

# FICHTE AND KANT ON THE GROUND OF EXPERIENCE

*Bryan Hall*

St John's University, USA

## 1. Introduction

In the first of his two 1797 *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre* (hereafter abbreviated as *IWL*), Fichte claims there are only two options for understanding the ground of experience. Either experience is grounded on the side of the object as a thing in itself (dogmatism) or it is grounded on the side of the subject as an absolute 'I' (idealism) where both the thing in itself and the absolute 'I' "must necessarily lie *outside of all experience*" (*IWL* 1:425).<sup>1</sup> *IWL* was intended to introduce a new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, one that Fichte himself did not publish, entitled *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (*WLnm*).<sup>2</sup> Much as he did throughout his career, in *WLnm*, Fichte offers an impassioned defence of idealism. The correct way of understanding Fichte's idealism, however, has been a subject of fierce debate.

In this paper, I consider two competing views: (1) The Realist View (RV): the absolute 'I' exists and serves as the real ground of experience.<sup>3</sup> (2) The Fictionalist View (FV): the absolute 'I' is only fictional but must be thought of as the logical ground of experience.<sup>4</sup> Claims invoking the absolute 'I' are not literally true, although they must be made within a certain domain of discourse, namely, a theoretical one concerning the ground of experience.

Whereas Fichte's conception of 'idealism' has been a source of sharp disagreement, his conception of 'ground' has largely been a source of bemusement. I suggest that by going back to Kant's own conception of 'ground' we can gain insight into Fichte's understanding

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations from *IWL* come from Fichte (1994). Translations from the 1796/99 *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (*WLnm*) come from Fichte (1992). Although I shall focus on *IWL* and *WLnm*, when appropriate, I shall also refer to the 1794 *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (*FWL*). Translations from the latter come from Fichte (1982). Generally, citations refer to Fichte (1845–46), except for citations to *WLnm* which refer to Fuchs (1982). For the sake of clarity, I use "absolute 'I'" (*WLnm*, 219) to refer to the unconditioned activity that Fichte elsewhere calls "absolute self-activity" (*WLnm*, 132), "intellect in itself" (*IWL*, 1:426), "'I'-in-itself" (*IWL*, 1:428) and the "pure 'I'" (*WLnm*, 23). Following Breazeale, I am leaving the title *Wissenschaftslehre* untranslated. Although it is often translated as 'Science of Knowledge' (e.g., Heath and Lachs), this is incorrect. A better translation would be 'Doctrine of Science' or 'Theory of Scientific Knowledge'. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is not a specific work, but rather a philosophical system that Fichte repeatedly reformulated over the course of his philosophical career.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen not to discuss *FWL* at great length since its presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is notoriously abstract, convoluted, and excessively formal. Although it is unclear how familiar Kant was with *FWL*, this did not stop him from characterising it as "nothing more or less than mere logic" (*Br* 12:370). As Breazeale (2014:388n.83) notes, however, Kant's concerns were shared by other contemporaries including Jean Paul and Nicolai. In any case, Fichte quickly abandoned *FWL*'s mode of presentation for something which (at least he considered) to be more intuitive. For a painstaking reconstruction of Fichte's argument in Parts I–II of *FWL*, see Förster (2012), ch. 8.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Fichte has long been a popular view. One of Fichte's contemporaries, F. H. Jacobi, accuses him of turning reality into a mere figment of the mind. See Fichte (1978, 1:245). Several commentators suggest that whatever 'not-I' exists for Fichte is wholly due to the absolute 'I' limiting its own activity. See Royce (1892:157–8), Seidel (1993:98), and Hickey (2004). Finally, Günter Zöller (1998:83) claims that Fichte eliminates any remnants of transcendental realism (the thing in itself) and attributes both the form and content of experience to the activity of the absolute 'I'.

<sup>4</sup> Breazeale (2002; 2014:88–92) and Crowe (2008) represent this more recent line of interpretation.

of the term. Whereas both Kant and Fichte hold that ‘real ground’ denotes what causes or determines something, ‘logical ground’ (‘ideal ground’ for Fichte) denotes what must be thought of as a condition for something without requiring a metaphysical commitment to that condition. It is through this idea of a logical/ideal ground, furthermore, that we find both Kant and Fichte committed to FV.

For Fichte, experience consists of reciprocally related finite subjects and objects. In this respect, I shall argue, Fichte’s position is quite similar to Kant’s own view. This is consistent with Fichte’s controversial claim that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is “none other than” Kant’s own system albeit presented in a different manner (*IWL*, 1:420).<sup>5</sup> *Pace* Fichte, there are good interpretative and philosophical reasons for holding that Kant and Fichte are both committed to FV and deploy the term ‘ground’ in parallel ways. Whereas the finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ (Fichte) or phenomenal subject and object (Kant) are real grounds for one another, the absolute ‘I’ (Fichte) or transcendental self (Kant) serves only as an ideal/logical ground. Whereas claims invoking real grounds are meant to be literally true, claims invoking ideal/logical grounds are not literally true (insofar as this involves a metaphysical commitment), though they must nonetheless be made within the aforementioned domain of discourse.

This paper is broken into four sections. I begin by discussing Fichte’s dichotomy as well as some of his reasons for rejecting dogmatism in *IWL*. The second section examines the version of idealism that Fichte presents in *WLn*, his own remarks on ‘ground’, as well as the important role that his “law of reflective opposition” plays in the constitution of experience. Although one can find significant support for RV in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, I shall argue that one can find support for FV as well. The third section reconstructs Kant’s Transcendental Deduction as an argument for what I call the ‘interdependency thesis’, i.e., the view that phenomenal subjects and objects (Fichte’s finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’) are sufficient real grounds for one another.<sup>6</sup> I argue not only that Kant’s thesis not only prefigures the law of reflective opposition that Fichte endorses in the *Wissenschaftslehre* but also that Fichte’s distinction between real and ideal grounds can be better understood through Kant’s distinction between real and logical grounds. The final section examines the interpretative and philosophical advantages of viewing both Kant and Fichte as committed to FV. First, although my interpretation already brings Fichte and Kant closer together than is generally thought, viewing them as both committed to FV brings them closer still. Second, FV allows Fichte to unite theoretical and practical reason in a way that Kant only envisioned but was not able to realise. Consequently, the *Wissenschaftslehre* can be viewed, at least from Fichte’s perspective, not only as a new presentation of Kant’s Critical philosophy, but also as the perfection of it.

## 2. Fichte’s Dichotomy and the Problems with Dogmatism

In *IWL*, Fichte defines ‘experience’ as “the system of representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity” (*IWL*, 1:423). The purpose of philosophy, in turn, is to “display the ground [*Grund*] of all experience” (*IWL*, 1:423).<sup>7</sup> Experience must have a ground since the former is contingent.<sup>8</sup> The ground itself, however, is necessary. Fichte is following K. L. Reinhold who held that the ground of experience must be singular and wholly unconditioned. Reinhold (1978:110–15) reasons that if experience is to be systematic (i.e., exhibit thoroughgoing interconnection), it must be grounded on a single principle which is not it-

<sup>5</sup> See also *IWL*, 1:430. Breazeale goes so far as to claim that Fichte spent his entire professional life dedicated to the task of defending the ‘spirit’ of the Kant’s philosophy. See Breazeale (2014:436).

<sup>6</sup> For present purposes, one can understand the ‘phenomenal’ as what lies within experience (the bounds of sense), while whatever might lie outside experience would be ‘noumenal’. For Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, see the First *Critique*, A235–60/B295–315.

<sup>7</sup> See also *WLn*, 13. Here I depart from Breazeale’s translation of *Grund* as ‘basis or foundation’. Although not incorrect, translating this term as ‘ground’ builds terminological continuity with Kant.

<sup>8</sup> See *WLn*, 13.

self derived from any other principle.<sup>9</sup> Fichte likewise agrees with Reinhold that whatever serves as this single, fundamental ground of experience must lie outside of experience either on the side of the subject (idealism) or on the side of the object (dogmatism).<sup>10</sup>

For Fichte, these are the only two options and they are mutually exclusive.<sup>11</sup> Experience always consists of an object being present to a subject and the philosopher must choose one of these two perspectives from which to abstract, resulting either in the object in itself or the subject in itself.<sup>12</sup> Idealism holds that experience is grounded in an absolute ‘I’. Both objects and subjects of experience are “produced by a free, but law-governed, act of thinking” (*IWL*, 1:448; see also *IWL*, 1:440–1). Dogmatism, by contrast, holds that experience is grounded on the thing in itself. The dogmatist is committed to materialism and thoroughgoing determinism.<sup>13</sup> For Fichte, the central question that must be answered in deciding between dogmatism and idealism is whether the independence of the subject should be sacrificed for the independence of the object (dogmatism) or whether the independence of the object should be sacrificed for the independence of the subject (idealism).<sup>14</sup>

Although Fichte does not think that idealism can directly refute dogmatism (or vice-versa), he thinks there are good reasons for preferring idealism to dogmatism. I mention three:

1. Idealism has a ready explanation for how we are conscious of our own freedom (our awareness is the finite counterpart of the free action of the absolute ‘I’), but dogmatism must claim that this awareness is a mere illusion.<sup>15</sup>
2. Whereas intellectual activity (idealism) can explain how the representations (mental events) that constitute experience arise, dogmatism cannot explain how mental events (or the intellect itself) arise from what is ostensibly non-mental (mechanically interacting material things in themselves).<sup>16</sup>
3. Once idealism is offered as an alternative to dogmatism, there is no reason to assume that there are things in themselves since the only reason there was to assume

---

<sup>9</sup> One can further motivate Fichte’s understanding of ‘ground’ by deploying what Paul Franks (2005:102–3) calls the “heterogeneity requirement”, that is, the requirement that the unconditioned ground for a series of conditioned things must be heterogeneous to the members of the series insofar as the ground is not subject to the same laws as what it grounds. If the heterogeneity requirement applies to the ground of experience, then the ground could not lie within experience on pain of subjecting that ground to the same laws that govern experience. As I shall argue below, the heterogeneity requirement applies only in situations where one has already stipulated that the ground is *unconditioned*. A ground can be *conditioned*, however, and still be a ground as long as the relationship between the ground and what it grounds is *reciprocal*.

<sup>10</sup> See *IWL*, 1:425 and *WLn*, 14. There is some disagreement in the literature as to the extent of Fichte’s agreement with Reinhold. The disagreement surrounds Fichte’s review of G. E. Schulze’s *Aenesidemus*. Schulze poses a number of objections to Reinhold’s view. Commentators like Breazeale hold that Fichte’s review indicates a break with Reinhold and general agreement with Schulze. See Breazeale (2014), ch. 2. By contrast, commentators like James Messina take just the opposite view on Fichte’s review; Messina (2011) claims that Fichte introduces the absolute ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, outside of consciousness, in order to respond to one of Schulze’s objections on behalf of Reinhold. For more on the debate between Reinhold, Schulze, and Fichte, see Neuhouser (1990:687–6 and 102–9), as well as Martin (1997), ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> See *IWL* 1:426 and 431. Whereas scepticism does not even try to ground experience (*FWL*, 1:121), dualist explanations fail to be based on a single principle. See also Breazeale (2014:309).

<sup>12</sup> This point is made by Breazeale (2014:109n.32).

<sup>13</sup> See *IWL*, 1:430–1.

<sup>14</sup> See *IWL*, 1:432.

<sup>15</sup> See *IWL*, 1:430 and *WLn*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> See *IWL* 1:437 and *WLn* p. 15. When it comes to Fichte’s characterisation of dogmatism, it should be noted that Kant would reject any talk about non-spatiotemporal things in themselves as material (extended) or as interacting mechanically. Beiser (2000:30) notes that Fichte’s idealism faces the opposite problem of explaining how infinite (absolute) intellectual activity can produce objects that are finite and passive.

their existence in the first place, according to the dogmatist, was that they were necessary to ground experience.<sup>17</sup>

As we will see in the final section, these theoretical reasons for preferring idealism to dogmatism are ultimately in service of practical considerations that are far more important from Fichte's perspective. Dogmatism requires us to deny our own existence as autonomous moral agents, agents that are fundamentally different from the mechanically governed world that surround them. Although our agency requires us to interact with this world, our agency is not reducible to this world.

Even though Fichte claims, in *IWL*, that dogmatism is a genuine alternative to idealism, elsewhere Fichte suggests that dogmatism may be self-stultifying.<sup>18</sup> For example, in his review of G. E. Schulze's *Aenesidemus*, Fichte seems to hold that the act of abstraction required to consider dogmatism is itself impossible:

However, it is by no means ingrained in human nature to think of a thing independent of *any* faculty of representation *at all*; on the contrary, it is downright impossible to do so. (Fichte 1988, 1:19)

This might seem to be making the familiar Berkeleyan point that *thinking* a thing is always representational insofar as *representations* (for Berkeley, sensible ideas) are the only things that can be thought (can serve as intentional objects). Fichte goes further, however, and seems to deny that the thing in itself could even be thought (i.e., that it could serve as an intentional object). Earlier in his review of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte claims that

the thought of a thing possessing existence and specific properties *in itself* and apart from any faculty of representation is a piece of whimsy, a pipe dream, a non-thought. (Fichte 1988, 1:17)

One might wonder, however, whether one system (dogmatism) whose foundation cannot even be thought can really offer a genuine alternative to another system (idealism) whose foundation is itself present to consciousness.

### 3. Fichte's Idealism and the Law of Reflective Opposition

Assuming that idealism and dogmatism are the only two options for grounding experience, and that dogmatism is untenable, one must turn to idealism which grounds experience on the absolute 'I'. In *WLn*, Fichte characterises the absolute 'I' "solely in terms of activity [...] and] appeals to the acting of the I in order to explain everything that is present within consciousness" (*WLn*, 35). According to Fichte, the absolute 'I' is real only through this activity. Unlike rational psychologists (e.g., Descartes), Fichte is not committed to the existence of some mental substance within which this activity inheres. The "absolute 'I'" is pre-individual (not a particular phenomenal subject).<sup>19</sup> It "cannot be derived from anything higher" (*WLn*, 213) and so is unconditioned. Fichte claims, in *IWL*, that the absolute 'I' can be usefully compared with Kant's conception of 'pure apperception' (*IWL*, 1:472, 476). For Kant, this is the 'I think', a pure mental activity, which "must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all" (B131–2). Kant does not believe that representations which could not be thought by a subject could count as representations of that subject. Even so, these representations are not simply *produced* by the activity of apperception as they are by Fichte's abso-

<sup>17</sup> See *IWL*, 1:431.

<sup>18</sup> For his claim that dogmatism is a genuine alternative to idealism, see *IWL*, 1:426.

<sup>19</sup> Zöllner (1998:57–8) makes this point.

lute ‘I’. This leads Fichte to criticise Kant, in *WLn*m, for considering “the ‘I’ only as ordering the manifold, and not as producing the same” (*WLn*m, 124). For Kant, apperception can only *organise* (in accordance with the categories) representational content that is already *given* in sensible intuition. Without this representational content, there would be only thinking without anything being thought, which is patently absurd.

Frederick Neuhouser attempts to explain Fichte’s conception of the absolute ‘I’ by drawing an analogy with electrical current: “[T]he current is nothing more than the motion of electrons, and yet it would not be unusual to say that their activity also *produces* the current” (Neuhouser 1990:108). Just as the absolute ‘I’ is identical with the activity through which it is produced, so too is the current identical with the activity (motion of electrons) through which it is produced. To extend the analogy, just as the current would be real regardless of what else it produces (e.g., the motion of a fan), the absolute ‘I’ is real regardless of what else it produces (*viz.*, experience). Although Neuhouser suggests that Fichte can avoid the charge of noumenalism by insisting on the reality of the absolute ‘I’ as an *activity* and not a *thing*, this strategy is unsuccessful. To serve as the ground of experience, the absolute ‘I’ must lie outside of experience. According to Fichte’s *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (*FWL*) from 1794, furthermore, the absolute ‘I’ is “wholly unconditioned and incapable of determination by any higher thing” (*FWL*, 1:119). As the unconditioned condition for the finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, the absolute ‘I’ would be noumenal for Kant. As he says in the *Prolegomena*:

But if reason, which can never be fully satisfied with any use of the rules of the understanding in experience because such use is always still conditioned, requires completion of this chain of conditions, then the understanding is driven out of its circle, in order partly to represent the objects of experience in a series stretching so far that no experience can comprise the likes of it, partly (in order to complete the series) even to look for noumena entirely outside said experience to which reason can attach the chain and in that way, independent at least of the conditions of experience, nonetheless can make its hold complete. (*Prol*, 4:332–3)

Although the RV interpretation of Fichte does not make the rational psychologist’s mistake in the Paralogisms (that is, inferring the existence of an unconditioned substance within which the activity of apperception inheres), by asserting the activity of the absolute ‘I’ as the complete sufficient condition for finite selves and not-selves, it makes a mistake similar to the rational cosmologist’s mistake in the thesis to the Third Antinomy. As we shall see below, although Kant believes that we must be able to *think* of such an activity as grounding the free actions of phenomenal subjects, we cannot cognise it. Kant would say that the assertion of an unconditioned *activity* (Third Antinomy) is just as problematic as the assertion of an unconditioned *thing* (Paralogisms). What matters for their noumenal status is not the distinction between thing and activity, but rather the fact that both are *unconditioned*.

Even so, what has been said thus far suggests that Fichte subscribes to RV and there is additional evidence that bolsters this view. Fichte claims elsewhere that the absolute ‘I’ is transcendently real (a noumenal commitment) and that the entirety of experience is generated by the unconditioned activity of the absolute ‘I’. In his review of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte refers to the absolute ‘I’ as “hyperphysical” and suggests that it is noumenally real.<sup>20</sup> In *WLn*m, Fichte claims that when investigating the ground of experience,

we assume the existence of something lying beyond all experience [...] [the] idealist accounts for representation on the basis of a representing subject, whose existence he presupposes. (*WLn*m, 14)

<sup>20</sup> Fichte (1988), 1:16, 23.

Fichte does not even seem that concerned with the charge of noumenalism, admitting at one point that “there are noumena, and these are nothing but our own pure thinking objectively considered” (*WLn*m, 203). Like Kant, Fichte makes a distinction between two worlds, the intelligible world (noumenal) and the world of appearances (phenomenal). Whereas Kant thought there was no (epistemic) way to build a bridge between the supersensible and the sensible, however, Fichte claims to have completed this project:

The *Wissenschaftslehre* has no trouble in constructing such a bridge. According to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the intelligible world is the condition for the possibility of the world of appearances; the latter is constructed upon the basis of the former. The intelligible world, in turn, rests upon its own proper center, namely, the I itself, which is a whole only in the act of willing. All representations originate in the act of thinking of willing. (*WLn*m, 124–5)

Regardless of whether Fichte is successful in building such a bridge, I want to focus on what would cross such a bridge assuming that he successfully built it. It seems that Fichte is saying that the representations that constitute experience (phenomenal) originate in the activity of the absolute ‘I’ (noumenal). Put differently, Fichte seems to be suggesting that the activity of the absolute ‘I’ is the productive cause of the representations that constitute experience. There are several passages in *WLn*m that support this view, e.g., when Fichte claims that “with its self-production the ‘I’ simultaneously produces its experience” (*WLn*m, 192).<sup>21</sup> Fichte believes, furthermore, that his position will allow him to answer a question that Kant was unable to answer, namely, why must we posit any objects at all?

The *Wissenschaftslehre* is now able to answer this question: [We posit objects] precisely because we have posited an absolute acting, to which the objects of our experience refer and by means of which these objects are given to us. For it is only by means of such acting—and moreover, only insofar as it is a hindered or arrested activity—that we obtain any consciousness whatsoever of what is actual. Only thereby is *experience* possible. (*WLn*m, 61)<sup>22</sup>

According to Fichte, the objects of experience simply are “hindered or arrested activity” of the absolute ‘I’. What is the *source* of the limitation, however, of the activity of the absolute ‘I’? Are these limitations self-imposed or do they come from without? In *WLn*m, Fichte characterises this limitation in terms of a “feeling” that leads us to infer the existence of objects outside us that are the cause of this limitation.<sup>23</sup> Fichte is reluctant to admit, however, that such inferences are warranted.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes he suggests that the feelings themselves are brute facts, but ones that provide the matter of experience.<sup>25</sup>

Fichte even draws a distinction between his conception of ‘feeling’ and Kant’s conception of ‘sensation’ insofar as the latter requires relation to an object through thinking.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See also *WLn*m, 21, 35–6, and 60.

<sup>22</sup> As we shall see in the next section, Kant has a clear answer to this question as well.

<sup>23</sup> *WLn*m, 83. There are important connections between Fichte’s discussion of *Gefühl* or ‘feeling’ in *WLn*m and his discussion of an *Anstoß* or ‘check’ in *FWL*. Although my focus is on *WLn*m and not *FWL*, Breazeale (2014:170) argues that *Gefühl* actually fulfils all of the functions that Fichte earlier attributes to *Anstoß*, namely, constraining the *practical* (striving) activity of the ‘I’ while also stimulating the *theoretical* (cognitive) activity of the ‘I’.

<sup>24</sup> Here he might be following Kant who recognises that such inferences are always doubtful since the effect (feeling) could have arisen from any number of causes. See A368.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see *WLn*m, 69–71, 99, and 165–6. Breazeale (2014:165) refers to them as “sheer occurrence”.

<sup>26</sup> Kant himself makes a similar distinction. See *KU*, 5:206.

The purpose of this distinction, according to Claude Piché (1998:74–5), is to avoid F. H. Jacobi’s famous criticism Kant, namely, that

without the thing-in-itself one cannot enter the Kantian philosophy [since one requires a cause of sensation], but with the thing-in-itself one cannot remain [one cannot deploy the category of causation beyond the bounds of sense]. (Jacobi 1968, 2:304; bracketed additions are mine)

Even if Fichte avoids Jacobi’s criticism, however, it raises another question, namely, what is the cause of feeling? If feelings are just brute facts that cannot be explained, then Fichte faces a criticism similar to the one that he earlier lodges against the dogmatist. Whereas the dogmatist must say that our feeling of freedom is inexplicable, Fichte must say the same about *all* of our sensible feelings.<sup>27</sup> In fact, if feelings really are ungrounded, then it would seem that Fichte has simply replaced the dogmatism of things-in-themselves with the dogmatism of feelings as brute facts.

This seems to contradict a key aspect of RV, namely, the idea that self-activity is responsible not only for *organising* the manifold but is also responsible for producing the *content* of the manifold itself. If feelings are the content of the manifold, they must ultimately be accounted for by the activity of the absolute ‘I’. The way that Fichte resolves this apparent contradiction is by claiming that the feelings come into existence through the act of reflecting on a limitation that the ‘I’ assigns to itself. This comes out pretty clearly when one combines Fichte’s summary of §14 of *WLnm* with his summary of §15: “Feeling is the relation of limitation to reflection [...] limitation is not a limitation of the ‘I’ and does not exist for the ‘I’ unless the ‘I’ assigns it to itself” (*WLnm*, 166 and 172).<sup>28</sup> Feeling itself requires the activity of the ‘I’ insofar as it involves a relationship between activity (reflection) and something that comes into existence for the ‘I’ through this act of reflection (limitation). Although this claim might appear to be epistemic (i.e., the absolute ‘I’ *discovers* this limitation), Fichte makes pretty clear that his claim is metaphysical (i.e., the absolute ‘I’ *creates* this limitation): “The limitation we have been discussing, the limitation from which consciousness starts, is *not inflicted upon me*, it is one I assign myself” (*WLnm*, 172; emphasis added).

Whereas feelings serve as an “ideal ground” of experience, the activity of the absolute ‘I’ is the “real ground” of experience.<sup>29</sup> Fichte characterises the real ground as “the determining agency that intervenes between what is determinable and what is determinate” (*WLnm*, 180). He goes on to insist, furthermore, that this agency is causal and that *all* efficacy is ultimately self-activity.<sup>30</sup> Feelings serve as the ideal ground of experience insofar as they constitute the matter of experience.<sup>31</sup> These feelings, however, result from the absolute I reflecting on the limitations that it places for itself. As Fichte puts it, “[a]ll experience [...] is based upon this synthesis of pure willing and original limitation, a synthesis that occurs by means of reflection” (*WLnm*, 163). In this way, the absolute ‘I’ is the real ground of experience. The activity of the absolute ‘I’ causes everything present in experience (placing limits for itself, reflecting upon them, and organising them). Fichte seems to leave little room for

<sup>27</sup> Although Fichte does not recognise that his view faces the same objection he posed for dogmatism, he recognises that his view could lead to dogmatism insofar as characterising feelings as brute facts leads us to *think* of things in themselves as the cause of these feelings. See *WLnm*, 165–6.

<sup>28</sup> Although it is tempting to connect Fichtean ‘feeling’ back to Kantian non-conceptualism, this position is difficult to maintain insofar as all activity of the ‘I’ is law-governed and so conceptually mediated. The better comparison might be with our moral feelings which, for Kant, are self-imposed through a practical law-governed procedure. See *KpV*, 5:73–6.

<sup>29</sup> Here I am following Breazeale (2014:59).

<sup>30</sup> See *WLnm*, 197.

<sup>31</sup> See *WLnm*, 69.

misinterpretation, claiming that “experience in its entirety is nothing but an acting on the part of a rational being” (*WLn*m, 24).<sup>32</sup>

Although I have spent some time discussing the *ground* of experience for Fichte and shall return to the concept again when discussing Kant’s view in the next section, I have said little about *experience* itself. As mentioned above, Fichte distinguishes between two standpoints: the intelligible and the sensible. What appears to be given from the sensible standpoint (feeling) is actually produced from the intelligible standpoint (absolute activity).<sup>33</sup> Within experience (the sensible standpoint), I am conscious of myself as limited. My body occupies a discrete spatial location and the external world limits my agency in a number of ways (natural law, external objects, and other embodied subjects). Consciousness of this limitation requires consciousness of other things (the finite ‘not-I’) that are not me. Consciousness of these other things simultaneously, however, requires consciousness of myself. As Fichte says:

I cannot be aware of any object or thing without being aware of myself; but I can be aware of myself only by being aware of an object [...]. The intuition of the ‘I’ and the intuition of the ‘not-I’ are thus reciprocally related to each other; neither is possible apart from the other. The reciprocal interaction just indicated never ceases; it is only further determined. (*WLn*m, 93)<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere, Fichte calls this the “law of reflective opposition” (*WLn*m, 38).<sup>35</sup> He goes so far as to claim that “nothing in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is more crucial than this interaction of the I and the not-I” (*WLn*m, 62). Fichte underscores this point by using the reciprocal interaction between the finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ as the *Leitfaden* that connects *WLn*m back to *FWL*.<sup>36</sup>

Fichte argues, in *FWL*, that the ground of experience can be explained through a hierarchy of three fundamental principles. The most fundamental principle states that “the self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence” (*FWL*, 1:98). What the absolute ‘I’ posits is itself as a certain kind of law-governed activity. This activity is ‘absolute’, however, insofar as it is unconditioned. Fichte claims that the “self posits absolutely, without ground or condition of any kind, an absolute totality of the real” (*FWL*, 1:137). It is from this unconditioned activity that Fichte derives the category of reality.<sup>37</sup>

The second fundamental principle holds that the absolute ‘I’ posits a ‘not-I’ which is “opposed absolutely to the self” (*FWL*, 1:104). The second principle is conditioned by the first principle with regard to its “matter” insofar as the ‘not-I’ is everything that the absolute ‘I’ is not and so depends on the ‘I’ for this opposition.<sup>38</sup> If the absolute ‘I’ is the totality of the real, what is opposed absolutely to it must be the totality of all negation, an absolute ‘not-I’. It is from the “form of the inference from counterposition to nonexistence” that Fichte derives the category of negation (*FWL*, 1:105.). As we shall see in the third principle, it is the opposition between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ that allows the ‘I’ to become conscious of itself as something determinate.

<sup>32</sup> See also *WLn*m, 18, 49, and 101.

<sup>33</sup> See also *WLn*m, 151, 201, and 231. Fichte’s clearest statement of this point comes in his *System of Ethics*: “From the transcendental point of view, the world is something that is made; from the ordinary point of view, it is something that is given” (Fichte 2005, 4:354). In *FWL*, Fichte says that were we aware in “ordinary reflection” (the level of the finite ‘I’) of what we are aware of through “philosophical reflection” (the level of the absolute ‘I’), we would call “the reality of things outside of us [...] a deception” (*FWL*, 1:234).

<sup>34</sup> See also *WLn*m, 62, 122, and 138.

<sup>35</sup> Although Fichte applies this law to a number of different things (thinking/imagination, cognising/willing, practical/theoretical reason), I am solely concerned with its application to the finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’.

<sup>36</sup> See *WLn*m, 72–3.

<sup>37</sup> See *FWL*, 1:99.

<sup>38</sup> See *FWL*, 1:104.

This opposition between absolute ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ is resolved through the third fundamental principle which is also the principle that has the closest connection to the law of reflective opposition in *WLn*m. The third fundamental principle holds that “in the self I oppose a divisible not-self to the divisible self” (*FWL*, 1:110). What is “divisible” is the quantity of reality that the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’ contain. Unlike their absolute and so *infinite* counterparts, in the third principle, the ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ are *finite* since their reality is divisible.<sup>39</sup> The finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ determine the quantity of reality that the other contains by mutually limiting one another. The activity of the finite ‘I’ is limited by the passivity of the ‘not-I’ and vice-versa. It is from this reciprocal relationship that Fichte derives the category of limitation (the final of Kant’s three categories of quality).<sup>40</sup>

By limiting one another, both of them become “something”, i.e., determined phenomenal subjects and objects, subjects and objects of experience (to use Kant’s language).<sup>41</sup> In fact, Fichte goes so far as to claim “no subject, no object; no object no subject” (*FWL*, 1:183). This is where Fichte comes closest to articulating the position that I shall later attribute to Kant. Although Fichte and Kant would agree that phenomenal subjects and objects (finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’) are impossible without one another, it is less clear whether they share the same reasons for thinking so or agree on what is required for this relationship. For example, whereas I shall argue that Kant subscribes to FV, the evidence thus far suggests that Fichte subscribes to RV. Fichte seems to make no bones about it when he claims that the finite ‘I’ and the finite ‘not-I’ are “products of original acts of the self” (*FWL*, 1:107).

Notwithstanding the evidence presented above, however, there is some reason to believe that Fichte might have actually subscribed to FV.<sup>42</sup> For example, Fichte refers to the absolute I as something that

possesses no actuality in the proper sense of the term [...] [;] instead it must be thought of as something that is necessarily thinkable, as something ideal [...] [that] possesses the reality of necessary thinking, and it is for necessary thinking that reality exists. (*WLn*m, 104)

Elsewhere, Fichte characterises the “I in itself” as a “mere idea”, one that is “nothing” and “meaningless” considered on its own (*WLn*m, 62, 103). Unlike mere inventions or fabrications, however, the absolute ‘I’ is a *necessary* assumption for Fichte’s system. To that extent, it possesses the ‘reality’ of necessary thinking.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned above, Fichte distinguishes between the philosophical (intelligible) and ordinary (sensible) standpoints. Fichte is clear, in *IWL*, that the purpose of the philosophical is only to make the ordinary comprehensible, but that does not entail that the former is actual in the sense that the latter is.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of whether one accepts a realist or fictionalist view of the absolute ‘I’, Fichte believes the feeling of necessity, indicative of experience, arises from the reciprocal interaction between finite ‘I’ (activity) and ‘not-I’ (passivity). This feeling arises from the self being compelled to act by that which it is not. As Fichte says:

<sup>39</sup> See *FWL*, 1:109. The absolute ‘I’ is “indivisible” since it is the *totality* of reality (*FWL*, 1:109–10). In the case of the finite ‘not-I’, its ‘reality’ is a “negative quantity” (*FWL*, 1:110) or “real negation” (*FWL*, 1:133).

<sup>40</sup> See *FWL*, 1:108.

<sup>41</sup> See *FWL*, 1:109–10.

<sup>42</sup> Although I think FV has some textual support and can help square Fichte’s view with Kant’s view, I do not want to argue that it is consistent with all of the realist sounding claims Fichte makes. It is difficult to see how a *fictional* ground (absolute ‘I’) could produce something *actual* (experience). It is also hard to see how FV could avoid facing some of the same objections (discussed at the end of Section 1) that Fichte lodges against dogmatism. For a discussion of this latter problem, see Crowe (2008:282–3).

<sup>43</sup> Here I am following Crowe (2008:278–80).

<sup>44</sup> See *IWL*, 1:455n. For further discussion, see Breazeale (2014:148).

This passivity must be intuited. But a passivity cannot be intuited save as an impossibility of the opposed activity; a feeling of being compelled to a specific act, of which feeling the imagination is certainly capable. This compulsion is stabilized in understanding as *necessity*. (*FWL*, 1:238–9)

Even if Fichte is committed to the actuality of an unconditioned activity (absolute ‘I’) as the distal explanation of experience (*pace* RV), it is important to note that experience (and the feeling of necessity that accompanies it), according to Fichte, does not arise until the third fundamental principle. The third fundamental principle in *FWL*, or later the law of reflective opposition in *WLnM*, is absolutely central to Fichte’s project in the *Wissenschaftslehre* insofar as it provides the proximate explanation of experience. Contrary to *FWL*, I argue in the next section that Fichte need not make appeal to a *real* ground for experience beyond the bounds of sense (first fundamental principle). Specifically, Kant offers us a way of grounding experience without going beyond it. In addition to attributing this approach to Kant, I argue that Fichte ultimately endorses it with the law of reflective opposition in *WLnM*.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. Kant’s Interdependency Thesis

After presenting his two options for how experience is grounded (i.e., either idealism or dogmatism), in *IWL*, Fichte throws down the gauntlet. Anyone who disagrees with him

must prove that there is some other way to elevate oneself above experience except by means of abstraction, or else he must prove that consciousness of experience contains some additional component beyond the two already mentioned. (*IWL*, 1:426)

In this section, I argue that although experience consists only of phenomenal objects and subjects, nevertheless, they are related in a way that grounds experience without going beyond experience.

In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant aims to prove that “the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience, and are thus also valid *a priori* of all objects of experience” (B161). Kant defines “experience” in a way similar to Fichte. Experience is that

in which all perceptions are represented as in thoroughgoing and lawlike connection [...] and is nothing other than the synthetic unity of the appearances in accordance with concepts. (A110)

Insofar as all appearances (sensible representations) are subject to *a priori* concepts (categories), they are connected necessarily in a system.

Kant claims that appearances are the means by which subjects are immediately related to objects in empirical intuition, but such objects of representation are undetermined unless these representations are united in the concept of what it is to be an object (categories).<sup>46</sup> The unification of representations requires synthesis and consequently the unity of consciousness (apperception) in the synthesis of them. The ‘I think’ unifies all its representations within a single consciousness in accordance with the categories understood as rules of synthesis. Consequently, according to Kant, “the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations” (A105). For these unified representations, we think of some object as corresponding to them. This is the “transcendental object = X”, which is always one and

---

<sup>45</sup> See *WLnM*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> See B146–7.

the same thing: a transcendental placeholder for the object of experience. The concept of a transcendental object is necessary, however, so that there is something to which cognition is related.<sup>47</sup>

At this point, it might appear that Kant views the object of experience in a way analogous to Fichte, that is, as something that is simply produced through intellectual activity. As was noted above, however, although apperception generates the *unity* of representations it does not produce the *representations* themselves. Perhaps even more important for present purposes, although the subject's activity determines the object of experience, experiencing objects is what determines the subject of experience. Without the synthetic unity of these representations (objects of experience), one would not be able to represent oneself as an identical subject enduring throughout these representations. As Kant says:

For the empirical consciousness that accompanies different representations is by itself dispersed and without relation to the identity of the subject. The latter relation therefore does not yet come about by my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but rather by my *adding* one representation to the other and being conscious of their synthesis. Therefore it is only because I can combine a manifold of given representations *in one consciousness* that it is possible for me to represent the *identity of the consciousness in these representations* itself, i.e., the *analytical* unity of apperception is only possible under the presupposition of some *synthetic* one. (B133)<sup>48</sup>

The idea seems to be that I am aware of myself as a particular consciousness only through the synthetic unity of my empirical representations (i.e., objects of experience). This makes it possible for me to recognise myself as the same consciousness throughout these representations. Put differently, my consciousness of objects at a particular time (synthetic unity) is what makes it possible for me to recognise myself as the same consciousness over time (analytic unity). This is a key passage from the B-edition Transcendental Deduction and understanding it in this way dovetails nicely with what Kant says later in the Refutation of Idealism. There he argues that the consciousness of one's own existence as determined in time proves the existence of objects outside of oneself. For Kant, "the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside of me" (B276). This is similar to Fichte's claim, discussed at the end of the last section, that in order for the finite 'I' to be conscious, it must be conscious of something opposed to itself (finite 'not-I').<sup>49</sup> According to RV, the difference between them is that whereas Fichte's finite 'not-I' is fundamentally *dependent* on the productive activity of the absolute 'I', Kant's object of experience and subject of experience are fundamentally *interdependent*.

The subject of experience makes the objects of experience possible by unifying representations into objects of experience, but the synthetic unity of these representations makes the subject of experience possible.<sup>50</sup> Since the subject of experience makes the object of experi-

---

<sup>47</sup> See A109.

<sup>48</sup> One might respond that the synthetic unity Kant has in mind in this passage is simply the original (*a priori*) synthetic unity of apperception and that this form of unity does not require the unity of representations in empirical intuition (objects of experience), but rather only the unity of representations in pure intuition (mathematical objects). Although Kant's focus is on *a priori* unity in most of this section (§16 of the B-edition Transcendental Deduction), this particular passage seems to suggest that Kant has in mind this original synthetic unity as applied to a given manifold of empirical representations.

<sup>49</sup> There are times when Fichte seems to endorse something like Kant's argument in the Refutation (e.g., *Foundations of Natural Right*, 3:40). There are other times, however, where Fichte seems to conflate the representations of things outside of us with the existence of things outside of us which is contrary to the Refutation (e.g., *WLn*, 3).

<sup>50</sup> See also Sebastian Gardner's discussion of how subject and object make one another possible in Gardner (1999:157–60).

ence possible, the object is not an independent thing in itself. Instead, the object of experience is a phenomenal object that is possible only through the relation it bears to a subject of experience. Similarly, since the object of experience makes the subject of experience possible, the subject of experience is not an independent absolute ‘I’ (in Kant’s terms, an intelligible or noumenal self). Instead, the subject of experience is the phenomenal subject which is only possible through the relations it bears to phenomenal objects. Kant maintains his transcendental idealism with regard to all objects of experience given that they are nothing once one abandons the perspective of the subject of experience. But since the objects of experience make the subject of experience possible, the objects of experience cannot simply be generated by the subject. Kant maintains his empirical realism with regard to all objects of experience.<sup>51</sup>

What I have been arguing thus far is that the phenomenal subject and object are sufficient to ground one another without appeal to something beyond the bounds of experience to ground either one. Undeniably, there are a number of passages where Kant seems to take the thing in itself as some sort of ground of appearance. He even goes so far as to characterise the relationship between thing in itself and appearance as embodying a conceptual or analytic truth. Although there are many examples, perhaps the best comes in the Preface to the B-edition of the First *Critique*:

Yet the reservation must also be well noted, that even if we cannot *cognize* these same objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to *think* them as things in themselves. For otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears. (Bxxvi-xxvii)<sup>52</sup>

But what should we infer from this conceptual truth? Must there be a thing in itself that causes appearances of phenomenal objects as Fichte’s dogmatist seems to think?<sup>53</sup> Here, it is important to note Kant’s contrast between ‘thinking’ and ‘cognition’. Kant’s point, in this passage, is that we must make use of the *concept* of something that grounds appearance, even if there is *nothing* to which this concept refers. As Kant says in the footnote to the above passage:

But I can *think* whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance whether or not there is a corresponding object somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities. (Bxxvi)

What should we make of this grounding relation? If we take Kant to be applying the category of causation beyond the bounds of sense, it could only be the category in its unschematised and not its schematised form.<sup>54</sup> The unschematised category of causation reflects the hypothetical form of judgement from the logical table of judgements, namely, that of ground to consequent.<sup>55</sup> When discursive creatures like us use these unschematised categories to make theoretical claims beyond the bounds of our sensible intuition, they have

---

<sup>51</sup> For Kant’s discussion of transcendental idealism/empirical realism, see A28/B44, A35–6/B52–3, and A366–80. Although Fichte would likely agree that the finite ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ are both transcendently ideal and empirically real, he grounds both on the absolute ‘I’ which according to RV is something transcendently real. As I shall argue, neither Kant nor Fichte (according to FV) need to assume the transcendental reality of the absolute ‘I’ in order to ground experience.

<sup>52</sup> See also A190/B235, A280/B336, and A283/B339.

<sup>53</sup> Fichte himself suggests that this is the only way to understand Kant’s meaning. See *IWL*, 1:482–3.

<sup>54</sup> The schematised categories are temporally determined versions of the concepts which only have legitimate cognitive application within the bounds of sense (spatiotemporal). See A137–47/B176–87.

<sup>55</sup> For the logical table of judgements, see A70/B95.

“only a logical significance” and are merely “functions of the understanding for concepts, but do not represent any object” (A147/B186 A147/B186-7).<sup>56</sup> As mentioned at the outset, I shall contrast this *logical* ground with a *real* ground which involves causing or determining the thing that is grounded.

Since this distinction plays such an important role in what follows, it is important to get clear on how it shows up in both Kant and Fichte. Fichte defines ‘ground’ in general as that through which one distinct thing is thought through another.<sup>57</sup> When this thinking is *efficacious*, Fichte calls the act of thinking a “real ground” (*WLn*, 197). This is where one distinct thing (e.g., experience) is causally produced through the thought of another (activity of the absolute ‘I’). When this thinking has “no sort of reality apart from representation”, it is only *intentional*, an “ideal ground” (*FWL*, 1:155). In this case, one distinct thing (thinking) is thought through the intentional object (object of thought). What is an ‘ideal ground’ for Fichte, I shall refer to as a ‘logical ground’ for Kant.

Kant also insists on the distinctness of ground and what is grounded in a letter dated May 12, 1789 to Reinhold and his distinction between real and logical ground is closely aligned to Fichte’s distinction between real and ideal ground.<sup>58</sup> In *On a Discovery*, Kant holds that the relationship between a real ground and what it grounds is synthetic and cannot be derived through the principle of contradiction. The relationship has to do with objects and he offers causation as a paradigmatic example.<sup>59</sup> He also distinguishes, in his letter to Reinhold, between two types of real ground: formal and material.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the contributions of the subject to her experience of objects could be considered real formal grounds, the contribution of the object to the subject’s experience of objects (as well as herself as an embodied subject) could be considered real material grounds. I believe that one can also connect Kant’s conception of a real ground to his conception of determination. ‘X really grounding Y’ can be usefully compared to ‘X determining Y’. For example, appearances have their lawful order (Y) by virtue of the unity of apperception in the synthesis of the manifold (X).<sup>61</sup> As we saw in the previous section, Fichte also connects the concept of determination to the concept of a real ground. In his letter to Reinhold, however, Kant goes so far as to define ‘ground’ in general as “that whereby something else (distinct from it) is made *determinate*” though he immediately qualifies this for logical grounds by saying that they are not valid for objects but only for the “manner of representation” (Br, 11:35).

In contrast to a real ground, the relationship between a logical ground and what it grounds is analytic and can be derived through the principle of contradiction.<sup>62</sup> The relationship obtains within a certain class of assertoric propositions. For example, I would argue that this relationship obtains between the concept of a thing in itself and an appearance in the B-Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The reason we must think that ‘the thing in itself grounds appearance’ is that the denial of this proposition is contradictory since it would entail affirming that there is an appearance without anything that appears. The concept of a thing in itself and the concept of an appearance are connected analytically, such that the former serves as the logical ground of the latter. At the same time, Kant makes clear, in the B-Preface of the First *Critique*, that even though the thing in itself must be thought in this context, this does not entail that anything answers to the concept. Tying

<sup>56</sup> Kant gives an example using the unschematised category of substance which he characterises as signifying nothing more than the relation between subject and predicate, i.e., the first relation of thinking in a judgement from the logical table of judgements.

<sup>57</sup> See *WLn*, 196.

<sup>58</sup> See Br, 11:33–9.

<sup>59</sup> See *ÜE*, 8:193–5, 231.

<sup>60</sup> See Br, 11:36.

<sup>61</sup> In this context, Kant calls the unity of apperception a “transcendental ground” (A127).

<sup>62</sup> See *ÜE*, 8:193–5, 230.

this back to Fichte, what must necessarily be thought need not be considered as anything more than an ideal ground (intentional object). As we shall see in the next section, this combination of (1) necessarily having to think X for Y (where Y is actual) and (2) ontological agnosticism about X allows one to relate both Kant's conception of a logical ground and Fichte's conception of an ideal ground (within the context of the examples given in the paper) back to fictionalism.

The kind of relationship that phenomenal subjects and objects bear to one another, however, is that of reciprocal real grounds. Both count as phenomenal substances for Kant insofar as they persist over time. The Third Analogy, which deals with causal community, articulates the general kind of relationship I have argued obtains between phenomenal subjects and objects:<sup>63</sup>

The relation of substances in which the one [e.g., subject] contains determinations the ground of which is contained in the other [e.g., object] is the relation of influence, and, if the latter reciprocally contains the ground of the determination of the former, it is the relation of community or interaction. (A210/B257–8; bracketed additions mine)

Although this relationship (substances in space mutually determining one another's modes) is not strictly identical to the relationship that I have in mind, it helps to illustrate that the notion of mutual determination or reciprocal real grounds is not itself incoherent by Kant's lights. Just as the determination of a phenomenal object in space requires the synthetic activity of the subject, so too does the determination of a phenomenal subject in time (unity of consciousness over time) require representing these phenomenal objects in space. Whereas Kant is talking simply about reciprocal real *material* grounds in the Third Analogy, however, I am articulating an account of reciprocal real *formal* (subject) and *material* (object) grounds using the Transcendental Deduction.

By 'mutual determination', I do not mean mutual production (in the sense that the father begat the son who begat the father). This would be viciously circular. Rather, what I mean is that neither phenomenal objects nor phenomenal subjects would possess certain essential properties absent the relationship they bear to one another. The object possesses its spatiotemporal and categorial properties by virtue of its relationship to the subject. The subject is the real ground for these determinations of objects. The subject is conscious of its identity over time by virtue of its relationship to objects. The objects are the real ground for this determination of the subject.

A good example of the relationship I have in mind can be found in Robert Boyle's discussion of the first lock and key. Put simply, he claims that without the existence of the key, the lock is not really a lock, but rather just a hunk of metal organised in a certain way. The same thing goes for the key.<sup>64</sup> Both the lock and the key are determined to their essential function by virtue of the relationship that they bear to one another.

Another example, one that does a good job of illustrating the relationship between phenomenal subjects and objects, or subjects and objects of experience, is the relationship between points and line segments in the first postulate of Euclid's *Elements*. Whereas a straight line segment is uniquely determined by its two endpoints, these points are uniquely determined by the straight line that is drawn between them. Even so, a point is not reducible to a line or vice-versa. Although Euclid has a primitive definition of 'point' as that which has no part and of 'line' as breadthless length, the geometrical objects that these terms denote are completely indeterminate without reference to one another. Whereas according to RV the absolute 'I' produces both subjects and objects of experience, Kant believes that the subjects and objects of experience determine one another. Just as in the Euclid example, subjects

<sup>63</sup> See Kant's definition of the schematised category of substance (A144/B183).

<sup>64</sup> See Boyle (1991:23).

and objects of experience are wholly indeterminate outside of the relationship they bear to one another. Although subjects and objects of experience are *real* grounds for one another, subjects and objects considered apart from the relationship they bear to one another are only *logical* grounds.

The logical ground need not denote anything real (e.g., the dogmatist's thing in itself), but rather something merely conceptual. For example, on the side of the object of experience, this concept must be thought as corresponding to the phenomenal object as a synthesised collection of appearances. This returns us to Kant's conception of the transcendental object = X, which, as noted, plays an important role in the Transcendental Deduction, insofar as it serves as a transcendental placeholder for the object of experience. In particular, even though the transcendental object is only "the concept of something in general" (A265) which denotes nothing in particular, when the synthesised manifold of appearances is related to this concept, the relation yields cognition of a phenomenal object.<sup>65</sup>

The transcendental object logically grounds phenomenal objects by serving as the transcendental placeholder within which the representations of phenomenal objects are unified by the subject's activity. What is true of the transcendental object is likewise true of the transcendental subject (within Fichte's idealism, the absolute 'I'). In the Paralogisms, Kant claims that the transcendental subject is the "concept of a mere something [...] wholly empty of content" (A355). This concept comes from abstracting from the 'I think' everything that makes it me doing the thinking. Kant explicitly compares the transcendental (or intelligible) subject to the transcendental object, furthermore, in the resolution to the Third Antinomy:

This intelligible character could, of course, never be known immediately, because we cannot perceive anything except insofar as it appears, but it would have to be *thought* in conformity with the empirical character, just as in general we must ground appearances in thought through a transcendental object, even though we know nothing about it as it is in itself. (A540/B568)<sup>66</sup>

It is the subject in its intelligible character that we think of as free. Just as the transcendental object must be thought as logically grounding the appearances of phenomenal objects, transcendental freedom must be thought as logically grounding the free actions of phenomenal subjects. Whereas phenomenal objects and subjects serve as the *real* grounds for one another through the relationship they bear to one another, the *logical* grounds for phenomenal subjects and objects must be thought as lying beyond the bounds of sense. When one considers the subject or object independently of the relationship they bear to one another, one is considering the logical ground. This concept is, however, wholly indeterminate and empty of content.

Although Fichte admits that finite 'I' and 'not-I' are "inseparably connected with each other within experience" (*IWL*, 1:425), according to RV, he would fail to recognise the possibility that subjects and objects might really ground one another through this conjunction. This leads the proponent of RV to search for the real ground of experience beyond the bounds of experience. Once one understands, however, how phenomenal objects and subjects ground one another, one need not assume the actuality of anything (substance or activity) beyond the bounds of sense in order to make sense of this relationship. In other words,

---

<sup>65</sup> Gerd Buchdahl (1992:161) also recognises the *conceptual* nature of the transcendental object.

<sup>66</sup> In the *Opus postumum*, Kant explicitly identifies the transcendental object with the thing in itself. For example, he claims at one point that "the object in itself (noumenon) is a mere thought object (*ens rationis*) [...] the material—the thing-in-itself = X is the mere representation of one's own activity" (OP, 22:36.3–4; 37.10–12). Kant makes a similar point for the transcendental subject, holding that considered in itself it is an "act of the understanding = X" (OP, 22:94.10). Translations are mine. It should be noted that Kant's claims are made from the perspective of the *theoretical* philosophy and should not be viewed as circumscribing what might be claimed from a *practical* perspective.

the real ground for phenomenal objects and subjects need not lie on the side of either *relata* (i.e., the dogmatist's thing in itself or the idealist's absolute 'I'), but can lie in the nature of the relationship itself. For Kant, the phenomenal object and subject are interdependent. They are *intrinsically* related such that neither is possible outside of the relationship they bear to one another.<sup>67</sup>

One might worry, however, that Kant (under this interpretation) falls prey to one of Schulze's (1911:135) criticisms of the Critical philosophy, namely, that Kant is inferring from the *fact* that phenomenal subjects and objects are reciprocally related to the *necessity* of such a relationship.<sup>68</sup> Understanding how Kant might respond to this objection requires examining what he has to say about modality in the Postulates of Empirical Thought. As I have argued, the Transcendental Deduction and the Refutation of Idealism strongly suggest that there (minimally) *is* such a relationship. In fact, the Refutation immediately follows the Second Postulate (which provides Kant's criterion for actuality) and can be viewed as an illustration of the latter.<sup>69</sup> Even if the relationship is *actual*, is there any reason to think it is *necessary*? In the Third Postulate of Empirical Thought, Kant draws a distinction between real (material) necessity and logical (formal) necessity. Whereas the former concerns "only the relations of appearances in accordance with the dynamical law of causality", the latter concerns "the connection of concepts" (A226–7/B279–80). Although one cannot derive the existence of an object simply by examining the concept of a subject, just as one cannot derive the existence of a subject simply by examining the concept of an object, subjects and objects are nonetheless necessarily connected in a way that generally reflects the dynamical law of causality as it operates in the Third Analogy (causal community). Insofar as phenomenal subjects and objects are mutually determining or reciprocal real grounds for one another, the relationship between them is materially (though not logically) necessary. This is a hypothetical not apodeictic form of necessity.<sup>70</sup> If there are phenomenal subjects, then necessarily there have to be phenomenal objects related to them and vice-versa.

## 5. Fictionalism and Fichte's Kantianism

When characterising Fichte's relationship to Kant, Günter Zöllner quips that "Fichte establishes a precarious balance between loyalty and patricide" (Zöllner 1998:11). If one accepts my interpretation, then Fichte clearly agrees ("loyalty") with Kant that the finite 'I' and 'not-I' (phenomenal subject and object) reciprocally determine one another and together constitute experience. Even so, if Fichte accepts RV, the two clearly disagree ("patricide") on whether this relationship requires a real ground outside of itself. Whereas Fichte would hold that the activity of the absolute 'I' is the sole *real* ground of experience and that limitations on this activity are self-imposed, Kant holds that the concept of an absolute 'I' (to use Fichte's term) is only a *logical* ground of experience and that the finite 'not-I' serves as a *real* ground for the finite 'I' (and vice-versa). If one interprets Fichte as accepting FV, however,

<sup>67</sup> The impossibility of the *relata* existing outside of the relationship is what makes the relationship intrinsic. Although I do not have space to defend the view here, I have argued elsewhere that, for Kant, appearances are these relations. In other words, appearances are not particulars (as is commonly held), but are rather spatiotemporal and causal structural intrinsic relations between the phenomenal objects and subjects that serve as the *relata* of these relations. See Hall (2010). For passages that suggest Kant viewed appearances as relations, see B66–7, A251–2, A265/B321, B306–8, and A284–5/B340–1. Fichte likewise endorses the view that "the whole [system of sensibility] is made up of nothing but relations" (*WLn*, 90, my bracketed addition). At a later point, he both endorses and attributes to Kant the view that "we can think of nothing but relations" (*WLn*, 212). Ironically, he goes on to criticise Kant for failing to make "any broader application of the point" (*WLn*, 212).

<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that my interpretation of Kant is quite sensitive to one of Schulze's related worries, namely, that the necessity of thinking something does not entail the being of that thing.

<sup>69</sup> See A225/B272. Kant's criterion for actuality is connection with perception in accordance with the Analogies of Experience.

<sup>70</sup> See A228/B280 and A160–2/B199–201.

he would be far more loyal to Kant than previously thought, at least with regard to the ground of experience.

As mentioned at the outset, Fichte viewed himself as a loyalist of Kant's system. If one interprets Fichte as subscribing to FV, then the above disagreement between Kant and Fichte disappears since the latter would no longer be committed to the transcendental reality of the absolute 'I' allowing it to serve as a logical ground of experience in Kant's sense. As mentioned in Section Two, there is some textual support in Fichte for this interpretation. For example, Fichte does claim that the absolute 'I' is *real* only insofar as it must necessarily be *thought* for experience. If this is what Fichte means when he talks about the absolute 'I' as a "real ground" (i.e., that we *must* think of it as grounding experience), his conception of the absolute 'I' is not that far off from Kant's own conception of the transcendental subject, i.e., something that *must* be thought of as grounding the free actions of a phenomenal subject. To use Kant's language, what is thought is a "transcendental idea" (A533/B561). Likewise, both Kant and Fichte distinguish between the intelligible and the sensible standpoints and would seem to agree that the former serves only to make the latter comprehensible.

When one examines how Fichte describes the absolute 'I' considered independently of its relationship to experience, the similarity between Fichte and Kant only deepens. As noted in Section 2, Fichte views the absolute 'I' as nothing on its own. This should remind one not only of Fichte's characterisation of the thing in itself, but also of Kant's characterisation of both the transcendental subject and the transcendental object considered independently of the phenomenal subjects and objects that they logically ground. Just as the transcendental subject (Kant) and the absolute 'I' (Fichte) must be thought of as grounding experience in their own ways, so too are these concepts completely empty considered independently of what they ground. Although Fichte characterises the absolute 'I' as the "real ground" of experience, what this amounts to, according to FV, is the *reality* of necessary thinking that Kant already assigns to the transcendental subject.

Likewise, even though Fichte earlier characterises the thing in itself as a "non-thought", he believes it can play a valuable function in relation to our own limitations. As he says, "[t]he thing in itself, i.e., what actually limits us, is an Idea—namely, that I must forever posit myself as limited" (*WLn*m, 75).<sup>71</sup> This is similar to Kant's view of the transcendental object. The transcendental object has a meaningful role to play insofar as it provides a unified manifold of appearances its relation to an object. Considered independently of this relationship to the manifold, however, the transcendental object = X (a non-thought as well).

Consequently, what we find is that the finite 'I' and 'not-I' (Fichte) or the phenomenal subject and object (Kant) reciprocally determine one another and together constitute experience. One must think of an absolute 'I' (Fichte) or transcendental subject (Kant) that grounds experience on the side of the finite 'I' (Fichte) or phenomenal subject (Kant) as well as a thing in itself (Fichte) or transcendental object (Kant) that grounds the experience on the side of the finite 'not-I' (Fichte) or phenomenal object (Kant). As fictional grounds, however, they possess only the reality of necessary thinking within the philosophical system and have no transcendental reality considered on their own.

Just as contemporary fictionalists hold that certain claims (e.g., in mathematics) are not literally true but are true only relative to a certain domain of discourse, FV holds that claims about the absolute 'I' are not literally true but are true only relative to a certain domain of discourse (viz., theoretical discourse concerning the ground of experience). Fichte's view, according to FV, takes on additional modal force, however, insofar as he holds that these literally untrue claims *must* be made within the domain of discourse (i.e., they possess the reality of necessary thinking). As I have argued, Kant would likewise hold that we *must* claim (for example) that the thing in itself grounds appearance. Such a claim, however, is

---

<sup>71</sup> See also *WLn*m, 61–2.

not literally true but is true only relative to a domain of discourse (viz., theoretical discourse concerning the ground of appearances). For Kant and Fichte, claims about the phenomenal object/finite ‘not-I’ grounding the phenomenal subject/finite ‘I’ are literally true and so pick out real grounds. However, claims about the transcendental self/absolute ‘I’ and the thing in itself, though they must be made, are not literally true and so pick out logical grounds.

Notwithstanding all of the parallels between Fichte’s and Kant’s systems, can the ‘law of reflective opposition’ (Fichte) or the ‘interdependency thesis’ (Kant) do the work that needs to be done to ground experience by Fichte’s lights? Going back to Reinhold, since we are talking about a *single* principle, it would seem meet Reinhold’s main condition for systematicity. It also seems to account for everything within experience insofar as the latter simply consists of interdependent phenomenal subjects and objects that really ground one another. By Fichte’s own admission, furthermore, this reciprocal relationship accounts for the feeling of necessity indicative of experience. Although Reinhold might insist that the ground for experience must be found outside what it grounds, Kant and Fichte could respond by saying that although this is true of the *logical* ground (what must be thought), it is not true of the *real* ground (which is given in experience). Nonetheless, is it not a *contradictio in adjecto* for the real ground of something to be found within that which it grounds? I shall briefly respond to this worry both contextually as well as philosophically.

Fichte derives his law of reflective opposition from Salomon Maimon’s principle of determinability.<sup>72</sup> Whereas Maimon’s principle only applies to concepts and judgements and is asymmetrical (proceeding from determinable to determinate), Fichte applies his principle to the objects of these concepts and judgements in a way that is symmetrical (relationship between determinable and determinate can be reversed). Fichte likewise inherited his method of philosophical fictions from Maimon (who himself adapted them from Kant’s ideas of reason).<sup>73</sup> Maimon insists that a “genuine philosopher cannot be expected to determine whether our cognition possesses a *real* ground outside our *faculty of cognition*”.<sup>74</sup> Philosophical fictions are useful because they allow us to step outside this faculty so as to bring systematic unity to our cognitions. Although Maimon was making a skeptical point, if he is right, then the demand to find the real ground of experience outside of experience is itself unreasonable. Since Fichte held that “no rational being will assume that reason could contain within itself a task simply impossible to discharge” (*FWL*, 1:156), he should likewise reject this demand.

Philosophers’ tendency to search for the real ground of experience beyond experience is something that Kant himself touches on in the Third and Fourth (dynamical) Antinomies of the First *Critique*. These antinomies assume that what needs to be explained is a causal *series*. Whereas each member of the series is conditioned by what causes it, whatever causes the series itself must be unconditioned on pain of being subject to antecedent causal conditions as well. The absolute ‘I’, in this respect, would be the unconditioned cause of experience where everything within experience would itself be conditioned. What the law of reflective opposition or the interdependency thesis illustrate, I would submit, is that experience need not be characterised fundamentally in terms of a causal *series*, but rather can be characterised in terms of a causal *community* between phenomenal subjects and objects. Once you abandon a picture of causal subordination in favour of a picture of causal coordination, the problem that motivated philosophers to look beyond the bounds of experience in order to really (causally) ground experience ceases to exist. Although experience may require appeal to *logical* grounds beyond experience, the principle that Kant and Fichte share is sufficient to provide the *real* grounds of experience without going beyond it.

<sup>72</sup> For this discussion of Fichte and Maimon, I am following Breazeale (2014:42–55).

<sup>73</sup> See Breazeale (2002:177–88).

<sup>74</sup> From Maimon (1912), xxxv–xxxvi, note d. Quoted in Breazeale (2002:182).

Notwithstanding the interpretive benefits of holding that Fichte is committed to FV, one might wonder how it can be considered consistent with the dichotomy from *IWL* that began this paper. Fichte holds that either the absolute ‘I’ or (exclusively) the thing in itself is the ground of experience. If one adopts FV, the most that Fichte can be talking about is a logical ground and he seems to allow for both the absolute ‘I’ and the thing in itself to serve as logical grounds of experience. Does this not undermine the exclusive disjunction upon which the dichotomy is constructed? Here, I think it is important to return to Fichte’s reasons for preferring idealism to dogmatism in *IWL*. In the First Introduction, Fichte claims that the dispute between the dogmatist and the idealist must ultimately be settled on practical and not theoretical grounds. He famously claims that “what sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is” (*IWL*, 1:434). Whereas idealists are fully aware of their freedom and with this their self-sufficiency, dogmatists are not fully aware of their freedom and so view themselves as wholly dependent upon self-sufficient objects. As Fichte says of dogmatists,

for the sake of their own selves, they cannot renounce their belief in the self-sufficiency of things; for they themselves continue to exist only in conjunction with these things. (*IWL*, 1:433)

Even under the assumption of FV, I believe that Fichte’s dichotomy can be maintained from a practical perspective. If you are not fully aware of your freedom, you must *think* of the thing in itself as the sole self-sufficient ground of your existence as a *conscious* being (dogmatism). In contrast, if you are fully aware of your freedom, you must *think* of the absolute ‘I’ as the sole self-sufficient ground of your existence as a *moral* being (idealism). According to FV, as idealists, Kant and Fichte would agree that the transcendental self (Kant) or the absolute ‘I’ (Fichte) must be thought as logically grounding the free actions of the phenomenal subject (Kant) or the finite ‘I’ (Fichte).

The value of free self-determination lies at the very heart of Fichte’s philosophical worldview and he comes to believe that unifying the theoretical and the practical is necessary for this worldview to be defended.<sup>75</sup> By unifying the theoretical and the practical, he boasts that his system “introduces throughout the whole man that *unity* and *connection* which so many systems fail to provide” (*FWL*, 1:295). Although Kant fails to unify the theoretical and the practical, this was one of his systematic aims. When comparing the First *Critique*’s Analytic of Pure Practical Reason with the Transcendental Analytic, Kant muses:

For someone who has been able to convince himself of the propositions presented in the Analytic such comparisons will be gratifying; for they rightly occasion the expectation of perhaps being able some day to attain insight into the unity of the whole pure rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle- the undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity of its cognitions. (*KpV*, 5:91)<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> See Zöller (1998:1–2). Breazeale (2014), ch. 14, argues that Fichte endorses equiprimordality, that is, that theoretical and practical reason are not different faculties but different applications of the same faculty. Neuhausser (1990:12) identifies three different ways of understanding the unity of theoretical and practical reason in Fichte: (1) they are compatible (i.e., their principles do not conflict with one another), (2) they are components of a unified system of philosophy with a single first principle, and (3) they possess a single underlying structure insofar as they express a single activity of the subject. Although Neuhausser does not believe that Fichte provides a compelling argument for any of these three ways of understanding the ‘unity of reason,’ the interdependency thesis is a single principle that can unify key elements of Fichte’s theoretical and practical philosophies. This aligns it most closely with Neuhausser’s (2), but since the activity of the subject plays an ineliminable role within the interdependency thesis, my solution has something in common with (3) as well.

<sup>76</sup> See also *GMS* 4:391.

Kant saw the unification of theoretical and practical reason as a task for the Critical philosophy, a task that Fichte aims to complete. Although a full discussion of Fichte's views on the relationship between theoretical and practical reason is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to sketch briefly an account of their unity that builds upon the theoretical account I have already offered (interdependency thesis and FV) and which aims to maintain consistency with the Critical philosophy. In *FWL*, Fichte argues that the finite 'I' must strive (*streben*) to overcome the obstacles that it is conscious of (i.e., the finite 'not-I') in order to achieve "the Idea of a self whose consciousness has been determined by nothing outside itself, it being rather its own mere consciousness which determines everything" (*FWL*, 1:117). Although achieving this ideal is, for Fichte, "our highest practical goal", it is not one that can ever be realised. As he says: "Man must approximate, *ad infinitum*, to a freedom he can never, in principle attain" (*FWL*, 1:117). The reason this task is infinite is because achieving the goal "contains a contradiction" (*FWL*, 1:117), one that is easily understood once one has adopted the interdependency thesis in conjunction with FV.<sup>77</sup> According to the interdependency thesis, the finite 'I' is a determinate subject only because of its relationship to the finite 'not-I'. Considered apart from this relationship (i.e., if the 'not-I' were overcome through striving), the subject would become the absolute 'I'. According to FV, however, this is contradictory since achieving our goal would leave us with no one to be. Although the absolute 'I' must necessarily be *thought*, it is in itself *nothing* at all.

### Conclusion

According to my interpretation, Fichte has married the key components of Kant's theoretical philosophy (the interdependency thesis and FV) to the key component of his own practical philosophy (infinite striving). Although I do not argue that Kant would endorse Fichte's conception of our highest practical goal (though it does bear some resemblance to Kant's conception of an absolutely good will), it is important to note the innovative way that Fichte has united the theoretical and the practical by his own lights.<sup>78</sup> If Fichte is successful in the way I have suggested, then not only would his view be far closer to Kant's view than is typically acknowledged but he would have also completed a task that Kant set for himself in a way that is minimally consistent with the Critical philosophy.

\*\*\*

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beiser, F. (2000) 'The Enlightenment and Idealism', in K. Ameriks (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 18–36.
- Boyle, R. (1991) 'The Origin of Forms and Qualities According to the Corpuscularian Philosophy', in M.A. Stewart (ed.) *The Selected Philosophical Papers of Robert Boyle* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett), pp. 1–96.
- Breazeale, D. (2002) 'Fichte's Philosophical Fictions', in D. Breazeale and T. Rockmore (eds), *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), pp. 175–208.

<sup>77</sup> See also *FWL*, 1:270, 281.

<sup>78</sup> For Kant, reason's "highest practical vocation" is establishing a will that is "good in itself" (GMS, 4:396). An absolutely good will, furthermore, is one that is fully determined by the moral law independent of sensual impulses. See GMS, 4:447.

- (2014) *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Buchdahl, G. (1992) *Kant and the Dynamics of Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Crowe, B. (2008) 'Fichte's Fictions Revisited', *Inquiry* 51: 268–87.
- Fichte, J. G. (1845–46) *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit & Comp).
- (1982a) *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Kollegnachschrift Chr. Fr. Krause 1798/99*, ed. E. Fuchs (Hamburg: Meiner).
- (1982b) *Science of Knowledge*, trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (1988) 'Review of *Aenesidemus*,' trans. D. Breazeale, in J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- (1992) *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*, trans. D. Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- (1994) *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other Writings*, trans. D. Breazeale (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett).
- (2005) *System of Ethics*, trans. D. Breazeale and G. Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Förster, E. (2012) *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Franks, P. (2005) *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Fuchs, E. (ed.) (1978) *Fichte im Gespräch* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog).
- Gardner, S. (1999) *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge).
- Hall, B. (2010) 'Appearances and the Problem of Affection in Kant', *Kantian Review* 14: 38–66.
- Hickey, L. (2004) 'Fichte's Critique of Dogmatism: The Modern Parallel', *The Philosophical Forum* 35: 65–80.
- Jacobi, F. H. (1968) *Werke* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft).
- Maimon, S. (1912) *Versuch einer neuen Logik* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard).
- Martin, W. (1997) *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Messina, J. (2011) 'Answering Aenesidemus: Schulze's Attack on Reinholdian Representationalism and Its Importance for Fichte', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49: 339–69.

Neuhouser, F. (1990) *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Piché, C. (1998) 'The Role of Feeling in Fichte's Rejection of the Thing in Itself', *Idealistic Studies* 28: 71–82.

Reinhold, K. L. (1978) *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens* (Hamburg: Meiner).

Royce, J. (1892) *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin).

Schulze, G. E. (1911) *Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie. Nebst einer Vertheidigung des Skepticismus gegen die Anmaßungen der Vernunftkritik* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard).

Seidel, G. (1993) *Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre of 1794* (Purdue, IN: Purdue University Press).

Zöllner, G. (1998) *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).