Fichte's Moral Philosophy

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One of the principle rules of all philosophizing to any purpose is this: We should always bear in mind *the whole*. No matter how trivial or subtle a particular inquiry appears to be, we should at least retain within ourselves a feeling for the whole. This feeling should always accompany us, and we should not make a single step along our path which is not in the spirit of the whole.

—Fichte, 'On the Difference between the Spirit and Letter in Philosophy,' lecture delivered in 1794; in Breazeale (1988: 213)

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Preface

Kant tells us a story in the *Critique of Pure Reason* about how the established sciences we know today, from mathematics to chemistry, were brought about through a 'sudden revolution in the way of thinking'—in each case, he adds, 'by the happy inspiration' of a single person (B xii). It is here that Kant introduces the metaphor of a 'new light' breaking upon those who discovered the inner principles of a science (B xii). Such is the 'transformation' Kant attributes to the birth of systematic cognition, and he proposes that philosophers, too, should emulate this model of revolution if they wish to find the 'royal path' of a science (B xiv).

In the summer of 1790, a twenty-eight-year-old tutor from Rammenau began to study Kant's first *Critique* at the prompting of his student. Unimpressed at first, he nonetheless pushed forth to read Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. Later that summer J. G. Fichte confessed the impact this second book had on his entire way of thinking:

> I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought never could be proven—for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc. . . . Thus I was deceived by the apparent consistency of my previous system, and thus are thousands of persons perhaps still deceived. (GA III/2, No. 63; in Breazeale 1988: 357).

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I wish I could claim to have experienced my own 'new light' in the study of Fichte. But looking back to the ten years since I have read his work, my journey has been marked by struggle, at times to the point where I despaired over the prospect of grasping Fichte's thought as a whole. I have been fortunate, however, to receive help from a number of people along the way, all of whom have contributed to shaping, refining, and improving the set of views

I put forward in this book. First of all, I would like to thank Paul Franks for introducing me to Fichte when I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto. I was able to pursue this interest during the academic year 2007–2008, having chosen the topic of 'conscience in modern thought' for my area examination. During that time I spent long hours reading Luther, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, and in retrospect I see how much that year planted seeds for the interpretations I had the opportunity to publish only years later.

My work on Fichte was reignited in the spring of 2013 when I taught a Kant-Fichte seminar at Temple University, and I have taught subsequent versions of that seminar at both Simon Fraser University and the University of Toronto. I am thankful to all the participants in those seminars for what was often a reciprocal exchange of learning. In recent years I have also benefited from a number of individuals who, either in person or in written correspondence, have provided me with constructive input. Thanks to Karl Ameriks, Dan Breazeale, Anthony Bruno, James Clarke, Ben Crowe, Yolanda Estes, Sebastian Gardner, Kristin Gjesdal, Kien-How Goh, Gabe Gottlieb, Paul Guyer, Dai Heide, Karolina Hübner, Andrew Huddleston, Markus Kohl, Michelle Kosch, Wayne Martin, Mike Morgan, Dean Moyar, Nedim Nomer, Arthur Ripstein, Lisa Schapiro, Ulrich Schlösser, Nick Stang, Bob Stern, Martin Sticker, Krista Thomason, Evan Tiffany, Jens Timmermann, Günter Zöller, Ariel Zylberman, as well as audience members at Indiana University, the University of Oslo, the University of Toronto, the University of Tübingen, and York University. Special thanks are due to Allen Wood for inviting me to coteach his Kant-Fichte seminar at Stanford University (June 12–14, 2018), which became the inspiration for Chapters 2–3, and to my two Oxford University Press referees, whose excellent feedback made numerous refinements to my manuscript.[1] Lastly, but surely not least, I owe a debt of gratitude to Peter Ohlin for his impeccable editorial guidance and ongoing support.

While I cannot claim to have received a sudden revolution in my understanding of Fichte, many of the individuals just listed contributed to the gradual improvement in my way of reading him. If during this time I felt anything like a transformative insight into Fichte's moral philosophy, it came not through my study of his *System of Ethics* but through my study of his Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, which brought before my eyes the principles of his entire philosophy. I am happy to present my contribution in this book as an attempt to understand, not Fichte's ethics in isolation, but Fichte's system of ethics as a whole, and to foreground the essential but often hidden links between

this system and his larger doctrine of science. In this regard I have tried my best to stay true to Fichte's own injunction that 'we should not make a single step along our path which is not in the spirit of the whole.'[2] I have therefore devoted the first chapter of my study to understanding the path leading to Fichte's mature philosophical position, as well as his subsequent path to the foundational portion of the *System of Ethics*. In all this I have been guided by a conviction that if we wish to understand Fichte's moral philosophy, we must understand Fichte's system, his methodology, and the 'spirit of the whole' permeating his corpus.

It is an exciting time to be working on Fichte. Wood's (2016) book is a landmark study, and together with Breazeale's (2013) superb collection of essays, English readers now have a wealth of high-quality scholarship to draw upon as they venture into Fichte's difficult texts. If I ever speak of a 'renaissance' of Fichte scholarship, I do so with some reservation, for there has been a steady flow of work coming out of Germany and Italy since the 1980s. Aside from a large number of monographs, the forty-plus volumes of *Fichte-Studien* (currently edited by Marco Ivaldo and Alexander Schnell) attest to the fact that scholarship on Fichte has enjoyed healthy activity for many decades now. Moreover, as I hope to show in the coming chapters, many interpretations of Fichte's moral philosophy on offer today have been worked out, with care and systematicity, by scholars of the past. In this respect we may find that *going forward* in the English literature is a matter of *going back*—for example, to the work of Karl Stäudlin, Friedrich Jodl, Kuno Fischer, Eric Fuchs, Maria Raich, Georg Gurwitsch, and Hans Verweyen, not to mention the excellent recent work of Stefano Bacin, Bärbel Frischmann, Jacinto Rivera de Rosales, Wenberng Pong, Teresa Pedro, Jakub Kloc-Konkołowicz, and Yukio Irie, to name only a few. I have learned a great deal from all of them.

Of course, writers receive support in many ways beyond the feedback of colleagues, students, and reviewers. I am grateful to have received financial support in the form of an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as institutional support in the form of a teaching leave from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. Almost all of the chapters of this book were written while living on the meeting place of Toronto, which belongs to the Dish With One Spoon treaty.[3] The Dish With One Spoon treaty binds the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee people to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and peoples, Europeans, and all newcomers have been invited into this treaty in a spirit of peace, friendship,

and respect. The meeting place of Toronto is still home to many Indigenous people, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to work on their land. I would like to acknowledge the covenants broken with the elders of the Dish With One Spoon treaty and to honor a collective need to strive for truth and forgiveness with all our relations, both past and present.

I am pleased to express my heartfelt thanks to J.-P. Tamblin, Shawna Turner, Gregmar Newman, and my Ahimsa family, who have offered me more support than they could possibly know. It is also with a loss for words that I am grateful for the love, support, and friendship of Leah Ware. She makes it all worth it. This book is dedicated to her.

Owen Ware
Toronto, Canada
August 2020

Abbreviations

References to Fichte appear in the order of abbreviation, volume number, and page number from *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämmtliche Werke*, 8 volumes, edited by I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–46) (e.g., SL 4:214). Where texts from this edition are not available, I refer to *J. G. Fichte: Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 42 volumes, edited by Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacobs, and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1964–2012) (e.g., GA I/4:307). References to Kant appear in the order of abbreviation, volume number, and page number from the Akademie Ausgabe, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Translation decisions are my own, although I have consulted (and sometimes followed) the current English translations of Fichte cited below, as well as translations from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (1992–), edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. In the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I follow the standard practice of referring to the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions.

Fichte

A	1790: *Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus* (*Aphorisms Concerning Religion and Deism*).
BEIW	1795: 'Ueber Belebung und Erhöhung des reinen Interesse für Wahrheit' ('On Stimulating and Raising the Pure Interest Truth').
BdM	1800: *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (*The Vocation of Human Beings*). Translated by Peter Preuss (1988).
CR	1793: 'Recension Creuzer' ('Review of Leonhard Creuzer, *Skeptical Reflections on the Freedom of the Will* (1793).' Translated by Daniel Breazeale (2001b).
EIW	1794: 'Ueber Belebung und Erhöhung des reinen Interesse für Wahrheit' ('On Stimulating and Increasing the Pure Interest in Truth'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1988).
ErE	1797: 'Erste Einleitung in die *Wissenschaftslehre*' ('First Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1994).

GA	*J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Reihe/Band: Seite)
GGW	1798: 'Ueber den Grund unsers Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung' ('On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1994).
GNR	1996/97: *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*). Translated by Michael Baur (2000).
GR	1793: 'Recension Gebhard' ('Review of Gebhard'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (2001a).
GWL	1794/95: *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*). Translated by Peter Heath and John Lachs (1982).
RA	1793: 'Recension Aenesidemus' ('Review of Aenesidemus'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1988).
SL	1798: *Das System der Sittenlehre nach den Principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (*The System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*). Translated by Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (2005).
VBG	1794: *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (*Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation).* Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1988).
VKO	1792/93: *Versuch einer Critik aller Offenbarung* (*Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*). Translated by Garrett Green (2010).
WLnm	1796/99: *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (*Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy [Wissenschaftslehre] novo methodo*). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1992).
WM	1794: 'Ueber die Würde des Menschen' ('On the Dignity of Human Beings'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1988).
ZwE	1797: 'Zweite Einleitung in die *Wissenschaftslehre*' ('Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*'). Translated by Daniel Breazeale (1994).

Kant

A/B	1781/87: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*). Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood.
G	1785*: Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*). Translated by Mary J. Gregor and Jens Timmermann (2012).

IaG	1784: 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichtein weltbürgerlicher Absicht' ('Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View'). Translated by Allen W. Wood (2007).
KpV	1788: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Practical Reason*). Translated by Mary J. Gregor (2015).
KU	1790: *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*). Translated by Eric Matthews (2000).
MS	1797: *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (*The Metaphysics of Morals*). Translated by Mary J. Gregor (1996).
R	1793: *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*). Translated by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (2018).
Refl	Various dates: *Reflexionen* (*Reflections*).
WA	1784: 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' ('An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?'). Translated by Mary J. Gregor (1996).

Fichte's Moral Philosophy

1
Origins

> I was deceived by the apparent consistency of my previous system, and thus are thousands of persons perhaps still deceived.
>
> —Fichte (GA III/2, No. 63; in Breazeale 1992: 357).

1.1. The Hero or the Fool?

Published at the height of his career in Jena, the *System of Ethics* by Johann Gottlieb Fichte marked a crucial development in his project of grounding all human knowledge in a new idealist philosophy. Like the author himself, the 1798 *System of Ethics* suffered various turns of fate, rising from active readership in the nineteenth century and falling to general neglect in the twentieth. Yet what has remained a regular theme in the reception of this work over the past two hundred years is an absence of agreement among its readers—and this remains true in the renaissance of Fichte's ethics we are witnessing today. Some have read Fichte's work as advocating an ethics of conviction, grounding morality in the voice of conscience within; others have read it as advocating an ethics of communication, grounding morality in rational discourse; still others have found in the *System of Ethics* an apology for modern technologism and have viewed his doctrine as a form of consequentialism. With such a variety of interpretations, it is only natural to wonder: What progress can be made in understanding Fichte's moral philosophy? And what, if anything, is its lasting value?

Some time ago Arthur Schopenhauer summarized his answer to these questions in his prize essay on morality. Referring to Fichte's ethics as a 'magnifying glass' (*Vergrößerungsspiegel*) for the faults of Kant's ethics, Schopenhauer wrote:

> In the same way that the student of anatomy does not see things so easily in preparations and natural products as they are in engravings, which represent the same with exaggeration; so to anyone who, after the critique given

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> in the above paragraphs, does not yet fully see the nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] of the Kantian foundation of ethics, I can recommend Fichte's *System of Ethics* as a means to the elucidation of this knowledge. (1841/2007: §11)

As if to add insult to injury, Schopenhauer continued:

> Just as in old German puppet shows the king or other hero was given a fool who repeated everything the hero said or did according to *his* manner and with exaggeration; so behind the great Kant stands the author of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, or more properly stated, *Wissenschaftsleere*. (1841/2007: §11)

This comparison was one that haunted Fichte in his own day, as his first major publication, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation,* appeared without his name, and the intellectual public celebrated it not as a work of Fichte's but as a work of Kant's. However, for many readers Fichte was not the fool who merely aped Kant's system with exaggeration, but rather the hero who lifted this system up to new heights. Writing just before Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach described Fichte's ideas as 'more lofty than Kant's,' going so far as to portray Fichte as 'the hero who alone sacrificed to ethical ideas the whole power, beauty, and splendor of the world' (1838: 81).[1]

When we turn to Fichte's writings themselves, it is clear why critics and sympathizers alike would compare Fichte so closely to Kant. In the 'First Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*,' Fichte makes this comparison explicit:

> I have long asserted, and repeat once more, that my system is nothing other than the *Kantian*; this means that it contains the same view of things, but is in method quite independent of the *Kantian* presentation. I have said this not to hide behind a great authority, nor to seek an external support for my teaching, but to speak the truth and to be just. . . . My writings seek neither to explain *Kant* nor to be explained by him; they must stand on their own, and *Kant* does not come into it at all. (ErE 1:420)

If we take Fichte at his word, the difference between his system and Kant's is only one of presentation. But then we must ask: Is Fichte's new method only a different means for arriving at the philosophical standpoint already articulated by Kant? If so, where does Fichte depart from Kant? And are these

departures mere exaggerations, as Schopenhauer claimed? Or are they genuine improvements, as Feuerbach believed? My aim in this opening chapter is to take some first steps toward answering these questions with the goal of setting the stage for a closer examination of Fichte's *System of Ethics*. Of course, a complete reply to these questions would require nothing less than a full-scale comparison of Kant and Fichte, which far exceeds the scope of any single book.[2] But I shall simplify the task ahead, without sacrificing the details necessary to make such a comparison compelling, by focusing on a crucial period of Fichte's early intellectual development: namely, the period from his initial encounter with Kant's philosophy (in 1790) to the publication of his first book (in 1792).

1.2. Fichte in Despair: The Summer of 1790

Early in the summer of 1790 Fichte began to study Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at the insistence of his pupil. Unimpressed at first, he nonetheless pushed ahead to read Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. Later that summer Fichte confessed to his friend F. A. Weisshun the impact this second book had on his entire way of thinking:

> I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought never could be proven—for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc.—and I feel all the happier! It is unbelievable how much respect for humankind and how much strength this system gives us! . . . Thus I was deceived by the apparent consistency of my previous system, and thus are thousands of persons perhaps still deceived. (GA III/2, No. 63; in Breazeale 1992: 357)

If only Fichte had said more in this letter about what it was in the second *Critique* that inspired such a revolution in his way of thinking. All he says, beyond making references to Kant's arguments for freedom and duty, is 'etc.' Sadly not much is known about Fichte's early philosophical views prior to 1792. Yet it is telling that in this letter to Weisshun there is mention of a previously held 'system,' since there is evidence to show that by the age of twenty-eight Fichte had spent a good deal of time engaged in speculation, enough to

have put his thoughts together into an organized whole. Thanks to the editorial work of his son, Immanuel Hermann Fichte, we have access to a set of aphorisms that Fichte penned sometime in 1790 prior to his Kantian turn. What is most striking about these aphorisms is that Fichte advocates a brand of necessitarianism (in a manner reminiscent of Spinoza's (1677/1986: IP29) claim that 'all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way'). But an equally important theme of this text is the palpable conflict one finds the young Fichte struggling over between the 'needs of the heart' (*Bedürfnisse des Herzens*) and those of the 'understanding' (*Verstand*) (A 5:3).

What we learn from these *Aphorisms* is that the 'needs of the heart' stem from what Fichte calls a feeling of one's 'miserable sin' (*Sündenelendes*) and 'punishability' (*Strafbarkeit*), feelings which the Christian religion draws upon to make its principles convincing. 'The Christian religion,' he writes, 'therefore appears more fit for the heart than for the understanding,' adding, 'it is for good and simple souls.—The strong require no doctor, only the sick' (*Die Starken bedürfen des Arztes nicht, sondern die Kranken*) (A 5:5). For the 'strong'—and Fichte no doubted wanted to count himself among this elite group—one need only follow one's understanding consistently, 'without looking either right or left,' and without deciding upon the outcome of speculation in advance. When one proceeds in this manner, Fichte maintains, the results point to a thoroughgoing deism that strips God of all anthropomorphic qualities and that views all events under the rule of strict necessity. Here Fichte makes mention of Kant's noble but unsuccessful defense of freedom in the first *Critique*, saying that Kant proceeded inconsistently and drew upon freedom only from feeling rather than from necessity. But Fichte's air of confidence is betrayed in the final lines of the text, which take an unexpected turn. In these final lines he observes that there are 'certain moments where the heart avenges itself against speculation,' where the heart turns to God with an 'urgent longing for reconciliation' (*eine dringende Sehnsucht nach einer Versöhnung*), encouraged by a 'sensation of visible help' (*Empfindung einer sichtbaren Hülfe*) (A 5:7).

At this point Fichte asks, 'How should one treat such a person?' That is, how should one treat someone caught between his *heart*, which longs for reconciliation with God, and his *understanding*, which reduces the world to strict necessity? As Fichte describes the state of this person:

> In the field of speculation he appears immovable. He cannot be helped with the truths of the Christian religion; for he admits them as much as they can be proved to him: but he invokes the impossibility of applying them to his own self. He can see the advantages of these principles which escape him; he can wish with the deepest yearning; but it is impossible for him to believe. (A 5:7).

What remedy does Fichte propose?

> The only means of salvation for him would be to cut off those speculations beyond the borderline. But can he do that, even when he wants to? Even when he is so convinced by the dreadfulness of these speculations, can he? Can he cut off from those speculations when this manner of thinking is already so natural, already so interwoven into his whole turn of mind? (A 5:8).

With this question the *Aphorisms* end abruptly, without answer, a sign that 1790 was a time of conflict between the desires of Fichte's heart and the demands of his head—that is, until the second *Critique* changed his frame of mind.

Rereading the remainder of Fichte's letter to Weisshun in the context of the *Aphorisms* serves to clarify this otherwise obscure period of Fichte's life:

> Please forgive me for saying so, but I cannot convince myself that prior to the Kantian critique anyone able to think for himself thought any differently than I did, and I do not recall ever having met anyone who had any fundamental objections to make against my system. I encountered plenty of sincere persons who had different—not *thoughts* (for they were not at all capable of thinking)—but different *feelings*. (GA III/2, No. 63; in Breazeale 1993: 357)

The rules of the understanding point to the denial of freedom, which Fichte had argued is the result of proceeding consistently in speculation. But now Fichte's point is that the consistency of this system was one-sided, since it stood at odds with the very thing he could not uproot from his self-understanding: the needs of the heart. It is not surprising, then, that after describing how the second *Critique* proved to him things he 'never thought could be proved,' such as the concept of freedom, Fichte adds, 'It is

unbelievable how much respect for humankind and how much strength this system gives us!' Quite a different attitude permeates the *Aphorisms* when Fichte speaks down to those 'good and simple souls' who are more aligned with feeling than reason. In fact, what seems to have cured Fichte of his despair was Kant's commitment to reorient philosophy from the standpoint of our shared pretheoretical or 'common' life. The second *Critique* brought 'faith' back into Fichte's life in the summer of 1790, but not the blind faith he was so resistant to accept previously that year. What Kant's ethics showed was that the dilemma Fichte had found himself in, between a mindless heart and a heartless mind, was a false one.

All of this fits with Kant's effort in the second *Critique* to reconcile one's heart with one's head. One's heart feels a lively interest in morality and freedom of will, and one's heart holds conviction in the existence of a soul and in the existence of a wise, all-powerful creator of the world. Speculation creates conflict with one's heart precisely because it follows a different order of explanation. One's head seeks a cause to every effect according to a rule of causal mechanism, which appears to govern all events in the natural world. Nowhere is Kant's effort to reconcile heart and head more pronounced than in his doctrine of the 'fact of reason' (*Factum der Vernunft*). For, by appealing to our common moral consciousness, Kant hopes to show that the principle of morality 'does not need to be searched for or devised,' that it 'has long been present' in all persons 'and incorporated in their being' (KpV 5:105). It is only because of this pretheoretical *Factum*, our everyday consciousness of duty, that we have an actual basis to affirm our freedom as the possibility of acting contrary to our inclinations. And so it is only by reorienting ourselves from a standpoint of common life that we can reconcile heart and head, the needs of feeling and the needs of the understanding—or, what was most urgent for Fichte, between faith and the principle of causal necessity. For Fichte, this pointed the way to vindicating the idea of our higher vocation as moral beings, which speculative reason reaches for but cannot justify.

There is no need to hypothesize about how the second *Critique* shaped Fichte's philosophical outlook at the time. We find the results of Fichte's study laid out in his first book, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, composed one year after his Kantian conversion. A cursory glance at this text shows that Fichte aligned himself closely with the opening moves of the second *Critique*. To begin with, he distinguishes the 'lower capacity of desire' (*das niedere Begehrungsvermögen*) on the basis of its receptivity to the matter of sensation and the 'higher capacity of desire' (*das obere Begehrungsvermögen*) on

the basis of its self-determining character (VKO 3:24). He also distinguishes these capacities in terms of their respective ends: the end of the lower capacity is structured around the idea of *happiness*, produced by the imagination on the basis of past pleasures, whereas the end of the higher capacity comes from the *form* of this faculty as such. With reference to Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason, Fichte writes that the form of the higher faculty of desire, as a self-determining activity, 'proclaims itself to consciousness' and is thus a 'fact of consciousness' (*Thatsache des Bewusstseins*) (VKO 3:23). Moreover, Fichte takes this 'fact' as evidence of our possession of a capacity for self-determination, adopting Kant's position in the second *Critique* that our consciousness of the moral law 'discloses' the reality of freedom to us. 'By this fact,' Fichte writes, 'it first becomes certain that the human being has a will' (VKO 3:24).

This is quite the statement coming from someone who, not that long ago, had accused Kant of proceeding 'inconsistently' in defending the idea of freedom. Yet one should not be misled in thinking that Fichte had become insensitive to skeptical problems surrounding the free will question. Just prior to reformulating Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason, Fichte warns the reader against being 'too hasty' in making the inference from (1) 'consciousness of self-activity in volition' to (2) the 'actual existence of this self-activity,' given that the appearance of freedom might be deceptive (VKO 3:22). He goes on to argue that it would be fallacious to conclude that we are actually free on the grounds that we are aware of no further cause determining our actions, since it could be the case that we are simply unaware of this further cause, thereby rendering our sense of freedom illusory (VKO 3:22). As he puts it, 'There would also be no willing at all, the appearance of willing would be demonstrable illusions' (VKO 3:22). The human being would be 'a machine in which representations would mesh with representations, like the wheels of a clock' (VKO 3:22), just as Fichte had viewed himself in the *Aphorisms*.[3] But whereas the *Aphorisms* left us with no alternative, the *Attempt* points to a path inspired by Kant. 'There is no salvation against these consequences,' Fichte writes, 'derived from concise inferences, other than through the recognition of practical reason and what it expresses, the categorical imperative' (VKO 3:22). Fichte even refers to the latter as the 'one and only universally valid principle of all philosophy' (*letzte, einzig allgemeingeltende Princip aller Philosophie*) (VKO 3:22).

Fichte would soon embrace a broader first principle from which to lay the foundation of his new doctrine of science, what he would eventually call the

principle of 'I-hood' (*Ichheit*). Yet it is remarkable to see how much of Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason, clearly present in the *Attempt*, survives into this mature period leading up to the *System of Ethics*. My own view, which I shall develop over the course of Chapters 2 and 3, is that scholars have not given due attention to this continuity in Fichte's commitment to what we might call *moral primacy*. As a result there remains much confusion in the literature about the first argument in Part I of the *System of Ethics*, titled 'Deduction of the Principle of Morality.' By and large scholars have read Fichte as giving the sort of deduction Kant allegedly sought in the final section of his *Groundwork*: a deduction of the moral law's authority on the basis of a non-moral conception of freedom. But a closer examination of the text shows that Fichte at no point seeks an argument with this structure of proof, namely, an argument that seeks to establish the necessity of the moral principle on the basis of non-moral premises. Instead, Fichte argues for the necessity of this principle on the grounds that it is the only possible 'form of thought' (*Denkform*) for determining our consciousness of freedom. Consciousness of the moral law, he argues, does not permit us to rationalize away the appearance of freedom, and that gives us a basis to say 'I *am* free' in place of the much weaker claim, 'I *appear* to be free.'

1.3. Kant's Architectonic Method

That Fichte found inspiration in Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason is evident, both from his letter to Weisshun and from his explicit endorsement of this doctrine in the *Attempt* and the *System of Ethics*. But there are many other sources of influence on Fichte's moral philosophy that can be traced back to the second *Critique*. One concerns Kant's statement of method:

> When it is a matter of determining a particular faculty of the human soul as to its sources, its contents, and its limits, then, from the nature of human cognition, one can begin only with the parts, with an accurate and complete presentation of them. (KpV 5:10)

This is the analytic path Kant identifies with the beginning of an investigation. But as he goes on to say, in a passage that must have made an impact on Fichte:

> There is a second thing to be attended to, which is more philosophic and architectonic: namely, to grasp correctly the idea of the whole and from this idea to see all those parts in their reciprocal relation [*wechselseitigen Beziehung*] to each other by means of their derivation from the concept of that whole in a pure rational faculty. (KpV 5:10)

Kant adds that this 'examination and guarantee is possible only through the most intimate acquaintance with the system,' so that those 'who find the first inquiry too irksome' will never arrive at 'the second stage, namely the overview, which is a synthetic return [*Wiederkehr*] to what had previously been given analytically' (KpV 5:10).

On its own Kant's statement of method is not particularly edifying. But it contains important clues, I believe, for shedding light on the structure and organization of Fichte's *System of Ethics*. First, we see Kant follow the analytic path in Chapter I when he considers the faculty of practical reason in isolation from all conditions of human sensibility (such as feeling, desire, and interest). Making this separation allows us to see that what is essential to the faculty of practical reason as such is its form: the way in which practical reason is self-determining. Kant describes this activity as a 'higher' faculty of desire because reason supplies determining grounds of choice through its own representations. Absent any feeling, desire, and interest—any empirical element for conditioning the will—the only representations left to direct action or the omission of action are formal, that is, they are representations of what is lawful or unlawful. The guiding principle of a higher faculty of desire is then equivalent to a principle of universal lawfulness. And since representations of universal law can only have their seat in a pure faculty, this principle is equivalent to what Kant calls autonomy, legislating oneself according to one's faculty of pure practical reason.

For Kant, this means that we cannot speak of a genuine principle of 'happiness' (*Glückseligkeit*) that would be coequal to the principle of pure practical reason. There is only one source of legislation for the faculty of practical reason, the moral law, which comes to light when we separate this faculty from all material conditions. The question then becomes: On what grounds are we entitled to assume our possession of such a faculty? Kant's initial task in the second *Critique* is to analyze the concept of a higher faculty of desire in which reason, not inclination, supplies determining grounds of choice. But by what right can we ascribe such a higher faculty to ourselves? In reply, Kant appeals to the fact that consciousness of the separation between

morality and happiness is something to which even the common person can attest. Consciousness of this separation is, he says, a 'fact of reason' because it precedes the kind of artificial thinking we produce in the course of speculation. And Kant's aim is to reproduce this original 'fact' with the aid of thought experiments, all of which show how we pretheoretically distinguish morality from happiness and recognize the authority of the former.

An important result follows from this, of which Fichte was no doubt aware. The moral law, while admitting of no independent proof, serves to warrant our belief in freedom of the will, something theoretical philosophy could show was logically possible but not real. However, there are further steps Kant must undertake to complete this line of argument, which he pursues in Chapters II and III of the second *Critique*. An easily overlooked point is that by Kant's own lights the analytic path can never demonstrate the necessary *connection* of the moral law to the will of human beings, what Fichte will later call the moral law's 'applicability' (*Anwendbarkeit*). Up to this point Kant has shown that the concept of the moral law is necessary for us to determine our consciousness of freedom, and that amounts to a 'deduction' (*Deduktion*) of the latter. But he has yet to show that the concept of the moral law also bears a necessary connection to our powers of judgment and feeling, which are parts of our faculty of practical reason as well. To complete his argument, then, Kant adopts the synthetic path which considers all the parts of practical reason together as a whole. The question of applicability then becomes: How is the moral law operative in our capacity to judge, and how is it operative in our capacity to feel? As we shall see, Fichte will follow a similar line of argument in the *System of Ethics*.

To sum up, Kant's aim in the first part of the second *Critique* is to show that the moral law is the legislative form of practical reason as such, the 'idea of the whole' from which we can derive a necessary reciprocal relation between all the parts of this faculty, including those parts normally tied to our pursuit of happiness (i.e., in judging and feeling what is agreeable to us). Indeed, what Kant refers to as the 'second stage' of his method culminates in Chapter III when he seeks to show how the moral law can play the role of an 'incentive' (*Triebfeder*) and thereby give rise to a motivating 'feeling' (*Gefühl*). What Kant aims to reveal in this chapter is a necessary connection between the moral law and the parts of practical reason tied to the faculty of sensibility, namely, feeling, desire, and interest. Rather than separate the faculty of practical reason from all material conditions (the analytic path described earlier), Kant now wants to demonstrate the applicability of the

moral law by recombining this faculty with its material conditions, in turn showing how all the parts of practical reason, both the pure and the empirical, form a reciprocal relation. If successful, the synthetic path marked by Chapter III would show how pure practical reason can give rise to a 'feeling of respect' (*Gefühl der Achtung*), whose expression in our faculty of sensibility would show that the moral law is applicable to a human will after all.[4]

1.4. A System of Ethics

With this sketch of the second *Critique* in hand, our initial question comes into sharper focus: What about this text might have inspired the young Fichte (then twenty-eight years old) to experience a conversion to Kant's philosophy? I suggested in passing that Kant's statement of method must have made a strong impression on Fichte, and I said this because we find a similar analytic-synthetic approach in many of his early writings. What Kant says about the 'second thing to be attended to, which is more philosophic and architectonic,' goes to the very heart of Fichte's effort to present a new doctrine of science based on the principle of the I in his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that every major philosophical treatise Fichte published during the 1790s proceeds according to this 'architectonic' method, first by separating a concept from its object (the analytic path) and then by recombining the concept and its object (the synthetic path). What makes Fichte's use of this strategy original in comparison to Kant's is that it serves as the basis for a deduction of all philosophical concepts: the activity of Fichte's pure I is simultaneously theoretical and practical and hence prior to the separation of our cognitive and volitional powers. For Fichte, this is the path to a true system of philosophy, the 'idea of the whole' from which we can justify concepts—such as the external world, the body, and other rational beings—by grasping their reciprocal relation to each other by means of their derivation from the concept of the pure I as such.

As a book constructed 'according to the principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,' Fichte's aim in the *System of Ethics* is to derive the concept of morality from the principle of I-hood as a means of establishing ethics as a science. This much is evident from the title of the book and from what Fichte says in the introduction. What is less evident, however, is that the entire *System of Ethics* exemplifies the analytic-synthetic paths of Kant's architectonic method, first by *separating* the concept of willing from its object (in Part I), and then by

recombining the two (in Parts II and III). Thus Fichte offers a 'deduction of the principle of morality' that begins, in §§1–3, by analyzing willing in isolation. This reveals the appearance of the will's freedom and shows by way of elimination that the moral law is the only 'form of thought' for determining our consciousness of freedom. In Part II, Fichte proceeds to offer a 'deduction of the reality and applicability of the principle of morality' that brings willing back together with its object. The first stage, in §§4–9, proceeds to break down the elements of our 'lower capacity of desire' (whose aim is happiness); the second stage, in §§10–11, proceeds to break down the elements of our 'higher capacity of desire' (whose aim is independence); and the third stage, in §§12–13, proceeds to synthesize the two in terms of our 'ethical vocation' (*sittliche Bestimmung*), whose sensible expression, Fichte argues, operates through our 'conscience' (*Gewissen*). The remainder of the book, in Part III, completes the synthetic path by offering a 'systematic application' of the principle of morality leading to a 'doctrine of duties' (*Pflichtenlehre*) (§§19–33).

One way to frame Fichte's project in the *System of Ethics* is in terms of a generalized analytic-synthetic method. I say this because the 'idea of the whole' from which Fichte hopes to derive the concepts of ethics is not the idea of reason in its practical capacity alone, as it is for Kant in the second *Critique*, but rather the idea of reason as such, or the idea of freedom as such; in short, the 'idea of the whole' is what Fichte calls the *principle of I-hood*. All the key concepts of the *System of Ethics* (such as morality, feeling, drive, conscience, and community) receive a warrant by means of their derivation from this single principle. So when Fichte says, 'My system is nothing other than the *Kantian* . . . [insofar as it] contains the same view of things, but is in method quite independent of the *Kantian* presentation' (ErE 1:420), we can better appreciate his point. At the same time, it does not take much probing beneath the surface of the text to see that Fichte's generalized method leads to important departures from Kant's moral philosophy, not just in presentation but also in substance. One of the more significant of these departures, I shall argue, concerns Fichte's notion of our ethical vocation, for unlike Kant, he does not link this vocation to our identity as persons who are 'elevated' above nature. Rather, Fichte defines our ethical vocation in terms of *reuniting* with our nature, which he views as a state of undivided wholeness. Every valid prescription of what we ought to do, whether to cultivate our bodies, our minds, or our relations with others, stems from a *striving for wholeness* that, in Fichte's eyes, is an accurate description of who we are.

1.5. The *Urtrieb*

We shall have the opportunity to unpack this claim further in Chapter 4, where I shall investigate Fichte's concept of a 'drive' (*Trieb*). Already in the *Attempt* one can see Fichte trying to distance himself from a theory of drives articulated by Karl Reinhold, one of Kant's first advocates, who popularized the language of drives in his effort to reconstruct Kant's faculty psychology. In place of a higher faculty of desire, Reinhold introduced the concept of an 'unselfish drive,' and in place of the lower faculty of desire, he introduced the concept of a 'selfish drive.' Fichte adopts this language in the *Attempt* by defining a 'drive' as the 'medium' through which one can be both active in representing a sensation and passive in receiving the influence of that sensation (VKO 3:17). And he goes on to distinguish a 'sensible drive' (*sinnliche Trieb*) and an 'ethical drive' (*sittliche Trieb*) in a way that corresponds to Kant's own distinction between empirically conditioned and pure practical reason. Yet Fichte adds, with a critical nod to Reinhold, that both of these drives have a self-directed point of orientation, and thus the selfish/unselfish distinction is unfitting (VKO 3:28). Nevertheless, it is important to see that in this text Fichte still accepts Kant's distinction of passive and active powers of the mind, since in 1792 he had yet to discover the fundamental principle from which to derive this distinction, the principle of I-hood. As we shall see, the implications of this discovery bear directly upon Fichte's mature moral philosophy, leading him to rethink our ethical vocation in terms of wholeness, or what I will call the 'whole person' thesis.

This development is most evident in the *System of Ethics* when Fichte speaks of our original nature as a 'fundamental' or 'original drive' (*Urtrieb*) (SL 4:101, 130, 133, 144, 146, 149, 206, 207). No longer committed to Kant's faculty psychology, Fichte now argues that what we call the lower and higher capacities of desire are but different aspects of a single drive, of which reflection separates for us sequentially as a drive for happiness and a drive for independence. We are originally undivided, and it is only through acts of reflection that we become objects of self-awareness and hence become 'two'—an I reflecting and an I reflected upon. While it is true that our pure drive for independence reveals our elevation above the needs of our sensible nature, there is no sense in which we are separate from our natural drive. Consequently, our ethical vocation does not consist in our identity as persons who are striving to overcome the limitations of our nature. Rather, as subjects divided in reflection, morality requires that we act in ways that

harmonize with the conditions of our nature. And since we live in a network of formative relations, morality requires that we cultivate (in the manner of preserving and perfecting) the relations we have to our bodies, to our minds, and to others. On the reading I defend in this book, Fichte's moral philosophy emerges from a robustly transcendental theory of agency whose central concept is the *Urtrieb* and whose specific imperatives (at embodied, cognitive, and intersubjective levels) all speak to the original nonduality of the I.

Of course, one can find a precursor to Fichte's idea of self-unification in the second *Critique*, although it is not immediately evident from the text itself. Quite late in the book Kant admits that the moral law, while the 'supreme' good (*Oberste* or *supremum*), is not for that reason the 'complete' good (*Vollendete* or *consummatum*), since the moral law abstracts from the material conditions of our faculty of desire (KpV 5:109). Because the moral law concerns only the form of this faculty, that of universal lawfulness, it has no 'matter' (*Materie*) and hence supplies us with no 'object' (*Object*) of volition (KpV 5:109). This entails that the argument of Chapters I–III contains a gap, which even the synthesis of pure and empirical practical reason in the feeling of respect has yet to fill. Kant's solution is to push the synthetic method further in the second part of the text, where he examines how our interest in happiness can combine with the moral law, the result of which yields the ideal of happiness measured according to virtue, or what Kant calls 'the highest good' (*das höchste Gut*) (KpV 5:109). As Kant goes on to explain, the object of the highest good gives content to an otherwise empty law. Striving to realize this ideal, the 'endless progression' (*unendliche Progressus*) of bringing our will into conformity with the law and becoming 'worthy of happiness' (*Glückseligkeit würdig*), constitutes our complete vocation (KpV 5:125).

While these contours of Kant's ethics may be less familiar to contemporary readers, I believe they made a deep impact on the young Fichte. Much of what is novel in the *Attempt* speaks to the puzzling relationship in Kant's system between morality and happiness, and one sees Fichte proposing his own rationale for the ideal of the highest good in terms of bringing 'unity' (*Einheit*) to the individual as an empirical-rational being. 'It is to be expected,' he writes, 'that the moral law will also positively affect the drive for happiness qua drive for happiness [*Glückseligkeitstrieb*], at least mediately, in order to bring unity to the whole, pure, and empirically determined human being' (VKO 3:34). In a footnote to this passage Fichte adds that neglecting this part of the theory of will, by which he means the part that considers how our drive

for happiness is positively determined by the moral law, 'leads necessarily to Stoicism in the doctrine of ethics—whose principle is self-contentedness [*Selbstgenügsamkeit*]—and to the denial of God and the immortality of the soul' (VKO 3:34n). With his mature doctrine of the *Urtrieb*, which we shall return to in Chapter 4, one finds Fichte embracing a much stronger version of the 'whole person' thesis first articulated in the *Attempt*, such that the doctrine of the highest good comes to play virtually no role in the *System of Ethics*.

Nor should this come as a surprise, since the idea that our original nature is undivided and that only reflection splits us into two drives (one striving for happiness, the other striving for independence) preempts the problem of duality which Kant's doctrine of the highest good was meant to solve. When we take up a properly 'transcendental' point of view, Fichte argues, 'we have nothing twofold, containing two elements independent of each other, but rather something that is absolutely simple; and surely where there is no difference there can be no talk of harmony nor any question concerning the ground of such harmony' (SL 4:133). Given this new ontology of the drives, we no longer face the problem of measuring happiness according to virtue, since happiness and virtue are no longer taken to be—as they were for Kant—expressions of different volitional faculties. Thus by the time of the *System of Ethics* Fichte comes to endorse a monistic drive theory, according to which the lower and higher capacities of desire are but different manifestations of a primordial yearning, distinguishable in time only as an individual becomes split in self-reflection. Even the most basic expression of agency, what Fichte previously called the drive for happiness, reveals a connection to the first principle of his system, the principle of the I as such.

Fichte's new ontology of the drives still remains true to the spirit of Kant's ethics insofar as it embraces a vision of moral life in terms of 'endless progression' (*unendliche Progressus*). In fact, one can hear echoes of what Kant calls the archetype of 'holiness' (*Heiligkeit*) (KpV 5:32, 84, 127n, 129) reverberating in the *System of Ethics*, although Fichte himself does not use this terminology. As Kant argues, holiness is the idea of a will in perfect conformity with the moral law, where not even the possibility of transgression threatens the will's purity, and for that reason it is not an attribute any finite rational being can claim to possess. Kant argues further that this archetype frames the character of our striving for perfection in the right way, namely, as endless progression. Curiously, there are various points in the second *Critique* where Kant frames the 'endlessness' of moral striving as a feature of Christian

ethics that distinguishes it from Stoic ethics. While both represent morality as commanding perfection of will, the latter doctrine puts forth rational 'self-contentedness' (*Selbstgenügsamkeit*) as an end attainable in time. While 'objectively' correct as a presentation of moral perfection, Kant argues, it is 'subjectively' false, since the Stoics overestimate the capacity of the human will to become independent. Christian ethics avoids this by characterizing moral perfection instead in terms of holiness, an ideal, he adds, which 'is not attainable by any creature but is yet the archetype which we should strive [*streben*] to approach and resemble in an uninterrupted but endless progress' (KpV 5:83).

I believe Kant's conception of Christian ethics reveals a more fine-grained set of comparisons between his moral philosophy and Fichte's. On the one hand, both Kant and Fichte formulate the moral law in explicitly non-Stoic terms, namely, as a form of autonomy that is unachievable in any duration of time. A recurring theme of the *System of Ethics*, as we shall see, is that what the moral law demands of us, the absolute self-sufficiency of reason as such, is an infinite goal we can only approximate but never attain (SL 4:66, 132, 150). In this respect what Fichte calls the 'final end' (*Endzweck*) of human reason is similar to Kant's archetype of holiness: it is a form of complete freedom, independence, or perfection of will that we can, as finite rational agents, only ever move toward. On the other hand, Fichte is careful to distinguish the concept of our final end from that of our 'ethical vocation' (*sittliche Bestimmung*)—though this distinction is easy to overlook. The final end of human reason is set by our pure drive, which strives for independence, and that is the formal command of the moral law. But Fichte is quick to point out that the pure drive on its own cannot yield positive actions, and for that reason the moral law is empty of content. The question then becomes: How can we understand our ethical vocation as a vocation to act in determinate ways?

Fichte's answer marks another important departure from Kant's position. In the *System of Ethics* Fichte no longer treats the pure drive and the ethical drive as identical, as he did in the *Attempt*. In addition to endorsing a monistic drive theory, according to which all volitional activity is but an expression of a single *Urtrieb*, Fichte comes to reframe our ethical drive as a determinate striving to harmonize our higher and lower capacities of desire. Our ethical vocation is no longer understood in terms of complete purity of will, as it is for Kant, since such an archetype cannot specify positive actions we ought to perform in striving for self-sufficiency. As Fichte now sees things, 'if one considers only the higher power of desire, then one obtains

a mere metaphysics of morals [*Metaphysik der Sitten*], which is formal and empty' (SL 4:132). The synthesis demanded by the ethical drive requires that the pure drive '*surrender the purity of its activity* (that is, the fact that it is not determined by any object), while the lower drive has to surrender enjoyment as its end' (SL 4:132; emphasis added). For Fichte, this is the key to a genuine system of moral philosophy: 'The only way to obtain a doctrine of ethics [*Sittenlehre*], which must be real, is through the synthetic unification of the higher and lower powers of desire' (SL 4:132). Our ethical vocation lies, not in holiness of will, but in wholeness of will.

1.6. Conviction versus Communication

On my reading, much of what is original to Fichte's moral philosophy lies precisely in the idea that our ethical vocation demands self-unity, or that the pure drive has to 'surrender the purity of its activity (that is, the fact that it is not determined by any object), while the lower drive has to surrender enjoyment as its end' (SL 4:132). This passage shows that our ethical vocation asks us to stand in a relationship of reciprocity with the natural drive, a relationship that is mutually active (in shaping objects of desire) and passive (in being shaped by such objects). While the pure drive seeks absolute independence from everything external to the I, everything belonging to what Fichte calls the 'not-I' (*nicht-Ich*), our ethical vocation requires that we give up this striving for purity—since its aim is entirely negative, as he says (SL 4:147). The only way the moral law can have reality and applicability, then, is through its synthesis with the natural drive, which is why a doctrine of ethics requires a theory of how our apparently separate drives for happiness and independence can be brought into alignment with each other. This is what saves the moral law from being reduced to an empty imperative to strive for self-sufficiency: for Fichte, the moral law is valid only because it accurately describes our original wholeness. And that is the sense in which the *System of Ethics* preserves Kant's commitment to the 'endless progression' of moral striving, but with a twist, since it recasts this process in terms of harmonizing our deeds with the original unity of the *Urtrieb*.

This way of framing Fichte's ethics departs from a long-standing tradition of interpretation, according to which the aim of moral striving is the complete dominion of the I over everything not-I. A venerable series of readers (including Hegel, Coleridge, Horkheimer, and Beiser) have found Fichte

guilty of advocating the same kind of dualism that plagued Kant's ethics, whereby the moral law requires a subordination of one's sensible nature to the faculty of reason. Few have challenged this reading,[5] and I believe it is one of the primary causes for the reluctant reception of Fichte's moral philosophy today. As I hope to show, this reading rests on a mistake: the evidence of Fichte's view of the I's dominion is, on closer scrutiny, merely a stage in his account of the dialectic of agency, whereby the pure drive (which does indeed strive for total independence from nature) has yet to acquire a *positive direction toward self-unity*. So when Fichte writes, for example, 'I am not only separated from nature, but I am also elevated above it' and 'When I see the power of nature beneath me, it becomes something that I do not respect' (SL 4:142), he is speaking from the standpoint of the pure drive. After all, it is precisely this striving for purity and for independence from the natural drive and its objects that must be surrendered for the sake of our ethical vocation.

Several payoffs follow from taking this more charitable line of interpretation. First, when we distinguish the final end of human reason from our ethical vocation proper, it becomes clear why Fichte gives a systematic role to 'conscience' as a higher 'capacity of feeling' (*Gefühlvermögen*). As we shall see in Chapter 5, what many commentators overlook is that Fichte introduces the concept of conscience as the final step of his argument in Part II, devoted to the question of how the moral law can have reality and applicability. His goal is to explain how our striving for wholeness can have sensible expression, such that we can act upon our duties with resolute conviction. His answer is that this expression takes the form of higher feelings of self-approval and self-reproach. It is thanks to a feeling of harmony between our present willing and our original drive for wholeness that we have, as it were, an affective criterion for acting in line with what we judge we ought to do; it is, conversely, thanks to a feeling of disharmony that we have cause to rethink our moral commitments. In this light, Fichte's theory of conscience plays a role analogous to Kant's theory of respect in the second *Critique*, which seeks to reveal a necessary connection between the moral law and the faculty of feeling. Tellingly, Fichte even adopts the same language Kant uses to describe the experience of respect as a two-sided feeling of self-approval (which arises when we are aligned with our striving for unity) and of self-reproach (which arises when we are not aligned with our striving for unity).

Second, when we understand conscience as giving sensible expression to our striving for wholeness, it becomes clear why Fichte gives a systematic role to 'evil' as the self-deceptive activity of avoiding our ethical vocation. As

we shall see in Chapter 6, what many commentators overlook is that Fichte introduces the concept of evil in §16 'in order to shed the clearest light on the doctrine of freedom and in order to pursue fatalism into its last refuge' (SL 4:198). His goal is to explain how avoiding the resolute convictions made possible by the higher feelings of conscience comes about, such that we can explain the phenomenon of egoism or evil in human behavior. The lingering worry is that such behavior might be caused by factors external to the will; that is why Fichte frames the topic in terms of fatalism, a view that would reduce immoral action to unfree action. By way of reply, Fichte offers a detailed account of the dialectic of agency, moving from the stages of prereflective existence all the way to moral autonomy, showing how our refusal to sustain a clear consciousness of duty is itself a free act—and is thus something for which we are responsible—even though, somewhat paradoxically, it leaves our consciousness of duty 'obscure.' On this picture, Fichte is committed to locating freedom at the root of evil, but he is also keen to explore the dynamics of self-deception in a way that anticipates what Sartre and other existentialists call 'bad faith.'

Third, when we understand evil as a form of self-obscurity, it becomes clear why Fichte places so much emphasis on the social dimension of our ethical vocation in Part III of the *System of Ethics*. As we shall see in Chapters 7 and 8, what many commentators overlook is that Fichte derives a set of moral duties by offering a closer analysis of our nature as a system of drives. After showing how conscience plays the role of an affective criterion for acting in line with what we judge we ought to do, Fichte then asks how we, as philosophers, can determine what actions make up our duties. On my reading, Fichte's solution is neither deontological, since it does not amount to bringing our will into conformity with the principle of morality, nor consequentialist, since it does not amount to maximizing an objective good external to the will itself. Fichte maintains instead that all moral prescriptions are valid only as commands to preserve and perfect the original conditions of our nature, and he regards our nature in a thoroughly teleological manner—as a system of drives whose 'final end' can be realized only through an ongoing process of reciprocal cultivation. What is more, he claims that each individual I's vocation can be realized only in the social whole of which it is a part, such that the self-cultivation demanded by morality acquires its orientation from the community of rational beings with whom one interacts. In its final shape, then, Fichte's moral philosophy amounts to a form of social perfectionism that has no equivalent in Kant or anywhere else in the landscape of contemporary ethics.

This brings us, however, to a final puzzle that threatens the integrity of Fichte's moral philosophy as a whole. If the feelings of conscience provide an unerring criterion for staying on course with our judgments of duty, as Fichte maintains, then how do we adjudicate cases of conflicting convictions between two or more persons? While it is true that the *System of Ethics* culminates in a social view of our ethical vocation, whereby each individual I realizes its freedom in reciprocal interaction with others, it remains unclear by what standard Fichte can resolve cases of moral disagreement. The difficulty is twofold. If we place emphasis on a principle of conviction, we save Fichte's commitment to the infallibility of conscience at the cost of making intersubjective agreement potentially intractable, and that lies in tension with Fichte's goal of defining our vocation in terms of arriving at communally shared convictions. On the other hand, if we place emphasis on a principle of communication, we acquire a way of adjudicating between conflicting consciences at the cost of losing the infallibility of conscience, and that lies in tension with Fichte's goal of securing the applicability of the moral law in our higher capacity of feeling. This puzzle goes to the core of Fichte's moral philosophy, which seems to oscillate between an overly subjective and an overly objective principle, either making conviction or communication the final standard by which to understand the basis of our duties. I shall propose a solution to this puzzle in Chapter 8.

1.7. Looking Ahead

As this brief sketch of Fichte's moral philosophy shows, one can discern the outlines of two *dramatis personae* animating the *System of Ethics*: the moral subjectivist who bids us to act with personal conviction and listen to the voice of conscience within, and the moral objectivist who bids us to enter into rational discourse with others and produce communally shared convictions. The figure of the subjectivist joins hands with another popular image of Fichte as basing all reality on the activity of 'the ego.'[6] Coleridge's 'burlesque' on Fichte from his *Biographia Literaria* (which begins with the opening line, 'Here on this market-cross aloud I cry: / I, I, I! I itself I!') presents us with an amusing illustration of this view.[7] But this image would color Fichte's reception well into the twentieth century, and by the time of Bertrand Russell's 1945 *History of Western Philosophy* Fichte is portrayed as a kind of metaphysical solipsist who believed that 'the Ego is the only ultimate reality,' a view

Russell correctly judged as approaching 'a kind of insanity' (1945/2005: 650–51). While most scholars would agree that Russell's portrait is a false one, the view that Fichte is a subjectivist remains largely unquestioned in historical studies of post-Kantian idealism.[8] Uprooting this image proves to be difficult, even when we move past superficial interpretations like Russell's, since Fichte is committed to establishing a new science of knowledge on the principle of the I as such. Is an ethics of conviction, which grounds morality in the voice of conscience within, not just the consequence of making all philosophical knowledge depend on the I and its self-activity?

Another perceived consequence of Fichte's idealism is that it seems to portray the activity of the I as one of endless struggle with the not-I. In the *Eclipse of Reason*, for example, Horkheimer (1947/2008) cites Fichte's early work as illustrating the pathology of humanity's quest to control and master the natural environment. In such work, Horkheimer writes,

> the relationship between the ego and nature is one of tyranny. The entire universe becomes a tool of the ego, although the ego has no substance or meaning except in its own boundless activity. Modern ideology, though much closer to Fichte than is generally believed, has cut adrift from such metaphysical moorings. . . . Nevertheless, nature is today more than ever conceived as a mere tool of man. It is the object of total exploitation that has no aim set by reason, and therefore no limit. (1947/2008: 76)

On this reading the flaw of Fichte's idealism is that by giving primacy to the boundless activity of the I, it requires a relationship of subordination to everything that is not-I, including the body and the natural environment. No wonder, then, that Fichte's moral philosophy has failed to receive a positive reception. With only a handful of exceptions,[9] most thinkers have shared Horkheimer's view that our desire to control, master, and dominate nature is a pathology to be diagnosed, not a principle to be celebrated.

If it were as simple as pointing to a text and settling the matter once and for all, there would no cause for further debate. But one can find evidence to support the figure of Fichte who grounds all morality in subjective conviction and who reduces nature to a mere object for the I to control. And one can also find evidence to support the figure of Fichte who grounds all morality in rational discourse and who upholds (contrary to Horkheimer's depiction) an organic model of nature. Our question then becomes: Which of these is the real Fichte? Out of charity, I shall try my best in this book to

find the element of truth in each of these personas, and the interpretations they have inspired, from Fichte the subjectivist to Fichte the objectivist—for I believe that the real Fichte lies at times in between these two extremes and at other times in their connection. Fichte is, for lack of a better word, a dialectical thinker. His philosophical positions resist normal categorization because they are synthetic, and this is true of both his foundational writings on the doctrine of science and his writings on political and moral philosophy. In this book I have sometimes found it helpful to employ terms that shed light on what I find distinctive about Fichte's ethical thought, such as his monistic drive theory, his genetic model of freedom, or his social perfectionism. But these labels should be viewed as provisional descriptions that serve only to mark the path to a better understanding of his system.

In order to prepare for my reading it will be necessary to understand the foundational ideas of Fichte's *System of Ethics*, starting in Chapter 2 with his concept of freedom and then turning to his concept of morality in Chapter 3. As a way of motivating these topics, I shall place Fichte's concepts in the context of his engagement with Kant and some early post-Kantians who had a strong influence on him, such as Karl Reinhold, Leonard Creuzer, and Solomon Maimon. What comes to light when we trace this constellation of thinkers is that Fichte remains close to Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason, and one of my main tasks in the coming chapters is to clarify how Fichte preserves, and modifies, this doctrine in his mature moral philosophy. My secondary aim in these chapters is to solidify evidence for my claim that Fichte divides his treatise into an analytic path in Part I, and a synthetic path in Parts II and III, much in the spirit of Kant's second *Critique*. My guiding conviction going forward is that in order to understand the individual parts of Fichte's ethics, we must first grasp the idea of the whole forming its very structure. If we can achieve insight into this whole and the interconnection of its parts, we may then be in a position to answer the question of whether Fichte's moral philosophy is an improvement upon Kant's or a slide backward. Whether the *System of Ethics* amounts to nothing more than what Schopenhauer called a 'magnifying glass' for highlighting the faults of Kant's ethics is a question, however, that I shall leave the reader to decide.