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SELF-MEASURE AND SELF-MODERATION
IN FICHTE'S *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke explains that the self-understanding or self-measure of the human mind includes an account of the mind's limits, and so the mind's self-understanding can provide adequate grounds for intellectual self-moderation or self-control: "If we can find out, how far the Understanding can extend its view; how far it has Faculties to attain Certainty; and in what Cases it can only judge and guess, we may learn to content our selves with what is attainable by us in this State."¹ Furthermore: "If we can find out those Measures, whereby a rational Creature put in that State, which Man is in, in this World, may, and ought to govern his Opinions, and Actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled, that some other things escape our Knowledge."²

Compared to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* may appear to exemplify the very opposite of intellectual modesty and self-control. Unlike Locke, Fichte argues that a true system of knowledge should not seek to limit or moderate itself by reference to what is allegedly unknowable outside of it. A true system of knowledge, writes Fichte, ". . . only has to agree with itself. It can be explained only by itself, and it can be proven—or refuted—only on its own terms."³ Furthermore, Fichte suggests that an appreciation of his system of knowledge requires not modesty in his readers, but rather an implicit sense of superiority: "I wish to have nothing to do with those who, as a result of pro-

tracted spiritual servitude, have lost their own selves and, along with this loss of themselves, have lost any feeling for their own conviction. . . ."⁴

In this essay, I shall seek to show that, contrary to initial impressions, it is Fichtean idealism, and not Lockean (or any similar) realism, that is truly modest.⁵ According to my account, Locke's explicit declarations concerning the modesty and limitedness of his own project exhibit a certain ignorance concerning the genuine problems at issue. In his claim to be modest, the realist Locke professes to know more than he actually does, and thus manifests his own immodesty. By contrast, the idealist Fichte must refrain from such direct claims to modesty and must *appear* to be immodest, precisely because he has a greater understanding of how *radically* limited human knowledge always is. Like Plato's Charmides, Fichte realizes that any explicit claim to self-limitation and self-moderation would actually give lie to itself.⁶

I. THE PROBLEMS AND PARADOXES OF SELF-MEASURE

As my reference to Plato suggests, Fichte's thought concerning the problems and paradoxes of self-measure can be situated within an extended and rich philosophical tradition. And so our consideration of some of these issues might well begin with a consideration of Plato. In book 4 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates suggests that genuine self-moderation or self-control is impossible, and thus perhaps the very idea of self-moderation or self-control should be dismissed as "ridiculous."⁷ After all, a self that is in need of control would have to be a self that is unruly or undisciplined in some way; however, a self that is unruly or undisciplined would be lacking precisely what would be needed for *self*-control. On the other hand, a self that is *capable* of controlling itself would have to contain some principle of discipline or control *within* itself; but such a self would then not *need* to be controlled or disciplined, and thus any activity that the self happened to exercise upon itself would not be real *self-control*, but some other form of self-relation. Thus where control is really *needed*, *self-control* is impossible; and where *self-control* seems to be possible, *control* is not really *needed*, and thus *self-control* is not possible. Socrates does acknowledge that one can talk of "self-control" in an incidental sense; however, a close examination of the issue will always reveal that what can be controlled by the self, precisely by virtue of its *need* to be controlled, is never the self qua self, but something

other than what is doing the controlling. One can thus never say that the self qua self is controlling itself; at most, one can say only that one *part* of the self is controlling some *other* part.

The problems and paradoxes of self-control reappear in slightly different form when one considers the issue of the mind's (or the rational self's) measuring or testing of its own knowledge.⁸ First of all, genuine self-measure or self-testing is not possible for a mind that is infallible. Genuine self-measure or self-testing presupposes at least the possibility of correction, and thus the possibility of error; for without the possibility of correction, a mind's relating to itself might be described as a kind of self-agreement or self-affirmation, but not as self-measure or self-testing. Furthermore, genuine self-measure or self-testing is not possible for a mind that is fallible but does not know itself as fallible. A fallible mind that does not know itself as fallible is indeed capable of being measured or tested, but only by someone or something *other* than itself. Genuine self-measure or self-testing requires that the self in question can at least conceive the possibility of its own being corrected, and thus the possibility of its own being in error; the testing or measure of a mind that does not know itself as fallible cannot be a self-testing or self-measure. It would seem, then, that self-testing or self-measure is genuinely possible only for a mind that is fallible, and that knows itself as fallible. But even this seems to be an impossibility.

If a mind is fallible, then there is in principle no reason why its fallibility does not extend to any attempted act of self-measurement or self-testing. In other words, there is nothing to rule out the possibility that any determinate standard to which the fallible mind might appeal in its act of self-measurement might be invalid or mistaken. Such a mind, then, is not merely fallible, but *radically* fallible; its fallibility extends in principle to any attempted act of self-measurement. Of course, one can suggest that the fallible mind might somehow hit up upon the right standard for itself; however, the fallible mind could never demonstrate *for itself* that such is indeed the right standard for measuring itself. For any such act of demonstrating is susceptible to the same kind of fallibility which pertains to the fallible mind as fallible. Accordingly, the validity of the standard for measuring or testing the mind can never be demonstrated by or for the mind to be tested, but only by or for a mind *other* than the mind to be measured or tested.⁹

We thus have what appears to be an insoluble impasse concerning the issue of intellectual self-measure. On the one hand, in order to have genuine self-measure, that by which the fallible mind is to be measured (the standard or criterion) must be *other* than the mind itself; if it is not *other*

than the mind itself, then we do not have genuine *self-measure*, but rather simple self-relation or self-agreement. On the other hand, precisely because the mind to be measured is necessarily fallible (for it would make no sense to measure or test an infallible mind), there can be no guarantee that the standard by which the mind chooses to measure itself is itself not mistaken or misapplied. We can thus state the problem in general terms: all genuine *measurement* requires an appeal to something *other* than what is being measured, but in intellectual “*self-measure*” the other is never really a genuine other, but only an other as it is understood or applied (and thus perhaps misunderstood or misapplied) by the (fallible) rational self.

If the problem of intellectual self-measure is simply accepted as it has been formulated thus far, then the problem would indeed appear to be insoluble. According to my account, Fichte’s solution to the problem consists in his disruption of our fixation on the mere *formulation* of the problem and his directing of our attention back upon our *awareness* of the problem as a problem. Like Socrates, Fichte aims to get us to reflect not so much on the theoretical problem as it stands before us, but rather on our *activity* and *involvement* in being puzzled by the problem in the first place. Through his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte suggests that it is *our awareness* of the problem as a problem that constitutes the beginning of a genuine solution to it.

What is at stake in the problem of intellectual self-measure is nothing less than the possibility of philosophy, if philosophy is understood to be a form of rational discourse that aims to test or justify rational discourse itself. After all, any attempt by philosophy to test or justify rational discourse must take place within the medium of rational discourse itself. Accordingly, the kind of rational discourse that is enacted in philosophy is a species of the self-testing or self-measuring that is our primary concern in this essay. If it should turn out that intellectual self-measure is impossible in general, then philosophy itself is also impossible.

Fichte acknowledges that the activity of intellectual self-measure as enacted through philosophy is inevitably circular insofar as one cannot demonstrate that such self-measure is possible without engaging in the activity itself. The point is not to escape the circularity, but to engage in it self-consciously. Furthermore, one should not be misled into thinking that the circularity alone amounts to a demonstration of the impossibility of philosophy. The circularity cuts both ways: the possibility of philosophy can be demonstrated only through its actuality; but conversely, the mere nonactuality of a self-justifying philosophical system does not amount to a valid proof of its impossibility. One can demonstrate neither the *possibility*

nor the *impossibility* of philosophical self-measure from some external point of view. "The question concerning the possibility of philosophy is thus itself a philosophical question."¹⁰

II. WHAT IS IMPLICIT IN OUR AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* can be understood as an invitation to enter into an activity that will ultimately demonstrate that our *awareness* of the problem of intellectual self-measure *as* a problem constitutes the beginning of a solution to the problem. But what is entailed in our *awareness* of the problem as a problem?

It was suggested above that the problem of intellectual self-measure arises as a genuine problem for us because we are aware of our radical fallibility as knowers. Furthermore, the human mind is radically fallible to the extent that its fallibility extends in principle to *any* attempted act of self-measurement and *any* attempted act of demonstrating the validity of a given standard for such measurement. To recognize that the mind is radically fallible is to recognize that no given content or standard is necessarily determinative for the self's thinking. In turn, to be aware that no given content or standard is *necessarily* determinative for the self's thinking is to be aware that the self's thinking is not determined by any external necessity, but is radically free. The *meaning* of this freedom is susceptible to further elaboration; for now it need not mean anything more than that no given content or standard (or idea or representation) necessarily imposes itself on us and forces or causes us knowers to accept it as true.

The important point is not merely that we can be wrong about any given content or standard that presents itself to us. What is important is that we are *self-consciously aware* that we can always be wrong about any given content or standard. The self's awareness of the *radical fallibility* of its own knowing thus coincides with the self's awareness of its own *radical freedom*. Stated differently, the self's own self-conscious awareness of the radical fallibility of its own knowing is possible only as an enactment of the self's radical freedom. We can be aware of our radical fallibility as knowers only because we are implicitly aware that we are radically free (i.e., that no given content or standard is necessarily determinative for our thinking).

Broadly understood, the goal of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is to begin with such skepticism about theoretical knowing and to develop a system

by articulating what is implicit in such skepticism. For Fichte, as for Socrates, what is crucial is not the mere *fact* that we are radically fallible (ignorant), but rather *our activity in being aware* that we are radically fallible (ignorant). When our fallibility (or ignorance) becomes *self-conscious* fallibility (or ignorance), the result is not mere emptiness, but rather a species of wisdom (or system).

Fichte explicitly acknowledges that skepticism about our capacity to know has always been integral to the achievements of systematic philosophy: "It is undeniable that philosophizing reason owes all the human progress that it has made so far to the observations of skepticism concerning the insecurity of every resting place yet obtained by reason."¹¹ It is unfortunate that the quasi-deductive structure of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* has misled many readers into thinking that Fichte's systematic philosophy is entirely different from the movement of self-conscious fallibility. As I shall try to show, Fichte's entire *Grundlage* can be understood as the self-articulation of human fallibility becoming fully self-conscious.

Also implicit in our awareness of the problem of intellectual self-measure is the inadequacy of realism as a solution to the problem. Stated in terms of the problem of self-measure, "realism" refers to any form of knowing that seeks to measure the adequacy of itself as a form of knowing by appealing to some content or standard that is supposed to exist entirely independent of itself. According to Fichte, a careful analysis of the *problem* itself will reveal two fundamental weaknesses in the realistic solution to it.

First of all, the realist's way of thinking is fundamentally arrogant or immodest. On the face of it, the "realistic" way of thinking may appear to be more modest than Fichte's idealistic way of thinking. After all, the realist argues that there are things that are simply independent of the human mind, things that necessarily place limits upon what we can truthfully think. For the realist, these external things constitute the proper standard for testing the validity of human knowledge, and it would be arrogant to refuse to conform one's thought to these external things.

In spite of initial appearances, the realist's claim to moderation amounts to a kind of immodesty that masks its own immodest character. The realist, after all, is not merely claiming that the human mind is fallible (a claim with which the Fichtean idealist would agree). The realist is also making a claim about the *ground* of the mind's fallibility: the mind is fallible because its own knowing may not always measure up to external things, which constitute the proper criterion or standard for testing the

mind's knowing. Implicit in this claim is the realist's (immodest) belief that it is possible, in principle, for the fallible human mind to escape its own fallibility and attain knowledge of external things as they exist in themselves, entirely unconditioned by the activity of the fallible mind itself. In other words, the realist implicitly claims to be able to achieve a God's-eye view of the self-in-itself and the thing-in-itself, as well as the relation of similarity (or difference) that holds between the two. The realist's claim thus amounts to an infinitizing of consciousness.

For Fichte, one who seeks to affirm the genuine fallibility of human knowing must refrain from accounting for such fallibility by appealing to some kind of determinate reality that can putatively be known to exist as independent of and unconditioned by the finite rational self's own way of knowing. Paradoxically, Fichte's idealistic claim that the rational self does not ultimately measure itself by anything that exists independently of itself does not amount to an infinitizing of consciousness. Fichte's idealism is not a sign of arrogance; it is a sign that Fichte has recognized and accepted the radical fallibility of human knowing all the more genuinely.

In addition to being fundamentally immodest, the realist's way of thinking, according to Fichte, is also implicitly self-contradictory. As we have seen, the problem of self-measure arises as a genuine problem because the fallible mind recognizes the radicalness of its own fallibility; the problem arises insofar as the rational self recognizes that no given content or standard is necessarily determinative for its own thinking. Nevertheless, in searching for a given content or standard by which to measure the self's thinking, the realist is, in effect, searching for a content or standard that is supposed to be necessarily determinative for the self's thinking. After all, if the content or standard sought by the realist were genuinely independent of consciousness itself, then it would have to be, qua standard, unconditioned by the activity of the fallible rational self being measured. In other words, a standard that is genuinely independent of consciousness itself would have to be unaffected, qua standard, by any change or distortion that consciousness might introduce as consciousness applies (or misapplies) the standard to itself in its act of self-measuring. But if the external standard is thus unchanged and unaffected, qua standard, by the self's interpretive activity (i.e., if the standard remains valid for thought, no matter what the self might make of it), then that standard would have to be, qua standard, necessarily determinative for the consciousness to be tested. (As soon as the standard is *not* thus immune to being shaped, conditioned, or interpreted by the self that applies it in the act of self-testing, the standard is no longer gen-

uinely independent and unconditioned.) In short, the realist's solution to the problem of self-measure posits the existence of some standard or content that is supposed to be necessarily determinative for thought; however, the solution that the realist proposes implicitly contradicts the self-conscious fallibility that gave rise to the problem in the first place.

We must keep in mind that the implicit contradiction in the realist's way of thinking is recognized as a contradiction by the observing idealist, and not by those realists who remain trapped within the contradiction. Indeed, the contradiction *cannot* be recognized by the realist, who has not fully appreciated the radicalness of human fallibility and freedom. Along these lines, Fichte acknowledges that his own idealistic position must be "dogmatically opposed" to realism, as well as to any position that even holds open the possibility of realism as a viable system.¹²

On the face of it, Fichte's claim concerning the necessity of this "dogmatic opposition" might appear to be a form of arrogance and immodesty. It might seem that a more modest approach would require Fichte to seek some kind of *rapprochement* between his own position and that of the realist (or the position of someone who holds open the possibility of realism). But just the opposite is the case: any proposed *rapprochement* between the two opposed positions would presuppose that there is some third, independent thing to which the realist and the idealist would both have access, and to which they could appeal in order to settle their differences. In other words, the proposal for a *rapprochement* between realism and idealism is itself based on the realist's immodest bias. By contrast, Fichte's idealism explicitly recognizes the inability of the fallible rational self to know any determinate "third thing" or standard as it might be "in itself," unrelated to and unconditioned by the activity of the fallible self. Thus Fichte's insistence on the necessity of his dogmatic opposition to realism is not a result of arrogance or immodesty, but is rather a corollary to his awareness of the radical limits of his own thinking and ability to persuade.

By acknowledging that his own position must be dogmatically opposed to that of the realist, Fichte is affirming that there is no possibility of persuading or coercing his critics to see things as he sees them, if they do not *already* acknowledge their own radical fallibility and freedom. Stated differently, Fichte is saying that the activity of self-conscious fallibility and freedom that underlies his own idealism cannot be induced or forced upon others through any kind of mediation, explanation, or argumentation. Philosophical discourse must simply *begin* with the activity of free, self-conscious fallibility, the hidden source of all wonder. Any force or

any appeal to some external "third thing" contradicts the essence of that freedom which lies at the basis of one's self-conscious fallibility.

The point here is not that Fichte's idealism must be dogmatically opposed to realism, while realism is not dogmatically opposed to idealism. Idealism and realism are each dogmatically opposed to one another; but the ways in which they are so opposed is fundamentally different. Fichte's idealistic position is dogmatically opposed to realism in a way that explicitly includes an awareness of its own dogmatic opposition. By contrast, the realist position is dogmatically opposed to the idealist position, but in a manner that seeks to deny the necessity of its own dogmatic opposition: realism steadfastly refuses to accept its own limits and thus continually seeks a common point of agreement between itself and idealism (by appealing to some thing-in-itself outside of all knowing). To this extent, Fichte is like Socrates, and the realist is like the poets, politicians, and craftsmen. Both are necessarily ignorant of the "third thing" outside of knowing by which they might finally settle their differences. But while Socrates (Fichte) acknowledges his own ignorance, the poets, politicians, and craftsmen (the realists) do not.

III. SELF AND NOT-SELF

Our understanding of the radicalness of the problem of intellectual self-measure implicitly includes within it an awareness of our radical fallibility and freedom as knowers. In order to show how our awareness of the problem constitutes the beginning of a solution to it, we must say more about the rational self that is aware of itself as radically fallible and free.

To be aware of oneself as radically fallible and free is to be aware that no given content is necessarily determinative for one's thinking. But exactly how are we to understand and define the rational self that is thus self-aware? Any attempted definition of the rational self as self-consciously fallible and free cannot be based on or derived from any given content. After all, the self's radical fallibility extends to any proposed definition of the self that is based on or derived from any given content (or idea or representation). If we are to remain sensitive to the problem of our radical fallibility, then—in our search for a solution to the problem—we must exercise extreme skeptical restraint in our definition of the self: in defining the self, we must refrain entirely from relying on any given content or idea or representation.

This skeptical restraint, however, does not prevent us from defining the self-consciously fallible, free self. Indeed, it is this very restraint that gives us just what we need in order to define the rational self without recourse to any given content. The rational self is nothing other than the activity of being aware of itself as radically fallible and free, undetermined by any given content. If we are to take the problem of self-measure seriously, we *must* define the self in this way. Any suggestion that the self might be more adequately defined by reference to something *other* than such activity implicitly involves the problematic, realistic claim that the self can have knowledge of some external thing as it is in itself, independent of and unconditioned by the self's own activity of being aware of itself.

The awareness of oneself as radically fallible and free, an awareness that constitutes the self's very being, is necessarily a *nonrepresentational* kind of awareness. Any given representation inevitably belongs to that sphere of given contents to which one may not appeal in defining the self. Thus the term "awareness" must be used here with caution: this awareness is nothing like any empirical awareness of a given, determinate content (derived either from internal or external sense). The kind of awareness that constitutes the self's being does not refer to or depend on any given content or fact (*Tatsache*) whatsoever, but is simply an activity (*Tathandlung*), namely the activity of being aware, in a nonrepresentational way, of oneself as free and undetermined by any given content.

With this, we have arrived at the first principle of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, the pure *Ich = Ich*. This activity is alternatively described by Fichte as the activity of self-positing, or the activity of simple "being for self." The "content" of the first principle of the *Grundlage* is thus nothing other than the activity of self-positing, or being for oneself in a nonrepresentational way. Here, the act of self-awareness and the content of the act fully coincide; all that the self is, is simply its own act of being for self, and all that is for the self, is simply its own selfhood as the act of being for self: "To posit oneself and to be are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical. Thus the proposition, 'I am, because I have posited myself' can also be stated as: 'I am absolutely [*schlechthin*], because I am.'"¹³

Fichte's description of the self-positing self as "absolute" (*absolut*), and the translation of the German "*schlechthin*" as "absolute" or "absolutely," can be misleading. Saying that the rational self "absolutely" posits itself is not an attempt to infinitize the self, but rather an attempt to express the radicalness of the self's fallibility. To say that the self "simply" or "absolutely" posits itself is to say that the self is so radically fallible as a knower that it

is absolutely unable to explain itself or (what amounts to the same thing) explain its awareness of itself by appealing to any thing other than itself. It would be fundamentally immodest for the self to try to explain itself by appealing to an external state of affairs that somehow preexisted the self and “caused” the self to become the self-consciously fallible self that it is. Any such explanation would involve the self in the immodest claim that it can, as a fallible self, have knowledge of a state of affairs that is independent of itself, unrelated to and unconditioned by the self’s own fallible activity. The self must simply *begin* with itself as self-consciously fallible and free, and it can never get “behind” or “ahead” of this starting point by appealing to any kind of condition, causation, or mediation. Far from infinitizing the self, Fichte’s discussion of the self as simply (*schlechthin*) self-positing is a much more thorough and honest admission of the self’s radical fallibility.¹⁴

Because of the skeptical restraint that we must exercise in defining the self, we must also refrain from thinking of the self as any kind of substance or thing at all. The rational self is not a thing that also happens to think (a *res cogitans*); it is nothing but the activity of thinking. The rational self “. . . is an *act*, and absolutely [*absolut*] nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something [*ein Thätiges*]. . . .”¹⁵ The rational self is nothing other than the “pure activity” of nonrepresentational, nonsubstantialist self-awareness. Any proposed definition of the self as an active *something* or active *substance* implicitly refers to some *being* or *substance* that can allegedly be known to exist as it is in itself, apart from the bare activity of the self’s thinking. Thus any substantialist or reifying vision of the self shares the realist’s immodest bias. Again, the exclusion of all passivity in this definition of the self is not an attempt to infinitize the self, but rather an attempt to acknowledge the self’s radical fallibility more honestly and completely.

This account of Fichte’s first principle in the *Grundlage* sheds some light on the question of whether Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* should be understood as a form of foundationalism or antifoundationalism. According to my account, Fichte’s thought necessarily problematizes any simple dichotomy between the two. On the one hand, Fichte’s thought seems to be a form of foundationalism: after all, Fichte is seeking to give an account of the *ground* of all possible experience.¹⁶ On the other hand, Fichte’s project seems to be antifoundationalist: traditional foundationalism entails the search for some kind of foundation that is *other* than the doubting self and to which the doubting self may appeal in order to put an end to its doubt.¹⁷ By contrast, the first principle or “foundation” of Fichte’s philosophy is nothing other

than the questioning, doubting, self-consciously fallible self that knows that no given content can be necessarily determinative for it. Unlike traditional foundationalism, Fichte's system does not provide us with any kind of reference point that is *other* than the self and in relation to which the self might immunize itself (or immunize some privileged set of claims) against doubt. If Fichte's system is to be understood as a form of foundationalism, then it is a foundationalism that forces us through its very enactment to question the very meaning of philosophical foundations.¹⁸

To ask whether Fichte is a foundationalist or an antifoundationalist is somewhat similar to asking whether Socrates is wise or ignorant. In one respect, it seems that Socrates is truly ignorant: Socrates does not possess knowledge of any determinate content or standard that will allow him to settle any particular question once and for all. But Socratic ignorance does not amount to a complete absence or obliviousness. After all, Socrates is *self-consciously ignorant*, and to that extent he is wise. More pointedly, Socratic wisdom is nothing other than the ongoing activity of self-conscious ignorance. The "content" of Socratic wisdom (self-conscious ignorance) is simply the nonrepresentational awareness that the rational self's thinking can never be fully satisfied or determined by any given content or representation; it is an awareness that the questioning self is always already "beyond" being determined by any thing or representation as it presents itself within experience. In general, it is not possible to understand the meaning of Socratic wisdom without understanding how it implies, and is implied by, Socratic ignorance; by the same token, it is not possible to understand Fichte's foundationalism without understanding how it implies, and is implied by, his antifoundationalism.

The nonfoundational foundation of Fichte's thought is the nonrepresentational, nonsubstantialist activity of the self as self-conscious of its radical fallibility and freedom. By virtue of its radical fallibility and freedom, the self is absolutely unable to explain itself as caused or conditioned by anything that is allegedly independent of it. But this inability of the self to explain itself by reference to something that is allegedly independent of it does not lead to any kind of incipient solipsism. In fact, the activity of the self as we have unpacked it thus far demonstrates that the self (as long as it is a self at all) is necessarily *not* the totality of all that is, and is necessarily finite and limited by what is *other* than itself.

As self-conscious of its radical fallibility and freedom, the self knows that no given content is necessarily determinative for itself, that no given content necessarily imposes itself on the self. However, one "thing" that

does “impose” itself on the self is the fact that the self must always *come-to-be* aware of itself as radically fallible and free. The self’s coming-to-be as a self-consciously fallible and free self always “happens” to the self, apart from any deliberate or free choosing by the self. The self cannot deliberately and self-consciously choose its own coming-to-be-aware of itself as radically fallible and free (and thus cannot choose to come-to-be the self that it is), since—“prior” to this coming-to-be—the self is “not yet” a self-consciously free self at all. The self-consciously free self is what it is only to the extent that it emerges, or awakens, *out of* a “prior” state of *not* being a self-consciously free self. Since the self was not *always* the radically free and self-conscious self that it is, the self cannot be the totality of all that is, for coming-to-be necessarily implies some otherness. The self-positing self thus cannot be the totality of all that is, and there must be some other to the self, or a not-self (*Nicht-Ich*). With this, we have arrived at the second principle of Fichte’s *Grundlage*.¹⁹

The necessity of the not-self for the self can be explained with reference to the activity of question asking: all question asking presupposes some sense of otherness. As long as any question is not yet answered, there is some other to the self or (what amounts to the same thing) some other to the self’s awareness of itself as a self. Insofar as there is some otherness to the self-conscious self, the self is not the totality of all that is, and there must be a not-self. Of course, one might challenge this conclusion by suggesting that the sense of otherness contained in any question does not pertain to any real otherness, but only to an illusory otherness. But even this suggestion confirms the necessity of the not-self for the self. If the otherness implied by the self’s questioning referred to an entirely illusory otherness, then the self’s being (its activity of being self-aware in a nonrepresentational way) would already be the totality of all that is; but in that case, the self would already know that much, for it would already know everything about everything by virtue of being self-aware. If that were the case, the self could not even *begin* to wonder whether an otherness were real or illusory. It would already know. Thus even the *appearance* of a *possible* otherness (in the form of any type of question) is necessarily a *real* otherness for a self-positing self whose being (as we have seen) consists in the bare activity of self-consciousness.

There must be a not-self, as long as the self is the fallible, questioning self that it is. Thus when Fichte says that the fallible and free self is aware that no given content is necessarily determinative for it, he is not saying that “anything goes” or that there are no limits on the self at all. Just as

Fichte's philosophy of the self-positing self does not amount to solipsism, so too Socrates' relentless question asking does not amount to a sophistry that respects no genuine otherness. We can now also see why Fichte's claims about the self's inability to know any external "thing-in-itself" do not lead us into a bad Cartesian dualism. There is no need to build a "bridge" between the self and the not-self, since the real existence of the not-self is always already entailed by the self's own questioning.

With the second principle of the *Grundlage*, our understanding of the first principle is necessarily transformed. The pure activity of the self-positing self (an activity in which the self's being and the self's awareness fully coincide) is not simply an already achieved givenness from which we make our beginning. As long as there is any otherness *for* the self, there is necessarily also a *difference* between the self's being and the self's awareness; and as long as there is this difference, the pure *Ich = Ich* is both a starting point *and* a yet-to-be-accomplished endpoint. We have already seen that the Fichtean system is self-consciously circular; we now see that the circle is necessarily turning and enriching itself as we go along. We can also see more fully why Fichte's foundationalism must also be an antifoundationalism: the first principle or foundation from which we begin does not remain fixed and does not continue to mean exactly what it meant for us at the beginning. The first principle or foundation develops and shifts in its meaning, even as we continue to rely upon it as our first principle or foundation.

IV. FICHTE'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF SELF-MEASURE

Precisely because of the self's radical fallibility, the self cannot claim to know any external thing as it is in itself, unrelated to and unconditioned by the self's own fallible activity. By the same token, the self (as self-conscious of its radical fallibility and freedom) cannot be explained, or accounted for, by reference to anything that is allegedly other than, or independent of, the self. On the other hand, we have also seen that the self *needs* a genuine other (or not-self) in order to be the self-consciously fallible and free self that it is in the first place. It seems, then, that our account of the self and not-self has led us into a contradiction.

The contradiction infiltrates our very definition of the self. The radical fallibility of the self required us to exercise extreme restraint and define the self as nothing other than the pure act of being for self, where

the act of self-awareness and the content of the act of self-awareness fully coincide. On the other hand, the radical fallibility of the self also led us to realize that the self could not be a self at all, unless there were also an other for the self (a not-self). Because there must also be a not-self for the self, it follows that the self *cannot* be defined as a pure act of being for self, where the act and the content of the act fully coincide.

The entire *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* can be understood as a series of attempts to eradicate this fundamental contradiction, yet “without doing away with the identity of consciousness.”²⁰ As the *Grundlage* demonstrates, every attempt to eradicate the contradiction ultimately fails. However, the net result is not merely negative: our awareness of the necessity of the failures yields a system of knowledge, a system that implicitly contains a solution to the problem of intellectual self-measure.

As we have seen, the problem of intellectual self-measure arose a genuine problem in the first place because of the self’s implicit awareness of its radical fallibility. Furthermore, the self knows that it is fallible only to the extent that it knows that it is not already the totality of all that is, that there is an other to the self in relation to which the self’s knowledge might be measured or tested. Thus all measure requires some relation to an other. On the other hand, we have also seen that—precisely because the self is radically fallible—the self cannot claim to know any other as it is in itself, independent of an unconditioned by the self’s own fallible activity. Any other for the self is never a genuine other, but only an other as it has been interpreted and understood (and thus perhaps misinterpreted and misunderstood) by the self. Precisely because of this self-conscious fallibility, the self’s activity of self-measurement *requires* a genuine other which, in principle, is also *unattainable*.

Fichte’s solution to the problem of selfhood and self-measure is to affirm the necessity of the contradiction. To be a self at all is to be always already for oneself or (what amounts to the same thing) self-aware, self-positing, self-intuiting, self-measuring. But the condition of the possibility that the self be the purely self-positing self that it is, is that there be an other (not-self) for the self (i.e., an other within the self’s awareness). Thus the condition of the possibility that the self be the purely self-positing, self-measuring self that it is, is that it *not* be purely self-positing or self-measuring.

For Fichte, any attempt to escape the contradiction that infiltrates all selfhood and self-measure is an attempt to escape the inevitable finitude of one’s own subjectivity. In order to escape the contradiction, one would

have to step outside of one's finite subjectivity and somehow achieve a point of view *above* both finite intuiting subject and finite intuited object. One would have to achieve a God's-eye view by which one could see the self-in-itself and the not-self-in-itself as two separate objects, connected by a third, mediating relation. Stated differently, one would have to intuit deliberately and simultaneously *both* the self-in-itself *and* the self-as-it-intuits-the-other. In order to escape the contradiction, one would have to stand above oneself, or behind one's own back.

For Fichte, such simultaneous intuiting (from above or behind) is impossible for a finite self. There simply is no self-in-itself that is intuitable as separate from the self-as-it-intuits-the-other. After all, there could be no self-in-itself, if the self did not *already* intuit an other; and there could be no other *for* the self, if the self were not *already* for itself. Any self that strives to hover above, or get behind, both self and not-self in order to intuit a fixed relation between the two is implicitly trying to intuit something that is external to one's *own* self (here the external thing is the totality constituted by self, not-self, and the relation between them), all the while leaving its *own* selfhood out of the picture. In thus trying to intuit both self and not-self as two independent things in relation to one another, the self inevitably turns these two "things" into a *new*, single object *for itself*. The self and not-self (as two allegedly independent things standing in relation to one another) now collapse into *one* external objectivity for the self that had tried to intuit them as two independent, external things in relation to one another. In short, any alleged God's-eye view (insofar as it is a view of anything determinate at all) can never be a real God's-eye view (a view of self and not-self as two independent things), but has always already become a finite self's view, a view that intuits a single objectivity *other* than itself, all the while leaving its own current activity as a self out of account.

The self-measuring self never knows itself-in-itself apart from knowing itself-in-relation-to-the-other. Because of this, the self-measuring self is always already caught in a contradiction; the self is always already measuring itself by itself *and* in relation to another, *both at once*. However, precisely because of its radical finitude, the self's first impulse is to think that its act of measuring itself is unproblematic and noncontradictory; the self's first impulse is to think that it is measuring itself by reference to a purely external standard, a standard that is independent of and unconditioned by its own activity as a self. This *must* be the self's first impulse, since the self *starts* with a question, a sense that it does not already know everything.

There is indubitably an other for the self, and it is natural for the self to think at first that its act of measuring itself in relation to an other is an act of measuring in relation to a *pure* other.

The finite self can realize only *after the fact* that the other by which it measured itself is not the absolutely independent other that the finite self at first took it to be. This realization *must* come after the fact, since the finite self cannot achieve a simultaneous intuition of both itself and itself-in-relation-to-the other; at first, the self must think that it is simply intuiting a pure other. The finite self realizes only later that the allegedly independent other was actually only an other-for-the-self; it realizes only later that the intuited other was always already an equilibrium of self-and-other together. For Fichte, all subjectivity is finite. This finitude entails some kind of otherness, externality, or difference. If one wants to give this finitude its proper due, then the otherness or difference should not be understood as extended across *space* between two independent things (self and not-self); the otherness extends rather across *time* between two different moments of the same ongoing process (the self as it reconsolidates, or re-collects, itself out of what it first took to be wholly other than itself—but never really was).

With this, Fichte inverts the Lockean account of intellectual self-moderation. According to Locke, the mind *first* discovers its limits, *then* decides to moderate itself according to its knowledge of those limits. Fichte's criticism tells us that, if the Lockean account were correct, then the alleged limits on the self could not be *genuine* limits at all, but only limits as they are understood and interpreted (and thus perhaps misunderstood and misinterpreted) by the self. In other words, such limits would be limits *within* consciousness, and thus not genuine limits at all. For Fichte, any genuine limits on the self cannot simply be the limits that the self finds within empirical consciousness. Genuine limits on the self must be limits that the self has already, unselfconsciously set for itself. In other words, the self does not *first* discover its limits, *then* moderate itself in accordance with them; rather, the self is so radically finite that it is always already self-limiting, and it can discover the limits that it has set for itself only after the fact.

Even after acknowledging the inadequacy of naive realism, the realist philosopher may still seek to hold onto some notion of an object or standard "in itself," unconditioned by all consciousness. The realist philosopher may even offer a sophisticated theory to account for our inability to achieve final and definitive knowledge of any "thing-in-itself." According to the realist, the thing-in-itself always escapes or recedes from our limited grasp, by virtue of its richness or depth or impenetrability. Indeed, experi-

ence seems to confirm the realist's account: through experience, we notice that the more we attempt to capture the thing-in-itself, the more the thing-in-itself seems to recede from our grasp. According to the realist, the thing-in-itself has not (yet) been captured by us, but it is at least *logically* possible that one day we may capture it.

For Fichte, the idealist knows that the real reason for the appearance of the thing's noncapturability is not the thing-in-itself, but rather what the self does to the thing in seeking to capture it. As soon as the self has captured anything at all (by bringing it within consciousness), the thing is inevitably no longer a thing-in-itself, but only a thing-for-the-self. There *appears* to be an ever-receding thing-in-itself, not because of anything genuinely independent of the self, but because of the self's own activity. The self *needs* to orient itself toward an other, in order to be a self at all; but as soon as the self knows the other at all, the self has (Midas-like) turned the other into an other-for-the-self; the self has always already destroyed the thing's independent character. The idealist recognizes that the self's own activity is the reason for its perpetual striving. By contrast, the activity of the realist is like the activity of a dog that unselfconsciously chases its own tail, hoping one day to catch it.

In order to be a self at all, the self needs a not-self, a nonempirically given other in relation to which the self is the finite self that it is. This other can never be captured or possessed by the self, as long as the self is a self at all. This points to yet another way in which Fichtean and Socratic philosophy coincide. Socrates acknowledges that all intelligible discourse whatsoever depends upon our awareness of the Forms as the goal or object of thought.²¹ And yet Socrates also refuses to give any definitive account of the Forms. For to give a definitive account of the Forms would be to imply that human thought can capture or master that in relation to which it is finite—in which case human thought would not be finite any more. It is precisely because Socrates is so self-conscious of his own limits as a thinker that he refuses to give a definitive account of the Forms. Of course, such refusal *appears* as arrogant to many of Socrates' interlocutors; such refusal *must* appear as arrogant, precisely because the interlocutors *themselves* are arrogant enough to expect that the Forms *can* be captured and made available to human thought once and for all. Like Socrates' self-conscious modesty, Fichte's idealism must *appear* as arrogant to the ones who are truly arrogant.

The Socratic doctrine of Recollection confirms my account of Socratic modesty. Because Socrates is aware of his own ignorance, he realizes that he

cannot already have any *actual* knowledge of the Forms. But because of his modesty, Socrates also realizes that he cannot claim that the Forms are *entirely* other than the self. For that claim would implicitly amount to the immodest claim that the self can know an other as it is in itself, entirely unconditioned and independent of the self's own activity. Because Socrates respects the otherness of the other so much, he cannot claim to *know* the other as *wholly* other; hence, the doctrine of Recollection.

The Fichtean self must strive to achieve knowledge of the other as it is in itself, all the while realizing that such knowledge can never be actualized. Of course, the critical reader may ask why the self needs to strive in this way at all. For Fichte, there can be no theoretical answer to that question, but only a *moral* one. The self must strive, because the self cannot be a self without striving, and the self *ought* to be a self. This reasoning is surely circular, but the circularity may appear less vicious if one realizes that the problems of selfhood and self-measure originally arose as problems for the self only because of a moral, and not theoretical, intuition.

The problems arose for the self because the self came to realize that it is radically fallible as a knower, that the self can *never* capture any thing-in-itself once and for all. How did the self come to realize that? Such a realization cannot be based on experience alone, since experience alone yields knowledge only of things as they have been thus far, not of how things *must* be for all time. The self's certainty that it can *never* immunize itself against theoretical error is not a function of the way external things have appeared to the self; it is a function of the self's orientation towards external things. It is not a theoretical certainty, but a moral certainty. Stated more precisely, the self's *theoretical uncertainty* (its awareness that it will *never* be able capture any thing-in-itself once and for all, without the least possibility of correction or revision) is grounded in a *moral certainty*. Along these lines, Socrates argues that we must continue to seek knowledge of the Forms—even when we realize that they may not be capturable by us—because of moral, and not theoretical reasons: “. . . we should be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking. . . .”²²

The self's striving (in vain) to eradicate the self-contradiction of consciousness arises out of a moral demand; but this striving also happens to serve a theoretical purpose. For in seeking to eradicate the self-contradiction of consciousness, the self (whose activity constitutes the content of the *Grundlage*) unself-consciously generates a series of thought categories (e.g., limitation, quantity, etc.). When all the possible avenues for eradi-

cating the self-contradiction of consciousness have been exhausted, the transcendental deduction of the categories is complete. Fichte can claim that his own deduction of the categories is genuinely *transcendental*, since the content of the deduction emerges solely from the self's ongoing struggle with its self-contradictory, self-conscious fallibility. The self's awareness of its self-contradiction as a self impels it to generate the categories of thought—categories in accordance with which the self had *already* been thinking about the contradiction in the first place. Thus the striving self is engaged in developing a system that, at first, could not appear *as* a system.

Perhaps a final, hermeneutical point is in order. Throughout this essay, I have made reference to Socrates in order to illuminate the meaning of Fichte's thought. The critical reader may reasonably ask whether such continuing reference to Socrates has rendered this a violent interpretation of Fichte's philosophy. I would say that the question erroneously assumes that the figure of Socrates can have meaning apart from our interpretation, and that we can be the philosophical selves that we are apart from the figure of Socrates. First of all, it is clear that there can be no Socrates-in-itself, just as there can be no thing-in-itself. But more importantly, we ourselves cannot be the self-conscious, questioning philosophers that we are without the figure of Socrates. No matter how autonomous and detached we might believe ourselves to be as "critical" philosophers, we are always already philosophizing within a given tradition, namely the tradition engendered by the questioning of Socrates. The real issue for us, then, is not whether we philosophize within that tradition, but whether we do so self-consciously. Indeed, philosophy itself can be understood as the never-ending activity of waking up and becoming self-conscious about what must have always already taken place "behind our own backs" as self-conscious subjects. This essay has been an attempt to contribute to the ongoing awakening.

NOTES

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. with an introduction by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 45.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
3. J. G. Fichte, "Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre—Vorerinnerung," in *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, eds. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, and Erich Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad

Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964ff.), I/4: 185; this English translation is taken from Daniel Breazeale, ed. and trans., *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), p. 5.

4. “Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der *Wissenschaftslehre* Vorerinnerung,” Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe*, I/4: 185; Breazeale, *Introductions*, pp. 5–6.

5. It is worth emphasizing here that my argument has to do with the modesty of Fichte’s system of idealism, and not necessarily with any psychological characteristics that may or may not belong to Fichte as an individual human being.

6. See Plato’s *Charmides* (158c) where Socrates asks Charmides whether he possesses the virtue of *sophrosyne*. Charmides cannot answer affirmatively, for such an answer would be immodest. Instead, Charmides remains silent about his self-moderation—a sign that he does, indeed, possess *sophrosyne*.

7. See Plato’s *Republic*, 430e–431a.

8. Throughout this essay, the terms mind, intellect, rational self, and knower (and all of their derivatives) are used interchangeably. My use of these terms (and their derivatives) is not intended to suggest any special technical meaning.

9. Of course, while intellectual *self*-measure seems to be impossible, there is nothing to prevent the mind from measuring or testing one representation *within* itself by appealing to some *other* representation within itself as the standard for such measure. However, such an activity would be the testing of one *part* by another *part*, and not the genuine *self*-testing of the self *qua* self.

10. Fichte: *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy—Wissenschaftslehre* (Novo Methodo), trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 89.

11. “Aenesidemus-Rezension,” Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe*, I/2: 41; this English translation is taken from Daniel Breazeale, ed. and trans., *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 59.

12. See “Aenesidemus-Rezension,” Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe*, I/2: 57; this English translation is taken from Breazeale, *Fichte*, p. 71. For more on the necessarily “dogmatic opposition” between Fichte’s idealism and other philosophical viewpoints, see Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–95), in *Gesamtausgabe*, I/2, 328; *Fichte: The Science of Knowledge*, trans. John Lachs and Peter Heath (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1920), p. 164.

13. Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, I/2: 260. This English translation is taken from *Fichte: The Science of Knowledge*, p. 99.

14. Any attempt to account for the self’s awareness of itself as radically fallible and free by reference to something other than itself is not only immodest, but also question-begging. For there can be no representational content for the self, and thus no explanatory principle or cause known as other to the self, unless the self is “*already*” a self and thus implicitly aware of itself *as* a self.

15. Fichte, *Erste einleitung zu einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre; Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, I/4: 200. This English translation is taken from *Fichte: The Science of Knowledge*, p. 21.

16. See, for example, Fichte, *Erste einleitung zu einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*; *Gesamtausgabe*, I/4: 186.

17. The alleged foundation in traditional foundationalism *must* be other than the doubting self qua doubting self; otherwise, it could not put an end to the doubting self's doubt.

18. For more on the question of Fichte's foundationalism and/or antifoundationalism, see the essays by Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore contained in the collection, *Fichte: Historical Contexts/Contemporary Controversies*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1994), chaps. 3, 5.

19. For more on the claim that this "prior" state of inactivity corresponds to the sphere of the not-self, see Fichte: *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy—Wissenschaftslehre (Novo Methodo)*, pp. 121–33.

20. See Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, I/2: 269; *Fichte: The Science of Knowledge*, p. 107.

21. See Plato's *Parmenides*, 135c.

22. See *Meno*, 86b–c.