

## THE PRIORITY OF EPISTEMOLOGY IN EARLY NEO-KANTIANISM

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*Abstract: This essay examines the argumentative context in which early Neo-Kantian philosophers defined and defended “epistemology.” The paper defends Richard Rorty’s claim that the priority of epistemology influenced how the history of modern philosophy was written but corrects his story by showing that epistemology was defended mainly via antifoundational arguments. The essay begins with a few programmatic arguments by Kuno Fischer and Eduard Zeller but focuses mainly on Otto Liebmann’s Kant und die Epigonen. I argue that Liebmann completes the agenda of Fischer and Zeller by giving a detailed account of how a metaphysical system is impossible for anyone who begins with modest, Kantian epistemological principles.*

Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is notable for, among many other things, the attention that it pays to the demarcation of philosophical subfields.<sup>1</sup> In his third chapter, “The Idea of a ‘Theory of Knowledge,’” Rorty argued that epistemology in particular is of recent vintage. He located its rise among Kant’s followers in nineteenth-century Germany, and he claimed that only after this period did philosophers and historians project epistemological questions back upon early modernity and antiquity (PMN, 132). The intent of this argument was to establish that our academic divisions are optional, so that current notions of philosophy would appear questionable (ibid.). These rather lofty argumentative goals met with mixed reaction, forcing Rorty later to withdraw his attempts at presenting an intellectual history as a challenge to our disciplinary self-understanding.<sup>2</sup> But the withdrawal of Rorty’s more ambitious aims nonetheless leaves a number of historical questions open. The present essay seeks to recover some of the historical theses on which he relied and to separate them from the admittedly exaggerated conclusions that he drew.

Of specific interest is the still underresearched question of how the early Neo-Kantian philosophers defined epistemology and justified it as the first philosophical science. Rorty's approach to this issue suffered from an uneasy mixture of philosophical and institutional considerations. While it is probably true that a perceived need to isolate philosophy "from ideology on the one hand and from the rising empirical science on the other" (PMN, 134) provided philosophers with a reason to demarcate, for instance, epistemology from metaphysics and psychology, this tells us little about the argumentative reasons for the move. Other scholars of Neo-Kantianism, such as Klaus Christian Köhnke, have followed Rorty in his emphasis on institutional analysis.<sup>3</sup> As a result they have underplayed some of the arguments, and, in Rorty's case, this occasioned a crucial mischaracterization of the Neo-Kantian defense of epistemology. Rorty zealously attacked both epistemology and foundationalism, and, in doing so, he conflated two things that were importantly distinguished in the nineteenth century. Philosophers in the 1860s, in fact, defended epistemology with explicitly antifoundationalist arguments, ones that curiously resemble moves from Rorty's own playbook. Much of his subsequent characterization of nineteenth-century epistemology was, then, misguided.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I recount the development of some programmatic, antifoundational arguments that were popular in Germany between the years of 1860 and 1865, in the interest of arguing that epistemology was established as the *prima philosophia* precisely because of the impossibility of a foundational or "systematic" philosophy. I trace the origin of epistemology as a distinct field of study to Kuno Fischer's writings on Kant. In the first section, I argue that Fischer provided the framework for Eduard Zeller's more famous account of epistemology's independence. In the second section, I explain how the theses of Fischer and Zeller were supported by some misguided historical and philological developments. This part of my essay vindicates Rorty's analysis somewhat, since it reveals how key portions of the popular narrative of modern philosophy rest on theses about the scope and nature of philosophy. In the third and fourth sections, I turn to Otto Liebmann's *Kant und die Epigonen* in order to show how the programmatic arguments of Fischer and Zeller were strengthened by explicitly antifoundational considerations. My focus will be on Liebmann's correlation argument, which I take to be worthy of further attention.

### THE PROGRAMMATIC ARGUMENT

One obstacle to an adequate history of this period, which Rorty rightly noticed, has been that we do not well understand the relationship between the received history of modern philosophy and the philosophical

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interests of nineteenth-century historians of philosophy. In this section, I aim to correct this problem somewhat by examining some arguments by that century's two most prolific historians of philosophy, Eduard Zeller and Kuno Fischer.<sup>5</sup> The arguments on which I will focus reveal that these philosophers rejected Hegelianism and instead laid the groundwork for the "Back to Kant" movement.<sup>6</sup> Fischer and Zeller defended epistemology with a mixture of programmatic argument and general historiography, the former being initially accompanied by large-scale attempts to construct a history of modern philosophy on a Kantian model. The common characterization of Zeller and Fischer as Hegelians, then, obscures an important development in nineteenth-century philosophy. I follow Andrew Chignell in labeling Fischer and Zeller instead as Neo-Kantians, and I explain how their arguments in epistemology framed their construction of a modern canon.

Fischer's many writings on Kant include a concise programmatic argument that he proposed most clearly in his 1860 lecture "On Epistemology as First Philosophy," which appeared in a volume called *Kants Leben und die Grundlagen seiner Lehre* (Kant's life and the principles of his doctrine).<sup>7</sup> The text departs from the premise that sciences are distinguished by their respective objects and concludes that a clearly defined and really existing object is a necessary condition for any valid science (*Kants Leben*, 80ff). A threat thus faces philosophy: if there could be an exact science of every existing object, then our Socratic pursuit of wisdom would be "a science without a home, or perhaps only with an imaginary one" (*ibid.*, 81). The escape route lies in the fact that all sciences presuppose that there is knowledge, so that philosophy can survive as *Erkenntnistheorie*. Rather than being threatened in relation to the sciences, philosophy asserted as its object the one thing ("Erkenntnis") that is a necessary condition for any science whatsoever. Epistemology thus names a definite object, namely, "knowledge," for philosophy considered as a science, as opposed to such less easily defined objects as "the absolute."

The question of epistemology's independence was already familiar as a special problem of Kantian interpretation, and Fischer's decision in regard to it motivated a new conception of the history of nineteenth-century philosophy. Simply put, the need to defend epistemology as an independent endeavor required a rejection of the methods pursued by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel—it also required a link between the Kantian notion of *Vernunftkritik* and the new concept of *Erkenntnislehre*.<sup>8</sup> Fischer therefore outlined a new history of Kantianism, ultimately paving the way for his mentee Otto Liebmann.<sup>9</sup> One text that presents these problems plainly is Fischer's 1862 Jena inaugural lecture on "The Two Kantian Schools in Jena."<sup>10</sup> A Kantian, according to this lecture, faces a plain dilemma. The Kantian can either practice *Vernunftkritik*, or

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criticism in the absence of a system, or attempt to complement criticism with a new system of philosophy. The history of Kantianism, on this new retrospective view, divides cleanly into two corresponding schools, with everything hinging on how one understands the concepts of “criticism” and “system” (Fischer, *Akademische Reden*, 90).

This historical dichotomy between criticism and system left the programmatic question in the background but brought to the fore an otherwise unarticulated need for a rejection of systematic philosophy. The central issue in rescuing philosophy as a science was to secure its object by distinction from the objects of the special sciences, not to establish limits on the form or scope of the discipline. But the received history of Post-Kantianism, which led to Hegel through Reinhold and Fichte, emphasized that the way to solve epistemological problems was to place them within a comprehensive philosophical system.<sup>11</sup> Systematicity, then, was seen as a threat to the independence of epistemology, and so *eo ipso* to the dignity of philosophy. Fischer’s response was to place all those philosophers whom we now call “Post-Kantians” on one horn of a dilemma and, in so doing, to prepare the way for their removal from the history of Kantianism:

From a Kantian view these philosophers—despite both the diversity of their systems and the intensity with which they fought each other—stand together as a group. They are all dominated by one basic thought, according to which they understand and develop Kantian philosophy. Reinhold embarked on a direction of speculative thought, which moved through its metamorphoses in the *Wissenschaftslehre* and *Naturphilosophie* and then finally reached its goal in Hegel. (Fischer, *Akademische Reden*, 84)

The other horn of the dilemma was followed by those who appropriated *Vernunftkritik* in the absence of a system. A relatively unimposing figure in Jakob Fries served as the historical precedent for this move, and Fischer regarded Fries’s school as “the newer” as opposed to “older Kantian school” (ibid., 86). This last move sharpened the rhetoric further against the Hegelian tradition: not only did Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel confine themselves to one position within Kantianism, but they also represented the older and less current of the two traditions. The symbolic context of the lecture only strengthens the point since Fichte and Schelling were announced thereby as outdated even at their own university. The appeal to Fries, on the other hand, was merely rhetorical. The latter’s anthropology of pure reason was no more acceptable than was Hegelianism, though it was less threatening (ibid., 99). Fischer’s text is, nonetheless, clear in its suggestion that criticism, now defined by him as *Erkenntnislehre*, will have to take seriously this possibility of eschewing systematic philosophy in order to focus only on knowledge

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and that this requires a specifically anti-Hegelian history of modern philosophy (see *ibid.*, 98–101).

If Fischer’s aborted appeal to Fries was idiosyncratic even within his own body of work—after all, he later authored major tomes on Fichte and Hegel, not on Fries<sup>12</sup>—this does not mean that the rhetorical strategy was without success. “The Two Kantian Schools in Jena” outlined the agenda for a new history of German philosophy: it must distinguish criticism from system and, in doing so, portray Reinhold, Fichte, Hegel, and other “Post-Kantian” philosophers as choosing the wrong path. A similarly ambitious combination of programmatic argument with general historiography appears in contemporaneous texts by Zeller, including his “On the Significance and Task of Epistemology.”<sup>13</sup> This very influential lecture, delivered contemporaneously with Fischer’s address, elaborated some consequences of the newly conceived relation of philosophy to the sciences. Since the former consists in an investigation of knowledge as this appears in various endeavors including physics and psychology, philosophy qua epistemology plays a regulative or surveillance role among the sciences (*Vortraege und Abhandlungen*, 483). The famous lecture, however, likewise proceeds on the premise that epistemology is incompatible with systematicity, without providing sufficient argument for the point. Zeller suggests only that the concept of a science requires a distinct, isolatable object, so that an approach like the one found in Hegel’s *Logic* is incompatible with the autonomy of scientific disciplines (*ibid.*, 480–82).

The “Return to Kant” with which this program concluded was, thus, also a return to a certain minimalist, epistemological Kant. The imperative of Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling, namely that Kant’s philosophy needed completion in a unified system, was shunned in favor of a specifically “critical” Kant. What was needed philosophically was, then, a definition of “criticism” as an epistemology that resisted development into a philosophy like Schelling’s or Hegel’s. Philologically, the task was made somewhat easier given the fact that philosophers of the period studied only a portion of what we now consider to be the Kantian corpus. To give just one example, it was not until much later that philosophers became aware of the *Opus postumum*, and this text was widely viewed as a threat to the early Neo-Kantian Kant.<sup>14</sup> In the next section, I outline how another, more influential philological dispute framed the debate over the definition of criticism.

#### EARLY KANT SCHOLARSHIP IN RELATION TO POST-KANTIANISM

In the last section, I concluded that the desiderata of the programmatic arguments by Fischer and Zeller included a minimalist reading of Kant

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as well as a more convincing explanation of how and why his successors followed false paths. Kant scholarship and the general historiography of philosophy became, on this point, inseparable pursuits. More importantly, both the special and general problems in the history of philosophy were guided by more general arguments about the priority of epistemology. In this section, I wish to illustrate how a contingent fact of textual history aided the minimalist interpretation of Kant that these philosophers needed. Of particular concern is the dilemma that Kant's two distinct versions of the "Transcendental Deduction" pose to the interpreter. The simple thesis of the early Neo-Kantians will perhaps seem surprising to some modern readers: the early industry of Kant scholarship was built on the premise that the entire second edition (1787) of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and most especially what we call the "B Deduction," is a corrupt text that cannot belong to an appropriately streamlined Kantian philosophy. Although later philosophers in the nineteenth century did sometimes express a preference for the B Deduction, the impact of the early Neo-Kantians should not be underestimated on this point. Even Dieter Henrich's now classic essay on the B Deduction stressed that then-recent emphasis on this text worked against the main current of the history of Kantianism.<sup>15</sup>

A philological hypothesis convenient to Neo-Kantianism lay in a series of good-faith assertions by Arthur Schopenhauer, who inadvertently inspired an industry of Kantianism qua *Vernunftkritik*. The first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as it happened, had been out of print and in rare circulation between the 1780s and its reappearance in 1838. In 1844, Schopenhauer published his *Critique of the Kantian Philosophy*, which was appended to the second edition of his *World as Will and Representation*. The latter text had appeared a quarter of a century earlier; in it, Schopenhauer claimed only a minimal allegiance to Kant. But he announced in the 1844 additions that the publication of Rosenkranz's edition (in 1838) had altered his view of that philosopher—the otherwise unknown first edition having presented a more acceptable line of argument.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his confession, but the effects of his view are another matter. Beginning with Fischer's 1854 volume on the *Critique*, younger historians (including Überweg, von Hartmann, and initially Vaihinger) began to follow Schopenhauer in his rejection of the second edition.<sup>17</sup> This presented them with a strategy for claiming an advantage over those Post-Kantians who argued that criticism or epistemology required justification in a philosophical system: the latter had relied exclusively on the faulty second edition of the *Critique*. Many in the new generation then culled the first edition for passages with which they could attack the so-called identity philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel. The scholarly movement in question came to

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an abrupt end in the middle 1880s, so that the program I review here lasted roughly thirty years.<sup>18</sup>

Schopenhauer added to his observation a psychological explanation of the difference between the editions: an oversensitive Kant, discouraged by undesired comparisons to Berkeley, wrote the second edition in a sort of embittered forgetfulness of his authentically idealist philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In the new edition, Kant then included a series of revisions and modifications such as the revised Preface, an alternative version of the Transcendental Deduction, the Refutation of Idealism, and a slew of additional references to the thing-in-itself. These texts, however, were supposed by Schopenhauer to be contradictory to the spirit of the first edition. Schopenhauer's expression of these points contains his characteristic vigor:

The entire section (A 348–92) in which Kant so beautifully and clearly presents his decisive idealism, was suppressed in the second edition. Kant replaced these passages with a series of contradictory proclamations. As a result the text *Critique of Pure Reason* as this circulated from 1787 until 1838 was butchered and spoiled. It was a book full of contradictions, whose meaning no one could have understood clearly. (*Die Welt als Wille*, 555)

The convenient edition-hypothesis inspired both broad historical arguments and particular philological tasks, both of which Schopenhauer outlined in their rudiments. His abbreviated history was indeed a meager bit of *ad hominem* speculation, since he insisted that Kant overreacted to the reception of his *Critique* between 1781 and 1787 (*ibid.*, 557). But this speculation became a research hypothesis, which was pursued in several works by Fischer's disciples.<sup>20</sup> In the 1860s and '70s, a number of notable figures attempted to narrate Kant's career as having regressed after 1781, although as a particular aim of interpretation it did not meet with tremendous success.<sup>21</sup> To the biographical narratives there corresponded some philological tasks that were suggested by the differences between the two editions, and the purpose of these was to delegitimize those texts added to the second edition. The two most prominent were—predictably given Fischer's agenda—the difference between the Deductions and the notion of a thing-in-itself.<sup>22</sup> Even in the English-speaking world, where the stakes were not well understood, these matters became the concern of early practitioners of the academic history of philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Not only did Schopenhauer place a wedge between Kant and his immediate successors, making it easier to portray the Post-Kantians as divergent from the master, but he also renewed interest in the relationships between Kant and his predecessors. Schopenhauer accepted the association with Berkeley, which was unthinkable for the Hegelians (see

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*Die Welt als Wille*, 535, 555). It later became a more important task for scholars to portray in a somewhat positive light the relationship between, for instance, Kant and Locke or Leibniz, namely, those philosophers who have since come to be called either “Pre-Critical” or “Pre-Kantians.” Establishing Kant as a synthesizer of the modern schools of epistemology was the early occupation of Kuno Fischer as well as many philosophers who worked in the subsequent three decades.<sup>24</sup> The various relationships among Kant’s predecessors on the origin and justification of knowledge became the subject matter that these philosophers called “modern philosophy,” with their influential historiographical categories such as “rationalism,” “empiricism,” and so forth. Philosophers after Kant were excluded from the picture on the premise that, by accident of publication history, they had no access to the real Kant.

Schopenhauer’s *ad hominem* speculation was thus the inspiration for a widespread historical and philological agenda. While Fischer and his students were not followers of Schopenhauer on substantive matters, their attachment to him on this point is undeniable. As late as 1883, we find Fischer defending the irreconcilability of the two editions in the same sense in which Schopenhauer asserts it, and he even uses the same quotations from the first edition to establish his point.<sup>25</sup> Among the many young scholars who participated in this debate was Friedrich Überweg, whose subsequent textbook on modern philosophy was especially influential. Überweg wrote his dissertation on the edition controversy in 1861, not long before publishing *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (Outlines of the history of philosophy).<sup>26</sup> The writings of Überweg, Fischer, and others can be credited with developing the specific picture of Kant, along with its limited set of interpretive problems, that formed the basis for further dispute in the age when historical publications multiplied rapidly.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Kuno Fischer published his last works on Kant, in the middle 1880s, philological discoveries had put the edition thesis (and with it the whole historical agenda) on the defensive.<sup>28</sup> Kant’s development was by then the subject of three decades of focused scholarship, so that blind conjectures such as Schopenhauer’s were no longer acceptable. A selection of nuanced biographical and philological accounts dismissed the old suggestion that Kant composed his later works in cowardly retreat or dogmatic forgetfulness.<sup>29</sup> Although some scholars even surmised that Fischer’s Kant was too heavily influenced by the Post-Kantians, this supposition poses the problem backward.<sup>30</sup> Schopenhauer’s thesis, as filtered through Fischer into minute scholarship, was rather the chief rhetorical method of defending the rejection of systematicity in favor of an isolated and independent *Vernunftkritik*. The historiographical offspring of Schopenhauer’s thesis perhaps reigned only in a brief era,

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but it was an important era historically. Neo-Kantian textbooks in the history of philosophy were then on the rise, and, in these popular works, the historians sought a way to draw a sharper distinction between Kant and his epigones.<sup>31</sup>

#### LIEBMAN ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CRITICISM AND SYSTEM

The edition controversy was only the philological manifestation of a philosophical task, and the eventual demise of the former is to be distinguished from the relative success of the latter. Kant did not, in the 1780s, merely retreat in cowardice from a bit of public criticism, but there remains, nonetheless, a question of which aspects of his philosophy should be selected as of lasting value. Fischer's philological program, I have argued, served the interest of demonstrating his new (but insufficiently defined) notion of *Erkenntnislehre* as consistent with the best interpretation of Kantian criticism. In this section, I argue that Otto Liebmann replaced the philological agenda with a substantive argument concluding that the principles of criticism are incompatible with any and every philosophical system. Liebmann thereby established the priority of epistemology on argumentative, as opposed to philological, grounds, and he did so with classically antifoundational weapons. To complete the argument, however, he needed a concept of criticism as an antifoundational epistemology without claiming to have found it in Kant's own text. He did this by supplementing what he took to be Kantian doctrine with two important ideas, what I will call his *correlation argument* and his *continuity thesis*.

Liebmann began by proclaiming the entire philological enterprise to be dangerously misleading. Dispute over the editions, he reasoned, runs the danger of presenting the most important philosophical matters as if they rest on historical contingencies. Undue emphasis on textual differences likewise overlooks the fact that whatever errors Kant made in the second edition were implicit in the 1781 text (Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen*, 26). Textual study in the history of philosophy was in this instance not only a premise in a larger argument, but it was also a dispensable premise. The strategy of Liebmann's 1865 treatise *Kant und die Epigonen*, in fact, makes both the programmatic argument and the general historiographical picture more convincing precisely by freeing them from philological disputes. This important text has been overlooked by scholars who have been too eager to look for what could be considered accurate portrayals of Kant, when Liebmann's allegiance was to an argument rather than to a late Prussian professor.<sup>32</sup> The Neo-Kantians generally were aware of what they sought in Kant, and Otto Liebmann retrospectively decided what counts as authentic criticism.

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He then accepted as authentic only those texts that supported his view. Any troubling passages by Kant about things-in-themselves or forthcoming systems, in this context, provided evidence only against a particular individual named Immanuel Kant, not against Kantian criticism qua epistemology as defined in 1865.

Liebmann's aggressively reconstructive history needed to preserve and defend the basic Neo-Kantian distinction between the critical and the dogmatic Kant, which is to say between epistemology and metaphysics. Liebmann offered a precise conceptual distinction between the "principal doctrine" and the "principal error" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but without appeal to the indecisiveness of its author. The sole doctrine that comprises critical philosophy, on Liebmann's view, is the apriority of the categories and space-time. After discovering this "principal doctrine," the argument runs, Kant made the *Hauptfehler* of trying to explain it in terms of so-called things-in-themselves. The task of the new epistemology was, thus, to rescue apriority while resisting any such ultimate explanation for the principle. The ingenious strategy of *Kant und die Epigonen* is to construct an argument that apriority implies the impossibility of any final explanations in philosophy, with the additional claim that all previous philosophers—including Kant—had missed this implication.

To achieve this end, Liebmann needed also to explain the slip from criticism to dogmatism, showing how *anyone* might lapse from a fleeting critical insight back into dogmatic metaphysics. He argued not that Kant in particular forgot his best insight, but rather that inquirers as such are disposed to do so. This point detached the argument from the contest for Immanuel Kant's literal meaning, while at the same time it solidified the Kantian canon by the further exclusion of all subsequent characters. This framework inspired a reluctant vilification by Liebmann of Fichte in particular, who was thought to have led the nineteenth-century downfall of criticism by pursuing only the *Hauptfehler* at the expense of authentic criticism. The strategy is rather straightforward: the living and the dead in Kant being clearly delineated, one needs only to show that it was the mistakes, rather than the critical insights, that served as inspiration for Fichte and (*eo ipso*) the other epigones. A minimal Kant and the mistaken Fichte are, in this context, self-conscious constructs of an abstract argument, since they name positions or tendencies more so than they do historical personages.

Despite the reduced emphasis on textual argument, Liebmann's actual position leans heavily on Fischer's rejection of the second edition. The minimal lesson that Liebmann gleans from Kant's philosophy is simply that our understanding has definite limits and that the task of an epistemologist is to seek and destroy any transgressions of the

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boundaries in question. This streamlined Kantianism accepts only the apriority of time, space, and the categories, factors that condition all scientific cognition. Most of Kant's writings after the "Transcendental Aesthetic" were still seen as unjust extensions of the critical principle, and Liebmann offered an argumentative (as opposed to a textual) rejection of them. The notion of a thing-in-itself came again under scrutiny, representing not merely an exemplary transgression but rather a kind of dogmatism *an sich* (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 27). Along with the controversy over the deductions, this doctrine had formed the heart of the philological controversies, so that Liebmann needed to replace both with more minimal Kantian arguments.

The *Ding an sich* is, in this context, a methodological problem more than a metaphysical or logical one. It is a matter of what kinds of explanations philosophy should seek, not a matter of whether anything is independent of minds. Only a dogmatism that could access things as they are independently of the conditions of experience—things in themselves—could declare the middle-sized dry goods that we experience to be "appearances," so that the opposition between things and appearances needed to be rejected:

Even if the spatio-temporal world were only an "appearance," it would not be such for the intellect. The reason for this is that the intellect is unable to compare the spatio-temporal world with anything else. The world in space in time is everything to the intellect, and so that world cannot justly be called an "appearance." (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 27).

A new theory was needed to replace this distinction, and Liebmann purported to discover this by means of his *correlation argument*. This argument states that the terms "subject" and "object" denote correlative concepts, ones that have no place in the absence of each other (*ibid.*, 41ff). As a result, there can be no question of an object's existing without a subject, nor of explaining objects metaphysically in terms of subjects (or vice versa). These notions belong together like a mountain and a valley, an idea at which Kant aimed but missed with his notion of appearance. It is not hard to see how the many Post-Kantian efforts at explaining these concepts in terms of each other can be classified as "dogmatic." Just as there is no meaningful question about whether mountains should be explained in terms of valleys or vice versa, so can there be no question of whether subjects should be explained in terms of objects or vice versa. The entire question of whether subjects or objects are prior, or between idealism and realism in metaphysics, is here explained as the result of a methodological shortcoming.

Replacing the thing/appearance distinction with the correlate theory comprises the first move in the correction of Kant's position and the

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preservation of criticism at the expense of systematicity. It remains to be explained why the correlate theory is so elusive, a task Liebmann executes with his pair of deductions of the concept of a thing-in-itself. These purport to illustrate why and how someone who achieves a moment of critical insight might revert to dogmatism. Dogmatic metaphysics, as Kant insists, rests in a basic tendency of the human intellect. If criticism is such a rarity, even among philosophers, then, we should not be surprised to learn that dogmatism is in some way pathological for humans. Liebmann's achievement on this point rests in his having brought a description of our dogmatic pathology under the rubric of a general definition and history of philosophy. Here he differs in an important respect from Fischer, conceding slightly more to a dogmatic sense of the task of philosophy: philosophy is the abstract representation of the world as a macrocosm and microcosm (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 33). In this, all past systems of philosophy have been in agreement, although the temptation to offer a complete picture of the world is fatal:

Despite their sharp diversity, all the systems of philosophy agree in one essential point. This pertains not only to the aim and means of the systems, but also their results. No matter what principles they begin from, or how they seek the reason for the world, they all arrive at a point where thinking ceases. They thrust themselves onto a very general something, be it of an intellectual or material nature. They then explain this something as not subject to further research and thus as the *causa prima* or innermost essence of the world. (Ibid.)

One problem with such first principles is that they do not stop regresses of questioning, a point that is complete only when we consider the second of Liebmann's deductions (ibid., 31). In this, he analyzes philosophical systems as extensions of mundane questions and answers, questions that arise through the ubiquitous categories of substance and causality—Liebmann thereby uses a basic Kantian doctrine to formulate a metaphilosophical position that we could call his *continuity thesis*. According to this view, the questions we ask about everyday objects reduce to two: "What is it?" and "From whence comes it?" Since these are applications of *a priori* categories (substance and causality), they apply without exception to any object of human cognition. It is thus possible to inquire further into any concept or explanation that any human being offers, so no first principle in philosophy is permissible. The metaphysician is guilty of something akin to what Rorty much later called "stopping the conversation."

The continuity thesis demands that philosophical explanations remain of a piece with everyday explanations. In each case, we proceed according to the *a priori* categories of substance and causality. As a result, no worries could arise that we have appealed to principles to which the

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categories would not apply—to do so (by asserting a first principle) would be precisely to lapse into dogmatism. The *apriority* of the categories, in other words, implies the impossibility of foundationalist metaphysics. To this extent, Liebmann argues against systematicity by appeal only to the status of the categories, which is exactly the move required by the programmatic arguments of Fischer and Zeller. To stop a regress of questions, we would have to transcend the conditions of experience.

By completing Fischer's argument from the concept of criticism (now better defined as a Neo-Kantian epistemology) to the rejection of systematicity (now better defined as foundational epistemology or metaphysics), Liebmann achieved precisely what all the misconceived histories could only fail to do. Criticism, on this account, arrives at a simple and antisystematic point: the answer to every question begs an additional question. To give a final answer, or to philosophize from a first principle, would imply that we can place a limit on the categories of substance and causality. In that case, we would cognize something that is not subject to those categories. This is dogmatism, and, with these arguments, Liebmann offered a redistribution of the Kantian triad dogmatist-skeptic-critic. A dogmatist is anyone who offers a first principle. A skeptic is someone who insists that there are no first principles, where his sibling the critic corrects the skeptic only with a more nuanced dismissal. The critic explains that we misunderstand the nature of questions when we imagine that any question could be definitively answered. Questions lead rather to more questions, a point that should not bring reasoning humans to any despair. An amusing analogy illustrates these three options by depicting a child who sees a rainbow:

The historical development of philosophy reproduces again and again the same error, which is comparable to the despair of a young child who is unable to traverse the rainbow. As Jacobi rightly observed, it appears that “the truth retreats rather than confronts humanity.” Certain people called “skeptics” occasionally arise, who attempt to infuse reason into the situation by insisting that we will never get to the truth. This is like telling the kid that the rainbow is too far. The child will indeed capitulate, but unconvinced that his initial goal was unachievable. He can only become convinced of that when a wiser individual teaches him that the phenomenon in question [*bunte Phaenomen*] is not a consistent thing, not an actual bow attached to the sky, but rather a reflection of the sunlight in the raindrops. Since the rainbow is just a reflection, there is good reason that it must always retreat upon our approach. . . . [T]his (wiser individual) was Immanuel Kant. (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 34–35)

The concept of criticism qua epistemology that Liebmann developed in these chapters thus led simultaneously to a rejection of systematic-

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ity, metaphysics, and foundationalism. These alternatives are seen to stem from a simple decision to end the regress of “why” questions, and it is the job of an epistemologist to prevent any efforts to so complete the inquiry. There is not to be any last answer, and the attempt to do so is as metaphysical as it is foundationalist: philosophers throughout the ages have sought to name the last *explanans* of inquiry, and Hegel’s absolute or Fichte’s *Ich* is, in this regard, no different from Spinoza’s substance or Thales’s water.

### KANTIANISM CONTRA KANT

The contentious point of Liebmann’s argument is that it attacks systematicity only by eliminating the distinction between things and appearances, whereas Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel had developed their systems through a similar move. Defenders of Post-Kantianism could easily claim that their tradition appealed to no metaphysical postulate, but rather began also with a rejection of the Kantian *Ding an sich*. It remained for Liebmann, then, to show that the Post-Kantian banishment of the *Ding an sich* was unsuccessful. The major strategy is to show that, in rejecting Kant’s position, these philosophers, nonetheless, appropriated “another species of the genus ‘thing-in-itself’” (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 85). The fallacy of the thing-in-itself is, again, a methodological one: it concerns the order and type of explanation rather than the ontological status of the *explanans*. Every systemic, organizing first principle (Thales’ water, Spinoza’s substance, Schelling’s identity, Hegel’s absolute, and so forth) presents a particular species of thing-in-itself, as Liebmann understands the problem, since each presents an instance of the relevant explanatory error. It is vital to this strategy that the historical Kant also succumbed (after 1787) to systematicity, with the result that the rejection of the historical Kant was central to the rejection of foundationalism. Kant committed the great methodological mistake by appealing to a thing-in-itself, since the latter does not allow of further explanation in terms of the questions “what” and “whence.”

In this section, I wish to examine how the continuity thesis—the claim that philosophical questions are extensions of mundane ones—enabled a rejection of a second Post-Kantian problem. Liebmann and his ilk were as much concerned, namely, with rejecting elaborate theories of subjectivity as they were with the methodological arguments discussed in the previous section. Rejecting Fichtean/Hegelian theories of the subject enabled them to portray philosophy, as above, as more consistent not only with psychology but also with the supposedly “critical” strictures on knowledge.

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Liebmann staged his attack on Post-Kantian theories of subjectivity by appropriating another piece of popular historiography, in this case providing a careful analysis of Gottlob Ernst Schulze's 1792 skeptical tract *Aenesidemus*.<sup>33</sup> Schulze published this text anonymously as a defense of a Humean skepticism against the philosophies of Kant and Reinhold. According to standard picture of Post-Kantianism, this somewhat successful criticism of Kant and Reinhold enabled Fichte to develop a more consistent idealist position.<sup>34</sup> This picture serves as an early chapter of the history of modern philosophy that leads to Hegel and that was defended by Hegel's followers in the years after his death. Liebmann's argument proposes an ironic reversal of this narrative: instead of providing Fichte with a clue to overcoming the philosophies of Kant and Reinhold in a move toward systematicity, *Aenesidemus* rather makes precisely this move impossible. The author thereby sides with Schulze/*Aenesidemus* against the historical Kant, with the rider that the skeptical arguments never applied to an appropriately minimalized Neo-Kantian Kant. The "Return to Kant," thus, has this historical oddity to it: to excise the metaphysicians from Kantianism, Liebmann had to accept those very (Humean and skeptical) criticisms of Kant to which Fichte had responded. The Kant of this period was thus not only Neo-Kantian but was even in a very important historical sense anti-Kantian.

Especially convenient for Liebmann was the fact that Schulze treated the idea of a subjective derivation of the categories (Fichte's and Schelling's mistake) as equivalent to an objective derivation (the historical Kant's mistake). The early chapters of *Aenesidemus* would come to play an increasingly central role in subsequent portrayals of the history of Kantianism, mainly because of this focus on the justification of the categories.<sup>35</sup> Schulze, it turned out, had provided a defense of Hume that prepared Liebmann's subsequent criticisms of Fichte, making the exact same arguments about the contradictory nature of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as Kant wrote it.

Schulze/*Aenesidemus* had argued (and Liebmann accepted) that Kant's strength lay in his concession to Hume that categories like causality cannot be derived from experience. On the other hand, Kant nonetheless attempted a derivation of such concepts. Schulze's application of this point, in the passages in question, concerns a purported derivation of the categories from the subject rather than from an object. This last point makes little difference to either Schulze or Liebmann, with the exception that it highlights the analogy between "thing-in-itself" and "absolute ego." Kant's premise, on Schulze's account, was "in order to be thought as possible at all, these judgments must be thought as present *a priori* and derived from the mind" (*Aenesidemus*, 107; 1792

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ed., 142). Given such an understanding of Kant, Schulze reasonably complained that

a derivation of the necessity and universality in knowledge by appeal to our minds [*aus dem Gemuethe*] does not make the existence of that necessity one bit more intelligible, than does a derivation (of the necessity and universality of our knowledge) by appeal to external objects and their influence. (ibid., 110; 1792 ed., 145)

Liebmann's reply concedes to Schulze the entire substantive debate. For more than a decade, Kant scholars had grappled precisely with this kind of inner contradiction in the critical philosophy, which was much easier to accept in 1865 than it had been in 1792. After all, the fact that Kant reverted to dogmatism was a premise not only of Liebmann's analysis but of the entire philological tradition that followed Schopenhauer and Fischer. Nonetheless, Liebmann differs from Schulze on one crucial point, which results in his deflecting Schulze's criticism away from Kant and onto Fichte. The issue concerns what is meant by "*a priori*," and Liebmann fairly objected to Schulze's interpretation of this: "Aenesidemus is constantly under the mistaken impression that 'to be given a priori' means the same as 'to be produced by the mind'" (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 47). Liebmann's own understanding of *a priori* is simpler. He takes this expression to mean only "not subject to further derivation." If this was also Kant's meaning—and Liebmann thinks that we can at least revise Kant to mean this—then Schulze's arguments would no longer apply to (the properly minimalized Neo-Kantian) Kant.

The many versions of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and by extension the German Idealist movement that was believed to have culminated in Hegel's school, elaborate two additional points that fall prey to Liebmann's argument, which combine to complete the agenda of Fischer and Zeller. Liebmann needed, namely, not only to argue from criticism to the impossibility of a system but also to secure the relationship of philosophy to psychology and the other sciences. The first Fichtean obstacle to this point lay in the identity of the human subject, which was put into an uneasy predicament by Fichte. Since the so-called *Ich an sich*—for obvious reasons Liebmann's preferred expression—is not subject to analysis by categories, it is not something that the empirical ego can recognize as identical with itself. Fichte's argumentation rather leaves an irreconcilable gap between the empirical and absolute egos. The latter functions "without our knowing it," and its constructions are such that we necessarily form no concept or representation of them and their occurrence. The absolute ego "stands behind the curtains directing the colorful puppet-show of existence with the invisible strings of its absolute activity" (*Kant und die Epigonen*, 82). Since this whole process is something of which we are apparently unaware, the suggestion that

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there is such a thing leads to interminable and insoluble difficulties such as this problem of the divided self. Liebmann's argument here served to eliminate the metaphysics of the subject that had interested German philosophers prior to 1860 and, in so doing, to correct the relationship between philosophy and psychology.

The irreconcilability of the egos thus coincides with the second problem, namely, the relationship between philosophy and other interrogative endeavors. Fichte took subjectivism beyond the boundaries set by Kant, as the latter was reconstructed by these writers. Like other early modern epistemologists, Kant accepted that the contents of our experiences (colors, sounds, and such) run through some sort of subjective filters. The mere fact that we are conscious of objects at all, however, is not something that we recognize as a result of our own activity. Criticism places certain conditions on the contents of experience and was never intended (as Fichte imagined) as an explanation of the fact that we have conscious experience in the first place. Acknowledging this, Fichte made concessions to "everyday consciousness," to which the fact of experience and the laws of logic appear to be the work of "corresponding objects that appear without our contribution" (Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen*, 80). Fichte was, thus, incapable of portraying philosophy as continuous with common experience in a manner akin to what Liebmann achieved when he defined philosophy in terms of mundane applications of substance (what?) and causality (whence?). Fichte rather had to insist that philosophical cognition was of a different nature and order than the types of cognition warranted by the categories. This point brings Fischer's agenda full circle, since Liebmann argued from a minimalized criticism (the apriority of the categories) to the impossibility of a system and then from the latter point to a modest relation between philosophy cum epistemology and other scientific endeavors. In the process, he secured a straightforward methodological argument that accepted the most common objections to the historical Kant, leaving no room for ideas such as transcendental subjectivity, intellectual intuition, the thing-appearance distinction, and so on.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that early Neo-Kantians defended the priority of epistemology on principally antifoundational grounds, in a manner that was overlooked by Rorty's polemic against both epistemology and foundationalism. It turns out that "epistemology" or *Erkenntnislehre*, in the earliest coherent defenses of this endeavor, was essentially antifoundational. The argumentative means with which Liebmann attacked the systematic philosophers, what I have labeled the *correlation argument*, in fact resembles an argument closer to Rorty's own agenda. The latter

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was fond of citing Sellars's claim that terms like "object" and "subject" have correlative meanings, so that there could not be one thing without the other. In a manner similar to Rorty, Liebmann concludes that this point implies the impossibility of ending the series of justifications with appeal to a final category. My argument, however, shows that these points represent the historical beginnings of "epistemology," and so not, as Rorty wished, its end.

Nonetheless, an important lesson is to be taken from Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, one that concerns our entire conception of the history of philosophy: the lesson, namely, that our history has been constructed over time by a range of working historians, many of whom plainly composed their narratives to accord with programmatic arguments and other philosophical agendas. A contemporary historian should not adopt old narratives without such detailed investigations into the underlying principles that motivated them. The Kant who synthesized rationalism and empiricism, for instance, is perhaps a holdover of such aborted philological debates as I have reviewed here. Rorty's failure was thus not, as he sometimes retrospectively feared, that he relied too much on intellectual history, but rather that he did not conduct it thoroughly enough.<sup>36</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), hereafter "PMN"). Further references to this work will be cited in the text.

2. In an interesting exchange with Michael Williams, Rorty explicitly disowns the historical narrative of PMN as it pertains to epistemology. See "Response to Michael Williams," in *Rorty and his Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 216.

3. Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Originally published as *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

4. For instance, Rorty wrongly claims that these philosophers were "getting down to the patient labor of sorting out the 'given' from the 'subjective additions' made by the mind" (PMN, 163).

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5. See Archibald B. D. Alexander's "Kuno Fischer: An Estimate of His Life and Work," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 5 no. 3 (1908): 57–64.

6. Michael Forster, for instance, rightly ranks Zeller as an Hegelian in regard to some matters in the historiography of ancient philosophy. See "The History of Philosophy" in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century, 1790–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Thomas Wiley had likewise listed these philosophers as Hegelians in his *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860–1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978). More recently, however, Andrew Chignell has argued for an account of Neo-Kantianism that begins with Kuno Fischer's works of the early 1860s. See his "Introduction: On Going Back to Kant," *Philosophical Forum* 39, no. 2 (2008): 109–24. Chignell's view is similar to the one I develop in this essay. See also Christopher Adair-Totef's "Hans Vaihinger's Kant-Studien," *Kant Studien* 87, no. 4 (2009): 390–95.

7. Kuno Fischer, *Kants Leben und die Grundlagen seiner Lehre* (Jena, 1860), 79–97. All translations from this and other German texts are my own. Further references to this work will be cited in the text.

8. On the history of these terms, see Köhnke's 1981 essay "Über den Ursprung des Wortes Erkenntnistheorie—und dessen vermeintlichen Synonyme" in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 25: 185–210.

9. On the relationship between these two, see Chignell, "Introduction."

10. This text appears in Kuno Fischer, *Akademische Reden* (Stuttgart, 1862), 77–111.

11. The most persuasive and current version of this Hegelian historiography had appeared in Johann Eduard Erdmann's *Versuch einer Darstellung der Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*, IIIen Bd 1ster Theil: *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Spekulation seit Kant* (Leipzig, 1848).

12. See Fischer's voluminous *J. G. Fichte und Seine Vorgaenger* (Basserman, 1869) and his much later *Hegel's Leben, Werke, und Lehre*, 2 vols. (Heidelberg, 1898–1901).

13. Zeller's "Ueber Bedeutung und Aufgabe der Erkenntnistheorie" appears, among other places, in *Vortraege und Abhandlungen* (Leipzig, 1887), 479–526. This edition includes an informative retrospective appendix by the author. A translation of the original lecture appeared as "The Theory of Cognition: Its Import and Problem" in the 1875 volume of *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 9, no. 1: 33–48. Further references to *Vortraege und Abhandlungen* will be cited in the text.

14. See Eckart Förster's excellent introduction to his edition of this text (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

15. Dieter Henrich, "The Proof-Structure of Kant's Transcendental Deduction," *The Review of Metaphysics* 22, no. 2 (1969): 640–59.

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16. My quotations from Schopenhauer will be from the *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Zurich: Haffmans Verlag, 1988); all translations are my own. Further references to this work will be cited in the text.

17. The English translation of Fischer's *Commentary on the Critick of Pure Reason*, trans. J. P. Mahaffey, (London, 1866), follows this controversy especially well. See especially pages 22 and 78.

18. See especially Hans Vaihinger, *Zur Widerlegung des Idealismus* (Tübingen, 1884).

19. Schopenhauer sees this hypothesis as nonetheless consistent with his earlier view of Kant (see *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 544).

20. This strategy is pursued in many works from the period, notably in Eduard von Hartmann's *Das Ding an Sich und seine Beschaffenheit* (Berlin, 1871). Vaihinger's early writings, including especially *Hartmann, Duhring, und Langer* (Iserlohn, 1876), pursue the same strategy.

21. Josiah Royce provided an especially insightful analysis of this literature in an appendix to his excellent historical study of 1892, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 483–92

22. The later editions of Friedrich Überweg's *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* provide helpful bibliographies and summaries of the relevant literature. In addition to von Harmann, *Das Ding an Sich*, see Julius von Kirchmann's *Erläuterung von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Berlin, 1869).

23. See, for instance, Hutchison Stirling's "The Question of Idealism in Kant: The Two Editions" in the 1883 volume of *Mind* (os8–22, 525–42)

24. The early volumes of Fischer's *History* were translated quickly into English, copies of which are today readily available online and through reprint. Other textbooks that follow Fischer's general strategy include not only Überweg, *Grundriss*, but also Wilhelm Windelband's popular *Die Geschichte der Neuren Philosophie in ihrem Zusammenhange mit der allgemeinen Kultur und den besonderen Wissenschaften dargestellt* (Leipzig, 1878).

25. The 1887 volume of *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (21–1, 1–13) translates the relevant chapter Fischer's 1883 *Criticism of Kantian Philosophy* (Munich, 1883).

26. *De priore et posteriore forma Kantianae critices rationis purae; commentatio qua ad audiendam lectionem publicam de philosophiae notione* (Berlin, 1861). Ueberweg succinctly summarizes the argument of his dissertation in his *Grundriss*, 3:167 (Berlin, 1875).

27. For detailed statistical information about historical publications in this period, see Ulrich Johannes Schneider's *Philosophie und Universitaet: Historisierung der Vernunft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1999).

28. The publication of the *Opus Posthumum* is one important event, as Eckart Foerster has explained in the "Introduction" to the recent Cambridge edition of that text.

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29. See Royce's Appendix B, which credits the victorious arguments mainly to Vaihinger, *Zur Widerlegung des Idealismus*.
30. See, for instance, Albrecht Krause's *Immanuel Kant Wider Kuno Fischer* (Lahr, 1884).
31. See Schneider, 317–55.
32. Köhnke, *Rise of Neo-Kantianism*, is particularly concerned to dismiss Liebmann.
33. Gottlob Ernst Schulze, *Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie*, reprinted Berlin 1911. Further references to this work will be cited in the text.
34. The standard picture is recounted, among other recent places, in Daniel Breazeale's "Fichte's *Aenesidemus* Review and the Transformation of German Idealism," *Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 3 (1981): 545–68. A more recent challenge to this picture, one that takes no account of the historical role of the texts, can be found in James Messina's "Answering Aenesidemus: Schulze's Attack on Reinholdian Representationalism and Its Importance for Fichte," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49, no. 3 (2011): 339–69.
35. See Wilhelm Windelband's *Die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie in ihrem Zusammenhang mit der allgemeinen Kultur und den besonderen Wissenschaften dargestellt*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1778–80) and Richard Falckenberg's *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (Jena, 1885).
36. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the North American Fichte Society at the Université Laval, May 2012. I wish to thank the participants of that conference, as well as two anonymous reviewers from this journal, for their helpful criticisms.

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