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*R*elations  
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## SELF-REFERENCE IN FICHTE'S LATE *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

Fichte tried, as no other philosopher has done, to ground all philosophy upon the idea of reflection, with the utmost coherence. I will try to show here that reflection is both the main concept and content of the whole Science of Knowing, with special reference to the later expositions. In those texts, reflection is presented as a “law”<sup>1</sup> that regulates philosophy as a system. Fichte’s Science of Knowing is intended to be a systematic examination of reflection, an exploration of every conceptual direction opened up by reflection, in order to scrutinise all the consequences that this implies for thought. Reflection is the main concern and methodological instrument of Fichte’s thought, and can also help us understand what the late expositions of the Science of Knowing added to that first and most influential exposition, the *Foundations* of 1794/95

### 1. The Meaning of Reflection in Fichte’s transcendental philosophy

Within transcendental philosophy, reflection means basically an operation that, together with abstraction, conducts the mind in the process of constructing concepts. *Reflexio* or “Überlegung” means for Kant, as he states in his *Logic*, the act of pointing out the similarities which, together with the abstraction of differences, results in a general representation or concept. In this sense, “reflection” is a principle of recognition of identity and difference of characteristics or, as Fichte writes, a “concept, in its qualitative unity, is the essential sameness in the essential not-sameness”.<sup>2</sup> Reflection signifies the construction of concepts, and is thus the principle of continuity and unity of intellection that must accompany any apprehension of difference.

This binding of sameness and not-sameness is a necessary condition for the employment of concepts in general. As will be shown later, Fichte argues that this binding must be understood as an organic principle, which he describes as “vivacity” or “life”. Reflection can only be conceived as a property of an organized whole and thus, points to knowledge or

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Fichte, Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie (hrsg. Von R. Lauth, E. Fuchs und H. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1962- [=GA]), vol. II/12, 264 (WL 1811).

<sup>2</sup> “[D]ie wesentliche Dieselbigkeit in der wesentlichen Nichtdieselbigkeit ist in ihrer qualitativen Einheit ein Begriff.” Fichte, Wissenschaftslehre (Hamburg, 1984 [= WL 1805]), 93.

knowing (as we should better translate “Wissen”) as an organized system which philosophy can accordingly expose as a science.

But Kant’s logical statement of *reflexio* as the grasping of the common characteristics of different beings in order to subsume them under a common concept, together with the abstraction of differences, cannot be itself understood without a reflective qualification. Fichte says, defining a basic feature of knowing, that it is “not unity of multiplicity, but unity of unity as such and multiplicity as such”.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, such a qualification was not at all new when Fichte used it to characterize the faculty of synthetic unity, or apperception. This reflective definition of concept, with the double occurrence of “unity”, explains why the construction of concepts could be called “*reflexio*”.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this qualified use of a reflective difference. On the one hand, this basic use of identity and difference as concepts of comparison or reflection, as in Kant, implies that unity splits into different ‘types’ or levels. Fichte explicitly accounts for this hierarchical difference of levels resulting from unity and difference in terms of “reflections” (“Reflex”).<sup>4</sup> Reflection introduces a difference of levels, in that one successively refers to the other. Reflection is always a step “higher” than the object of reflection. On the other hand, a key example of an essential property of reflection can be found in this qualification of unity and difference as unity of unity and difference: that is to say, as unity reflects and duplicates itself, one term of the relation must be at the same time the whole relation. This was the predicament and the speculative concept of the I in the first exposition of the Science of Knowing. As absolute, the I was simultaneously the whole reality and, as finite I, it was only a part, or half of reality. The difference between the I and the not-I was encompassed by the identity of the absolute I.

Moreover, reflection is always a kind of repetition or duplication, but not a simple one, as we shall see. The *Foundations* of 1794/95 remains a crucial text on this issue. “By [...a] new positing, relative to an original positing, [...the I] opens itself, if I may so put it, to an external influence; simply by this reiteration of positing, it concedes the possibility that there might also be something within it that is not actually posited by itself.”<sup>5</sup> This text plays a key role in the future development of the doctrine. The duplication of knowing by reflection is a condition of any differentiation within itself. At stake, therefore, is Fichte’s conception of the unity of theoretical reason, insofar as the synthesis of thought with intuition is granted by the reflective character of the former. The positing of any representation, or “scheme”, as Fichte later puts it, depends upon knowing in some way duplicating or reiterating itself within itself. “Being as being” (“Seyn als Seyn”)<sup>6</sup> is, according to Fichte, an expression of this duplication of knowing, which necessarily happens with any

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<sup>3</sup> “Nicht Einheit der Mannigfaltigkeit, sondern Einheit der Einheit als solcher, u. der Mannigfaltigkeit als solcher” (GA II/12, 209).

<sup>4</sup> II/12, 250.

<sup>5</sup> “[...] durch dieses neue, auf ein ursprüngliches Setzen sich beziehende Setzen öffnet es sich, daß ich so sage, der Einwirkung von aussen; es setzt lediglich durch diese Wiederholung des Setzens die Möglichkeit, daß auch etwas in ihm seyn könne, was nicht durch dasselbe selbst gesetzt seyn” (GA, I/2, 409).

<sup>6</sup> II/12, 199.

representation of some being identical with itself. Reflective difference arises out of identity, as is shown in the first paragraphs of the *Foundations* of 1794/95.

According to the later texts, the law of reflection expresses itself in the particle “als”, or “as”. The “as” is the core of any representation of being in knowledge, but it also raises a significant problem about the reflective duplication of knowing itself. As is well known, reflective self-representation as a doubling of itself does not seem to be enough to understand how consciousness identifies itself as itself.

Self-knowledge of course raises the question of the circularity involved in knowing. This problem worried Fichte from his first writings as the *Eigene Meditationen über Elementarphilosophie* or the *Aenesidemus Rezension*.<sup>7</sup> His general answer to this problem is that knowing, or the I, cannot be understood like a mirror that duplicates things, among which you can find knowing itself. The relation of knowing to its known object, or to itself, is not a relation between two beings at the same level, which has important consequences for Fichte’s theory. But neither can it be understood as a relation of mere representation. Representation must be understood as a result of other faculties underlying it. So the Science of Knowing does not describe knowing as representing itself – or any other thing – as an available thing before its eyes. In order to understand representation of itself and other things, the Science of Knowing analyses itself as a result of other underlying factors that cannot be thought in isolation. Fichte tries to understand circularity out of its origins, or genesis, and to show that the circle is unavoidable, and why.

Reflection is also understood as an examination of presuppositions. As Kant defines it, “transcendental reflection” is “the comparison of representations with the cognitive faculty to which it belongs, and by means of which I distinguish whether it is belonging to the pure understanding or to sensible intuition.”<sup>8</sup> Transcendental reflection is thus simply to pay attention to the subjective activity presupposed in any given representation and to the conditions of its constitution. Fichte sees in transcendental reflection a double systematic determination. It means not only that epistemological presuppositions should be taken into account, but also that any object, and being itself, as schematized, is constituted by means of a specific activity.

The epistemological consequence of transcendental reflection according to Fichte is a permanent question that goes along with every argument in the Science of Knowing about the agreement between what is said and what is done in saying it. This is not a question of some moral agreement between an individual’s “actions” and “words”; rather, it is a self-referential procedure,<sup>9</sup> the need for an objective agreement (which we could call ‘pragmatic’) between “saying” and “doing”, between language or meaning itself and its ‘pragmatic’ presuppositions. One key for Fichte’s procedure is that those ‘pragmatic’ presuppositions can always be translated again, or expressed in semantic terms (i.e. in terms of transcendental and phenomenological content). The presupposed “act” is a way of categorizing reality, a pure concept. As a methodological device, this quest for ‘pragmatic’ agreement through strict

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. II/3, 26.

<sup>8</sup> KrV A 262, B 317 (trans. Norman Kemp Smith).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. I. Thomas-Fogiel, Fichte. Réflexion et argumentation (Paris, 2004), 92-97: “L’auto-référence comme identité du “Tun” et du “Sagen”.

self-reference is hence, as it seems, one main source of content and argumentation in the Science of Knowing.

Any general definition of knowing is immediately subject to such a condition. “The proposition: *knowing in itself is such and such* is undoubtedly still knowing. Now either this latter knowing would be excluded from the predicate (you would forget yourself) and so objective knowing would obviously not be knowing in itself, but just knowing after *exclusion* of the subjective [knowing]; and the answer would be [...] false. Or this subjective knowing would be also *brought into the predicate* [...] and the factual form of subjectivity would remain [...] for any new reflection, that could do no better than repeat the same old game.”<sup>10</sup> In this passage, the method of strict self-reflection shows that circularity expresses itself as an irreducible facticity in knowing. Knowing is always a fact, that can only be comprehended by a circular concept. How to understand this facticity is another question, as will be discussed below.

In another fundamental example, Fichte tries to show that Metaphysics, especially Spinosism, invites the philosopher to “think *being* absolutely in itself, as being”.<sup>11</sup> Strict self-reflection about what you *do* in acting by thinking in this way immediately shows that what you get is not “being in itself”, but just an image of it, a scheme of being, something that is not being, but external to being, so to speak. But this would contradict the metaphysical definition of being, which, according to Fichte, must include everything that in some sense *is*; that is to say, being is an exclusive totality, self-included and self-determined. In such a metaphysical definition of being, what is done is in contradiction with what is said.

Against his critic Schelling, Fichte uses a similar argument. He quotes the first paragraph of Schelling’s *Darstellung meines Systems*: “Reason is absolutely one and absolutely the same with itself”, and comments: “How is this proposition generally possible? In it, reason is comprehended [...] and compared to something else. This is a fact. Either the author is reason itself, and so reason is more than was indicated in the quoted paragraph; or he is outside reason, and so there is something outside it, [...] which would be surely difficult for him to explain.”<sup>12</sup>

As a general result of such arguments about what one *does* in thinking and saying, it is found that it is not rationally possible to construct a pure reflective theoretical understanding. That is, understanding cannot understand itself without being interrupted and in some sense shadowed by intuition, by what is called a *hiatus* in understanding. The critical separation between understanding and intuition rests on this result.

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<sup>10</sup> “Der Satz: das *Wissen an sich* ist das, ist ohne Zweifel selbst wieder ein Wissen. Entweder nun dieses letztere Wissen würde aus dem Prädikat weggelassen (man vergäße sich selbst) so wäre das objective Wissen offenbar nicht das Wissen *an sich*, sondern nur das Wissen, nach *Abzug* des subjectiven; und die Antwort würde, hierauf attendierend, offenbar falsch. Oder, dieses subjective Wissen würde *in das Prädikat mitgebracht* [...]: aber doch bliebe faktisch die *Form der Subjektivität* [...] selbst jeder neuen Reflexion, die nur das alte Spiel wiederholen könnte” (WL 1805, 9).

<sup>11</sup> “Denken Sie das *Seyn*, scheinlich an sich, als *Seyn*” (ib. 13).

<sup>12</sup> “Die Vft. ist schlechthin Eine u. schlechthin sich selbst gleich.’ [...] Wie ist dieser Satz überhaupt möglich: In ihm ist die Vft. *umfaßt* [...] u. verglichen mit einem andern. Dies ist Faktum. Entweder der Verf. ist selbst die Vft. - so ist sie mehr als das im ersten § angegebne; oder er ist ausser ihr, so ist etwas ausser ihr, [...] was er nicht leicht erklären dürfte” (II/12, 162).

However, those are still just limited results of this principle of transcendental reflection as pragmatically interpreted by Fichte. Such a reflection implies a foundational consequence as a general agreement between saying and doing. In Fichte's words, "if a philosophy does not mention itself, it must deny itself", "it is surely false".<sup>13</sup> Thus, "a part of this system [the Science of Knowing] is its concept of itself".<sup>14</sup> The Science must depict itself as a part of itself. Nevertheless, this part of itself cannot be understood as a small-scale mapping out of the whole included in it, as is found in living beings or some machines, because what is at stake is not just a stable structure, parallel to another, as its image, but the very relation of depicting, in Fichte's words, "Wissen in der That ertappt" ("knowing caught in the act"). The denial of the possibility of depicting the relation between representation and that which is represented will imply that reflection and images as mental content are inexistent or senseless. Conversely, the sense of image as appearance relies on this possibility of comparing being with image. How this meta-level of understanding is possible is a main question of the Science of Knowing.

There follow two conclusions: first, representation, image or some mind that thinks and intuitively a world, cannot be understood without a self-grounding systematic philosophy. Image can only be understood within a self-foundationalist philosophical theory, because if knowing means some way of depicting being, a Science of Knowing must depict ultimately its own act of understanding. And this is the concept of a philosophy as system. If this reasoning is correct, there is no empirical solution for the problem of image, insofar as it constitutes a conceptual problem. The main difficulty is that a seemingly empirical question about some determinate being, namely knowing or image, necessarily implies reflection in its answer, that is to say, knowing of knowing. But knowing of knowing is no more a determinate being, something like a "thing", or a "something" at all, but precisely "reflection", whatever it is. Moreover, Fichte tries to show that reflection is not only a form of acting on the part of some actual or factually-determined living being or consciousness, but inevitably an epistemological matter. Ultimately, explanation must in some way explain itself.

Second conclusion: representing representation, knowing of knowing, must be based on a faculty that is not representative thought. As Fichte saw very early on, when he expressed his thoughts about Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, it is impossible to represent representation by its own means, and representation must be based on something else. This something else that underpins representation is what Fichte after 1807 called "Vermögen" or "faculty". In 1804, in particular, he also called this faculty "life", given the obvious fact that only living beings can represent images, insofar as images depend on being understood *as* images. Some inanimate thing can be an image of another, but it cannot be an image *as* image, as Fichte states it. To be an image *as* image is to distinguish itself from its model, or "Urbild". In his *Foundations* of 1794/95, he called the faculty capable of making this image absolute "I". Although this was not altogether wrong, and has been in some way very productive, since it stressed that the whole question of philosophical science should be centred on reflection, it

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<sup>13</sup> "[...] erwägt sie [sc. die Philosophie] also ihrer selbst nicht, so muß sie sich läugnen"; "ist sicher falsch" (II/11, 302, 299).

<sup>14</sup> "Ein Theil dieses Systems ist sein Begriff von sich selbst" (II/12, 151).

was nonetheless misleading as a name for a pre-reflective condition of reflection. It was indeed disputable to name absolute “I” something that, although constituting a condition for self-consciousness, explicitly has no self-consciousness.

I think it is in this context that the unusual employment of the term “faculty” (“Vermögen”), without determining clearly what the faculty is for, acquires its meaning. As was remarked above, the relation underlying the link between knowing and its known object cannot be understood basically as a relation between two different beings that are indifferently positioned alongside each other, as is typical of inanimate beings. Neither is the relation between knowing and being known comparable to the relations into which objective beings typically enter towards each other. The relation that underlies knowing or image must implicate some kind of activity or *interest*. It cannot be thought of merely as juxtaposition or lying indifferently side by side. For this reason Fichte uses concepts like “agility”, “life” or “vivacity”, “drive”, “effort” and “development”, but also “Hingabe” (perhaps “renouncing”, “surrender”), “check” (or “obstacle” – “Anstoß”), “breaking off” (“sich brechen an”)<sup>15</sup>, or “stopping” (“sich anhalten”) for the positive and the negative sides of the relation. It could be added that reflection is supported upon reference as an active relation to itself and its other. Fichte’s well known “I” and “not-I” are not at all the subject and its opposite, in the sense that they underlie knowing, but something that is projected or perhaps actively “under-projected”. This non-indifference is a basic feature of reflection, which makes it suitable to characterize subjectivity.

In order to further determine this non-indifference relation, how it grounds reflection and knowing, and what other problems it involves, I must return to the problem of circularity. This question can only be adequately broached by a correct entry into philosophy. As a comparative and historical remark, it should be noted that Hegel, for instance, favours the logical operator of “sublation” (“Aufhebung”) and negativity, while Fichte begins with positing (“setzen”) or positivity as a non-indifferent condition for any relation or differentiation to be established. If philosophy begins with negativity or indeterminate being, nothing at all is presupposed, so no circularity occurs. The main logical instrument for such a system is negativity, which determines itself as “sublation” (“Aufhebung”). For Fichte, on the other hand, negation is already an activity, or dependent on an absolute activity, characterised as a relation of non-indifference between what is posited and what is negated or denied. Using the concepts of the *Foundations* of 1794/95, the not-I can be posited only in relation to the absolute I. So being is to be understood as lack of activity, and only possible in relation to it.

Taken in isolation, negativity would be merely some undetermined activity, and it would not be possible to define it as negation or to distinguish it from the activity of positing. Negation is already a determination that can only be made against positivity, or absolute positing (“setzen schlechthin”). As negation, it is dependent of positing.

At every step and in every sense of knowing, either at the level of sensible intuition, intelligible seeing, epistemological or ethical level, the theory is defined by a drive to self-positing. Fichte’s thought begins with the act of self-positing, and circularity is not exactly avoided. Especially in his late period, the general sense of the exposition is to show both that the fact of seeing, knowledge, or phenomenon (“Erscheinung”) presupposes some faculty,

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. II/12, 218.

and that the defined faculty, if it develops or actualizes itself, necessarily generates the phenomena, the act of “seeing” and theoretical and practical knowing. The all-encompassing drive is towards an absolute possibility of reflection (“Reflexibilität”), which is ultimately the image that the Science makes of itself within itself. And this is the most fundamental drive, because it is the drive that aims to an ideal autonomy of knowing; thus, it grounds both the integral reflectibility of science and the autonomy of practical reason.

## 2. The logic of appearance

Knowing is defined in its basic features as a phenomenon that manifests itself as seeing. Phenomena have two main characteristics. *First*, any phenomenon to be seen as object is a negation of the absolute faculty, an interruption of it, and this interruption produces the reflection of the faculty. As has already been noted, this scheme of the faculty may be considered a deduction of the Kantian critical distinction of faculties between understanding, centred on apperception, and sensibility as pure passivity. So, as negation is dependent on position, passivity for Fichte is just a reduced grade of activity. Determination of the drive is negation, but negation is just an “alienation” (“Entäußerung” – in the early texts) or a “renouncing” or “surrender” (“Hingabe” – in the later expositions) of position or positing.

Fichte’s conception of transcendental idealism can be elucidated in this context. Transcendental idealism does not mean that real being is a product of mind or that being has its origin in man’s or absolute consciousness. It is just a science of knowing, and the subject, or the I, is mentioned in it as no more than a condition of knowing, insofar as it is impossible to think the relations involved in knowing without some kind of activity. Knowing and its conditions should be treated in philosophy. As regards nature and empirical matters, Fichte leaves it open either to the contingency of an infinite experience or to the empirical sciences. Transcendental idealism is based on the idea that knowing is not some being, or a thing, but its status is quite different, namely showing, appearance or phenomenon, and that appearance requires concepts that are not the same as those suitable for understanding being as a thing. Many concepts are needed to construct a transcendental theory of appearance, but for my purposes, we may stress the concepts of “faculty” and “as” (“Als”).

The activity of the faculty is senseless, and does not appear to any seeing without the “as”, that is to say, without reflection. But what is this pre-reflective activity? And why does reflection happen? It must be conceded that this pre-reflective activity cannot be an activity of any kind, but must be described as vivacity and also intuition, if these can be described as activities at all. And indeed, they cannot be otherwise described if not as activities that leads to reflection. Their status in the theory of reflectivity is merely the status of conditions leading to reflection. As Hegel rightly pointed out in his *Logic of Essence*, reflection presupposes itself. When you know something, you cannot get outside the phenomenon, nor can you get outside seeing and still see something in order to characterize it except by referring it to reflection, that is, as pre-reflective. The only way to characterise this activity is as pre-reflective, that is, as life or as intuition. The knowing and the phenomenon that is known form a totally coherent and complete system that cannot get outside itself, towards a thing-in-itself, as in Kant’s *Transcendental Aesthetics*. Outside it there are only its pre-conditions.



That is why Fichte's absolute in the Science of Knowledge, which he calls A, or Scheme 1 is already an image, not a being. Hopefully, the circularity of self-presupposition is here not a vicious one. As a "system of reflectibility", the complete system of appearance is self-including. I do not think circularity in this sense is a reason simply to dismiss Fichte's system. Knowing has its own laws to explain phenomena and itself, and the Science of Knowing hopes to get rid not of the circle itself, but of its vicious character by showing why the circle happens. A totally different solution would probably imply getting rid of reflection altogether. Anyhow, the Fichtean circle of reflection has a definite beginning, namely that knowing *should* ("Soll") know itself. The beginning is a "should-be" of the "as", according to the late Fichtean terminology.

The second question was why reflection happens. It occurs, according to Fichte, without a ground. He explains this in the following way: "the faculty may or may not actualize itself".<sup>16</sup> There is no ground for the actualization of reflection. Such a ground would have to be transcendent and would no longer be critical or phenomenological. We can look at it in two ways: either as the utmost contingency, or as freedom. In any case, the act of reflection is not a consequence of anything else. It is a form, an *energeia*, which relies upon some pre-reflective activity, but does not follow on from it as from a complete ground. It is a condition, not a ground in some other sense. Either as freedom, or as sheer contingency, you cannot determine the happening of reflection by some principle alien to it. As was mentioned in response to the question concerning pre-reflective activity (the so-called "faculty") and in trying to avoid circularity, the beginning of the circle is that knowing "should" know itself. And reflection releases itself both from vicious circularity and senseless contingency because reflection "should be" or, in its own terms, there "should-be an as" ("soll des als").<sup>17</sup> So, reflection is an expression of an act of freedom, and not of contingency. Since reflection can also be seen as a case of double negation, Fichte says that "once it is, it cannot not be" ("einmal seyend, kann nicht nicht seyn").<sup>18</sup>

Reflection rests thus upon facticity since the faculty may or may not actualize itself. Fichte's project is to demonstrate that if the faculty actualizes itself, than it must happen lawfully and in the form of the "as". "Thus, *in consequence of this* fact, the appearance itself becomes an absolutely real creative power *ex nihilo* and obtains a creative life of its own. The proof of this rests on the fact that it is *not* by virtue of the absolute itself that this appearance becomes a *creative power in its own right*, inasmuch as the absolute is responsible only for its own appearing, and by no means for the appearing of the appearance itself." ("Also – *zufolge des Faktum* ist die Erscheinung in sich selbst absolute reale Schöpferkraft eines neuen, durchaus aus Nichts, ein eigenes schöpferisches Leben. Der Beweis beruht darauf, daß es *dies nicht* durch das absolute ist, indem dieses nur bis zum Erscheinen dieses, keinesweges aber bis zum Erscheinen der Erscheinung selbst geht.")<sup>19</sup> Such typical phrasing sums up much of the doctrine till this point, and allows us to go deeper into it. The text means that

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<sup>16</sup> "Cf. II/12, 182, etc. "Vollzieht es sich, oder vollzieht es sich nicht?"

<sup>17</sup> Passim.

<sup>18</sup> WL 1805, 40.

<sup>19</sup> II/12, 178. I am very grateful to Prof. Daniel Breazeale for the translation of this passage.

appearance, which is pure facticity, because its factual or material happening cannot be deduced from any law, has its own internal laws, which are based on the I's own activity and conditions. These laws, according to Kant, are categories as modalities of apperception. But if we want to capture phenomenon in general in its normal sense, it must be considered as the appearance of an objective being or, generally speaking, as the appearance of a being objectively as it is in itself. So, as the quotation says, appearance, or phenomenon, must be understood as depicting being in itself. Although, if image is to be not just another being at the side of absolute being, the picture that it shows of being must have in itself the mark of the "as". As Fichte puts it, image is only image *as* image, it must be recognized *as* image in order to be a picture or an image of some 'transcendent' being (to speak with Husserl). "*As*" image means the reflection that image cannot dispense with. And since reflection, as seen above, is self-presupposing, image must include two elements: one that is given by being in itself (what happens in the so-called Scheme 1), and another that is absolutely freely posited by reflection (which is called Scheme 2). Fichte concludes that, if appearance exists as a fact, then this must - so to speak - organically merge being and image. And this fusion is called "seeing".

As a first essential feature, phenomenon is hence an interruption of the faculty by reflection. I have already pointed to the *second* essential feature of the phenomenon. Phenomenon must appear to itself, reflectively, as itself. But so long as it sees itself just as an image, it must understand itself as different and opposite to being. And it is essential to phenomenon that both hold together: its doubling itself in itself on the one hand, and its opposition to what is opposed to it, on the other. Knowing is never a simple duplication, but a duplication that reflects itself upon its other or offers a reflected difference. That is why Fichte always assumes five elements, that is, the reflective duplicity at the level of the seen object, which is already a privation of the absolute faculty, and the same duplicity at the level of free reflection. Together with the unified vision of the whole, it sums up five elements.

Since the expositions of the intermediate period, Fichte's somewhat strange disjunction of reflection into infinity and quintuplicity appears as a central element of knowing. Fichte's so-called "quintuplicity" is not totally clear, and it seems to admit different forms and expressions. In any case, it is grounded on the division of the I into real and ideal, a distinction that comes from the first exposition of the Science of Knowing.

Fivefoldness is grounded on reflexivity in such a way that the duplication of the I into reflecting and reflected implies another duplication into real and ideal. "In respect to their ideality, all things depend upon the I; but in regard to its reality, the I is itself dependent."<sup>20</sup> Real and ideal activity are two ways in which the I reflects itself in its relation to its other. The activity of the I is split up not only into reflecting and reflected, but also into sensible and intellectual activity. Ideal activity is a projection of the I beyond whatever is given as determinate being. Such a condition must be understood as a necessary condition of phenomenality in general. Since reflection is not deduced, but happens without a ground, a complete agreement between the faculty and its reflection is not possible. If the pre-reflective activity agreed entirely with reflection, there would be neither a real determination of the faculty

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<sup>20</sup> "Alles ist seiner Idealität nach abhängig vom Ich, in Ansehung der Realität aber ist das Ich selbst abhängig" (GA, I/2, 412).

nor ideal activity. The empirical mobility of knowing would be paralysed. Philosophy, ethics and religion depend on the I freeing itself from the immediate intuition of the object and becomes conscious of itself as freely outlying images and as a free agent in space and time. The I is at the same time sensible and intelligible and, in both cases, it is also duplicated into objectivity and subjectivity. Roughly defined, quintuplicity or fivefoldness is a result of the double difference and unity between subjective, objective, sensible and intellectual (“übersinnlich”).

Besides fivefoldness, which is a static structure that reflects the difference of activities and balances underlying reflexivity, reflexivity also implies infinity. The relation that the I establishes in relation to its objective world in order for there to be knowledge presupposes an infinite faculty or activity.<sup>21</sup> Since its first exposition, the Science of Knowing stresses that such an activity is “infinitely outreaching”,<sup>22</sup> and so the I receives its determination only from this active relation by which it posits itself actively before its object. It means that the object is given as the limits of the I, but also that the I can transform its object, that it can change its “limits”. The so-called “infinity” is the indefinite potentiality of the I to appropriate the object and to act upon it. This indefinite living activity of the I will be understood as the scheme of temporality in knowing.<sup>23</sup> This infinity expresses itself as time with its everlasting “novelty”, the unpredictable character of the empirical scheme of the world presupposed by knowing, the moving scheme of the breaking-off of the faculty at its own facticity. Knowing depends on temporality, on the “development of the principle”, that is to say, of the development of the aforesaid faculty. By this development, the objective world is always new, empirical and a posteriori. In this paper, I will not go into the question of the constitution of space, which runs along somewhat similar lines.

It must be remarked that the deduction of temporality from the a priori conditions of knowing should not be understood as a metaphysical derivation of something existent (time) from another existing thing (the self), or as a psychological description, but only as the integration of the meaning of temporality into the conditions of a complete system of knowing as reflexivity.

Fichte claims that appearance is an organic unity in which each element cannot be understood without the other. Necessity holds here as a transcendental law to reflection. So, knowing understands its own law by a procedure involving reflecting upon presuppositions. Since knowing is thoroughly reflective, the law of reflection brings all the elements together in such a way that each one is itself but also its relation to the other; reflection finds itself in intuition, and intuition cannot be defined without reflecting itself. “Should-be” cannot be seen without a being where it can apply itself, and being cannot be seen without a “should-be” as the act that brings any being into knowing. Also Fichte’s so-called method of “genetic” seeing and understanding is derived from reflection, insofar as one thing is developed from the other by a movement of seeing.

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<sup>21</sup> GA, I/2, 358, 403; GA, II/12, 270.

<sup>22</sup> GA, I/2, 369.

<sup>23</sup> GA, I/11, 353.

Another structural element of reflection, namely double negation, is here at work with the purpose of a theory of subjectivity. The self-reference of the I is well characterized by double negation as activity. The I does not define himself simply side-by-side with anything else, that is, with the not-I. As sheer absolute I, it has no meaning. Only as a presupposition to reflection can it become something determined. The I must characterize itself therefore as not-not-I, that is to say, by opposition to not-I. I cannot now discuss further if double negation, as a logical operation, leans upon the logic of reflection or conversely. Naturally, according to the Science of Knowing, the logic of reflection comes first.

Even though Fichte never claims to employ a dialectical method, he frequently uses contradiction as a way of exploring new aspects and discovering distinctions to be made in knowing. The main contradiction motivating the analysis is the status of image itself, which is given as a fact. Image must be considered to be a duplication of being, “a being outside being”.<sup>24</sup> Assuming that being is a general term to encompass all beings, image is not being, but something else, namely (as we saw at the beginning) being’s own reflection. It is being *as* being, or ultimately it must be understood as the self-exposition and self-understanding of being. Accordingly, if we read “existence” instead of “image”, “the absolute, in its existence, splits itself - into absolute existence, on the one hand (but then it no longer exists as absolute) and *as* absolute, on the other (but then it does not exist absolutely).”<sup>25</sup> The basic contradiction of assuming an image of being as a thing-in-itself expresses itself in the logic of reflection as the well-known distinction between objective and subjective genitive. *As* absolute it exists not absolutely as itself, but in an image, and as *absolute* it simply does not exist, it cannot be figured, but should be immediately the absolute itself, the absolute “in-itself” of the exposition of 1804. As Fichte states in his *Religionslehre* and again in the Science of Knowing of Königsberg 1807, “seeing stands in its own way”, it “makes itself turbid”.<sup>26</sup> Seeing is just a contradiction in itself, or at least a split in the sense of being. And that is why Fichte says that “through its existence, the absolute changes hopelessly its own inner essence.”<sup>27</sup> And that is the critical and existential meaning of the factual seeing of absolute being.

As I tried to show above, from its own perspective, reflection is necessary. Once posited, it cannot not-be, and it has therefore an autonomous life of its own. Knowing, as a general term, encompasses any content of consciousness, somewhat like phenomenological intentionality. It makes no sense to search for the causes of knowing in the known objects. Knowing is an autonomous totality, a condition of possibility of an infinite experience, and encompasses all theoretical and practical experience and knowledge. As was seen above, the reflexivity implied by knowing imposes upon it a circularity of sense that can be determined only negatively or by privation. Inasmuch as knowing comprehends everything, understanding it in one way or another does not change anything inside the objective world. Understanding it like the Science of Knowing, as a practical compound of images, reflections, forces or

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<sup>24</sup> Passim.

<sup>25</sup> “Das absolute selbst in seinem Existiren zerschlägt sich: inabsolutes Existiren, und darin existirt es nicht als absolute; u. in Existiren *als* absolutes, u. sodann existirt es nicht absolute” (WL 1805, 108).

<sup>26</sup> “[...] immer verdeckt unser Sehen selbst uns den Gegenstand, und unser Auge selbst steht unserm Auge im Wege” (SW 5, 471). Cf. II/10, 112, WL 1807.

<sup>27</sup> “das absolute verändert durch das Existiren sein eignes inneres Wesen absolute, unwiederbringlich [...]” (WL 1805, 91).

thrusts, instead of as a world of things that just lies there implies not different facts or objects, but as Fichte often says, a new vision or an “enlarged vision”.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Fichte’s “absolute”

But we should still ask what Fichte’s “absolute” is. It is so far clear that “absolute” means the things-in-themselves beyond their appearing to us. It is an ideal of objectivity and truth that cannot be given up, especially in a world very realistically defined as a pre-reflective world of drive, action and image. Absolute in such a conception is the place where reflection ultimately breaks off. Fichte’s absolute is where knowing cannot reflect further, inasmuch as reflection means relating the object to our thought. As we shall see, reflection ultimately breaks off before what ethically should be. And it is so because there reason breaks off before itself under the form of the individual I.

It is a commonplace that reflection is opposed to life. Fichte’s absolute is doubtless pre-conscious life not yet made turbid through reflection. According to the terminology of the late Science of Knowledge, “schematizing causes the schematized to fade.” (“Im Schematisieren verblaßt das eigentl. Schematisirte”).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore “when reflection occurs, doubt appears. What shall we do then? How can we solve it?”<sup>30</sup> At this point in his 1810 exposition, Fichte criticises what he considers to be Schelling’s philosophical “trick”, that is, ceasing arbitrarily to reflect wherever he wants to find absolute reality. Fichte’s purpose, on the contrary, is to construct an integral “system of reflectibility” where only the complete self-elucidation of visibility will allow absolute being to be reached beyond all the conditions of appearance.

Absolute as being, in the sense of being-in-itself as the ground for objective truth, was, through the analysis of seeing, understood as the pre-reflective activity of knowing itself. But the activity that, as a “should be”, is the condition that allows the I to see the sensible activity itself *as* such, is another kind of activity. This is the intelligible activity, as a higher-level “should be”, that allows us to see intelligence as reason, that is to say, as autonomous. Fichte wants to show that this super-sensible “should be” is the ideal of total autonomy of rational life in relation to sensible activity, and in such a way that this autonomous activity of reason, absolute reflection of knowing about itself is the complete image of knowing. Only at this point, where the system of appearance is completed, can reflection come to an end. This end is or should be a complete self-reference of knowing. Nevertheless, the ceasing of reflection does not at all imply the ceasing of the activity of “should-be”. It is merely a “should-be” that posits the complete foundation of reason by itself as its goal. This is an epistemological goal, but, as a drive of autonomy of reason, is like a Kantian practical interest in morality.

However, in order to better understand where reflection legitimately comes to an end in the Science of Knowing, we should interpret Fichte’s statement that “knowing is God’s image”, which appeared at the head of every exposition from the late period. The very first scheme, absolutely original image (and that means the place where reflection absolutely

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<sup>28</sup> II/12, II/13, 145.

<sup>29</sup> II/12, 184.

<sup>30</sup> *Ib.* 152.

breaks off) is equated with the divine, or God's image. Religion undoubtedly plays an important role in Fichte's thought, particularly after Iena, but already in some of the earlier works. But it would be a pity to spoil all those bold transcendental concepts that try to deal with pure appearance through philosophical reflection alone by simply making God the substantial non-phenomenological absolute ground for appearance. As I understand it, the late Science of Knowing may to some extent be considered as a commentary on Fichte's key statement from around 1798 concerning the "quarrel of atheism", which seems to divide his philosophical life into two different periods. "The moral order is the *divine* that we admit. [...] This living and acting moral order is God himself; we do not need another God and can grasp no other."<sup>31</sup> Insofar as ethical order is, if not exactly God, his image, the statements of the following years (namely that knowing is God's image) seem to mean that the ultimate ground to knowing is ethical. Probably with regard to the possibilities for ambiguity in the expression granted by the aforesaid contradiction in image, Fichte writes, still in 1810, that "God does not exist; only his phenomenon exists."<sup>32</sup> This returns the discussion to the level of critical and phenomenological thought. Absolute in this sense is the ethical drive towards the autonomy of reason as a faculty with its own laws, which should be understood as practical postulates and theoretical systematic ideas.

Continuing to read Fichte: "... alles *als* aber macht sich durch das Soll, durch das zum Gesez gewordne absolute Erscheinen Gottes" ("every *as* makes itself through the *should-be*, through the absolute appearing of God manifested as a law").<sup>33</sup> Such a law is a practical law of acting according to reason. The divine character of ethics is grounded on the freedom of autonomy of an intellectual drive that posits its own condition by a free ideal activity which comes to consciousness by the occasion of the sensible reflection of knowing.

Ethics is the link between the sensible and intellectual faculties that underlie knowing. At the level of the applied Science of Knowledge, Fichte's system of reflexivity becomes a theory of man according to which knowing and consciousness can only develop inside an ethical order. Thus, it would make little sense to speak about consciousness in a state of complete non-ethical relations. But this is a question that should be addressed to Fichte's ethics, philosophy of right and philosophy of history.

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<sup>31</sup> "[...] diese moralische Ordnung ist das *Göttliche*, das wir annehmen. [...] Jene lebendige und wirkende moralische Ordnung ist selber Gott; wir bedürfen keines anderen Gottes, und können keinen anderen fassen" (GA I/5, 354.)

<sup>32</sup> "Gott ist nicht da, sondern nur seine Erscheinung ist da" (GA II/11, 294).

<sup>33</sup> II/12, 224.