

DI GIOVANNI, George

Professor
Department of Philosophy
McGill University

855 Sherbrooke Street West
Montréal, H3A2T7

george.di_giovanni@mcgill.ca

+514-398-6060

Fichte's Transcendental Argument in the Lecture Notes of 1804

Abstract:

In a transcendental argument, a judgement »S is P« is unpacked into the two reflective claims: »I say that S is P«, and »What I say *is indeed the case*«; and the truth of the second is made to rest on the authority of the »I say« of the first. The argument has all the features of a testimony, where the reliability of the testimony (as in juridical cases) depends on the extent to which, in being rendered, it conforms to stipulated canons of objectivity. As presented in 1804, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* can be interpreted as a protracted argument of this kind, inasmuch as, since its avowed subject-matter, the One, is *ex hypothesi* ineffable, its validity as a narrative about it depends solely on its internal logic *as* narrative. Such a narrative can only be one which, in constructing any schema about its transcendent subject-matter, at the same time de-constructs it: in the course of this process it methodically and exhaustively uncovers the genesis of otherwise merely accepted facts of experience, manifesting them for what they truly are (a disappearing appearing), and also allowing the necessarily unspoken evidence of the One to shine through (at least, for those willing to freely give themselves over to the discipline of Fichte's Science). The *Wissenschaftslehre* 1804 is a type of apophatic theology. It is a Spinozism, but one developed from the standpoint of a finite subject who knows that he exists in a universe where, in truth, there is no explainable room for finitude.

Key words:

Spinoza, Kant, Wissenschaftslehre 1804, transcendental argument, intuition, discursiveness

Fichte's Transcendental Argument in the Lecture Notes of 1804

»On a particular occasion I divided the science of knowledge into two main parts; one, which is the doctrine of reason and truth; the second, which is a doctrine of appearance and illusion, but one which is *indeed true* and is grounded in truth.«¹

1. Transcendental arguments

I suspect that arguments of the transcendental type are as old as philosophy itself. For present purposes, however, »transcendental« must be understood with reference to Kant. I want to claim that a transcendental argument in Kant's sense was already present in Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*, and that Fichte, in the second of his two 1804 presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,² gave a variation on this Cartesian form of the argument—while avoiding, however, the psychological idealism for which Kant had criticized Descartes.

The *cogito* argument, as Descartes was repeatedly forced to insist,³ could not be presented in syllogistic form. It was not a matter of subsuming »I am one who thinks« under »Whatever thinks«, and so on. The mistake in this formulation was to believe that truth is attained by proceeding from the universal to the particular, whereas according to Descartes the opposite is the case. One must begin with the particular, the existence of which can be directly asserted, and proceed from there to the universal. Albeit in a different context, Kant later made an equivalent point. He had never been able to understand how judgements could be taken to be

¹ Wright, Walter E., tr.: *The Science of Knowing: J.G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*. Albany, NY 2005. Lecture 15 (translation slightly modified), p. 115.

² References will be made to GA, followed by a page reference to the English translation (cf. Note 1).

³ Cottingham, John; Stooff, Robert; Murdoch, Dugal, eds.: *Renée Descartes, Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II. Cambridge 1984, cf. p. 271.

simply combinations of concepts.⁴ The point of a judgement is rather to assert that the combination in question can be found realized in actual fact. The significant synthesis in judgment is not between concept and concept, but between this combination of concepts and what is actually the case. For Kant, in other words, any judgement »S is P« should be unpacked into the two reflective claims: »I say that S is P«, and »What I say *is indeed the case*«.

A transcendental argument, according to Kant, is concerned with precisely this synthesis of conceptual and existential claims—in my formulation, with the transition in a judgment from *subjective saying* to *objective asserting*.⁵ The strategy that the transcendental argument uses to this effect is to demonstrate that the *saying* at issue is such that it is itself the vindication of the validity of the assertion of existence. We know the form that the argument took in Kant's *Critique*. »Being-given« in sense experience is for Kant the test of actual existence.⁶ His argument, accordingly, is that only by deploying in the course of experience the

⁴ KrV B140-B142. Citations from Kant's *Critique* in English are from Smith, Norman Kemp: *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Palgrave Macmillan 2007.

⁵ In this paper I shall repeatedly shift from the idiom of »language« to that of »thought« using the two indifferently without in any way denying that there are contexts in which the difference is important.

⁶ KrV B72: »Our mode of intuition is dependent upon the existence of the object, and is therefore possible only if the subject's faculty of representation is affected by that object.« See also Kant's objection to Leibniz's and Wolff's treatment of »the difference between the sensible and the intelligible as merely logical«; according to Kant, »this difference is quite evidently transcendental.« (KrV B61-62) »It is not that by our sensibility we cannot know the nature of things in themselves in any save a confused fashion; we do not apprehend them in any fashion whatsoever.« (KrV B62). It would therefore be mistaken to take sensations for vague representations, for the difference between the two is of the function that each plays within the economy of experience. Paradoxically, though not apprehending things in themselves, sensations nonetheless play in experience the only existential function possible.

concept of an object in general as determined by the categories⁷ is it possible to *recognize* in otherwise merely subjective sense-events the appearance, i.e., the *being-given*, of an intended object; the existence of this object can, therefore, be validly asserted. This last step is where the transcendental move is made. The determining factor in the argument is »recognition«, that is, »reflective cognition«. Not any givenness constitutes objective experience, but a givenness that is recognizable as such—in other words, one which is reflectively conceptualized (apperceived) as satisfying the norms of what counts as an object. Any other kind of «being-given» would be nothing to the experiencing subject, except a pathological distraction: »intuitions without concepts are blind«. ⁸

⁷ The categories are the »original pure concepts of synthesis that the understanding contains within itself *a priori*... [By] them alone can it *understand* anything in the manifold of intuition, that is, think an object of intuition.« (Kant, KRV, B106) Further, the categories are «concepts of an object in general, by means of which the intuition of an object is regarded as determined in respect of the logical functions of a judgment.« (KrV B128) An object is distinct from the manifold of representations: »The unity which makes the object necessary can be nothing else than the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations«; this unity is a «unity of rule» which allows one to think through the predicates of an object. (KrV A105) »Since this unity must be regarded as necessary *a priori*—otherwise knowledge would be without an object—the relation to a transcendental object, that is, the objective reality of our empirical knowledge, rests on the transcendental law, that all appearances, in so far as through them objects are to be given to us, must stand under those *a priori* rules of synthetic unity whereby the interrelating of these appearances in empirical intuition is alone possible. In other words, appearances in experience must be under the conditions of the necessary unity of appearances, just as in mere intuition they must be subject to the formal conditions of space and time. Only thus can any knowledge become possible at all.« (KrV A109-110).

⁸ KrV B75.

Descartes' *cogito* is the prototype of Kant's argument. Just as, according to Kant, reflective conceptualization establishes the required mental space within which the significant presence of objects (the recognition of their *being-given*) can be realized, so too does the *cogito* establish for Descartes the sufficient reflective space for the indubitable assertion of a *sum* which might otherwise be doubted.⁹ To argue transcendently, whether in Descartes' or Kant's manner, is not unlike giving witness. It is the *saying* itself, the declaratory assertion, that guarantees the truth of what is said. *Sic dico, sic est*. In Kant's case, the definition of what constitutes an object validates the objectivity of the experiences that fall within that definition's ambit. The witness analogy is especially appropriate with reference to Kant, because of his special reliance on juridical imagery. As we shall see, it has relevance for Fichte as well.

I am not implying that the idea of a transcendental argument is unproblematic. In a different forum I would say that the argument is only a variation of the proof of God's existence»from the concept«—the »ontological argument«, as Kant called it. I mention the issue here, however, simply to point out that the same difficulty affects both arguments, the ontological and the transcendental. Both are supposed to lead to a judgement of existence. However, existence is nothing except as determined, and unless one can clearly specify *whose* existence is being asserted in the judgement, the assertion loses seriousness. This is the source of all scepticism. Not any testimony is as good as any other, and the measure of credibility is the extent to which a testimony provides a well determined narrative about the testified fact. In this respect, both Descartes' and Kant's arguments were vulnerable to attack. Descartes must surely have been subjectively certain that the *sum* he asserted was his own, i.e., the subject responsible for the *cogito*. But this subjective certainty required a public face, a well determined identity, before it could be accepted as a warrant for objective truth. However, as soon as Descartes turned attention to *who* this subject was, of whose existence immediate certainty was alleged, he

⁹ The upshot of Descartes's reflections as summarized in Part Four of his *Discourse on Method*, is that, »Observing this truth, *I am thinking, therefore I exist*, was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it. I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.« *Philosophical Writings*, Vol. II, p. 127.

proceeded to determine it as if it were just one more thing¹⁰ (albeit an immaterial one) among the many whose existence had given rise to the doubt that his argument was intended to block. As Kant later objected, Descartes' *cogito* was no more than the abstract expression of an awareness in general that could not be pinned down to any determinedly existing subject.¹¹ The argument failed where it counted most, namely, in determining to what exactly it gave witness.

Kant, for his part, at least seemed to offer a clear protocol for determining the actual existence of the subject responsible for the *cogito*, namely its given location in space/time. The »I think« and its categories were quite explicitly only logical functions that provided reflective unity for a narrative tracing a real thinking subject's itinerary across space/time. That itinerary determined this subject's identity, turning an otherwise empty »I« into a concrete »self« whose existence was supposed to be distinctly identifiable. To return to the trope of »witnessing«, on Kant's transcendental theory a witness's credentials for his declared certainty about events consisted in his ability to place himself in the same spatio/temporal context as the witnessed events.¹² On the face of it, all this sounds reasonable. But the problem is that space/time can be

¹⁰ Cf.: »I am certain that I am a thinking thing« (*Meditations on First Philosophy, Philosophical Writings*, Vol. II, p. 24).

¹¹ This objection is developed by Kant in his »Refutation of Idealism«. »Certainly, the representation, *I am*, which expresses the consciousness that can accompany all thought, immediately includes in itself the existence of a subject, and therefore also no empirical knowledge, that is, no experience of it. For this we require, in addition to the thought of something existing, also intuitions, and in this case inner intuition, in respect of which, that is, of time, the subject must be determined. But in order to determine it, that inner experience is itself possible only mediately, and only through outer experience.« (KrVB 277).

¹² That such is the case for Kant is apparent in the Analogies of Experience, most strikingly in the second, where Kant discusses the principle of causality with reference to time. We have no knowledge of things in themselves but only of these things *as* they appear to us, i.e., as actually present to us in experience, a presence which occurs in time. Nonetheless,

just as imaginary as real, and Kant never gave sufficiently robust criteria of what counted as »truly given« in space/time—or so can be argued because of reasons connected with his unknown »thing in itself«. At issue was the »givenness« of his allegedly given facts experience.

In effect both Descartes' and Kant's argument suffered from the same disability: there was a hiatus between reality (the »thing«) as intended in thought (whether the *cogito* in question was Cartesian or Kantian) and the *fact* which determined it existentially. With respect to Kant, Solomon Maimon pointed out this disability in the course of his polemics against Reinhold.¹³

according to Kant, we still have to distinguish within the temporal series of appearances between a subjective and an objective side, corresponding respectively to a synthesis of apprehension and a synthesis of perception. There is an objective side to appearances to which one must be true in order to retain a robust distinction between fictions (even dreams) and reality. Thus, we must distinguish between the temporal sequences of the appearances *to us* of a house as we observe it from top to bottom or from bottom to top, and the temporal sequences of a moving ship also as appearing to us. The first sequence is accidental (subjective apprehension); the second is necessary (objective perception). Kant's claim is that we could not maintain this distinction without introducing the principle of causality as a norm of experience distinguishing types of sequences—where »cause«, of course, will have different meanings in different empirical contexts. (Cf. KrV A191/B236-A195/B240). My point is that the otherwise logical function of »I think« becomes a concrete »self « (one capable of bearing witness) only to the extent that, in the course of actual experience, the experiencing subject reflectively (that is, conceptually) draws distinctions between itself and a field of spatio-temporally appearing objects. Its content, as »self «, depends on the content of these objects, even though the process of drawing distinctions depends on the logical functions of the »I« and its categories.

¹³ Maimon, Solomon: *Letters of Philaletes to Aenesidemus* (excerpt), in di Giovanni, George: ed., tr.: *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*. Indianapolis & Cambridge, 2000, pp. 158-203. Also, *Introduction*, Section 5, pp. 32-36.

Reinhold himself never saw the point. But Fichte did. As he asked in his 1804 lectures—harking back deliberately to Descartes: »Could you ever think [...] without being aware of it, and conversely could you possibly be *aware* of such thinking without assuming that you really and in fact were thinking? Would the least doubt remain for you about the truth of this witness of your consciousness? I think not. [...] But you cannot provide the genetic middle term for these two disjunctive terms.«¹⁴ The problem was indeed still the ontological one of mediating between thought intention and existence, between *saying* and *asserting*—in effect, of giving a public face to the otherwise private witness of consciousness.

I have skipped historically to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804, because of present space constraints, but also because we know the stages of the development of Fichte's Science from Dieter Henrich's 1966 seminal essay.¹⁵ To define the conditions of an act for which *performance* and awareness of it *as performance* coincide—a thought-act, that is, in which subject and object are identical—was Fichte's concern from the beginning. The recurrent problem was that, in being objectified, the thought-act turned into a result, and its originative character as »act« was therefore missed. How Fichte tried to resolve this problem in 1804 is our question. We shall see, as we retrieve the theme of transcendental deduction at the end, that this retrieval takes us back, not just to Descartes or Kant, but to Spinoza.

2. WL 1804: *Faktizität, Evidenz, and Begreifen*

Fichte's first move was to accept, as all other philosophers had done prior to him, that even in a foundational science one must begin with certain facts of consciousness—specifically, Thought and Being (Descartes' *cogito* and *sum*), their presumed unity, and a cluster of other facts (x, y, z)

¹⁴ Lecture XIII, GA II/8: 195; English, p. 103.

¹⁵ Henrich, Dieter: »Fichte's Original Insight.« Lachterman, David R., tr. In: *Contemporary German Philosophy*. University Park and London 1982, Vol. I, pp. 15-52. The original text is Henrich, Dieter: *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht*. Frankfurt a.M. 1967.

in which Thought and Being find their determinations.¹⁶ These last clusters of particular facts

¹⁶ It is difficult to cite Fichte in the present context according to single texts, for it is part of his method that he repeats himself continuously, but always with a difference. What might appear at one point as a normative starting point turns out to be, on reflection, a fact in need of further genetic derivation. No single claim can be taken at unqualified face value. Lectures I and II, globally, can be taken as the basis for this general statement of Fichte's method that I am offering. One long passage in Lecture II (to which the English translation unfortunately fails to do justice) might however be especially instructive. I am referring to GA II/8: 25(line18)-27(line 5). [The second series of the 1804 Lectures are printed in GA on *recto* only.] Fichte has said in Lecture I, and repeats in Lecture II, that truth consists in reducing the »many« to the »one« —where the »many« and the »one«, and the need to reduce the one to the other, are taken as just starting points, i.e., factually or historically. The »many« is immediately determined by Fichte as consisting originally in the distinction between Thought and Being, each of which is in turn subject to an infinitude of possible further determinations (x, y, z). Past philosophers have tried to achieve the desired »one« by reducing either Being to Thought, or Thought to Being. It was Kant, the inventor of the transcendental method which Fichte was still pursuing, who recognized that there is no Thought without Being, and no Being without Thought; that the determinations of the one are accompanied by parallel determinations in the other. Thought and Being, and so too their determinations, and the various ways in which we combine them, belong, however, to appearances, to their economy precisely as appearances. They simply occur to us (*vorkommen*): they are *geschenkt, zugegeben*. The aim of the philosopher, however, is to reach beyond them by virtue of an insight into the »One« (call it »Absolute«) which is at the source of all of them, and which, in itself, is neither Thought nor Being. »Nach unserer über alle Erscheinung hinausliegende[n] Einsicht aber, daß das absolute nicht eine Hälfte, sondern die unzertrennliche Einheit sey, ist es absolute und an sich weder Seyn, noch Denken, sondern A.« (P. 24, lines 23-36; English, p. 30). To give expression to this Absolute is the repeated effort (fated to failure from the start) of the Lectures that follow. It is important to note that Fichte's schema of

were the domains of Kant's three Critiques. Fichte's objection to Kant was not that he had assumed them (it would have been impossible not to) but that he had tried to synthesize them by means of a reflection which left them simply assumed, and which, therefore, remained external to them. The result was a system of *ex post facto* conditions and postulates which, despite the transcendental method deployed in establishing them, never shed their hypothetical character.¹⁷ Even the reason responsible for them, and the laws mechanically governing it, were, according to Fichte, no more than mere facts of consciousness.¹⁸

How was one to overcome this facticity—how to absorb such facts of consciousness into the reflection mediating them, so that the mediation itself would not assume the character of a *tertium quid* with respect to both facts and reflection? Here is where Fichte made his brilliant phenomenological move. This consisted, in effect, first in defining the nature of the facticity that was the fundamental character of all the assumed facts; and, second, in transcendently establishing the conditions that made for precisely that facticity.

Facticity is not a quality inscribed, so to speak, in the content of facts, but a quality of their occurrence in experience—of the presence which they establish *for* consciousness. This presence, once it has occurred, is incontrovertible, but not for that—this is the crucial point—intellectually satisfying. It might not have occurred; hence, thought necessarily to be

an Absolute which is the transcendent source of Being and Thought— where these two are further determined *in tandem* into an infinitude of further particular determinations—corresponds to Spinoza's schema of Substance, Attributes, and Modes. The transition from Substance to Attributes, just as the transition in Fichte from Absolute to Thought and Being, ultimately escapes reason.

¹⁷ Fichte makes this point in more than one place. Cf., for instance, Lecture II, GA II/8: 27(line 25)ff.; English, pp. 31-33. Lecture III, GA II/8: 43(line 3) to the end of the lecture; English, pp. 37-39.

¹⁸ For reason operating mechanically, cf. Lecture III, GA II/8: 45(line 9); English, p. 37. Lecture VI, GA II/8: 91(lines 15-21); English, p. 58; Lecture X, GA II/8, 147(lines 3-17); English, p. 81(bottom)-82.

accepted, it is so accepted only because it cannot not be accepted. The presence is *ineluctable*, to describe it in one word. The implication is that, although in any process of knowledge one must begin from given facts—indeed, one is implicated in them even before one officially begins with them—as »facts« they must have already been measured against some norm of satisfying presence. They must have already been introduced into a reflective conceptual space and found wanting. »Facts« are results, and are taken as »principles« (*Principiaten*) only by empirical thought.¹⁹ This is a claim, of course, common to all idealism. It was already implied in Kant's just cited dictum that sensations without thought are blind: immediacy is, as immediacy, already mediated. The difference in Fichte's case lay, however, in the distinctive way in which this mediation was to be conceived. It was a matter of reflectively constructing the genesis of precisely the facticity of facts, thereby also bringing them into in a system of knowledge.

At issue was the reflective space into which »facts« must already have been introduced even as one is first confronted by their presence in consciousness. This is a space, according to Fichte, which is delineated within consciousness by the relation between *Begreifen* (conceptualization) and what Fichte calls *Evidenz* or (evidence).²⁰ (I leave aside for the moment the trope of »light« which Fichte also introduces in defining this space, as well as the extra factor of *Einsehen* or »intuition«. I shall return to them.) Assume for the sake of contrast a theory in which conceptualization is primary in experience, and knowledge, therefore, is essentially discursive. Evidence is of course important on this theory but only as the achievement of a type of reflective life which conceptualization makes possible in the first place. Evidence is the satisfaction of precisely this life: it is a discursive achievement. For Fichte the exact contrary is

¹⁹ Cf. Lecture VI, GA II/8: 89(line 1); English, p. 56, where *Principiat* is translated as »principled result«.

²⁰ In the English translation, *Evidenz* is rendered as »manifestness«. This is, in my opinion, unfortunate: first, because the verb »to manifest« is used in places to translate also »to reveal« and »to appear«, and, second, because the image of »seeing« (cf. the Latin *video*) which connects *Evidenz* with »insight«, and also with Fichte's prominent trope of »light«, is lost.

the case.²¹ Evidence is the primary factor which does not derive its determinateness, and hence its existential traction, from any background process of conceptualization, but rather, with respect to any such process, stands as its condition and only source of validation. Its relation to the concept is, therefore, antithetical. On the one hand, it would have no effective presence in consciousness apart from conceptualization: the latter is consequently *de facto* always assumed by it. But, on the other hand, since its source is independent of conceptualization, a disproportion is created between the two. The concept cannot possibly express the authority which evidence commands originatively. This is not a matter of content, of a more or less that is contained by each. Rather, the two are asymmetrical: the one, evidence, stands on its own, self-contained and self-justifying; the other, conceptualization, is a representational activity whose nature is to refer outside itself and thus find achievement in a presumed object transcending it. Conceptualization necessarily presupposes the division into Thought and Being, and into the *x*, *y*, *z*, of their more particular determinations, with which, as I have said, every reflective process begins. Within its domain, truth consists in overcoming precisely this division: ideally, in achieving perfect unity

²¹ »Thus it [the A which is the source of all knowledge] presents itself to you with impressive, absolutely irrefutable manifestness [*Evidenz*]. [...] And if you were asked for reasons, you could refuse the request and still not give up the claim. It is manifest [*leuchtet*: glows] to you as absolutely certain«. Lecture III, GA II/8: 39(lines 5-9); English, p. 35. Cf. Lecture IV: »Thus, since reconstruction is conceiving, and since this very conceiving abandons its own *intrinsic validity*, this is precisely a case of conceiving the inconceivable *as inconceivable*«. GA II/8: 55(lines 7-10), English, p. 41. The whole process of conceptualization destroys itself before the evidence which is at its basis and which it tries to express. Cf. also: »If the absolutely inconceivable is to be manifest [*einleuchten*] as solely self-sustaining, then the concept must be annulled, but to be annulled, it must be posited, because the inconceivable becomes manifest only with the negation of the concept«. Ibid., 57(lines 34-37); English, p. 42. »Negating the concept by means of manifestness [*Evidenz*], and thus the self-creation of inconceivability, is the living construction of knowing's inner quality«. Ibid., 59(lines 11-14); English, p. 43. The rest of the page is significant.

between Thought and Being. But, if such a unity were ever achieved, conceptualization would gain the same self-containedness that characterizes evidence: it would merge with it. By the same token, so would evidence lose its medium of expression.

The hidden agenda motivating all of thought's particular engagements with its objects is thus to answer to a demand for an evidence which it presupposes, and which it would also manifest, but cannot manifest, for its conceptualizing activities are based on divisions which in fact belie it, and which, if ever overcome, would mean the end of thought itself. This is what makes for the dissatisfaction that accompanies all experience: hence for the facticity of its facts. Its source lies in the disproportion, the gap or hiatus (as Fichte also calls it), between conceptual products and the evidence which they would express but cannot. It is as if »facts« carried with them a secret which they would manifest, but cannot, yet give testimony to it in thus hiding it—at a distance, so to speak. Their ineluctable character lies in precisely this ambiguity.

This, *in nuce*, is Fichte's derivation of *Faktizität* in 1804. *Faktizität* is the precipitate (*der Absatz*) of the tension produced by the disproportion between *Evidenz* and *Begreifen*.²² But more must be said to show how this derivation amounts to a whole science—or, at least, sufficiently more to rejoin our »transcendental argument« theme.

3.WL 1804: *Leuchte* and *Einsehen*

The already mentioned »light« is Fichte's leading trope in the 1804²³—clearly a metaphor, but one that assumes technical meaning in context. Light illumines: it thus produces *Evidenz*, and does so *sua sponte*.²⁴ At the same time it also points to a source (the Absolute, life, *esse in actu*,

²² Cf. Lecture IV, GA II/8: 59(lines 8-35; the expression *totde Absatz* is on line 32); English, p. 43. The split between Thought and Being, which makes for the facticity of the latter, is the result of the split between the »one« (i.e., the A which escapes consciousness) and the Thought/Being disjunction. This is the *hiatus irrationalis*.

²³ »The midpoint of everything was pure light.« GA II/8: 61(line 32); English, p. 44. The translation is not accurate, and I have amended it.

²⁴ »For we do not create the truth [...]; rather, truth creates itself by its own power, and it

as Fichte variably refers to it) which it, however, also hides, and, in hiding it, hides itself as well. Light is present only by virtue of what it illumines; neither it, nor its source, are *per se* visible. Inasmuch as the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s intent is to establish this light as the source of the visibility of things, it can do so, therefore, only in terms of this visibility itself, that is to say, in terms of the clarity of visible things. But, leaving metaphors aside, the point is that, if the evidence that justifies conceptualization is at issue in that conceptualization, but the evidence *ex hypothesi* transcends it, then, in order to express this evidence, the concept can do so only by playing out its relation to it vicariously, at a distance, in the medium of the relative clarity which this conceptualization at least believes it has achieved with respect to its objects. Ordinary consciousness does all this *de facto*, immersed as it is in facticity. The *Wissenschaftslehre* does it reflectively and methodically, in full knowledge that the concept fulfills its vocation as concept only to the extent that it negates itself before the evidence that it would express (if it just could), and, in this negative process, it thereby also divests itself of the illusion that its objects are the source of truth, that they are things standing on their own and not mere appearances of the truth.

But, for this, one needs discipline and technique.²⁵ Fichte asks his auditors to creatively (*energetisch*) imagine themselves at a point between the domain of light, which they can presume they are unconsciously nurturing within themselves, and the domain of the fully blown consciousness that presupposes the division between concept and being (between thought and its

does so whenever the conditions of its creation are present.« GA II/8: 69(line 33-35); English, p. 48. »For if [...] one posits that the principle of the negated concept is just the I (since *I* indeed appears as itself freely constructing and sketching out the concepts in response to an invitation), then its destruction in the face of what is valid in itself is simultaneously *my* destruction in the same moment, since I as its principle no longer exist. My being grasped and torn apart by the manifestness [*Evidenz*] which *I* do not make, but which creates itself, is the phenomenal image of my being negated and extinguished in the pure light.« GA II/8: 117(lines 20-27); English, p. 69.

²⁵ The first presentation of this schema is in Lecture II, but variations of it continue in the rest of the Science.

object), and their further differentiations into the particulars *x*, *y*, and *z*. They must imagine themselves at that limit-point between the two domains, oscillating between the two without either letting go of the possibility of conceptualization (which would amount to falling into unconsciousness); or forgetting that the concept depends on the light for its validity (which would amount to giving in to mere facticity). Of course, they cannot remain at this state of oscillation. They must revert to the mode of determined conceptual discourse. But this return is with a difference, for they now know that in conceiving the Absolute (the presumed source of *Evidenz*), they must conceive it precisely as inconceivable; that even this predicate, »inconceivable«, does not really belong to the Absolute but is rather a function of their thinking, a statement about this thinking rather than about the Absolute; indeed, that even this schema just now adopted of a point where one hovers between *Evidenz* and *Begreifen* is just *that*: a thought-constructed schema which stands indeed for an intended transcendent truth, but can only express it immanently—at a distance from it; that is, only according to norms that *de facto* govern the thought constructing it.²⁶ Fichte's auditors must, therefore, strike it down as anything valid *per se* even as they construct it.²⁷

²⁶ Cf., for instance, Lecture II, GA II/8: 33(line 8)-35(line 10), English, 32. Lecture IV, GA II/8: 55(lines 6-10), English, 41. Lecture VI, GA II/8: 95(lines 15-34), English, 60. This last is an especially significant text, for Fichte makes clear that the schemata he has been using (Absolute, limit point of differentiation, differentiated Being and Thought) are not independent of our thinking, i.e. are not to be taken dogmatically as positions about the transcendent One. The same point is made, even more strikingly, in Lecture VIII, where Fichte points out that the split between Thought and Being, and, by implication, between the »light« which manifests this split while at the same time reducing it to the »factual« and the split itself, does not occur in the »light« but in the insight into it. GA II/8: 121(lines 7-34); English, p. 71.

²⁷ Lecture III. GA II/8: 37(lines 10-12); English, p. 34. Also: »Somewhere, if the concept is created it must absolutely and thoroughly create itself, without anything antecedent and without any necessity of a »we«; because this »we«, as has been shown, always and everywhere requires some previous knowing and cannot achieve immediate knowing.

The 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* repeats over and over again this pattern of constructing schemata representing possible forms of the relation in consciousness of thought to being, each relation constituting a particular realization of *Evidenz*—thus rehearsing, in effect, past historical positions regarding truth—and of methodically striking them down one by one by revealing their mere facticity. Idealism and realism are struck down, and so, too, the new forms of idealism and realism that emerge over the demise of the previous ones.²⁸ Consciousness itself is struck down, as well as the subject/object division which is essential to it.²⁹ The very process of thus constructing *a priori* otherwise mere facts of consciousness, thus presuming to genetically enact within *oneself* a passage to the ineffable Absolute; indeed this »oneself« itself, the »us« who believes is doing the constructing, whereas, in truth, the construction does itself spontaneously—all this is struck down.³⁰ What is left is just ineffability. »Thus, away with all

Therefore we cannot create the conditions, they must emerge spontaneously, reason must create itself, independent from any volition or freedom, or self.« Lecture IV, GA/ II.8: 63(lines 14-21); English, pp. 44-45.

²⁸ Lecture XII, XIII and XIV deal with this reduction. Both idealism and realism must be struck down because, in their different ways, they both presuppose an »in itself « as absolute which, in point of fact, cannot be such, for it implies an opposition and must be, therefore, a relative, the product of consciousness. This is not to deny that, factually, we presuppose the »in itself«.

²⁹ Lecture XIV is relevant. Cf. »[Here is the] chief result: Consciousness has been rejected in its intrinsic validity, despite the fact that we have admitted we cannot escape it. [...] If we have once seen into this fact, although *factically* we could never negate consciousness, we will not really believe it when judging truth; instead, when judging, we will abstract from it; indeed, on the condition that we want to get to truth, we must do this, but not unconsciously, since it is not necessary that we see into the truth.« GA II/8: 217(lines 25-33); English, p. 110.

³⁰ Fichte praises Spinoza for having seen, regarding the opposition between God and us, that, if we seriously want to avoid dualism, since God ought not to be done away with,

words and signs!« Fichte tells his auditors. And he continues, »Nothing remains except our living thinking and insight, which can't be shown on a blackboard nor be represented in any way but can only be surrendered to nature.«³¹

What happens then? Does the *Wissenschaftslehre* lead into that semi-conscious stupor which Aenesidemus/Schulze, in his parody of Schelling, recommended to Schelling's disciples as the optimum state of mind for apprehending the Absolute?³² This is a tempting conclusion, considering Fichte's repeated reminders to his auditors that the consummation of truth is something highly personal; that they should think creatively, rely on their inner vital resources, in order to let the light of the Absolute manifest itself to them.³³ One might well think that the

then the negation has to be borne by us. »It is clear and undeniable in his system that every separate existence vanishes as [something] independently valid and self-subsistent.« This of course applies first and foremost to the »I«. But then Spinoza, according to Fichte, went on to kill God as well, by turning him into a thing without life. Lecture VIII, GA II/8: 113(line 28)-117(line 27); English, pp. 68-69.

³¹ Lecture VI, GA II/8: 95(lines 30-33); English, p. 60.

³² [Schulze, G. E.]: »Aphorismen über das Absolute, als das alleinige Prinzip der wahren Philosophie, über die einzige mögliche Art es zu erkennen, wie auch über das Verhältniß aller Dinge in der Welt zu demselben.« In: *Neues Museum der Philosophie und Litteratur*, Bouterwek, Fr., ed. I (1803, 2), pp. 110–148. Reproduced in Jaeschke, Walter, ed.: *Transzendentalphilosophie und Spekulation: Der Streit um die Gestalt einer Ersten Philosophie (1799– 1807)*, Hamburg 1993. For a discussion of the episode and further relevant materials, see Meist, Kurt Reiner: »Sich vollbringende Skeptizismus: G. E. Schulzes Replik auf Hegel und Schelling.« In: *Transzendentalphilosophie und Spekulation*, pp. 192–230.

³³ This is a recurrent theme. For a religious-sounding expression of it, where science is equated with the love of God, and this love is one which takes possession of the knowledge-seeker, see Lecture V, GA II/8: 75(lines 8-8-26); English, pp. 50-51.

upshot of Fichte's Science is an immediate intuition (the *Einsehen* mentioned earlier) which, ultimately, has to be consummated in private. This, however, cannot be the case. Immediate consciousness cannot be the last word for Fichte, for one thing because he considered it to be a product of idealism which, together with the latter, had to be struck down.³⁴ Like the idealism that was its source, it, too, was a merely derived fact of consciousness, and itself the further source of facticity. In this, Fichte was clearly criticizing Schelling, and, very likely, his own earlier faith in intuition. For another thing, when Fichte appealed to his auditors to make of the *Wissenschaftslehre* a personal affair, he was clearly urging them to enhance their life by *thinking* energetically and resolutely, I stress the term »thinking«: it is the concept, not any supposed immediate intuition, which is at stake in this enhancement.³⁵ Fichte differentiated his system from Spinoza's precisely by the fact that, whereas the latter had failed to provide a bridge from absolute oneness to multiplicity, and vice-versa, his system had forged such a bridge: it was in

³⁴ »The idealism which has been rejected as intrinsically valid is the same as absolute immediate consciousness, therefore, so that we express as forcefully as possible what it comes down to, the science of knowing denies the validity of immediate consciousness's testimony absolutely as such and for this reason: that it is this, and it proves this denial. [...] Only pure reason, which is to be grasped merely by the intellect, remains as solidly valid.« Lecture XIII, GA II/8: 205(lines 10-16); English, p. 106.

³⁵ The step made in Lecture VII is especially significant in this respect. Fichte has so far stressed the necessarily self-negating nature of the concept before the »light« and the »*Evidenz*« which genetically precedes the concept. It turns out, however, that we factually begin with the concept, and that, so far as its economy as concept goes, its negation works itself out in its appearances as concept, that is to say, in the many configurations that it assumes in the course of knowledge, in the inner logic of such constructions (which come up in the course of Fichte's Science) as the »through-one-another«, the »of itself«, the »should «. Although anti-discursive, Fichte's science must be so discursively. Cf., especially, GA II/8: 103(line 25)-105(line 31); English, pp.63-64.

the self-destructive work of the concept, and there alone, that the presence of the »one« was made manifest.³⁶

We are back to a point already made. It is exclusively in the medium of conceptualization that the light can lighten (*leuchten*), or *Evidenz* be manifested. In being struck down as facts, the facts of consciousness are not thereby done away with. Rather, they are simply revealed for what they are: derived results, mere appearances rather than self-contained objects. In other words, in unfolding his Science, Fichte was still simply expanding on the project of manifesting the origin of facticity—a project which he, and all those heeding to his message, already accomplish (though only in principle) by creatively placing themselves at the limit-point between *Evidenz* and *Begreifen*. This is a point which Fichte also calls *der Lages des Todes*, and *der Tod im Wurzel*,³⁷ for it is there, in the tension between *Evidenz* and *Begreifen*, that *Faktizität* has its origin. Just like Descartes who, upon retreating into his *ego*, discovered that nothing that he knew before had been lost, but everything had been found again, within the *ego*, but indexed as »ideal«, so Fichte discovers that nothing is lost in the course of his Science: everything returns, though genetically constructed in the modality of mere appearances. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is the science of precisely these appearances *as appearances*.³⁸

³⁶ I am interpreting here one text in Lecture IV: GA II/8: 55(lines 27-31); English, p. 55.

³⁷ Cf. Lecture VIII, GA II.8, 121(line 7)-123(line 10); English, p. 71. Also, Lecture XIV, GA II.8, 217(line 26)-220(line 32); English, p. 111, but see 110-112 *in toto*. Unfortunately, the English translation lacks in these contexts the rhetorical force of Fichte's German.

³⁸ For a summary statement of how the Science is set in motion, see the concluding paragraph of Lecture VI. In being negated by »light«, the concept is at the same time »posited«, i.e., established factually. But the content of this concept, as a thus posited concept, is precisely its appearance at the limit point between A (the source of evidence) and multiplicity. We thus have the appearance of an original appearance which will be followed, by a rule of descent, by the appearances of the appearance of this primordial appearance. GA II/8: 97(line 37)-99(line 13); English, p. 61.

4. Fichte's transcendental argument

We rejoin our original theme. How did Fichte negotiate in 1804 the gap—the *hiatus irrationalis*,³⁹ as he also called it—between the *cogito* and *sum*? Certainly not by means of Descartes' self-awareness. The testimony of immediate consciousness is one of the facts which Fichte resolutely strikes down. Just as certainly, not by means of Kant's critical idealism, whose critical reflections and contrived postulates Fichte equally strikes down. Rather, Fichte fills the gap with his Science, with its characteristic self-deposing language. I say »self-deposing« (*absetzen*), because it is a language that says whatever it says while at the time negating itself, thereby dispelling any illusion that its objects are anything standing on their own, that they have a claim to being more than just the mere appearance of truth.

Fichte favoured visual tropes—light, schemata—to express what, on his account had to remain inexpressible. The very idea of philosophy as a conceptual construction which Fichte shared with Schelling (and Hegel derided) evokes visual imagery. But one need only reflect on the exhortations with which Fichte punctuated his 1804 Science, or, even more, on the rhetoric of the *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben* of two years later, to recognize that his argumentat indeed takes on the transcendental form of a *sic dico, sic est*. And it is no doubt tempting to interpret this *dico*, because of its exhortative tone as contrasted with the more legalistic tone of Kant's, as a religious testimony, as if it rested on a voice which comes from nowhere determinable and is not even audible, yet whose resonance is felt in the conviction with which it is given. This would make of the *Wissenschaftslehre* a *doctrina mystica*. But, in fact, despite its apophatic tendency, there is no mysticism in Fichte's Science.⁴⁰ There is, rather, (and this is

³⁹ Lecture XIV, GA II/8: 225(lines 4-23; English, p. 113. Lecture XVI, GA II/8: 249(line 34)-351(line4); English, p. 124.

⁴⁰ Gurvitch speaks of a mystical intuition in Fichte that accompanies his intellectual intuition; Gueroult questions it. Cf.: Gurvitch, M.: »L'évolution de la Doctrine de la Science.« In: *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 40 (1933, 1), pp. 127-128. Gueroult, M.: *Études sur Fichte*. Hildesheim/New York 1974, p. 133.

what gives authority to its testimony) a commitment to action: a commitment to live life in full which, to be sure, finds eventual visible satisfaction in social and political action. But, to attain this satisfaction, it must first be submitted to the discipline and clarification of all facticity which is the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The latter's testimony, as it transpires from the lectures of 1804, is that of a narrative which is consciously about mere appearances: it is the narrative of a narrative of a narrative, *ad infinitum*. It was indeed the fitting narrative for Parmenides' second way of illusions,⁴¹ and Fichte had now dissolved into it Kant's otherwise empty reference to a transcendent thing-in-itself. Fichte is the first post-modernist (I mean this, incidentally, as an indictment, not an encomium). His difference is that he thought that there could be a definitive logic of such an endless narrative.

Something else transpires from the same lectures. I said that Fichte struck down both idealism and realism. This was, however, for the sake of attaining a kind of super-realism⁴²—a move that was finally made by striking down two more factual divisions, namely, between I and We, and, most important, between this »I or We« and Being.⁴³ »Wie in der erzeugten Einsicht wir selbst das Sein werden, so können wir zufolge dieser Einsicht nicht mehr zum Sein herausgehen, denn wir sind es; und überhaupt absolut nicht aus uns herausgehen, weil das Sein nicht aus sich herausgehen kann.«⁴⁴ It is impossible to read these words without hearing in them the testimony of someone else—I mean, of the Spinoza who had been the dominating intellectual

⁴¹ Cf. Note 1, above.

⁴² Lecture XIV, GA II/8: 225(lines 18-22); English, pp.113-114. See also, as an example of what we might call Fichte's existentialism, Lecture XV, GA II/8: 231(lines 1-29); English, p. 231.

⁴³ Lecture XV, GA II/8: 233(19-23); English, p. 117.

⁴⁴ Ibid. lines 28-31. »As we become being in the insight we have produced, we can—as a result of this insight—no longer come out of ourselves toward being, since we are it; and really we absolutely cannot come out of ourselves at all, because being cannot come out of itself.«

power of the day, at least since Goethe's early poetic period, and whose figure has already irrepressibly intruded in this presentation. Jacobi said of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that it was an inverted Spinozism.⁴⁵ Jacobi was wrong. Not that Fichte was not a Spinozist (he certainly was). But he had not inverted Spinoza's system. Rather, what he had done (and in this he had been truly brilliant) was to give a phenomenology of what it is like to exist as a subject in a universe, the truth of which, as Fichte explicitly premised in his 1804 lectures, is the One—call this One Substance, Absolute, God, or what have you. This existence is, in brief, the life of an epiphenomenon: of one who, though at a determinate *there*, none the less has its truth somewhere else. It is to exist like one of Spinoza's »modes«. The problem with an epiphenomenon is not that its existence is fragile: so it is for every being whose truth is in becoming. The problem, rather, is that it is ephemeral, more a make-believe than anything real; there is nothing robust about it apart from the robustness that one arbitrarily chooses to attribute to it, even in spite of any evidence to the contrary. Epiphenomena need a special narrative to sustain them. Fichte's new Science provided the logic of one.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jacobi in his open »Letter to Fichte« (1799/1816): »I first found entry into the *Doctrine of Science* through the representation of an *inverted* Spinozism. And I still portray it to myself as a materialism without matter, or a *mathesis pura* in which a pure and empty consciousness counts for mathematical space.« Di Giovanni, George, ed., tr.: *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*. Montreal/Kingston 1994, p. 502. GA III/3: 4.