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Any Colour You Like: The Interplay of Fichte's 'I', 'Not-I', and *Anstoß*

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore two differing conceptions of J.G. Fichte's *Anstoß* and how it relates to his Transcendental 'I', the ground of his *Wissenschaftslehre*. I argue that one should not attempt to read later interpretations of the *Anstoß* back into his earlier definition, but find that attempts to tread a middle way between the original and later interpretations have thus far been equally unsuccessful. Instead, I suggest a new way of interpreting the *Anstoß* as a constituent component of the absolute I, built into his first principle of self-consciousness, and argue that this way allows the I to turn back upon itself without being externally determined. I argue that this way also avoids solipsistic and nihilistic objections by actually supporting the arguments of the proponents of earlier interpretations. I then advance to advocate the *Anstoß*'s importance in the wider sphere of understanding how Fichte's theory of *transzendentallogisch* enables his first and rudimentary derivation of consciousness, prior to the finitely derived practical I of his later Jena writings.

Keywords

Anstoß – check – intersubjectivity – striving – structural necessity

1 Introduction

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Anstoß* is, broadly, defined as a 'check' on the activity of the I.¹ A primary difficulty in understanding his work lies in more clearly defining what is meant by this term, and whether Fichte used it consistently during his Jena period (May 1794–April 1799). Daniel Breazeale forwards the idea that the *Anstoß* constitutes a 'feeling', upon the encounter with which the I is turned back. Gabriel Gottlieb, on the other hand, attempts to tread a middle road between this view and the view that rejects that one should read the later formulations of the *Anstoß* back into the definition of the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95). He does this by proposing that it should be taken as a self-imposed normative task for the I. This paper intends to focus on the role of the *Anstoß* in the *Grundlage*, and builds on Fichte's theory of striving in Part III to suggest a new interpretation of the *Anstoß* as an eternal but malleable 'fact' of the I. It also defends this view against possible repercussions for the temporal finitude of the I, repercussions that, left unchallenged, would essentially place the practical I between a self-positing rock and a centripetal hard place.² I analyse the *Anstoß* of the *Grundlage* in relation to Fichte's earliest derivation of the practical, and emphasise the importance of Fichte's theoretical and practical philosophies being 'mappable' onto one another, in transitioning from the *transzendentallogisch* to the more intersubjective *bewusstseinstheoretisch* (theory of consciousness). It is my hope that doing so will compel the reader to understand quite *why* it is so important that we understand what the *Anstoß* does for Fichte's initial derivation of practical subjectivity, and how it thereby enables his later theory of consciousness to develop.

1 Translations of '*Anstoß*' range from 'kick-off', or 'initiate', to 'impetus', or 'stumbling block' (e.g., according to *Cassell's German-English Dictionary* (1978, 2nd Ed.)). Breazeale notes Jacob Grimm's discussion of the usage of '*Anstoß*' at the end of the 18th century, understood here as 'impetus', a note that influences the argument of his essay. It is interesting, nonetheless, to note that, dependent upon how we employ the term, '*Anstoß*' could be taken to mean, anti-theoretically, an 'initiation' or a 'hindrance'. See Breazeale, Daniel: "*Anstoß*, Abstract Realism, and the Finitude of the I." In: *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*. New York 2013, 159.

2 Cf. GWL 339–40 [GA I/2: 408–9].

2 'I', 'Not-I', and *Anstoß*

Fichte begins the first construction of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by claiming that the root of reality is the 'I' (*das Ich*); things external to me exist 'for me', so are, therefore, 'posited' by me. Everything that exists before me, then, is the result of the absolute positing of the I. Even the assertion of a fact, such as Descartes' conclusion that 'I am', expresses an act of a particular self. To be aware of anything, the I must first be aware of itself, and by extension, if it is to posit anything, it must have already posited itself. If it does this in a way that contains within it any limitations – that is not simply 'I am I' – then this presupposes a quality that is not yet posited, and which limits the I. 'I am I' must therefore be the first principle of self-positing, the recognition of existence and I-hood. (GWL 202–5 [GA I/2: 257–61])

With this recognition that 'I am I', however, we also recognize the second principle; that '-I is not equal to I. We must concede, therefore, that something exists within the absolute I that stands opposed to the relational I. (GWL 208 [GA I/2: 265–6]) This Not-I contains within it all that is not contained in the I. But in order that the I is still absolutely posited in the first instance, this limiting on the part of the Not-I cannot be *done to* the I, for otherwise something would be contained outside the absolute I that it has no positing-power over. To reconcile this predicament, the I must freely and willingly posit itself as limited, allocating a degree of reality to the Not-I. Fichte frames this as an equal determination; "all reality is included in consciousness, and that portion of it that does not pertain to the I pertains to the Not-I, and vice versa."³ (GWL 214 [GA I/2: 271])

Fichte's use of '*vice versa*' is important, as it indicates the positing power of the Not-I in itself. Granting the Not-I certain qualities – albeit initially only passivity – allows the Not-I to gain relational autonomy, an autonomy that becomes important to Fichte's later work, especially his *Foundations of Natural Right* (1797). Fichte points out that "The *Not-I*, as such, *possesses no reality in itself; but it does possess reality insofar as the I is passively affected.*" (GWL 234 [GA I/2: 294]) The power of the Not-I is both, in itself, something that originally contains nothing, *qua* aspect of the I, and something that is involved in reciprocal determination with the I, *qua* ground of some reality.

Intuitively, it would seem that the Not-I cannot play both of these roles. To resolve this incongruity, there must exist something in between the I and the Not-I, the occurrence of which obliges the I to limit its outreaching activity (*die Tätigkeit*) and determine itself (*bestimmen*). The I here freely recognizes

3 All emphases are original unless otherwise stated.

its own unfreedom and determines the Not-I to act as its opposite. Left to itself, the I's outward activity would constitute all causality, but the occurrence of the limit acts as a prompt to freely curtail its freedom – and thereby bring into existence the relational I. This limit, or 'check', is the *Anstoß*, which provides the occasion for the I to limit itself. (GWL 292 [GA I/2: 354–5]) As Zöller says, "the I is determined in a most general, unspecific way to bring about its own determinations at the instigation of the check."⁴ By its being 'determined in a most general [...] way', the I is not actually stripped of any freedom to limit *itself* and is not acted upon. But something nonetheless changes which affects the I's activity, and turns it into something limited, something which can bring into existence a Not-I without any content of the I being sacrificed. In this way, the I is not determined by the Not-I, and hence remains the root of reality. But it is now determined, of its own volition, to respond to the check and limit its activity.

In what follows I will explore the nature of the *Anstoß* and two interpretations of it. I will suggest a different way of looking at the *Anstoß*, as a 'moment', prefigured in the structural opposition between I and Not-I and the striving (*streben*) that stems from this. I argue that this avoids the objections of other-determination that seeing the *Anstoß* in close relation to the Not-I yields. I will further argue that this view does not undermine Fichte's account in the *Grundlage*, and that it maintains the structural delineation between his earlier *transzendentallogisch* and the later derived *bewusstseinstheoretisch* that becomes prevalent in the later Jena works.

3 Interpretations of the *Anstoß*

What *is* the *Anstoß*? Where does it come between the I and Not-I? It is firstly something that forces the I to act, but is essentially 'neutral'. Neuhausser claims that representing comes from an "inert, wholly passive *Anstoß*,"⁵ upon which the I then reflects. Given that the *Anstoß* cannot be part of a determined I or Not-I, it would make sense to agree with Neuhausser that it lacks activity. But since passivity is surrendered to the Not-I, the *Anstoß* should not contain that either. We might be inclined to say that the *Anstoß* contains *nothing*; neither activity nor passivity. Fichte states that the activity that is reflected by the check "always remains an activity of the I, and all that is foreign and opposed to the I is *the fact that this activity is driven back upon itself*." (GWL 337 [GA I/2: 405–6],

⁴ Zöller, Günter: *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*. Cambridge 2002, 51.

⁵ Neuhausser, Frederick: *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*. New York 1990, 48.

emphasis my own) This would suggest that the *Anstoß* itself is something that lies outside the immediate activity of the I, as the driving back, which ostensibly seems to be a result of the *Anstoß*, is ‘foreign and opposed’. But, as we have already established, the Not-I must be empty of content unless determinations are surrendered to it by the I, suggesting that if the *Anstoß* is to contain any reality, it must lie outside the sphere of the Not-I too. In this instance, then, it would seem as though the *Anstoß* lies outside both I and Not-I. But how can it do this, since the Not-I is derived from the absolute I – i.e., the sphere of causality?

This question might yield other ambiguities too, for Fichte suggests that it is the Not-I “to which there is ascribed [the] check.” (GWL 322 [GA I/2: 387]) Understood in this way, the *Anstoß* is part of the Not-I, and is something external to the I that limits it. But if the Not-I has no content, if the I has not yet been limited, then the check acts as the boundary of something empty, and in effect must be the Not-I at this moment of positing.⁶ The *Anstoß* is the point at which the I’s activity is to be limited, the point at which it is to posit the Not-I beyond it. But if it is a part of the Not-I, its positing as something for which the Not-I is responsible must be simultaneous, and it therefore cannot be ‘neutral’. Perhaps when Fichte says that the *Anstoß* is ‘ascribed’ to the Not-I, he is merely reiterating the necessity of the Not-I for its existence. If the Not-I did not exist, there would be no boundary against which the I’s activity would need to be checked.

Gottlieb agrees with this but interestingly suggests that, as something that indirectly determines the I, the *Anstoß* should be considered a structural component of the I.⁷ It is certainly true that the I’s finitude is an essential part of its positing activity, otherwise, there would be no way of separating it from the Not-I. But this suggestion goes too far the other way; while the initial suggestion was that the *Anstoß* lay outside both I and Not-I, according to this interpretation, taken alongside the above view, it appears to be a component of both I and Not-I. The *Anstoß* seems to be, then, a part of the I if and only if it is also a part of the Not-I, and yet simultaneously not contained within either. To frame this difficulty another way, the *Anstoß* must be both contained in, and abstracted from, the absolute I.⁸

6 Similarities might be drawn with Kant’s assertion that “the concept of a noumenon is [...] a limiting concept, and intended to keep the claims of sensibility within proper bounds.” (KrV A255/B310–11)

7 Gottlieb, Gabriel: “Fichte’s Relational I: *Anstoß* and *Aufforderung*.” In: *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook*. Cham 2019, 218–9.

8 Cf. GWL 295 [GA I/2: 357].

To visualize this problem, I would like to sketch the analogy of a circle. The perimeter of this circle suffers from the same difficulty as the *Anstoß* – is it a part of the circle itself, or is it a component of the area outside the circle by which it delineates what is not ‘part of’ this area? The activity in this circle extends outwards from within, stemming from one original point, and automatically reflects itself by being limited, the activity has nowhere to go upon meeting the boundary but back inwards. Whether the perimeter is actively determining what constitutes the circle, or whether it is merely an instrument of the area outside to pin a certain area into ‘circle-hood’, is still an unknown. It is simply a nondescript line, lacking unity with either the area designated ‘circle’ or the area designated ‘not-circle’.

Perhaps we might get a better idea of this relationship by returning to Neuhausser’s assertion that it is ‘inert’ and trying to understand the *role* of the *Anstoß*; what it does and how it interacts with the I. Alas, this raises a more fundamental question concerning Fichte’s intentions regarding the *Anstoß* and the transition from his *transzendentallogisch* to his *bewusstseinstheoretisch*. One debate on this matter is between what Gottlieb calls the ‘standard interpretation’, and the ‘intersubjective interpretation’. The standard interpretation states that the *Anstoß*, as conceived in the *Grundlage* is not the same thing as the *Aufforderung* (summons), introduced in *Natural Right*. Fichte’s most explicit discussion of the *Anstoß* in *Natural Right* states that “to find itself as an *object* (of its reflection), [the I] would have to find itself, not as *determining* itself to be self-active [...], but rather as determined to be self-active by means of an external check [*Anstoß*].” (GNR 32 [GA I/3: 343]) Fichte here sees the *Anstoß* as specifically outside the I. But proponents of the standard interpretation would argue that this evolution of the *Wissenschaftslehre* was developed by Fichte *post hoc* and that the characteristics presented in this quote are not so clear in the earlier system. This would enable the check to be ‘inert’ in the case of the *Grundlage*, but active in *Natural Right* (and for the I to be self-determining in the former, but other-determined in the latter), for instance.

But this assertion isn’t quite so simple. The intersubjective interpretation suggests that the reverse is true; it is ‘intersubjective’ as it appeals to the necessity of relation between the I and other determined Is. A form of this interpretation is endorsed by Breazeale, who stresses that the *Anstoß* is a ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*), the encounter with which prompts the I to posit a limit. His rationale is that feelings are subjective states of the I and possess a determinacy that is not freely determined by the activity of the I. Such feelings, therefore, constrain the practical I, whilst stimulating its activity.⁹ As we can see, in

9 Breazeale: “*Anstoß*, Abstract Realism”, 169–70.

this interpretation, Breazeale leans more towards the definition that Fichte proposes in *Natural Right*, suggesting that the *Anstoß* is almost 'positive' in prompting the I to posit further.

This is perhaps put best by Altman: "[The *Anstoß*] begins as a feeling, is then perceived as a given sensation, and ultimately is subjected to concepts, such that we take it to be an objective representation."¹⁰ Altman's idea of an *Anstoß* requires something that can transform itself or react to changes in the nature of the I that the *Anstoß* (or Not-I) must bring about. Indeed, this account synthesizes in some way Breazeale's claim that by the time *Natural Right* and *The System of Ethics* (1798) were published, Fichte had sketched three different kinds of *Anstoß*; 1) an original system of feeling, 2) a summons to limit and respect other freedoms, and 3) a moral 'ought' as concrete empirical action.¹¹

But I think it would be a step too far to say with certainty that these three sketches of the *Anstoß* are necessarily all the same, transformative *Anstoß*, as appealed to by Altman. It's important to note that he specifies the introduction of 'concepts' that transform it into a representation. In this sense, the movement described by an initial feeling, then sensation, then representation is one singular process from the theoretical to the practical. Breazeale's delineation of the three is perhaps easier to identify with the chronological progression of Fichte's work, but essentially cordons Fichte's work off into distinct stages, united only by the way in which the I at each point interacts with the *Anstoß*. And here we begin to understand the ambiguity in Fichte's writings and his continued employment of the term '*Anstoß*', despite its having taken on different definitional terminology between the 1794/5 *Wissenschaftslehre* and the 1797 *Natural Right*.

Nonetheless, what Altman and Breazeale do agree on is the primacy of the *Anstoß* as something 'felt', something that the I feels obliged to limit itself in the face of. In this, they are supported, in some sense, by Fichte himself: "the determinacy we are now speaking of is a feeling. Now a feeling is certainly a determination of the I, but not of the I as intellect, that is, of that I which posits itself as determined by the Not-I."¹² (GWL 293 [GA 1/2: 355])

Gottlieb disagrees, noting that if the *Anstoß* is a 'feeling', then the check it imposes upon the I is a causal determination. This is other-determination, as opposed to self-determination, and hence cannot be an *Anstoß*, nor can the

10 Altman, Matthew C.: "The Letter and the Spirit: Kant's Metaphysics and Fichte's Epistemology." In: *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook*. 426.

11 Breazeale: "*Anstoß*, Abstract Realism", 185.

12 This claim relies heavily on the primacy of the practical, a notion further discussed later.

feeling of an impression.¹³ I am inclined to agree with this critique; though it leaves us with the difficult task of explaining *how* the *Anstoß* can limit the I (or prompt the I to limit itself) without determining it. It is true that a starting principle of pure activity – ‘I am I’ – cannot contain within it any passivity without being obliged or obliging itself to give some up to something external. And by feeling, it is being limited in a way that we have not yet proven possible.¹⁴

Gottlieb’s alternative is that the *Anstoß* gives the I a normative task to limit itself, by turning its activity back upon itself. A normative account has merit; it imposes a non-hypothetical imperative to propose that the I curtail its self-activity, and reflect it inwards. But he states that while self-limiting happens voluntarily, “it does not make sense to characterize the infinite outward-stretching activity of the I as a voluntary act.”¹⁵ The I, then, remains free, but still ends up determined – as though it freely determines its unfreedom by determining itself.

However, Gottlieb’s new conception is not altogether different from the ‘summons’. It is not entirely clear how the normativity of this conception of the *Anstoß* differs from that of an impression, and thereby how an undetermined I can interact with something it ‘comes up against’. According to this account, the *Anstoß* still relies on the I ‘understanding’ when to voluntarily limit itself in the face of this normative check, which again leans into the suggestion that it is encountered as a ‘feeling’.

An interesting discussion of the German term *Aufforderung* is put forward by Wood on the forcefulness of the word, and how Fichte might have intended it to be understood.¹⁶ He notes that as well as the legalistic interpretation of ‘subpoena’ or similar, it could be seen as an ‘invitation’, concluding that Fichte’s use leans far more towards ‘invitation’ than to ‘demand’. This is because the act of ‘summoning’ being enacted by the *Aufforderung* endows us with the option to not do what it asks of us.¹⁷

13 Gottlieb: “Fichte’s Relational I”, 221.

14 Hoeltzel suggests that “Insofar as it appears adventitiously and lacks conceptual structure, the merely sensory content of consciousness is an affront to reason’s highest ideal and a check to the I’s essential endeavor. Accordingly, sensation becomes ‘feeling.’” (Hoeltzel, Steven: “Check and Summons (*Anstoß* and *Aufforderung*).” In: *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook*. 356) I take this to mean that feeling appears to be the product of this interaction of the check and the outreaching activity, rather than the condition thereof.

15 Gottlieb: “Fichte’s Relational I”, 231.

16 I promise this is going somewhere, please bear with me.

17 Wood, Allen W.: “Fichte’s Intersubjective I.” In: *Inquiry* 49 (2006, 1), 73.

There are parallels to be drawn here with the definitional problem of the *Anstoß*; though perhaps not down the axes of 'forceful' to 'unforceful', but from 'active' to 'passive'. Looking at these axes, we understand precisely why the *Anstoß* is such a problematic concept for Fichte's early philosophy – does it contain this activity, or passivity, or neither? To be summoned, as in the case of the *Aufforderung*, seems to come from something wholly external, something which contains activity, suggesting that the *Aufforderung* at least must originate *in* or *from* the Not-I. Textually, I noted earlier the definition Fichte gives the *Anstoß* in *Natural Right*. What is important about the mere mention of the *Anstoß* at this point is that *Natural Right* also refers to the *Aufforderung*. Clearly, the *Anstoß* in *Natural Right*, whether Fichte intended it to be the same thing as in the *Wissenschaftslehre* or not, was, at this point, distinct from the *Aufforderung*.

Might this hint at the usage of the *Anstoß* in Fichte's earlier work? As yet, we cannot be sure. But, since the *Anstoß* and *Aufforderung* in *Natural Right* are both explicitly referred to as 'external' to the relational I, we cannot apply either of them to the I as a prompt for turning its activity back upon itself. The question of distinctness seems, at this point, to be whether one can map Fichte's practical philosophy onto his theoretical one. Or maybe instead the revisions that Fichte made which resulted in an *Anstoß* more distinct in form from – or at least less unambiguously identical with – the earlier one, were merely appeals to a reader to understand.

What we *can* see, however, is that the *Anstoß* of *Natural Right* fundamentally cannot be the same thing or perform the same function as the *Anstoß* of the 1794/95 *Wissenschaftslehre*. We cannot yet identify exactly what the function of the earlier *Anstoß* is, or *how* it is distinct. But rendering it as 'impetus' (GNR 32n, editor's note) contains within it a positive function that cannot be performed by something 'inert' or 'wholly passive'. Importantly, Gottlieb's normative conception seems to do exactly what Wood claims the *Aufforderung's* role is. If the *Aufforderung* is not a demand, it is an 'invitation' or 'request' to limit oneself in the face of another. Equally, the I, if we take up the normative conception of the *Anstoß*, has the ability to *not* oblige the 'invitation'. It seems to be the case that the *Anstoß* either externally determines the I in a way that runs counter to Fichte's theory of self-positing, or else it essentially does precisely the same thing as the *Aufforderung*.

It would appear, according to this, that Gottlieb's conception has been placed in a difficult position – it must either betray Fichte's own *Wissenschaftslehre* by blurring the lines between his transcendental logic and his theory of derived consciousness, or else it fails to act as a 'middle way' between the standard and intersubjective interpretations, endorsing the latter far more fully than

it apparently would have liked. It may be that a fuller understanding of the *Anstoß* may be the key to understanding whether or not we can continue to accept the early *Wissenschaftslehre* as a coherent system, from which we can derive a theory of consciousness. And, of course, if we do accept Gottlieb's 'normative *Anstoß*', then we must retroactively reconfigure the I so that it can be something which has the capability to be normatively acted upon. In short, such ideas to a far greater degree challenge the early *Wissenschaftslehre* than they do affirm it.

There is a more primordial question in 'feeling' that needs to be addressed before we can move on to a more constructive section of our endeavour. This is: what about Breazeale's claim that feelings are subjective states of the I? We have so far spent a great deal of time showing that Gottlieb's system is not so different from the intersubjective approach, but what is so disagreeable about this approach in the first place?

It should be stated that on one reading, Breazeale is in keeping with Fichte's assertion that "Feeling is purely subjective." (GWL 349 [GA I/2: 419]) But this is to put the cart before the horse, as feeling in this sense is the "manifestation within the I of an inability". (GWL 348 [GA I/2: 419]) At this stage, this merely acknowledges that the I has been checked and offers an account of how the I might interact with the check, but does not necessarily constitute the check itself.

Firstly, I would argue that, by the very nature of deduced feeling, the process of feeling cannot be a subjective state of the I – we cannot imagine an I that does not feel because its outreaching activity – the movement outward from a single principle ('I am I') in all directions to fill *everything* – is not checked and it cannot therefore become a relational being. This is not to say of course that the act of feeling is what brings about the limiting of a finite I, indeed this is precisely the argument that we are trying here to refute. But feeling is a consequence of the relational I, a component of it which is not possessed in the absolute I. Feelings, or acts of recognition, are thus objective to respective Is; they constitute a component of the relational I but are not the springboard off which the relational I comes into being.

This leads us to the second claim of Breazeale's argument; that feelings possess determinacy externally of that endowed to them by the I's activity. How can we be so sure that feelings are a consequence of the process of self-limiting and *not* that first principle that results in the same? To this, I would reply that a fixed thing to which the I then responds must be contained outside a being that consists of pure activity. To undergo a feeling is to undergo passivity and though feelings might possess a determinacy that the I does not, if we accept this view, the I possesses determinacy insofar as it is determined by the

determinate feeling. The I, then, does possess this determinacy; for how can it be determined by something already determinate without being acted upon? If we do accept that feelings possess some form or content that the I does not, do we not accept that feeling is a qualitatively different thing to the I, and is therefore external to it too? If so, by appealing to feeling as an *Anstoß*, we either endorse that notion that the feeling of the I is externally determined and does not self-limit, or else we endorse the idea that feeling itself is external to the I, at which point we would still need some way of connecting it to the I and bringing about the self-limitation we seek.

Thus far, we appear to have ended back where we started, with this strange, fuzzy thing dodging definition, still unsure of whether to apply more concrete terms to it which were picked up by Fichte in later works. We can see that accounts which appeal to other-determination cannot truly answer this question about what the *Anstoß* is or does, as they inadvertently appeal to something external of it and thereby strip the I of an amount of positing power. The *Anstoß* must come from the I but cannot come through a medium of normativity or force; in essence, we can say that there must be 'no hard feelings' in formulating our conception of Fichte's early *Anstoß*, no solid thing to run up against unless that thing comes from itself and is a consequence of itself.

4 The Striving Activity of the I

So far, we have only established what the *Anstoß* cannot be; it cannot be felt, nor can it be a normative task-setter. It cannot be a part of the relational I, but nor can it be a part of the Not-I. It seems to be somewhere in between each. But we cannot simply understand what the *Anstoß* is *not* and hope to derive some sort of function from this alone. The *Anstoß* is, to Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre* at least, the gatekeeper of consciousness. Without it, we cannot understand exactly how we differentiate between I and Not-I, or how they come to be separate entities within the absolute. Šumah suggests, in a similar vein, that it is a "junction of irreducible elements."¹⁸ But this does not mean that it is, by its very nature, ineffable. Granted, it may be difficult to understand in relation to what we have already defined – the more solid concepts of I and Not-I – but this does not mean that we can leave it as merely a 'junction', something simply to be bypassed on the way to freely posited self-awareness. Without this

18 Šumah, Lidija: "Fichte in Reverse: From Onto-theology to Materialist Ontology." In: *Crisis and Critique* 2 (2015, 1), 278.

'junction' between finite and absolute, I and Not-I, etc., we cannot understand how we transition from the transcendental to the practical.

Having clarified the difficulty in pinning the *Anstoß* to either I or Not-I, we see the need for it to act as a structural component of the absolute I, as mentioned above. Fichte outlines in §6–7 of the *Grundlage* his notion of the infinitely striving activity of the I. This striving is aimed at the expansion of the finite I to fill the absolute. In essence, it is the I's outreaching activity, the movement from a single principle to the absolute. But it now possesses an added desperation upon encountering an opponent that hinders it (*das Widerstreben*). Fichte states that "in its connection with a possible object, the pure, self-reverting activity of the I is a *striving*; and indeed, according to the preceding proof, an *infinite striving*. This infinite striving, extending endlessly outward, is the *condition of the possibility of any object*: no striving, no object." (GWL 330 [GA I/2: 397])

Fichte recognizes that the striving operates in the same way as the outreaching activity. In this way, the I does not strive *against* the boundaries of the absolute I, as the absolute I is all that exists. But Fichte's assertion presupposes an *Anstoß*. In a contradictory turn for his 'no [this], no [that]; no [that], no [this]' format commonly used in the *Grundlage*, while 'no striving' may indeed mean 'no object', it is not the case that 'no *outreaching activity*, no object' applies. Nor is it true that one can easily instantiate 'striving' for 'outreaching activity'. The very nature of striving necessitates something to strive *against*; in this case, an *Anstoß*, and by extension a Not-I. Despite the inability to instantiate the two, however, the striving and the outreaching activity must be the same – one cannot have striving without outreaching activity. The outreaching activity is converted into a striving upon meeting a boundary, but as we have seen above, this cannot be something it feels necessitating a turning back. And so, lacking determination, the striving is a striving only after having determined itself. But by virtue of its striving, it has determined itself from the moment of its activity moving beyond itself, 'extending endlessly outward'.

I want to argue instead that the *Anstoß* is eternal, that is, it exists always within the I, and is what converts the I's mere outreaching activity into a striving activity as such. Fichte himself claims that "the point of union between the absolute, the practical, and the intelligent natures of the I [is that] [...] the I demands that it contain within itself all reality and that it fill infinity." (GWL 340 [GA I/2: 409]) Fichte himself is here claiming that the 'demand' to fill infinity is the unifying principle, and that this follows from the first principle of self-positing. As this act of positing must always be spontaneous, and Fichte's second principle, that '-I is not equal to I, follows from the first, then the I must always be consciously aware of the Not-I. By extension, the I must always be

conscious of the *Anstoß* which comes between them, from at least the second ‘moment’ of its outreaching activity. The striving for unity with the Not-I, then, could even be said to precede the Not-I itself, as the outreaching activity which is the first act of self-positing is, in reaction to a boundary, concomitant with striving.

In recognizing these first two principles, that ‘I am I’, and ‘-I is not equal to I’, we recognize a difference between the two. We hence understand the concept of the negation of the one by the other, and the boundary caused by the concepts of opposites in recognizing the purity of a principle such as ‘I am I’. The *Anstoß* is merely the point of rebellion – or striving – that arises from the purity of the absolute I. In this way, the structural necessity of the *Anstoß* is not something ‘felt’, nor is it something normative, that turns the I’s activity inwards. Consciously or otherwise, the activity does this naturally, and the *Anstoß* merely acts as a ‘moment’, at which the outreaching activity autonomously reverts inwards.

It is important to consider the more recent understanding of Fichte’s usage of the term ‘*Anstoß*’ as taken from rationalist mechanics, in which it denotes the far more proactive ‘impulse’.¹⁹ Hence, we can see that when Fichte says

What is posited in opposition to the I does nothing more than set the I in motion so that it can act. In the absence of such a first mover outside itself, the I would never have acted; and since the essential nature of the I consists entirely in acting, it would also not have existed. But nothing else pertains to this [first] mover other than that is supposed to be a mover, a force posited in opposition [to the I],

GWL 341–2 [GA I/2: 411]

the *Anstoß* comes to take the role of a unifying principle, the enabler of all of the principles (moments) of the system of positing to come into their union.

It is not revolutionary to claim that the second principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is automatically and implicitly contained within the first. It is alluded to by Stolzenberg when he claims that “the second action [of positing the Not-I in opposition] *as action* is not deducible from the first principle. If, however, it is deployed [...], then it must be understood as opposing, where

19 This is a view first noted by Druet, in which *Anstoß* comes from a ‘shock’. See Druet, Pierre-Phillipe: “L’«Anstoss» fichtéen: essai d’élucidation d’une métaphore.” In: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 70 (1972, 7), 384–92 (See also Breazeale: “Editor’s Introduction.” In *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794–95)*. Oxford 2022, 99–100.).

in the first action the self-positing of the ego is assumed.”²⁰ It is thus my contention that the two principles are united in the nature of the first. The third principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that “*The I posits in the I a divisible Not-I in opposition to the divisible I*” (GWL 214 [GA I/2: 272]) must also follow from the opacities of the first two.

There is, however, debate over whether this second principle *can* necessarily follow from the first. Schnell asserts that the first principle is “all-encompassing, all interconnecting and mediating I-hood.”²¹ Taken in this way – the absolute containing all causality – it must be the case that any opposition is implicitly contained within, in his words, a ‘then ...’ that must follow an ‘if ...’.²² Fichte writes in a letter to Reinhold that the question of difference is “answered only up to a point in the Theoretical Part, but [...] is completely answered in the Practical Part,” (EPW 399 [GA III/2: 344]) meaning that the understanding of difference, and the *Anstoß* contained therein, must be indicative of an already completed moment of movement from the theoretical to the practical (in a most unspecific way).²³ Some argue that the first principle as originally given and the theory of identity that comes to develop in §5 of the *Foundations* fundamentally differ, perhaps indicating an irreconcilable incompatibility between the Theoretical and Practical Is.²⁴ However, I am happy to defer to the account offered by Schwab, that Fichte’s account of the difference between I and Not-I must be prefigured in the absolute I, otherwise this difference cannot manifest itself proper.²⁵

At this point, I find myself committing a hypocrisy of sorts. I noted earlier that it was a problem of Gottlieb’s normative *Anstoß* that it left itself vulnerable to betraying Fichte’s own thought – a trap to which I now appear susceptible. But I would note the duality of recognition involved in understanding

20 Stolzenberg, Jürgen: “Martin Heidegger Reads Fichte.” In *Fichte and the Phenomenological Tradition*. Berlin 2010, 211.

21 Schnell, Alexander: “Why Is the First Principle of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* Foundational for Fichte’s *Entire Wissenschaftslehre*?” In: *Fichte-Studien* 49 (2020, 1), 88.

22 Ibid. 82.

23 Fichte says that how the check happens to the I “is a question that lies beyond the boundary of the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.” (GWL 299 [GA I/2: 262])

24 See Waibel, Violetta: *Hölderlin und Fichte. 1794–1800*. Paderborn 2000.

25 Schwab, Philip: “Difference within Identity? Fichte’s Reevaluation of the First Principle of Philosophy in §5 of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.” In: *Fichte-Studien* 49 (2020, 1), 112–3. We might even say that this characterisation of the *Anstoß* and its positioning within the first principle exploits Fichte’s ambiguous account of identity and difference in §5. See GWL 336–7 [GA I/2: 405].

these principles, what Stolzenberg calls their “partial indeducibility”.²⁶ Fichte concedes that in certain instances, one must naturally recognize the principle of opposition and the statement posed contra first principle. (GWL 208 [GA I/2: 265]) I would argue that the nature of the statement ‘I am I’ is, in one instance, infinite, but in another finite and self-determined.²⁷ I will henceforth refer to the infinite first principle, and the finite first principle, as respectively the first principle that stems outwards into the absolute I and is not checked; and the first principle, the recognition of which contains within it the Not-I and the *Anstoß*.

The dual aspect of this first principle is what distinguishes my account from the characterizations of, say, Neuhausser. It still makes sense to both agree with and reject that the *Anstoß* is ‘inert’; the duality of *Anstoß*-as-moment can explain this incongruity. In each respect, it is tethered to both the infinite and finite first principles. In the first instance, we have the ‘inert’ *Anstoß* that does not determine the outreaching activity. And in the other, we have the non-inert *Anstoß* that brings about the I’s determination, but a determination that still nonetheless originates from the activity of ‘I am I’.

If we accept this theory, ‘I am I’ comes to do a lot of heavy lifting for the Fichtean system – not only does it constitute the pure activity of the absolute I, but it also serves as the counter to the principle that brings the not I into existence, it is absolute *and* relational. That first, absolutely unconditioned principle seems to be the touching point between the outreaching activity and the Not-I that, broadly, checks it. I would argue that the *Anstoß* is that first principle of ‘I am I’ – the first principle *qua* first principle, as the unity of both infinite first principle and finite first principle, as one contains a necessity for the *Anstoß*, whilst the other contains the *Anstoß* itself.

In a way, the *Anstoß* must be contained in the concept of I-hood, for ‘I am I’ is the unconditioned principle from which all others are derived, including the check – this much is obvious. But I think that the *Anstoß* is contained within it from its very inception, insofar as the other two absolute principles are contained within it as well. Their being so contained would be futile without the check to delineate them, but none are contained insofar as it is pure activity which, according to Hohler “knows nothing of the not-I. The check does not depend on an independently existing not-I nor does the I realize whether the limitation is merely a self-determination.”²⁸

26 Stolzenberg: “Heidegger Reads Fichte”, 211.

27 Cf. Schwab: “Difference within Identity?”, 106.

28 Hohler, T.P.: *Imagination and Reflection: Intersubjectivity*. The Hague 1982, 44.

The I, being pure activity, must be the progenitor for the Not-I and *Anstoß*. The important part of his claim, though, is that the limitation must occur *before* the encounter. The check must be already prefigured within the I so that it can recognize, or better *posit*, the Not-I.

But Fichte himself recognizes an even more primordial need for the I, and especially for its outreaching activity. He states, “*No infinity, no limitation; no limitation, no infinity.*” (GWL 296 [GA I/2: 358]) Without a check, the infinite outreaching does not become a striving, and without a striving activity rather than a merely outreaching one, it cannot bring about its own self-limitation.

There can be no outreaching activity if the I is utterly infinite. Or better put, the outreaching activity which accompanies the I cannot be a striving without meeting resistance. The absolute activity cannot turn itself inwards to become a relational striving against resistance without an inherently understood concept of resistance, i.e., an *Anstoß*. Hence, the *Anstoß* circumvents the difficulty of determining the I in any way, as it must be necessary for both the theoretical and the practical I, to convert the one to the other. We might even say that this characterization places the theoretical and practical constitutions of the I in an equally-determined relationship, giving them “equiprimacy”, as Zöller suggests.²⁹

The equiprimacy of theoretical and practical philosophy should be argument enough for us to construe the *Anstoß* as something derived from ‘I am I’. By this I mean that it contains both the infinite first principle and finite first principle, it can be the mirror between something determinable and something determined. From it, not only can we derive the absolute I, the infinite, but we can also derive the relational I, the finite, and by extension its counter, the Not-I. The practical and theoretical in this context hold a similar role, as though two sides of the same coin, the importance of which cannot be forced into conflict with one another.

Here we return to Hohler, who stresses the equiprimacy of practical and theoretical, by appealing to the relational I – a result of the *Anstoß* – or the way by which it becomes characterized. He states that “the determination [...] can only be explained in the practical sphere.”³⁰ If there is no practical side to the I, there can be no Not-I, no *Anstoß*, and no check therefrom. As I stressed earlier, one cannot imagine an unchecked I, whose activity goes on infinitely. So, while the two are equally important to one another, it is only from the practical side that we can see the effects of this equiprimacy. For Fichte, “the act of positing in opposition occurs immediately in and along with [the action by which I and

29 Zöller: *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*.

30 Hohler: *Imagination and Reflection*, 43.

Not-I are posited as opposable]; both actions are one and the same and are distinguishable only in reflection.” (GWL 213 [GA I/2: 270]) We must have both an infinite first principle and a finite first principle, and their union must create the *Anstoß* from precisely *within* the opposition of an infinitely outreaching (and later striving) I.

5 *Anstoß* as Striving Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Check

There are some possibly unfavourable consequences of conflating the *Anstoß* with the structural necessity of the I's striving. Its striving for unity is at the same time a striving for an 'abolition' of the finitude of the I and Not-I. The first step towards abolishing the Not-I is to abolish the *Anstoß*, subordinating one to the challenge of the other, leaving I and Not-I free to intermingle in one complete, 'absolute' I. The striving, then, towards abolishing the Not-I, as part of the I's recognizing its capacity to posit and conflict with it, is the I's drive towards self-immolation. This is impossible as the I, as long as it is surrounded by other Is (in a latterly derived intersubjective sphere), is ineradicable. Gottlieb uses the example of a boxer throwing a punch to describe the *Anstoß*.³¹ In the same vein, in my conception, the *Anstoß* is, as this contentious and active check, like a referee holding two fighters apart from one another. It is static and holds both I and Not-I in their respective spheres, meaning abolition is impossible and making the *Anstoß* concomitant with futility. As long as the *Anstoß* exists, it serves as proof that neither I nor Not-I can abolish the other.

In this respect, the striving comes from an almost futile rebellion against the *Anstoß*, as Breazeale says, “[The I] is offended or affronted thereby.”³² Given that we have established that the *Anstoß* is already present to the I, it does not need to ‘feel’ the *Anstoß*, as it inevitably will have to limit itself, but does so by striving outwards. Fichte himself notes in *Outline of What is Distinctive of the Wissenschaftslehre with Respect to the Theoretical Power* (1795) that the I posits beyond the *Anstoß* to create the Not-I but is limited in the act of positing “*up to the boundary*.” (GWL 393 [GA I/3: 157])

This striving for unity/abolition gives the *Anstoß* the power to oscillate between normative and inert. It is a fact of the I which is both aware of it without the need to ‘become aware’ of it – and is thus not in any way determined by it – yet allows the finite I to limit itself without ‘feeling’ a certain point at which

31 Gottlieb: “Fichte’s Relational I”, 219–20.

32 Breazeale: “*Anstoß*, Abstract Realism”, 188.

it must do so. The I simultaneously ignores and runs up against the *Anstoß*, avoiding the determination that a concrete clash would impose upon it.

This also avoids the despair that striving for unity against a concrete check would yield. As Breazeale puts it: “an awareness of our own divided condition is precisely what *makes possible* that endless practical striving that constitutes our true vocation as human beings. Having a divided self should therefore not be perceived as a *threat* to human freedom, but rather as a *condition* and *consequence* of the same.”³³

We should revel in our dual natures – finite and infinite, practical and theoretical – as the oscillating *Anstoß* that delimits or brings into existence the striving unites them under that very concept of striving. Can we make any preliminary remarks about what this dual nature includes? Can we turn to Clarke’s point, that the body for Fichte is the representation of a free I? Clarke notes here Hegel’s criticism, that the body’s being so posited means it is part of the Not-I which constrains the I.³⁴ *Prima facie*, this seems to be a problem for Fichte, as it appears to force him into inadvertently endorsing a form of substance dualism and raising questions about what the relational I actually constitutes.

But understanding the *Anstoß* as a structural component answers this difficulty. I refer again to the importance of a divided self. Taken in this way, the body cannot be something actively determining the I from outside, but instead has been determined to appear such by the activity of the I’s having passed through itself first – through this moment of self-determination.³⁵ We can see, then, what Wood means when he claims that “The body is not an empirical accompaniment but a transcendently deduced requirement for being an active I at all.”³⁶

Embodiment’s being a necessity for the I – a container for the union of finite and infinite self-activity – can help to ease the transition from Fichte’s transcendental to his practical philosophies. But, you might ask, what can understanding the *Anstoß* do? To the dogmatic naysayer, the *transzendentallogisch* in isolation cannot give us any helpful information regarding our interaction with the world. But what the *Anstoß* does, as this foundational point of simultaneous reflection and extended positing, is derive ground from the very fact of activity in the world for ‘an I’ to exist – the very certainty we need to refute

33 Breazeale, “The Divided Self and the Tasks of Philosophy.” In: *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, 151.

34 Clarke, James A.: “Fichte, Hegel, and the Life and Death Struggle.” In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22 (2014, 1), 100.

35 It is the first task of *Natural Right* to demonstrate this.

36 Wood: “Fichte’s Intersubjective I”, 70.

scepticism. I mentioned earlier that the *Anstoß* is ‘the gatekeeper of consciousness’. This assertion, I hope, will have seen its full fruition here; that without the *Anstoß*, I cannot talk about conscious beings, without some external determination being done *deus ex machina* to rescue me from solipsism. As Fichte himself claims, the check “must occur *if* any actual consciousness is supposed to be possible.” (GWL 339 [GA I/2: 408])

The *Anstoß* is, of course, not the only condition of consciousness; Hoeltzel highlights the *Aufforderung* as one such other.³⁷ But I hold that the *Anstoß* is a more primordial condition. If the *Aufforderung* is the condition for the I’s self-consciousness in relation to the world, the *Anstoß* is the condition for its self-consciousness in relation to itself. This, fundamentally, is the difference between Fichte’s ‘*bewusstseinstheoretisch*’, seen as the summons to real self-efficacy in the world, and his ‘*transzendentallogisch*’, the derivation from purely absolute terms of the theoretical sphere.

Hegel famously claimed that “[Self-consciousness] is only the motionless tautology of: ‘I am I.’”³⁸ This may be, but contained within it is the derivation of self in an absolute sphere of existence. If we can derive a check, and by extension an opposition from this ‘motionless tautology’ alone, we can advance on to other knowledge. Wood puts this effectively, claiming that I can understand myself by myself, simply by thinking of the idea of an abstract other counter to myself. We can keep self-consciousness, and consciousness about other beings in a solely theoretical, hypothetical sphere, but this is not enough; we are prompted to think the rest of the world with this as the original principle to be completed.³⁹ The completion of this original principle is the *Anstoß* (which in Fichte’s later *Rechtslehre* and *Sittenlehre*, comes to be subordinated to the *Aufforderung*, as the active summons in his theory of consciousness), the component feature of the I which moves from the first unconditioned principle to the second, and the third. And with this, we move from the theoretical to the earliest exposition of the practical, the infinite to the finite, merely from that motionless tautology – which, by bringing the two Is into their union, *acts as* the *Anstoß* – of ‘I am I’.

Not only this, but the *Anstoß* as first principle does not contradict Fichte’s claim either, that the I cannot posit the *Anstoß*, as it eradicates the need for the *Anstoß* to be posited *at all*. Fichte agrees that “the impulse or check [...] would occur to the activity of the I precisely in the act of positing itself.” (GWL 294 [GA I/2: 356]) By being a structural component, it avoids the need to act either

37 Hoeltzel: “Check and Summons”, 358.

38 Hegel, G.W.F.: *Phenomenology of Spirit*. New York 1977, 105.

39 Wood: “Fichte’s Intersubjective I”, 70–1.

internally or externally upon the I. It becomes a mere *is*, rather than a more complex and problematic *does*.⁴⁰ The I is posited, and Not-I is assumed therein. From this, the check creeps into the frame alongside, an uninvited guest in the act of positing, but one upon which the other guests rely.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that the *Anstoß* of the *Grundlage* does not occupy the role that Fichte gives it in his later Jena period. To do so, I have tried to delineate a way in which it can determine the I's activity without acting upon it, in a way that does not presuppose any practical content within the I, such as 'feeling'. I have defended its role in the I's self-limiting by which it remains inert. In this process, the I's awareness of this check which is only quasi-positing, and only quasi-contained in the concept of practical I-hood, is founded in Fichte's first principle, that 'I am I'. As such, the *Anstoß* needs no normative quality or determined awareness of its presence to be able to turn the I inwards, a process that happens as soon as the I recognizes that it must do this by itself. Such an automatic process is critical for consciousness because the *Anstoß* acts as the point of convergence between theoretical and practical philosophy for Fichte. The conflation of *Anstoß* and *Aufforderung* by some proponents of the intersubjective approach is to some extent understandable, as there can only be one *moment* of consciousness, seen from different perspectives. The *Anstoß* as the theoretical gateway, or 'gatekeeper' of the movement from theoretical to practical, and later the *Aufforderung* as practical self-limiting in an intersubjective world containing other Is. This is not to undermine the later *Aufforderung*, but to stress that, though the later doctrine of intersubjectivity is contained in the *Grundlage*,⁴¹ it serves a different purpose, one concerned with actual consciousness as opposed to the derivation of the possibility of consciousness with which Fichte is primarily concerned at this point. In this early work, the necessity of the *Anstoß* to the absolute I for the creation of the relational I, and its structural complicity of the same could represent a difficulty to the I, but its free unfreedom is nonetheless a form of freedom. We might even say that the I is necessarily determined such that it could simultaneously have been

40 Similarities could be drawn with Kant's thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*). Cf. KrV A255 & §32 of the *Prolegomena* (4:314–5). For further discussion on this comparison, see Förster, Eckhart: *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA. 2012, 196.

41 Breazale: "Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self." In: *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*. Albany 1995, 97.

and not have been otherwise. Such freedom within bounds is reminiscent of Henry Ford's dictum: "Any customer can have a car painted any colour he wants, so long as it's black."⁴²

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