

Ich, Fichte: Absolutely
by
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Following the Copernican Revolution made by Immanuel Kant with his Critical Idealism, some felt the revolution in epistemology had gone awry and was not sufficiently critical. Johann Gottlieb Fichte was such a critic and furthered the revolution in his *The Science of Knowledge* (1797).

Kant

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/7) Immanuel Kant argued for the establishment of the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge. Establishing what was possible or impossible for human beings to know would place philosophical disputations in their respective epistemological context. Hence ‘knowledge’ proffered by various Metaphysical philosophies achieved by way of *a priori* speculation where each claimed to have deduced the truth, would be judged impossible. Impossible because the material they discussed was not subject to human experience. This is not experience in the sense of empiricism – which can be just as problematic as metaphysic – but experience synthesised with Transcendental Categories and conditions inherent to the human intellect. It is the application of the Categories to experience or intuition which determines the conditions of what is or is not possible for human beings to know.

The application or synthesis of the Categories creates the world we perceive. Integral to this is the connection of intuitions in the ‘Synthetic Unity of Apperception’: intuitions synthesised by the categories are experienced by the accompanying ‘I think’ of consciousness. This is the highest principle, the foundation for human knowledge.

A consequence of the synthesis of categories with intuitions for Kant’s Critical Idealism is that reality divides into the world perceived and experienced by people – the *Phenomenal* World; and the world as it exists in itself beyond the perception of human beings – the *Noumenal* world. This bifurcation of the world meant for Fichte, that Kant’s Copernican Revolution had faltered, having unnecessarily fallen short of its goals. Fichte believed he could complete the revolution.

Fichte

The I

The first absolutely unconditioned principle of knowledge is the existence of a positing

intelligence, of an I (*Ich*). Fichte demonstrates this with the proposition that $A = A$. Within this Law of Identity, the connection between the two terms – that if A exists, then it is A – is cognised as necessary. From where does this apodictic judgement arise? Fichte concludes it is evidence of the positing activity of the I. It is a deed-act (*Tathandlung*) that is a spontaneous activity. Without this, the connection between the two could not be made. He writes:

That while being or essence consists simply in the fact it posits itself as existing, it is the self as absolute subject. As it *posits* itself, so it *is*, and as it is, so it posits itself and hence the self is absolute and necessary for the self. What does not exist for itself, is not a self. ¹

Not-I

Fichte further characterises the positing I as a straight line stretching out to infinity. Presumably if it is so infinite this precludes anything determinate or finite? Enter the second Principle of Negation. This infinite striving of the I encounters resistance or otherness in Negation. Something hinders its otherwise inexorable positing and striving. This, Fichte says, is the Not-I (*Nicht Ich*). This Not-I is not separate from the 'I'. For:

Opposition is possible only on the assumption of a unity of consciousness between the self that posits and the self that opposes. For if consciousness of the first act were not connected with that of the second, the latter would not be a counter-positing but an absolute positing. It is only in a relation to a positing that it becomes a counter positing. ²

It is the relation between the two that gives rise to both sides. Thus the objects I encounter and which sometimes hinder me in my sojourn in the world are instances of the Not-I. Hence, the determination of the I encounters an object, the passive Not-I. If it hinders me, the once passive Not-I becomes active and determining.

Grounding: I and Not-I

The determining action of the Not-I creates a finite I. This interaction between the two is the foundational grounding of knowledge. Both limit and determine each other. As such, the Kantian Category of Quality (reality, negation, limitation) is discerned here. Theoretical knowledge examines the effects, the limitations and determinations of the Not-I on the I. Practical knowledge examines the effects of the I on the Not-I as it attempts to understand, incorporate and manipulate the Not-I.

In other words, the I as a positing activity is Absolute. It posits the Not-I which by means of the

intermediation of both, permits the finite I or subject to emerge. Knowledge thus arises through Negation and its incorporation.³ The I or subject strives to understand the Not-I, this makes it achieve what Kant termed the ‘Synthetic Unity of Apperception’.⁴ All the manifold of ‘intuition’ of the Not-I occur and are captured by the I. There is nothing left over and hence no noumenal world of things-in-themselves (*ding an sich*) as there was for Kant’s faltered revolution. This constant intermediation of I and Not-I ‘maps’, so to speak, the world of our experience.

So in walking outside I encounter the Not-I before me. As I ‘perceive’ the world and the objects in it – the Not-I – it is simultaneously being ‘created’ by the transcendental categories. The tree I perceive before me is a singular example of the unified totality of ‘treeness’; It exudes a reality and is limited in space and time negating what it is not; from springtime to winter it is the stable site of change and movement. It is the spontaneous deed-action of the mediation of I and Not-I in the Absolute I that produces the furniture of the world.

Solipsism?

If the Not-I is a creation of the I then everything that confronts the I or me, is my creation. In other words, the I or Subject creates the world in its subjectivity. Contrary to Fichte’s claims that the Absolute I is the foundation of certain knowledge; it is rather the foundation of solipsism. For all I can know with certainty is my own existence and a world that on Fichte’s own argument, I as subject subjectively create.

Fichte might respond citing not subjectivity which lends itself to the charge of solipsism but citing the *intersubjectivity* of the I with other I’s of the Not-I.

Compelled by its striving, the I intermediates with the Not-I. This allows it to appreciate its power of agency. Striving against the Not-I entails a determinate quality as the I moulds and adapts it to its striving ends; it also involves a determining quality of the Not-I on the I, negating it (e.g. I have to circumvent an obstacle like a brick wall so it is determining my actions). Being so ‘thrown back’ on itself, the I can reflect upon the nature of the negation and why it occurred. Negation not only furnishes consciousness of what impedes it but also, furnishes self-consciousness. Thus objects of the Not-I exist beyond the finite I.

Secondly, a distinct encounter with the Not-I differs from the mere presence of material objects. For there are not just inert objects but objects that ‘summon’ the I. In other words, the self-consciousness of the I is further enhanced by its conscious awareness of another consciousness addressing it, in summoning it, making solicitations. So contrary to solipsism, the consciousnesses of others are as necessary to the self-consciousness of the I as are its own states. Striving of the I can be both assisted and impeded by the intersubjective intermediation of other consciousnesses, other I’s.⁵

In fact, this scenario of other I's is central to Fichte's arguments in *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796).⁶ The striving of the I cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy without also ascribing this to others – thus contrary to the claims of solipsism – presupposing the existence of other persons besides itself. The I can only become conscious of itself and its social freedom in the presence of other I's and their freedom. Persons *qua* persons can only emerge in a community of free persons. Intersubjectivity is precisely this social interaction and the essence of human society. Without this there could not be rational, self-conscious human beings. Consciousness is thus a social creation – a profound insight of German Idealism which had far reaching socio-political ramifications.⁷

Finally, in his later writings, Fichte equated the Absolute I as God, as pre-existing and as such, Absolute Mind which presupposed the emergence of *each* and *every* finite I – a philosophical position found most notably in the Absolute Idealism of Hegel.⁸

Conclusion

The I is not to be understood as a private, subjective 'Cartesian' self but as an activity, a dynamic process which in conjunction with the activity of the Not-I, becomes a finite, individual self to realise its striving and being as part of the larger Absolute I, from which it came and which sustains it and everything

References

1. P. 98. *The Science of Knowledge*.
2. P. 104. Ibid.
3. Will Dudley notes (op cite below) that triadic Dialectic first appears in German Idealism although implicitly, with Fichte and not as is more commonly held, with Hegel.
4. #16, 17 The Original Synthetic Unity of Apperception.
Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*.
5. A similar process is found in Hegel's own account of the emergence and development of consciousness and self consciousness. See A. Consciousness and B. Self-Consciousness, of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.
6. #18 – #29 of Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right*.

7. As Karl Marx wrote in the Thesis On Feuerbach, VI:

‘The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each human being, it is in its reality, the ensemble of the social relations’.

The consciousness of each human being can only emerge in a social environment with other human beings.

8. See JG Fichte *Outlines of the Doctrine of Knowledge*.

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