been called *internalism*: it is the view that mental contents can be determined independently of the determination of any extra-mental reality. If Fichte holds these three views, then he is obviously a subjectivist. Indeed, if Fichte holds these three views, then he probably *is* crazy. And there is apparently explicit textual evidence that Fichte *does* hold all three views. Yet I will try to show, nevertheless, that he does not hold any of them.

(I will be concerned, in this paper, with the work of Fichte's Jena period, from 1794-1799, since contemporary interest has primarily been attracted to that work. There is controversy about the degree and significance of Fichte's development in the Jena period, and consequently about which texts to emphasize. For reasons I have given elsewhere, I regard the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo* of 1797-1799 to represent the most mature expression of Fichte's Jena project.)^{viii}

I will begin with creativism. Clearly, if Fichte believes that the mind creates the objects of its awareness, then he is *ipso facto* a subjectivist. And if he believes that *his* mind is the creative agent, then he is certainly arrogant and possibly mad. I suspect that Russell is ascribing both beliefs to Fichte in the passage I cited earlier, because I suspect that Russell takes Fichte to be talking about *creative activity* when he says that the I *posits* itself and *posits* objects. If my suspicion is correct, then Russell is not the first to understand Fichte in this way. Here is an extract from an 1803 work by Jean Paul, in which the insane character Leibgeber comments on Fichte's philosophy:

“‘I astonish myself,’ said I, casting a cursory eye over my System, while my feet were being bathed, and looking significantly at my toes while their nails were being cut, ‘to think that I am the universe and the sum of all things . . . Oh what a being, who creates all but himself (for it only *becomes* and never *is*) . . .

At this point my feet refused to remain in the tub, and I paced up and down, barefoot and dripping: ‘Make thee a rough estimate,’ said I, ‘of thy creations - Space -

Time (now well into the eighteenth century) - what is contained in those two - the worlds - what is within those - the three realms of Nature - the paltry realms of royalty - the realm of Truth - that of the Critical [i.e., the Kantian] school - and all the libraries! - And consequently the few volumes written by Fichte, because it will only be after I shall have posited or made him first that he will be able to dip his pen . . .”^{ix}

In this passage, positing is explicitly equated with creating or making. And it is of no small importance how one understands Fichte’s talk of positing or *setzen*. As Peter Heath and John Lachs tell us, “At certain points . . . Fichte writes almost as if *setzen* and its compounds were the only verbs in the German language.”^x They go on to suggest that, “By *setzen* Fichte refers to a nontemporal, causal activity that can be performed only by minds.”^{xi} As it stands, this explanation is not terribly helpful, because it leaves unspecified what sort of causal activity is intended. Heath and Lachs later ascribe to Fichte the view that “through the creative power of reason whatever is posited is made real” and that “in [positing,] an undivided self is totally engaged in a single creative, all-encompassing enterprise.”^{xii} While they do not explicitly *say* that positing is creating, they strongly suggest it, and they thereby encourage a subjectivist interpretation of Fichte.^{xiii}

However, Fichte himself explicitly rejects creativism. He writes: “We cannot absolutely ‘think up’ [*Erdenken*] anything, or create [*Erschaffen*] through thinking.”^{xiv} In roughly contemporaneous lectures, he tries to guard against the creativist misunderstanding of his thesis that “the *representing subject* is whatever it is only by means of *self-activity*.” He says, “This proposition should not be taken to suggest any creation of representations . . .”^{xv}

Fichte’s rejection of creativism is important, since it blocks one short road to a subjectivist interpretation. But of course this is insufficient. We need to understand what Fichte means by “positing” if we are to develop an alternative to the subjectivist reading. Indeed, we surely need an account of positing if we are to give *any* satisfying interpretation of Fichte. Yet commentators have been remarkably happy either to leave the term as a primitive^{xvi} or to make vague gestures in the direction of an explanation.^{xvii}

A more promising tradition seeks to explain Fichtean positing against the background of

the term's use in logic. Thus Charles Everett, in 1892, suggested that, "The word 'posit' means to find or recognize, and thus to assume as given"^{xxviii} since, in traditional logic, positing or immediate affirmation is opposed to inferentially mediated affirmation. Unfortunately, this cannot be what Fichte has in mind. It is uncontroversial that he is attempting, among other things, to construct an argument from the self-positing of the I, whatever that is, to the positing of the external world, whatever that should be. Most of Fichte's acts of positing are achieved through inferences, so he cannot take positing to be immediate affirmation. Recently, Günter Zöllner has modified Everett's suggestion by removing the immediacy requirement. According to Zöllner, the term originates "in logic, where it means affirmation in judgment."^{xxix} However, the modification is of limited help: *setzen* cannot mean judgmental affirmation for Fichte, because what he posits is the self and various entities, none of which are judgments. Perhaps because he realizes this, Zöllner goes on to define "positing" implicitly, in terms of its role, saying that "there is . . . no direct precedent for the specific use of the term in transcendental philosophy before Fichte."^{xxx}

The history of logic is, I think, the right place to look. But Everett and Zöllner have not found what they are looking for. Everett may have been led astray by the species of medieval disputation known as *positio*. In such disputations, a disputant could be obligated to argue as if a certain proposition were true, even if the proposition were known to be false, or heretical, or self-contradictory, or even nonsensical!^{xxxi} This use of the term "to posit", though genuine enough, is not likely to contribute to a charitable reading of Fichte. These disputations were long gone by the eighteenth century, but Zöllner is correct to say that "to posit" could mean "to affirm in judgment". For example, Baumgarten, in his *Acroasis*, uses "ponere" for "to affirm in judgment", and he gives the German "*setzen*" as equivalent to the Latin.^{xxii}

Much more promising, I believe, is the use of the term by *Kant* and his German scholastic predecessors. As Béatrice Longuenesse has pointed out, the term "ponere" or "*setzen*" played a crucial role in Kant's developing criticism of the rationalist tradition.^{xxiii} I will draw on her work in what I say about Kant and his predecessors. Contrary to Zöllner, there is a fairly direct

precedent in transcendental philosophy, and in its close relative, rationalist ontology, for the use of “positing”.

If post-Leibnizian German rationalism deserves to be called *rationalism*, then it should strike us as important that the term “*ponere*” features centrally in what the rationalists say about *reason* in their metaphysics and about *reasoning* in their logic. Thus, for Christian Freiherr von Wolff (the central figure in post-Leibnizian scholasticism), the ontologically crucial Principle of Sufficient Reason states that, “*nihil est sine ratio sufficiente, cur potius sit, quam non sit, hoc est, si aliquid esse ponitur, ponendum etiam est aliquid, unde intelligitur, cur idem potius sit, quam non sit*” (“nothing is without a sufficient reason why it is rather than not being, that is, if something is posited as being, then something is posited whereby it can be understood why the former is, rather than not being”).^{xxiv} One may also say that reasons *determine* things, for to posit the reason for a thing is to posit the determinations of that thing.^{xxv} For the post-Leibnizians, metaphysics and logic are deeply intertwined, so it is no surprise that Wolff defines the rule of inference known as *modus ponens* in almost exactly the same terms: “*Si in syllogismo hypothetico antecedens ponitur, ponendum quoque est consequens*” (“If, in a hypothetical syllogism, the antecedent is posited, the consequent must also be posited”).^{xxvi} From these passages, we may draw this conclusion: to posit is to determine a thing for a reason, and to reason is to recognize that one act of positing also commits one to another.

During his development towards his mature critical philosophy, Kant gradually disentangled ontology from logic. Against Leibniz and Wolff, he argued that even a complete grasp of a concept and its logical relations could never be sufficient for knowledge that the object corresponding to that concept actually exists. However, while distancing himself from rationalism, he retained the term “*ponere*” or “*setzen*” in his account of reasoning, and even gave it greater emphasis.

For example, as is well known, Kant criticized the ontological proof of the existence of God.^{xxvii} The proof was invalid, Kant argued, because it failed to distinguish between a *logical* predicate and a *real* predicate.^{xxviii} Any term is a logical predicate if its concatenation with a

subject-term yields a proposition. But only those terms are real predicates that determine what a thing is, either essentially or accidentally. Now, the verb “to be” may be used, in its various forms, as a logical predicate. One may say, to modify slightly one of Kant’s examples, “The sea-unicorn or narwal is existent, but the land-unicorn is non-existent”. But in such cases, one is actually saying whether a certain concept is instantiated or not; one is not saying whether a certain object has the distinguishing feature of existence or not. Thus, “existence” is never a real predicate that articulates the determinacy, reality, or thinghood of a thing. So “existence” cannot be one of God’s real predicates and cannot be part of God’s essence.

Kant proceeds to give an alternative account of “being”:

“The concept of *Position* or *setzen* is perfectly simple: it is identical with the concept of being in general. Now, something can be thought as posited merely relatively, or, to express the matter better, it can be thought merely as the relation (*respectus logicus*) of something as a characteristic mark of a thing. In this case, being, that is to say, the positing of this relation, is nothing other than the copula in a judgment. If what is considered is not merely this relation but the thing posited in and for itself, then this being is the same as existence.”^{xxix}

Here we have a distinction between two senses of “being”, *both* explained in terms of positing. First, there is the copulative or predicative use of “being” in, say, “The narwal is a mammal”. To predicate is to posit a characteristic mark in relation to a thing. Predication is relative positing.^{xxx} Second, there is the existential use of “being”. Kant says that existence is not a real predicate, but is rather “the absolute positing of a thing.”^{xxxi} Thus Kant uses the same terminology as the rationalists, in order to articulate his difference from them.^{xxxii}

In another attempt to disentangle ontology from logic, Kant distinguished between a *logical* ground or reason and a *real* ground or reason.^{xxxiii} A logical ground has an analytic relation to that for which it is the reason. For example, “If a being is an animal, then it is mortal” expresses logical reasoning, because to deny that an animal is mortal is to entail a contradiction. But the relationship between a real ground and that for which it is the reason cannot be comprehended in terms of the principle of contradiction. I may believe that I am coming down with the flu because I have been exposed to the cold, but no contradiction is entailed by the

assertion that someone has been exposed to the cold but is not coming down with the flu. The Wolffians had neglected this distinction, in Kant's view. But, once again, he continued to use the scholastic language of positing to explain what reasons, both logical and real, are. So it should come as no surprise that when he was struck by Hume's problem about causation, he formulated it as follows: Hume had challenged reason "to give him an account by what right she thinks that something could be so constituted that if it is posited, something else necessarily must thereby be posited as well, for that is what the concept cause says."^{xxxiv}

We might unify Kant's account of grounding with his account of predication, by suggesting that *logical* grounding is a necessary connection between *relative* positions, whereas *real* grounding is a necessary connection between *absolute* positions. Thus we may attribute to Kant an account of positing and reasoning that is clearly descended from Wolff's, although that account has been modified in crucial respects: to posit is either to commit oneself to the existence of a thing, or to determine some characteristic of a thing; and to reason is to recognize either that some act of absolute positing commits one to another, or that some act of relative positing commits one to another.

Although Kant uses the term "positing" to make crucial distinctions between the role of reason in logic and the role of reason in ontology, he nevertheless has little or nothing to say about positing itself. From his point of view, the *distinctions* he is able to draw with the term are significant, but the fact that he uses *the same term* to designate what lies on both sides of those distinctions may *not* be important. However, I suggest that this fact *was* of great importance to *Fichte*. Like Kant, Fichte speaks of positing (not judgments, but) things and their determinations. Like Kant again, Fichte gives an account of both logical and real inference in terms of positing. However, unlike Kant, Fichte seems to have been impressed by the idea that, by employing a single term denoting *a single, articulated activity*, one might construct a unified - yet variegated -- account of the role of reason in logic and ontology. Starting with an account of positing, one might develop an account of every kind of reason, and of every use of the verb "to be", whether predicative or existential, whether logical or real.

This background enables us to understand what Fichte means when he makes apparently creativist statements. For example, when he says that the acting subject “contains within itself the ground of all being”,^{xxxv} he does *not* mean that the subject creates everything that is. Rather, he means that, if we are to understand both predicative and existential uses of the verb “to be”, along with our inferential transitions from one such use to another, then we must examine the activity of positing in terms of which those uses are explained. As he says a page earlier, his guiding question is the question, “. . . ‘how is a being for us possible?’ . . . This is a question that inquires concerning the ground of the predicate of being as such, whether this predicate is attributed or denied in any particular case.”^{xxxvi}

The idea of such a unified account of reason and being must have seemed particularly attractive in light of the lack of unity perceived in Kant’s philosophy by Fichte and some of his contemporaries. On this post-Kantian view, Kant had given a brilliant account of the basic laws of the metaphysics of experience, and he had given a brilliant account of the basic laws of the metaphysics of morals. But (and this is obviously contestable) Kant’s procedure had been haphazard and inductive, rather than systematic and deductive.^{xxxvii} Consequently, the theoretical laws discovered by Kant needed to be grounding in an unifying account, as did the practical laws. Furthermore, it would not be sufficient to give two entirely distinct unifying accounts, one of theoretical reason and one of practical reason. What was desired was a single unifying account that showed how theoretical reason and practical reason could be distinct, yet could be *one and the same faculty of reason*. This was an especially challenging project because theoretical and practical reason seemed not only to differ from one another, but actually to be in tension. Fichte assumes that Kant is correct to think that a fully adequate account of practical reason must culminate in the articulation of absolute or categorical norms -- that is, norms whose binding force is entirely independent of the obligated subject’s possession of any particular desire or project. The norms of theoretical reason are not categorical in this way. In fact, the norms of theoretical reason guide us towards entirely naturalistic explanations [of events], which makes it extremely hard to understand how we could be subject to the categorical norms of

practical reason. The theoretical explanation of an action, it seems, will always appeal to some desire or project of the agent, apparently excluding the possibility that the agent is guided by a categorical norm of practical reason. Fichte's aspiration is to reconceive rational agency in general -- *including theoretical reasoning* -- as activity constrained by categorical normativity. If he succeeds, then he can remove the apparent tension between theoretical and practical reason, grounding their basic principles within a single unifying account. To do this, he needs a fundamental notion of rational agency as such. Positing is the notion he employs.

I believe this gives us a proper starting-point for an interpretation of Fichte. Positing is neither a creative activity nor the affirmation of judgments. Rather, positing is the fundamental activity of rational agency in general. It is an activity articulated into existential commitment, predication and inference. And it is an activity which forms the basis both of the ontological or transcendental forms of existential commitment and real inference, and of the logical forms of judgment and analytic inference. Furthermore, since Fichte rejects any radical distinction between theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning, positing is an activity that is capable of both theoretical and practical inflections.

So far I have blocked only *one* route to the interpretation of Fichte as subjectivist, by showing that positing is not creating. But I want to make a further suggestion about positing, that will play a central role in the remainder of my argument against the subjectivist reading. My suggestion is that Fichte places great weight on the literal meaning of *setzen* or positing -- that is, *placing*. For Fichte, to commit oneself to the existence of a thing, and to determine a thing through predication, is to place or locate that thing within a determinate place in the space of reasons.^{xxxviii} Admittedly, Fichte does not explicitly speak of "logical space", like Wittgenstein,^{xxxix} or of "the space of reasons", like Sellars, Lewis, McDowell and Brandom. However he does use spatial terminology at crucial moments in his account of reason. For example, he talks about the complete determination of a thing as the total filling of a conceptual "sphere", from which distinct realities are thereby excluded.^{xl} He also insists, against Kant, that the method of philosophy is closely akin to the method of geometry.^{xli} Moreover, as we shall

see, the spatial character of reasoning is, for Fichte, not merely metaphorical. There are systematic relations between the ontological or transcendental space of reasons, the logical space of reasons, and the three-dimensional framework that we ordinarily call space. I will return to this later.

III: Self-Awareness: Is Fichte a Conflationist?

Now, I want to undermine the second pillar that supports subjectivist interpretations of Fichte. Does Fichte conflate consciousness [of objects] with *self*-consciousness?

Some think there is explicit textual evidence that Fichte is a conflationist. He says, “Without self-consciousness there is no consciousness whatever”.^{xliii} In numerous papers, Castañeda states as an obvious fact -- apparently on the basis of this statement -- that, “For Fichte . . . all consciousness is self-consciousness.”^{xliiii} Now, if Fichte is indeed a conflationist in this sense, then he is also a subjectivist, because he regards every object of consciousness as the self under another guise. But beside the general problems of subjectivism, this conflationist view seems obviously false. Surely there *is* a distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness, and any philosophy that denies that distinction is in serious trouble. Furthermore, it is hard to understand what might *motivate* Fichte to conflate consciousness with self-consciousness. Kant famously says that, “The ‘I think’ must be capable of accompanying all of my representations.”^{xliiv} One way to understand this thesis is to say that, if any thought is to count as *my* thought, I must be able to ascribe that thought to myself. Setting aside for the moment controversial questions about the exact import of this thesis, it seems plain that only a *capacity* for self-ascription is required, not an *actual* self-consciousness that accompanies each of my thoughts.

There are actually two elements of the conflationist charge. First, Fichte is said to confuse consciousness with *explicit* or *reflective* self-consciousness. Second, Fichte is said to confuse the *capacity* for reflective self-consciousness with an *actual* self-consciousness.

The first element is easily dealt with. Even in the passages that seem most damning, Fichte says only that consciousness must be *conditioned* by self-consciousness, not that

consciousness *just is* self-consciousness. He says, for example, that “I can be conscious of any object only on condition that I am also conscious of myself, that is, of the conscious subject.”^{xlv} Furthermore, there are numerous passages in which Fichte explicitly distinguishes the conditioning self-consciousness with which he is concerned from reflective self-consciousness. For instance, Fichte says, “In thinking about an object, one disappears into the object; one thinks about the object, but one does not think about oneself as the subject who is doing this thinking.”^{xlvi} Whatever we are to say about the self-consciousness that Fichte believes to condition consciousness, it is evidently not reflective self-consciousness. Fichte is as cognisant as anyone of the obvious distinction between moments when one is absorbed in the external objects of one’s consciousness, and moments when one becomes explicitly aware of oneself.

It is harder to deal with the second element of the conflationist interpretation: the charge that Fichte conflates the capacity for self-consciousness with the actuality of self-consciousness. For it seems incontrovertible that Fichte *does* insist on an actual -- if pre-reflective self-consciousness -- conditioning every act of consciousness. He emphatically paraphrases Kant’s thesis: “as Kant puts it: All of my representations must be capable of being accompanied by the ‘I think’ and must be thought of as accompanied thereby.”^{xlvii} Why this insistence? Why would the capacity for reflective self-consciousness be insufficient?

Various answers have been offered to this question before, but none are satisfying and I don’t want to discuss them here.^{xlviii} Instead I want to give an answer to the question that brings out certain affinities between Fichte and some recent analytic philosophy.

First, I need to say more about the capacity for reflective self-consciousness that is required, according to Kant, if any representation is to count as mine. I want to leave aside questions about what this thesis means *for Kant*, which I believe is quite different from what it means *for Fichte*.

Now, Fichte speaks, not about what is required for any representation to count as mine, but about what is required *for consciousness*. However, “consciousness” is a notoriously slippery term. It can contrast with “not being conscious” in the sense of carelessness or

negligence; it can contrast with “unconscious” in the psychoanalyst’s sense, or in the anaesthetist’s; and there are many more contrasts, and thus many more uses for this term. Rather than assuming that we know in advance what the term “consciousness” means, we should look at how it is used in particular contexts. For example, we should look at how Fichte uses the term in the context of his philosophical project. Since Fichte’s aspiration is to give an account of rational agency in general, I think that the most charitable interpretation of Fichtean consciousness is the following: an act or state is conscious, in Fichte’s sense, if it is accessible to the rational agency and the deliberation of the agent performing that act or in that state. Like Kant, Fichte thinks that some acts or states are *bewusstlos* or unconscious. Those acts or states may in some sense have representational content, but their content is nevertheless inaccessible to me as a rational agent.^{xlix}

If Fichtean consciousness is construed along those lines, then the Kantian thesis may be interpreted as follows: if any representational content is to be employable by me in my rational deliberation and agency, that content must be capable of being reflexively ascribed to me. For example, if I am to make use of the perceived fact that there is an obstacle obstructing my path of motion, then it is not sufficient that I be in an informational state that represents that fact. I must also be able to access that information and to relate it to my actual motion and to my desire to reach a certain destination. I must be able to think of *my* course of action, *my* desire, as obstructed -- I must be able to think of the obstacle as an obstacle *for me* -- if I am to respond rationally to the situation.

So far, I have said only that a *capacity* for reflexive self-ascription is required. But let us think more carefully about that capacity. It is crucial that this is a capacity for *reflexive* self-ascription. It would not be sufficient if I were to be capable of *non-reflexive* self-ascription. Suppose, for example, that Fichte’s path of motion is obstructed by a carelessly abandoned pile of books -- say, the collected works of Kant. If Fichte is to respond rationally to the situation, it is not sufficient that he be able to think of J. G. Fichte, or of “the first great post-Kantian”, or even of “this person here”, as obstructed, even if those designations do in fact refer to him. He must

also be able to think of J. G. Fichte, or of “the first great post-Kantian”, or even of “this person here”, as *himself*.ⁱ

This point is related to some influential arguments made by Castañeda and Anscombe.ⁱⁱ An explicit reflexive self-ascription would involve a reflexive self-*reference*, the sort of reference typically achieved by a use of the first-person pronoun, “I”. As Castañeda and Anscombe have argued, reflexive self-reference is not reducible to any other variety of reference whatsoever. Reflexive self-reference is completely unmediated by any other conception of oneself or information about oneself. Consequently, reflexive self-reference alone is guaranteed to refer to the appropriate referent. In contrast, self-reference by means of one’s name is mediated by the information that, say, “J. G. Fichte”, *is* one’s name; self-reference by means of a description is mediated by a certain conception of oneself as, say, “the first great post-Kantian”; even self-reference by means of demonstratives is mediated by conceptions of, or information about, their referents. Each of these non-reflexive self-references can therefore fail to refer, or can fail to refer to the appropriate referent. Since reflexive self-*reference* is irreducible to any other variety of reference,ⁱⁱⁱ it follows that reflexive self-*ascription* is irreducible to any other variety of ascription. If any content is to be employable by me in my rational deliberation and agency, then that content must be capable of being reflexively ascribed to me. If I were *only* capable of ascribing some content *non-reflexively* to myself, *that* would not render the content accessible to me as a rational agent.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Now, Fichte is primarily concerned with thoughts, not with their linguistic expressions.^{liv} But one of his central and frequently repeated points is the absolute and unparalleled *immediacy* of thinking of myself as myself, or as “I”. That is the point of his insistence that the self-awareness with which he is concerned is *intuitive*. In Kant’s terminology, an intuition is an immediate awareness of a singular actuality. There is good reason to say that, on Fichte’s view, the immediate or intuitive character of *thinking* of myself *as* myself is precisely what underlies the unmediated character of the *linguistic* reflexive self-reference achieved by appropriate use of the first-person pronoun.^{lv}

Suppose that it is in this way that we take the Kantian thesis that the “I think” must be capable of being attached to each of my representations. Still, why should Fichte think that the capacity for reflexive self-ascription requires some sort of self-consciousness that actually conditions my representations? A further step is required to answer this question. Namely, Fichte holds -- along with many contemporary analytic philosophers -- that capacities and, more generally, *possibilities* cannot be metaphysically basic. They must be grounded in *actualities*. As Nelson Goodman has expressed this view: “the peculiarity of dispositional predicates is that they seem to be applied to things in virtue of possible rather than actual occurrences - and possible occurrences are . . . no more admissible as unexplained elements than are occult capacities.”^{lvi} Fichte puts the point in his own way, as a claim about our capacity to posit things modally: “A merely possible efficacy, or an efficacy in general is only posited through abstraction from a certain [efficacy], or from all *actual* [efficacies]; but, before something can be abstracted from, it must be posited . . .”^{lvii} What follows from this view is that the capacity for reflexive self-ascription cannot be basic. It must be grounded in some posited actuality.

Let us now put this claim together with the claim explored earlier, that reflexive self-ascription is irreducible to any non-reflexive self-ascription. What we need, then, is an actual ground for the capacity to reflexively self-ascribe. We might attribute to Fichte the following line of thought. If the capacity for reflexive self-ascription is irreducibly a capacity for *reflexivity*, then the actual ground for that capacity must *already* involve reflexivity. Otherwise, how could the actual ground *be* the ground of *that* capacity? On this view, I am able to produce thoughts of this irreducibly peculiar kind, because I am merely making explicit an implicit actuality that is already of this irreducibly peculiar kind. Any other explanation of the capacity for reflexive self-ascription will have to explain where the irreducible reflexivity comes from.^{lviii}

Now, there are various objections to the argument suggested. First, one might claim that capacities *can* be metaphysically basic. The equivalent claim about dispositions has recently been discussed in an interesting debate between David Armstrong, C. B. Martin and U. T. Place.^{lix} Indeed, Heidegger thinks that one of the important features of the Kantian thesis is that

it makes a capacity metaphysically basic, not an actuality.^{lx} This is an interesting objection, but I won't be discussing it in this paper. A second objection is that this is a pseudo-explanation. To say that I am capable of reflexive self-ascription because there is always already some reflexive actuality is like saying that opium can make you sleepy because it has dormitive virtue! Fichte himself raised this objection and responded to it.^{lxi} But I won't discuss these objections here.

My point has not been to defend Fichte's view, but to show that he is not a conflationist and that he adopts his position in response to intelligible philosophical problems. He does not conflate consciousness of objects with reflective consciousness of oneself, and he does not conflate possible self-consciousness with actual self-consciousness. Instead, he believes that a content can be accessible to my rational agency only if I am capable of reflexively self-ascribing it, and he further believes that I can be capable of reflexive self-ascription only if there is some reflexive actuality that is distinct from explicit self-consciousness, but that is made explicit by explicit self-consciousness and that renders explicit self-consciousness and rational agency possible.

It is now possible to formulate his non-conflationist view in terms of positing. Fichte describes this reflexive actuality by saying that it is "*an act of self-positing as positing*".^{lxii} We should now be prepared to make some sense of this enigmatic locution. What Fichte means is that the reflexive actuality is an existential commitment with respect to oneself as the agent engaged in making existential commitments, predications, or inferences. Unlike other existential commitments, *this* one is necessarily presupposed by the capacity for rational agency. Indeed, any other existential commitment is an exercise of rational agency, and must necessarily presuppose existential commitment by the rational agent to herself as the positing agent. In this sense, the act of self-positing has an *absoluteness* surpassing that of any other existential commitment. The act of positing myself as positing is the condition of any other act of positing, but it is itself *unconditioned* by any other act of positing. I said earlier that Fichte aspires to make room for the categorical norms of morality by reconceiving rational agency in general as responsiveness to categorical normativity. Now I will simply note that, in Fichte's view, the

basic form of categorical normativity is to be found in the self-positing act of which I just spoke. Rational agency in general, whether theoretical or practical, always involves an unconditional commitment. Of course, Fichte does not think that this unconditional commitment to one's own agency is identical with unconditional commitment to morality. But he thinks he can show that unconditional commitment to one's own agency provides the conceptual resources for the development of an appropriate conception of morality. How he seeks to show that, and whether he succeeds, are matters into which I cannot go here.

Now I want to return to my earlier suggestion that we understand Fichtean positing as *placing within the space of reasons*. How does that suggestion help make sense of the claim that rational agency presupposes “an act of self-positing as positing”?

In order to explain this, I need to rehearse some ideas associated with John Perry and David Lewis. Perry noticed that the immediacy and irreducibility of reflexive self-reference create a problem for a prevalent view of belief and desire.^{lxiii} On that prevalent view, belief and desire are attitudes *de dicto*, or attitudes toward propositions, while propositions are universally accessible objects or states-of-affairs, with absolute truth-values, expressible by that-clauses. (We need not discuss any particular answer to the thorny question about how these objects are to be individuated.) Perry explains why this view is in trouble by elaborating a series of two-stage examples. At stage one, the subject knows all the facts (or true propositions) there are to know about his situation, but cannot locate himself, in some sense, with respect to those facts. For instance, an amnesiac is lost in a library, despite having read the map of the library and his own up-to-date biography; since he does not know that *he himself* is the person described in the biography as wandering in the library whose map he has read, the knowledge is of no use. Or, the author of a guidebook to a certain wilderness is lost in that wilderness; we may suppose that he knows the wilderness better than anyone else in the world, but that knowledge is of no use unless he can locate himself in it. At stage two, the subject succeeds in locating himself with respect to the facts. The amnesiac realizes that he himself is the person described in the biography as wandering on the eighth floor of the library; the author of the guidebook locates

himself at a particular point in the wilderness; the knowledge already possessed now becomes available for deliberation and action-guidance. Perry asks how to characterize the evident change in the subjects' beliefs that occurs in the transition from stage one to stage two. The beliefs acquired, which Perry calls "locating beliefs",^{lxiv} are what he calls "essentially indexical." In other words, those beliefs have the irreducible and immediate reflexivity of first-personal beliefs. But such beliefs cannot easily be accommodated by the doctrine that belief is an attitude towards propositions, as prevalently understood. As Perry puts it, any attempt to specify a locating belief in first-personal terms -- for instance, by saying, "I am the amnesiac wandering on the eighth floor of the library" -- seems, from the viewpoint of the traditional doctrine of propositions, to have "a *missing conceptual ingredient*: a sense for which I alone am the reference, or a complex of properties I alone have, or a singular term that refers to no one but me." Alternatively, we might say that, from a Fichtean viewpoint, any attempt to specify a locating belief in *non*-first-personal terms will have a *surplus conceptual ingredient*.

Now, there are many ways of responding to Perry's problem. Each has its own virtues and vices. Here, I am interested only in David Lewis' solution, because of the light it sheds on Fichte. Lewis' radical suggestion is to do away with propositions as the objects of belief and desire altogether. Turn the troublesome exceptions into the norm, and they won't be troublesome any more. In Lewis' words, "I say that *all* belief is 'self-locating belief.' Belief *de dicto* is self-locating belief with respect to logical space; belief irreducibly *de se* [that is, the kind of belief whose manifest irreducible reflexivity creates trouble for propositional attitude theory] is self-locating belief at least partly with respect to ordinary time and space, or with respect to the population. I propose that any kind of self-locating belief should be understood as self-ascription of properties."^{lxv} On Lewis' view, *every* belief, and for that matter every desire, involves reflexive self-ascription. Every belief is a self-location in logical space; some beliefs are also self-locations in empirical space.

Castañeda calls Lewis' view, along with a similar but distinct proposal of Chisholm's, moderately Fichtean.^{lxvi} What is *Fichtean* about the view is the idea that every belief involves

reflexivity. What is *moderate* about the view is that it is not conflationist, unlike -- so Castañeda thinks -- Fichte's *own* view. But *I* have tried to show that Fichte *himself* is only "moderately Fichtean". If there are extremist Fichteans -- in other words, conflationists -- then Fichte is not one of them.

Now, Fichte knows nothing about propositional attitudes. They have not yet been invented. Consequently, he is not responding to Perry's problem. The problem *Fichte* is responding to is: what is the actual ground of the capacity for reflexive self-ascription, hence the actual ground of rational agency? But Fichte's solution to that problem has an affinity with Lewis' proposal. Namely, the ground in question is the activity of self-positing or self-locating in the space of reasons, an activity that *need not* be made explicit in every act of positing, but which is there *to be made explicit* when appropriate. Of course, this activity of self-positing is not a locating of myself in the space of reasons *as a particular individual*, conceived in a determinate way, on the basis of certain information. We are concerned only with that activity of self-positing that is presupposed by any act of positing whatsoever -- namely, "the act of self-positing as positing", the location of myself *as a locater in logical space*, as a thinker of determinate objects in general, perhaps myself as an individual, perhaps another. For reasons quite different from Lewis',^{lxvii} then, Fichte reaches an apparently similar conclusion: every act of positing involves immediate self-positing, every act of consciousness is conditioned by an actual self-consciousness.

I say "apparently similar". But of course there are enormous differences. What entitles Lewis to his spatial terminology is his distinctive brand of *modal realism*. By a "proposition", Lewis means "a set of possible worlds, a region of logical space".^{lxviii} By a "property", he means "the set of exactly those possible beings that have the property in question."^{lxix} Given these meanings, each proposition corresponds to exactly one property: namely, "the property of inhabiting some world where that proposition holds."^{lxx} So, to believe a proposition is to reflexively self-ascribe the property of inhabiting some world where that proposition holds, which is to locate oneself within a particular set of possible worlds or "region of logical space".

What underwrites the spatial terminology is the idea that, as an inhabitant is situated among other inhabitants in the realm of some actual world, so is the actual world situated among other worlds in the realm of possible worlds. The possible worlds provide a sort of prior structure in which the actual world may be situated, as the actual world provides a prior structure in which an inhabitant may be situated.

It is not modal realism of this sort that underwrites Fichte's use of spatial terminology. His idea is that there are systematic relations between the general activity of self-positing and the specific activity of self-locating in empirical space. In particular, he argues that the activity of self-positing can only occur insofar as the self-positing agent also locates herself in empirical space. Moreover, he seeks to derive the necessary structure of empirical space from the necessary conditions of self-positing. For Fichte, it makes sense to think of rational agency in general in spatial terms, because we *must* think of any particular instance of rational agency in literally spatial terms. In fact, literal spatial terms, such as self-location, may be systematically derived from abstract features of rational agency in general, such as self-positing. Obviously, this derivation of empirical space from the space of reasons is an ambitious project fraught with difficulties -- difficulties whose discussion belongs elsewhere.^{lxxi}

IV: The Space of Reasons: Is Fichte an Internalist?

I now turn to the third pillar supporting the subjectivist reading of Fichte: internalism. Of course there has been much discussion of internalism versus externalism in the philosophy of mind since 1975, and those terms have been taken in many ways. By "internalism", I shall mean what I think Putnam meant in "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (although he called it "methodological solipsism"): namely, any view is *internalist* if it maintains that beliefs and desires -- acts or states of the kind that enter into rational agency -- can be individuated with only one existential commitment, commitment to the existence of the agent to whom those acts or states are ascribed. In contrast, any view is *externalist* if it maintains that the individuation of beliefs and desires involves existential commitment to something else outside the subject to whom they are ascribed. (The many varieties of externalism, the many different accounts of how

beliefs and desires are individuated and of precisely which external existential commitments are involved, are matters that can be left aside here.)

To be an internalist is certainly not *ipso facto* to be a skeptic about the external world. Still less is it *ipso facto* to be a subjectivist. But many people regard internalism as the thin end of a skeptical or even subjectivist wedge. One could give a version of the history of modern philosophy that goes something like this: Descartes developed internalism and, despite his intentions, could not avoid skepticism; Kant avoided skepticism by locating the objects of knowledge into the internal realm of phenomena, leaving the genuinely external things in themselves forever unknowable; Fichte rejected those things in themselves altogether, thereby plunging himself into subjectivism. I am certainly not endorsing this story, but it seems close to the spirit of the Russell quotation with which I began, and something like it may in fact be widely believed.

Now one can easily form the impression that Fichte is an internalist. For example, it is one of his characteristic idioms to speak of that which is posited as “posited in the I”.^{lxxii} This certainly suggests that the I is some sort of mental, inner space. Furthermore, one can hardly avoid the impression that, in Russell’s words, “Fichte, abandoned ‘things in themselves’”. If the I is a mental inner space, and if things in themselves are external objects, then surely Fichte *is* a subjectivist. And this reading seems compulsory when Fichte says, for example: “The spirit of our philosophy is this: {nothing outside of me,} no alleged ‘thing in itself,’ can be an object of {my} consciousness; the object for me is I myself.”^{lxxiii}

However, I maintain, first, that the I is *not* a mental inner space and, second, that things in themselves are *not*, for Fichte, external objects. First, Fichte’s use of spatial terminology should be understood in light of his conception of positing as locating within the space of reasons. When he calls the space of reasons “the I”, this is misleading. What he *means* is that thinking of myself as myself in a very general way, simply as a rational agent, plays a central role in the activity of positing and so in rational agency itself. And the first person pronoun “I” is the characteristic linguistic expression of that very general way of thinking of myself, of what Fichte

calls “the act of self-positing as positing”. Still, it *is* misleading to call the space of reasons “the I”, especially since one may be misled into taking Fichte to be talking about an individual agent. Remember Russell: “The Ego as a metaphysical concept easily became confused with the empirical Fichte . . .” But this is a confusion that Fichte himself explicitly condemns. By “the I”, he says, he just means “reason in general”.^{lxxiv}

To render intelligible Fichte’s rejection of things in themselves, I need to say something about Fichte’s conception of philosophy. Like Kant, Fichte understands himself to be engaged in *transcendental* philosophy. He does not take the approach to ontology and reason taken by traditional metaphysics, but rather approaches ontology and reason via the study of the necessary conditions for the possibility of human reasoning -- or, more precisely, of human positing. Also like Kant, Fichte distinguishes between the *empirical* standpoint from which one ordinarily experiences and the *transcendental* standpoint from which one examines the necessary conditions of the possibility of one’s ordinary experiences. The difference between those standpoints is such that certain terms will have one meaning when employed within discourse about ordinary experience, and will have another meaning when employed within the discourse of transcendental philosophy. Among the ambiguous terms are “in us” or “ideal”, along with their contrasting terms, “outside us” and “real”.^{lxxv}

So far, so Kantian. But Fichte’s account of the two standpoints, and thus his account of the ambiguity, differs significantly from Kant’s. Given Fichte’s project, “in us” -- or, in his idiom, “in the I” -- will mean, from the transcendental standpoint, “in the space of reasons”. In that sense, the content of *any* possible act of existential commitment, predication or inference is, transcendently speaking, “internal”. But of course this does not mean that any entity whatsoever is, empirically speaking, “in me” as an idea in my individual mind! On the other hand, a thing in itself, *transcendentally speaking*, would be something to whose existence we could not commit ourselves, something of which we could predicate nothing, and about which we could not reason. In short, it would be a thing about which we could not say anything whatsoever. But we would be forgetting the special character of transcendental discourse if we

concluded that, in Fichte's view, we cannot say anything about objects that are external, *empirically speaking*.

In fact, one of Fichte's main philosophical aspirations is to demonstrate that the space of reasons *must* be such that we cannot help but posit objects that are external, empirically speaking. Indeed, his method of demonstration makes him an externalist. For he argues that there could not be any *determinate* acts of consciousness whatsoever, unless there is a material spatio-temporal world of objects in which a plurality of rational agents exercise their agency. Thus, we could not individuate beliefs and desires if we did not make existential commitments to other things, as well as the subject to whom they are ascribed.^{lxxvi}

I cannot go into the details of Fichte's argument here. But I do want to say something about his transcendental method, something that will cast a new light on everything I have said so far. Each of Fichte's mature Jena works is divided into two parts, an *ascending* part and a *descending* part. In the ascending part of his argument, Fichte explores necessary conditions of the possibility of rational agency which he readily admits to be merely notional abstractions. For example, when Fichte says that an immediate self-awareness conditions every act of consciousness, he does not mean that such a self-awareness can ever, on its own, be an act or object of consciousness. It is merely a notional abstraction -- "a hollow self-positing that produces nothing, an intuition in which nothing is intuited"^{lxxvii} -- an abstraction inferred solely for the sake of the transcendental project. In the descending part of his argument, Fichte exploits the very fact that the conditions he has given *are* notional abstractions.^{lxxviii} Thus, he argues that the immediate self-awareness required for rational agency can occur only if the subject of the self-awareness is an embodied agent within a material world also inhabited by other agents. So it is that Fichte, for all his initial, immaterialist-sounding talk about the absolute I, can reach conclusions like these: "all objects necessarily occupy space, that is, they are material",^{lxxix} and "I and my body are absolutely one, simply looked at in different ways. . . . The distinction that appears to us is based entirely upon the difference between these ways of looking at [the same thing]"^{lxxx}. Fichte thinks that the first person pronoun *can* express an abstract way of thinking of

myself that plays a central role in enabling our rational discourse. But he roundly rejects the idea that there is any abstract or immaterial entity to which the first person pronoun refers when it is used this way. His inventory of the furniture of the universe is thoroughly materialist.

IV: Conclusion

I hope I have shown that, despite rather compelling appearances, Fichte is very far from being a subjectivist. However, I would not be surprised if what I have said leaves you puzzled about the sense in which Fichte is an *idealist*. How does his idealism relate to Kant's? And how does his idealism relate to the *realism* of many contemporary philosophers?

Karl Ameriks has rightly pointed out that post-Kantian arguments for idealism differ radically from Kantian arguments.^{lxxxix} Fichte gives what Ameriks, following Reinhold, calls a "short argument" for the thesis that we cannot know things in themselves. Kant -- responding to the difficult questions about the foundations of physics that divided Leibniz and Newton -- argues that the spatio-temporal form of the objects of our knowledge cannot be the form of things in themselves, although we are bound to assume that things in themselves exist as the ground of the objects of our knowledge. In contrast, Fichte -- bypassing Leibniz and Newton altogether -- argues simply that we cannot say anything whatsoever about things in themselves, because to speak of them would be to posit entities that are supposed to be posited independently of any act of positing on our part, and that is plainly incoherent.

I want to add the following to Ameriks' observation. When a Kantian says that we cannot know things in themselves, although we must believe that they exist, and a Fichtean says that we cannot say anything about things in themselves whatsoever, the Kantian and the Fichtean are talking past one another. By "thing in itself" and, for that matter, by "idealism", Kant and Fichte simply do not mean the same things. Kant's main target is the traditional metaphysician's conception of a substance as a thing that is what it is in virtue of some form, independently of the forms of *our* cognitive faculty. As an account of wholly mind-independent reality, Kant thinks, the traditional metaphysician's picture must be along the right lines. But we can only *know* reality in another sense, as subject to the forms of our cognitive faculty. And this very fact

vindicates the strong knowledge-claims made, say, by Newtonian physics.

In contrast, Fichte is not concerned with the traditional metaphysician's conception of substance, or with the vindication of Newtonian physics. By "thing in itself", Fichte means: "a posited entity whose positing is wholly independent of any act of positing". What he wants to vindicate is our conception of ourselves as material, embodied, social agents, who are nevertheless guided by categorical norms that abstract entirely from any fact about material entities. In the service of that project, Fichte makes the unconditioned activity of positing into the foundation of his account of the way the material, social world must be.

You may say that Fichte's short argument for idealism still seems trivial and uninteresting. Since nobody has ever cared to claim that there are things in themselves in his rather peculiar and incoherent sense, why should we care that Fichte rejects them?

The answer, I suggest, is that Fichte's rejection of things in themselves is a methodological thesis disguised as a metaphysical truism. His real point is that we should make the philosophy of rational agency into the foundation of our ontology and our logic, if we want to make sense of ourselves as rational agents. Whether or not anybody has ever claimed in so many words that there are things in themselves in Fichte's sense, plenty of people have thought that we should first develop ontology and logic, and then attempt to account for rational agency. From Fichte's point of view, such people are engaging in the rational activity of philosophizing, while developing philosophies that pretend not to presuppose rational activity, and they will ultimately find that they have left no room for it. Put in this form, Fichte's idealism is no longer trivial. It is a substantive proposal about the order in which we should philosophize if we want to make ourselves intelligible to ourselves. But while it is no longer trivial, it is also no longer a truism.

I hope to have shown, not only that Fichte is not a subjectivist, but also why he is attracting contemporary interest. Both Anglo-American and continental philosophy have spent much of the last century trying to escape Descartes. But there is a nagging sense that we will not have rendered ourselves intelligible until we have accommodated those peculiar features of the rational agent's first person perspective that exercised Descartes. At least one reason for the

revival of certain Fichteian ideas is that Fichte exemplifies the attempt to fully accommodate those peculiar features, without immaterialism of either the Cartesian or the subjectivist kind. A central problem of modernity -- how to situate ourselves within the natural world -- is still with us.

ⁱ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945, 718. Hegel's various accounts of Fichte's philosophy -- starting with his first philosophical publication -- have done much to spread the idea that Fichte's "subjective idealism" was a necessary stage on the path to Hegel's own idealism. See Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf, Albany: SUNY Press, 1977.

ⁱⁱ Responding to the suggestion that his own philosophy has affinities with Fichte's, Heidegger, with some petulance, cites Schiller's remark in a letter to Goethe on October 28, 1794: "According to Fichte's oral expression -- for in his book there is not yet any mention of this -- the *ego* is creative through its representations, too, and all reality is only in the ego. The world is for him only a ball which the ego has thrown and which it catches again in reflexion. Thus he would have truly declared his godhead as we were recently expecting." Apparently accepting this interpretation, Heidegger then remarks: "According to Fichte the ego throws forth the world, and according to *Being and Time* it is not the ego that first throws forth the world, but it is *Da-sein* (human being), presencing before all humanity, which is thrown." See Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* trans. Joan Stambaugh, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985, 187-188. For Heidegger's view of modern philosophy as a development from Cartesianism to subjectivism, see *Nietzsche* Vol.4, trans. F. A. Capuzzo, ed. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982, 96-138.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is brought out clearly in the texts collected in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* ed. Roderick M. Chisholm, Glencoe: Free Press, 1960. See especially 155-185, where the "New Realists" give an account of subjectivism and its rise close to Russell's.

^{iv} Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981, 89, cf. 547.

^v See Allen Wood, "Fichte's Philosophical Revolution", *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1992), 1-28.

^{vi} See Dieter Henrich, "Fichte's Original Insight", trans. D. Lachterman in *Contemporary German Philosophy* Vol. I, College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982, 15-53, and "Self-Consciousness: A Critical Introduction to a Theory", *Man and World* Vol.4, 1, 1971, 3-28.

^{vii} See Manfred Frank, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbsterkenntnis*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991.

^{viii} See my "Freedom, *Tatsache*, and *Tathandlung* in the Development of Fichte's *Jena Wissenschaftslehre*", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, Heft Nr. 79/3, Fall 1997, 331-344, and my review of Wayne Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, forthcoming in *European Journal of Philosophy*.

^{ix} Jean Paul, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana*; translated in *Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. T. J. Casey, trans. E. Casey, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992, 227-228.

^x Peter Heath and John Lachs, "Preface", in Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge* trans. Heath and Lachs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, xiii.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, xiv.

^{xii} *Ibid.*

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- ^{xiii} Elsewhere Lachs writes: “The German word ‘setzen’ is ordinarily translated as ‘to set,’ ‘to place,’ or ‘to establish.’ Its root significance is creative activity, an activity that can show itself in various modalities. It may be the simple physical act of placing an object in some location, the biological activity of bringing children into the world (*Kinder in die Welt zu setzen*), or the exceptionally complex socio-political action of raising some person to the throne (*auf den Thron setzen*). What we have in each case is practical activity that is productive or creative; it is always purposive and often voluntary.” See “Fichte’s Idealism”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1972), 311-318, especially 312-313.
- ^{xiv} Fichte, *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* eds. R. Lauth, H. Jacob and H. Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1964- (henceforth *GA*) I:4, 245.
- ^{xv} *GA* IV:2, 24: “kein erschaffen der Vorstellungen”, translated in *Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo (1796/99) (henceforth *FTP*), trans. and ed. D. Breazeale, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, 96.
- ^{xvi} Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, says much that is helpful about *self*-positing, but nothing about positing more generally.
- ^{xvii} Wayne Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte’s Jena Project*, op. cit., is helpful in characterizing the function served by the notion of positing. But his suggestion that positing is pre-representationally treating something in a certain manner remains largely undeveloped.
- ^{xviii} Charles Carroll Everett, *Fichte’s Science of Knowledge: A Critical Exposition*, Chicago: S. C. Griggs, 1892, 71.
- ^{xix} Günter Zöllner, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 29-30.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, 46.
- ^{xxi} I am grateful to Paul Spade for his expertise and helpfulness. See Spade, “Roger Swyneshed’s *Obligaciones*: Edition and Comments”, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age* 44, 1977, 242-285; “Three Theories of *Obligaciones*: Burley, Kilvington and Swyneshed on Counterfactual Reasoning”, *History and Philosophy of Logic* 3 1982, 1-32; “If *Obligaciones* were Counterfactuals”, *Philosophical Topics* 20, 1992, 171-194.
- ^{xxii} Alexander Baumgarten, *Acroasis Logica in Christianum L. B. de Wolff*, Halle: C. H. Hemmerde, 1761, repr. Heidelberg: G. Olms, 1983, §51.
- ^{xxiii} Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 346-358.
- ^{xxiv} Christian Freiherr von Wolff, *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1736, repr. in *Gesammelte Werke*, Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964-, §70.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, §118.
- ^{xxvi} Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis sive Logica*, Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1740, repr. in *Gesammelte Werke*, Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964-, §407.
- ^{xxvii} Kant first gives the argument in 1763, in “The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God”. See Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. and ed. David Walford in collaboration with Ralph Meerbote, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 2:65-75, 117-119. He repeats it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A592/B620-A602/630. It is unchanged by the dramatic developments of 1763-1781, except in one respect. See the next footnote.
- ^{xxviii} This is the terminology of 1781. In 1763, Kant had distinguished between “a determination of a thing” (a real

predicate) and that which “occurs as a predicate in common speech”. Perhaps he had not yet arrived at his mature conception of logic as the formal consideration of judgments in complete abstraction from their content (i.e., from the possible application of their component concepts to objects).

^{xxix} Kant, “The only possible argument”, op. cit., 2:73, 118.

^{xxx} This account is unchanged in 1781. See A598/B626-A599/B627: “The small word ‘is’ [when serving as the copula of a judgment] adds no new predicate but only serves to posit the predicate *in its relation* to the subject.”

^{xxxi} See A598/B626: “‘Being’ . . . is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations as existing in themselves.” Obviously Kant cannot intend things in themselves in his technical sense, i.e., things conceived independently of the necessary conditions of our cognitive faculty. I think that “positing something in itself” is identical with, in his earlier terminology, “positing something absolutely”. To posit something in itself or absolutely is, first, to posit it unconditionally, as opposed to positing it hypothetically, under some condition, and, second, to posit it with all its predicates, so that one’s existential commitment also incurs further commitments.

^{xxxii} The similarities and differences between Kant’s account and that of Suarez have been discussed by Hans Seigfried, “Kant’s Thesis about Being Anticipated by Suarez?”, *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress*, ed. L. W. Beck, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972, 510-520. Could Kant’s discussion of “being” have roots in Aquinas? Aquinas famously distinguishes between being *simpliciter* and being *secundum quid*. He sometimes designates the former “*positio absoluta*” and the latter “*relatio*”. See, e.g., *De Verbo*, 21, 1c and the comments on that passage of Robert W. Schmidt, *The Domain of Logic According to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966, 92-93. (I thank Paul Spade for pointing me in this direction.) But does Aquinas think of being *secundum quid* as “*positio relativa*”, as Schmidt suggests, or is *positio* contrasted with relation?

^{xxxiii} See “Attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy”, also published in 1763, in *Theoretical Philosophy*, op. cit., 2:165-204, 206-241. See also Kant, *Metaphysik Volckmann*, 28-1: 404.

^{xxxiv} Kant, *Prolegomena*, trans. G. Hatfield, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 4: 257, 7.

^{xxxv} Fichte, *GA I:4*, 212, translated in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings* (henceforth *IW*) trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, 40.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 211. This also explains what Fichte means when he says that “All being is a limitation of free activity” (*ibid.*, 249n.) or that “being is nothing but a negation of freedom” (*ibid.*, 299). He wants to give an account of our understanding of being -- hence of reason -- in terms of the free activity of positing. In the service of such an account, he takes positing to be an activity that can be designated without already presupposing an understanding of being, on pain of circularity. As we shall see, however, he also takes that designation of positing to be a merely notional abstraction, necessary for philosophy, but incapable of complete determinacy. Determinate positing can only be the activity of an embodied human being.

^{xxxvii} See Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Kollegnachschrift Chr. Fr. Krause 1798/99*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1982, 5-6, translated in *FTP*, 80.

^{xxxviii} Robert Pippin uses this notion to explicate Fichte’s idealism as opposition to the myth of the given in “Fichte’s Alleged Subjective, Psychological, One-Sided Idealism”, forthcoming.

^{xxxix} Logical space plays an important role in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. For a detailed discussion, see Erik Stenius, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964, 90-112. The suggestion that Wittgenstein was influenced by Boltzmann’s method in statistical mechanics is made by Allen Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973, 143.

^{xl} See Fichte’s useful account (one of his rare examples!) of coming to understand the effects of magnetism on a piece of iron, *GA I:2*, 340-350, *Science of Knowledge*, op. cit., 175-185.

^{xli} This was already important to Fichte when he first developed his own systematic conception in the notes known as *Eigne Meditationen*. See *GA* II:3 and the recently discovered early lecture transcripts in Fichte, *Züricher Vorlesungen über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre Februar 1794*. *Nachschrift Lavater*, ed. E. Fuchs, Neuried: Ars Una, 1996. For a later, published account, see Fichte's 1800 announcement of a new (in fact, never published) *Wissenschaftslehre* in *GA* I:7, 153-174, translated in *IW*, 186-201.

^{xlii} *GA* I: 4, 219, translated in *IW*, 50.

^{xliii} Castañeda already uses the adjective “Fichtean”, roughly to mean “conflationist”, in “On Knowing (or Believing) that One Knows (or Believes)”, *Synthese* 21 1970, 187-203, especially 193, 195, 202, but he gives no citations. In *Thinking, Language, and Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 65, he says that “Fichte erred in holding that all (episodes of) consciousness are (episodes of) self-consciousness”, citing the entire *Science of Knowledge*, op. cit., as evidence! Finally, in “The Role of Apperception in Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories”, *Noûs* 24, 1990, 156 n.5, he cites as evidence for his conflationist interpretation the text cited in my previous footnote. I can only assume that this is the text he had in mind all along.

^{xliv} Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131.

^{xlv} *GA* I:4, 276; translated in *IW*, 112.

^{xlvi} *GA* IV:2, 29; translated in *FTP*, 110-111. See Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 82, n.24 for other passages, and Neuhausser, op. cit., 82.

^{xlvii} *GA* I:4, 253, translated in *IW*, 86. Fichte is well aware that Kant says only that the ‘I think’ must be capable of accompanying all of my representations. He cites the text verbatim earlier. See *GA* I:4, 228, translated in *IW*, 60. Henrich suggests that the text of B132 may support Fichte's reading, since Kant speaks of pure apperception as “generating the representation ‘I think’”, suggesting that some actual self-awareness is expressed by the explicit “I think”. See Henrich, “The Origins of the Theory of the Subject”, trans. William Rehg, in *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, eds. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992, 29-87, especially 50.

^{xlviii} Neuhausser makes a helpful attempt to answer this question in *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, op. cit., 92-102. He concludes that Fichte's transcendental claim is neither compatible with the strategy of Kant's transcendental deduction nor supportable by an independent transcendental argument which differs from the argument explored here.

^{xlix} See, e.g., *GA* I:4, 226-227, translated in *IW*, 58, where Fichte distinguishes between unconceptualized intuitions, which are not conscious states in his sense because we are aware of them only through philosophical inference. See also *GA* IV, 1, 196: “Our opinion on the matter is this: to be sure, there are representations which one can call obscure or without consciousness. One only arrives at conceptions of them insofar as one infers their presence from something that is actually present. These obscure representations are called intuitions . . .”

¹ Thus the unconceptualized intuitions of which Fichte speaks are unconscious, not because I cannot self-ascribe them at all, but because I can only self-ascribe them inferentially, in my philosophical reflections.

ⁱⁱ Castañeda's main articles on this topic are collected in *The Phenomeno-Logic of the I*, eds. J. Hart and T. Kapitan, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 1999. Anscombe's “The First Person” is collected in *Self-Knowledge*, ed. Q. Cassam, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 140-159.

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact Anscombe does not wish to say that first person pronoun refers at all, because she thinks that if one concedes an irreducible variety of reference, one is forced to acknowledge an irreducible variety of referent: the Cartesian ego. Like many others, I do not feel this force. As we shall see, Fichte accepts an irreducible variety of reference while refusing to acknowledge any immaterial entities. For him, the first person pronoun expresses the form of rational agency, and one may either consider that form as a notional abstraction that is not an entity, or one

may consider that form as individuated in a human individual, in which case it is the human being who is the (material) entity.

^{liii} The point is nicely put, following David Kaplan, by Sydney Shoemaker, *The First Person Perspective, and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 16-17: “As recent writers have noted, one of the distinctive features of first-person belief is the role it plays in the explanation of behavior. Having a genuine first-person belief, of the sort one expresses by saying “*I*”, is not merely a matter of believing something of what is in fact oneself. To use David Kaplan’s example, if I merely believe of the person I in fact am that his pants are on fire (I see someone in the mirror with his pants on fire, but do not realize that it is me), this will not influence my behavior in the way that the belief I would express by saying “My pants are on fire!” would. It seems reasonable to hold that part of what makes a belief a belief about the person who has it (in the way beliefs expressed by first-person sentences are about the speaker) is the fact that it plays this distinctive role in the determination of action.” See Kaplan, “Demonstratives”, in *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 481-563.

^{liv} See *GA* I:4, 273, translated in *IW*, 108: “Linguistic signs have passed through the hands of thoughtlessness and have acquired some of its indeterminacy; one is therefore unable to make oneself sufficiently well understood simply by employing such signs. The only way in which a concept can be completely specified or determined is by indicating the act through which it comes into being. If you do what I say, then you will think what I am thinking.”

^{lv} See, e.g., *GA* I:4, 217-219, 276-278, translated in *IW*, 46-49, 112-115. This is the context from which the supposed evidence for Castañeda’s conflationist reading has been torn. Fichte’s point is that every act of consciousness involves an immediate, reflexive awareness of oneself as the agent performing that act. Reflective expressions of reflexive self-ascription merely make the immediate self-awareness explicit.

^{lvi} Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965, 42.

^{lvii} *GA* I:3, 341.

^{lviii} Fichte thinks that he cannot *prove* that no other account is possible, but that the onus of proof placed on his opponents is in fact unbearable.

^{lix} See D. M. Armstrong, C. B. Martin and U. T. Place, *Dispositions: A Debate*, ed. T. Crane, London: Routledge, 1996. Thanks to Timothy O’Connor for bringing this to my attention.

^{lx} See, e.g., Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, 267: “But self *is* only as ability, as the *I can* . . .”

^{lxi} See *GA* IV:2, 135-136 and 168, translated in *FTP*, 293-294 and 338. Reflexive actuality is a merely notional abstraction inferred by the philosopher in order to explain the possibility of rational agency; the inference is only vindicated if the abstraction can be shown to be isomorphic with a norm that actually plays some role in our ordinary lives. Thus, the structure of reflexive actuality is supposed to be isomorphic with the idea of autonomous agency that plays a central role in morality. While normative realization vindicates the transcendental philosopher’s inferred abstractions, the inferences in turn vindicate the norms, which are shown to be necessary conditions of the possibility of rational agency.

^{lxii} *GA* I:4, 528, translated in *IW*, 113.

^{lxiii} John Perry, “Frege on Demonstratives” and “The Problem of the Essential Indexical” in *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Peter Geach had already anticipated the problem. See “On Beliefs about Oneself”, reprinted in Geach, *Logic Matters*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972, 128-129.

^{lxiv} Perry, op. cit., 35: “I shall use the term ‘locating beliefs’ to refer to one’s beliefs about where one is, when it is,

and who one is.”

^{lxv} David Lewis, “Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*”, in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 140.

^{lxvi} H-N. Castañeda, “Reference, Self-Ascription and Believing”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 1, 1987, 426: “The [Self-Ascription] View is nicely Fichtean in a moderate sense: all consciousness is diffusely self-consciousness, and all reference is tacit self-reference.” See 440 for Chisholm’s “subdued Fichteanism”. The views of Chisholm compared and contrasted by Castañeda with Lewis’ views are from R. Chisholm, *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981.

^{lxvii} Fichte and Lewis share at least one motivation: systematicity. See Lewis, op. cit., 134: “Our attitudes fit into a causal network. . . Uniform propositional objects . . . facilitate systematic common-sense psychology.”

^{lxviii} Lewis, op. cit., 134.

^{lxix} *Ibid.*, 135.

^{lxx} *Ibid.*.

^{lxxi} Crucial transitions occur in sections 10-11 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where “positing” begins to mean determining an object’s spatial location. See *GA IV:2*, 98-112, translated in *FTP*, 234-257.

^{lxxii} See, e.g., *GA I:2*, 258, translated in *Science of Knowledge*, op. cit., 95.

^{lxxiii} *GA IV:2*, 163, translated in *FTP*, 332.

^{lxxiv} See, e.g., *GA IV:2*, 240, translated in *FTP*, 437: “The ‘pure I’ of the published *Wissenschaftslehre* [i.e., the 1794-5 *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*] is to be understood as reason as such or in general, which something quite different from personal I-hood.”

^{lxxv} See Kant’s Fourth Paralogism in the A edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

^{lxxvi} Note, however, that Fichte’s externalism is *transcendental*, not *empirical*. That is, Fichte holds that there is a philosophical demonstration that positing external objects is a necessary condition for the determinacy of acts of consciousness. He has no view, as far as I can tell, about how we actually individuate those acts within ordinary experience. In contrast, that is just the question addressed by contemporary externalisms, which are therefore empirical in Fichte’s sense.

^{lxxvii} *GA IV:2*, 45, translated in *FTP*, 142.

^{lxxviii} See, e.g., *GA I:4*, 214, translated in *IW*, 43: “It is precisely because no consciousness is produced by this act [i.e. the act of self-positing as self-positing], considered purely on its own, that we may proceed to infer the occurrence of another act, by means of which a Not-I comes into being for us.”

^{lxxix} *GA IV:2*, 107, translated in *IW*, 247.

^{lxxx} *GA IV:2*, 256, translated in *IW*, 458.

^{lxxxi} Karl Ameriks, “Reinhold and the Short Argument to Idealism”, *Proceedings of the Sixth International Kant Congress (1985)*, eds. G. Funke and T. Seebohm, Washington: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and the University Press of America, 1989, Vol.2, Pt.2, 441-453; “Kant, Fichte, and Short Arguments for Idealism”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 72, 1990, 63-85; and *Kant and After: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy*, forthcoming. I am grateful to Karl Ameriks for helpful conversation on these topics.