

Fichte's Intersubjective I

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Abstract: The challenge to philosophy of mind for the past two hundred years has been to overcome the Cartesian conception of mind. This essay explores the attempt to do this by J. G. Fichte, especially regarding intersubjectivity or the knowledge of other minds. Fichte provides a transcendental deduction of the concept of the other I, as a condition for experiencing the individuality of our own I. The basis of this argument is the concept of the 'summons', which Fichte argues is necessary for us to form the concept of an end of our own action.

I. Our Cartesian Habit

As philosophers of mind, we are all recovering Cartesians -- in the same sense that some people are said to be recovering alcoholics. Like recovering alcoholics, we have our good days and our bad days. I sometimes think that meetings of philosophers of mind ought to begin by going around the room with introductions saying “My name is ‘...’ -- here too it might lead to greater candor if we confined ourselves to first names only – “and I am a Cartesian.” The state of denial involved in pretending otherwise seems to me what condemns most philosophy of mind to failure from the start.

The struggle against Cartesianism began earlier in the continental than in the Anglophone tradition, because the latter has always been dominated by empiricism, which emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century from a creative misreading of the modestly skeptical Cartesian rationalist John Locke, who took over rather uncritically Descartes’ conception of mind and experience. My aim in this article is to explore some of the anti-Cartesian thoughts, especially on the topic of “other minds”, of the philosopher I regard as the earliest decisively anti-Cartesian in the continental tradition, Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

In the modern counter-movement to Cartesianism, however, whether continental or Anglophone, there has been little agreement among philosophers about how Cartesianism is to be avoided. More often it is simply *evaded*; the anti-Cartesian philosophical schools are always more successful at labeling their rivals as ‘Cartesian’, or ‘solipsistic’, or ‘monological’ than they are at developing a clear and convincing alternative.

Thus we have to read far into Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* before finding out what Damasio thinks Descartes’ error was, and then it is not clear that he locates any

view at all that is both clearly an error and was clearly held by Descartes, except the metaphysical dualism that is now so universally rejected that it seems silly to waste the title of a book on it.¹ Even quite early in the history of modern philosophy, the materialism of Hobbes, Lamettrie and Diderot tried to preserve the Cartesian view of matter without the Cartesian view of mind, but also rejected only Descartes' substance dualism, while essentially retaining the Cartesian conception of what mind is like. It is that deeper struggle against Cartesianism that is most needed, but this is also where the greatest confusion reigns. John Searle and Daniel Dennett, for instance, can find no more devastating attacks on each other's philosophy of mind than by accusing each other of latent Cartesianism. It is easier, moreover, to find both accusations convincing than to decide how far the reluctant Cartesianism of each philosopher is responsible for what is false in each view and how far it is responsible for what is true. To me, it looks as if the animus against Descartes is due chiefly to the fact that he invented the modern problems of subjectivity and the mind-body (or even the mind-brain) relation which we are still so far from solving that philosophers and scientists on all sides naturally project on him the discontent they feel toward their own frustrated efforts. Just as the first thing a recovering alcoholic must do is learn to respect the power that demon rum has over them, so the first thing we recovering Cartesians need to learn is respect for Descartes as the founder of all modern philosophies of mind.

The conception of mind that makes us all reluctant Cartesians is not Cartesian substance dualism, but rather a certain picture of the mind and its relation to the world. This picture makes of the Cartesian I a special kind of place – a metaphorically 'inner' place, in which the I reposes at the center of its own little inner world of ideas. Outside

this metaphorical inwardness – but now, strangely, the ‘outside’ seems literal rather than metaphorical, there are objects – material bodies, including the body that gives the metaphorical inner place of the I its literal spatial location. Or rather, there are such objects if, somehow, we can convince ourselves on the basis of these inner contents alone that there is anything outer at all – a problem which, in our overconfident spells of sobriety seems silly, but at other times formidable and even insoluble, when we see it through the bottom of our Cartesian bottle. Other I’s, if there are any, have to be conceived of first and fundamentally as a species of these objects, even though they could not possibly be anything like them. Rather, they too must exist as other metaphorically inner places, whose existence we have to infer based on constructions or causal inferences from the behavior of certain of these (already always doubtful) material objects. Such a picture makes the mentality of others doubly unavailable to us – first, because it can never be available properly, in the way our own mentality is, and second, because it necessarily fails to partake of the only kind of objectivity – that of material things – that the mind is capable of grasping in contrast to its own subjectivity.

One take on the basic problem with the Cartesian picture is to say that it confuses mentality with perspectivity. For Descartes, a thought is that which is in us in such a way that we are immediately and infallibly aware of its presence, and also its nature, at least when our attention is directed toward it.² This in effect supposes that the true nature of a mental state is grasped only from the ‘inside’ – that is, as if the only perspective on it that counts is that of the person whose mental state it is. Mental states become inherently “subjective” in the sense that their true nature can be known only from a single point of view, that of the subject of them.

It is as if we thought a smile or a grimace could be correctly apprehended and interpreted only when felt by the person who is smiling or grimacing, and that others must be dependent on the smiler's or grimacer's perception and interpretation for any correct information they might have about these facial expressions. The back side of my coffee cup, that is visible to you and not to me, is as much a part of it as the front side, which is visible to me and not to you. Why not acknowledge that it is the same with mental states? For in fact my annoyance or rage are just as much present to you as the grimace or the angry outburst through which they are manifested. You understand the grimace only by understanding the annoyance, and vice-versa. To think otherwise is to misunderstand not only the mentality, but also the behavior. For the way I interpret the thoughts you express is as much a part of the nature of those thoughts as the way you intend them in expressing them, and the way you perceive my anger or sympathy is as much a part of their nature as the way I perceive them. And this is even more true of our subtler and more complex thoughts than it is of our outbursts of joy or anger, for the reality of what we think consists as much in how others correctly interpret our expressed thoughts as in how we interpret them from our (perhaps interested and self-deceiving) perspective.

Descartes regarded thoughts as entirely real, in fact, as the only realities on the basis of which we could come to know about any other realities at all. There is nothing wrong with adopting the perspective of the subject for epistemological or methodological purposes, as Descartes did, and as Fichte did too, in making the active I the first principle of transcendental philosophy. But we immediately go astray about the nature of mind if we think that the nature of mental states can be grasped only from one perspective. For it

belongs to the very concept of what is real or objective that it can be known from different perspectives, and its nature cannot depend solely on what is known about it only from one perspective. So the Cartesian conception of mind easily leads us to question whether mental states are part of the objective world at all. Do we need to study them in our psychology, or even mention them in a scientific theory of the objective world?

This last thought, as adapted by empiricist materialism, eventually led to what one can only describe as an utterly demented thought, which was nevertheless accorded honorific scientific status by a certain school of psychology. This is the lunatic thought that psychological science must ignore the mental entirely and instead treat solely of the externally observable physiological processes and bodily behavior of human organisms. The appeal of behaviorism and its more recent neuroscientific cousins to otherwise sane and highly intelligent people of scientific temperament is surely a devastating *reductio ad absurdum* of the Cartesian conception of mind that obviously lies behind such views.

Yet is it hardly less insane for me to think that the cordial or angry feelings you are showing toward me, or the thoughts about history or politics or philosophy you are communicating to me, really consist in neural processes going on inside your skull? For that implies that if I find your thoughts ambiguous or in need of clarification, or if I am unsure about the genuineness of your emotions, then all my questions on this score would best be answerable, at least in principle, by performing brain surgery on you and finding out what is literally going on inside your head. Someone who thinks that surely belongs in a padded cell just down the hall from those patients who think mental states aren't part of the objective world at all.

The real problem -- not an unfamiliar kind of problem in philosophy, after all -- is that, led astray by a certain picture, we can't understand any longer the very concept of the mental -- at least not at the theoretical or scientific level -- and so we don't know where the concept of the mental states of others fits into the repertoire of concepts in terms of which we think, and must think, about things in general.

Because the noises I have just been making -- about being trapped in bottles or pictures, and so forth -- no doubt sound suspiciously like those customarily made by the later Wittgenstein and his followers, I must hasten to add that I regard the Wittgensteinian approach to mind as far worse, worse by something like an order of magnitude, than the Cartesian, materialist and behaviorist ones I have been discussing so far. For the Wittgensteinian thinks that everything would be fine and dandy just as it is, if only we could find some way to cure ourselves of our misguided philosophical tendency to ask questions about the mind. That thought, however, is reprehensibly complacent and obscurantist. For of course we need a theoretical understanding of the mental, and even a science of it, if we can get one. And such a science has to be integrated into our understanding of matter, biology, neuroscience and the behavior of organisms. The problem is that all our attempts at a science of the mind up to now seem to be incurably Cartesian in ways we all know is deeply wrong but still have no idea at all how to correct.

II. A Transcendental Approach to Intersubjectivity

Well, perhaps it is a bit of an overstatement to say "no idea at all." Or so I will try to argue. For I think that at least the first beginnings of a better theory of mind were made in the German idealist tradition, and some of them have been advanced both by

Hegelianism and phenomenology. The origin of this tradition, as I have said, I believe to be in the thought of the founder of post-Kantian German idealism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. We are still far enough from success in the attempt to de-Cartesianize our concept of the mental that Fichte's approach continues to have something to teach us.

What I want to discuss here is not so much a post-Cartesian conception of subjectivity or mentality in general, as rather a certain crucial aspect of it – namely, intersubjectivity, or our conception of the mentality of others and our awareness of it. One important approach to this topic developed on the European continent has been the phenomenological one, deriving from Husserl, and such followers as Edith Stein and Emmanuel Levinas. One possible weakness in the phenomenological approach is in its way of answering the fundamental transcendental question, which Kant called the *quaestio quid iuris*, regarding the mentality of others, namely: With what right do we employ the concept of a mental state that is not our own? Some of Husserl's remarks might suggest that phenomenology's answer to this question is a kind of verificationist answer. By this I mean that it justifies the employment of this concept by means of the criteria for the fulfillment of intentions directed toward the mental life of others.³ To the extent that this is Husserl's procedure, he recommends delineating the relevant experiences of intentionality and fulfillment, and once we see that the essentially pre-delineated conditions have been satisfied, he thinks there is no further basis for any skeptical questioning about whether our experience really contains the objects of the specified intentions. Any verificationism of this kind would make phenomenology curiously uncritical, since it would seem possible to validate through such a phenomenological strategy any number of dubious concepts to which very real

quaestiones quid iuris might rightly be raised. For people who believe in such things as streaks of luck, or witches, or demonic possession, also become conscious of these supposed objects through a determinate species of intentionality, and their circle of illusion and self-deception surely also involves experiences of fulfilled or frustrated intentions that could be employed to construct verification procedures for what is objectively only a bunch of superstitious hokum.

The problem, from the standpoint of a more Kantian species of transcendental philosophy, is that such a verificationist strategy can never answer the doubts might be raised *de jure* about applicability of a concept whose role in experience is facing a skeptical challenge. Skeptics know that we are accustomed to employ such notions as material body, causal power, and the thoughts and feelings of others; they know as well as we do what we normally count as criteria for applying these concepts. Their claim is that we have no way of excluding the possibility that these procedures, and indeed any employment of these concepts at all, is simply based on an illusion. In this connection Fichte imagines someone who replies to solipsism (he calls it ‘egoism’) by appealing to everyday empirical criteria; he dismisses such a reply as “superficial and unsatisfying, ... not an answer to our question at all. ... Egoists also have these experiences to which appeal is being made” (SW 6:303).⁴

A properly transcendental answer to the *quaestio quid iuris* would be after the manner of a Kantian transcendental deduction. Such a strategy sets the bar much higher than any verificationism, and answers skeptical worries the phenomenologist leaves unaddressed. A transcendental approach begins, namely, with some conception of possible experience that is so basic that it is very difficult to subject it to skeptical doubt

without undermining the interest of the doubts themselves. Starting with a minimal and fundamental conception of experience, the transcendental philosopher argues for our entitlement to employ other concepts by showing them, and even their instantiation within experience, as a condition for the possibility of even this minimal starting point.

There are signs in some of Husserl's *Nachlass*, however, that he is actually much closer to this approach, where he argues that solipsism is self-undermining. This is certainly the way Fichte conceives of the transcendental problem of other I's. "We ourselves," he says, "introduce [other rational beings] into experience. It is *we* who explain certain experiences by appealing to the existence of rational beings outside of ourselves. But *with what right* do we offer this explanation? The justification needs to be better demonstrated before we can use this explanation, for its validity...cannot be based simply on the fact that we make use of such explanations" (SW 6:303). Fichte proposes to deduce transcendently from a minimal standpoint – that of the self-positing I -- not only the material world, and the necessary material embodiment of the I itself, but also the presence in experience of other I's, all as fundamental conditions for the possibility of the I's own original activity. I cannot, Fichte says, bring into existence I's other than my own. "Yet the concept of such beings underlies [my] observation of the not-I, and I expect to encounter something corresponding to this concept" (SW 6:304). The point of transcendental argument is to justify this expectation, and to provide transcendental grounding for the concepts it involves.

Regarding the external world, Kant's refutation of idealism argues that the temporal determination of even the inner contents of the Cartesian mind would not be possible unless those contents were related to a material world distinct from them. Fichte presents

a similar but distinct argument for the same conclusion, claiming that the ‘ideal series’ of representations presupposes a ‘real series’ of causal contacts between the I’s material body, which is the indispensable vehicle for its activity, and a not-I or material world on which the I acts. Analogously, Fichte’s strategy regarding other minds will be to claim that some of the essential activities of the I itself – in particular, those through which it determines itself as an individual agent – presuppose interaction with other I’s and therefore the employment of concepts of an I which is not our own, as a condition for the possibility even of our own self-awareness.

Of course a strategy of this kind is notoriously problematic, and arguments along these lines are famously difficult to execute. Philosophers outside the Kantian tradition have had no difficulty coming up with reasons for doubting not only particular transcendental arguments for such ambitious conclusions, but even the entire enterprise of transcendental philosophy itself. This might make it seem like a rather pointless exercise to provide such answers to skepticism, since it is easy enough for anyone tempted by skeptical doubts in the first place to renew them by challenging the transcendental procedure. But this objection ignores the fact that for transcendental philosophy the real point was never merely to have an answer to skepticism, but rather to use this way of answering skepticism in order to provide insight into the nature of the fundamental concepts about which we are inquiring, and developing a new and revolutionary theory of the relationships between them. Skepticism can always persist, if it is stubborn enough. The value of skepticism to the non-skeptic is that it provides a challenge to our way of thinking about our fundamental concepts, and thus possibly an incitement to think about them differently. This is the way the transcendental philosopher

really sees the matter. In the present case, I regard the real point of Fichte's transcendental approach to intersubjectivity as helping us develop an entirely new concept of mind, finding a way out of the Cartesian conception that we all find so unsatisfactory and yet also so difficult not to relapse into (at least on our bad days).

The fact that Fichte's first principle is the I has resulted in his being thought of by a long, ignorant and uncomprehending tradition as "just another Cartesian." The whole point of a transcendental strategy, however, is to begin with what your opponent can't plausibly deny, and then try to show that this commits us to things the opponent thought could be avoided. Thus a starting point that *looks* Cartesian is naturally used as *a way out* of Cartesianism. For we soon see that Fichte's I, though Cartesian in its certainty and its immediately and freely self-produced self-awareness, is distinct from the Cartesian I in that it is limited to that direct awareness of awareness that consists solely in the free activity which is, according to Fichte, the essence of all subjectivity, and also what is most deeply fundamental in all experience. Describing his first principle, Fichte says: "Your thinking is an *acting*. Do not fear that through this admission you are conceding something that you will regret later. For I am talking only about the activity, of which you become conscious to yourself, and only to the extent that you become conscious of it" (SW 1:522). The I "is only active, and absolute, never passive... it also has no being proper, no subsistence, for this is the result of an interaction... We should not even call it an active something, for this expression refers to something subsistent in which activity inheres" (SW 1:440). The Fichtean self-positing I is simply an activity – it is not even an active *something* (such as a Cartesian *res cogitans*), which, as Hume and Kant had

already observed, is not given to us at all merely in the active consciousness of consciousness that constitutes the ground of all experience.

The next objection will naturally be that there is something incoherent and impossible about the Fichtean I, the thought of an activity without an agent – in other words, that the Fichtean principle of the self-positing I is necessarily an incomplete thought, one that requires other thoughts, such as the thought of the *being* that is self-active. This point, however, should not be seen as an objection to Fichte, for it is precisely the point of a transcendental theory of experience to show that what we start with is possible only on the condition of what we transcendently deduce from it. Analogously, Kant proposes to show in the Transcendental Deduction that the synthesis of apprehension (a manifold of subjective representations in time present for a single, self-identical subject) is also not a complete thought, since it is not possible without syntheses of reproduction and recognition, which in turn are not possible without transcendental apperception and its relation to the concept of an object distinct from these representations and thought through the categories. And in the Analogies of Experience Kant proposes to show that a manifold determined in time is not possible without reference to the experience of a world of substances distinct from representations whose successive states are determined in time through causal laws and whose simultaneous states in space are subject to reciprocal causality. In other words, Kant's point is that the thought of a series of subjective states through time is an inherently incomplete thought, which requires for its completion a law-governed objective world. In the same way, it is precisely the point of Fichte's argument that the thought of the self-positing I is an incomplete thought that drives us on transcendently to think a whole series of necessary

thoughts that are required for its completion. The only question is what these thoughts are and in what order they are necessitated.

III. The Other I as Condition for the I's Individuality

From the beginning of Fichte's attempt to develop a Doctrine of Science (*Wissenschaftslehre*) in 1794, it is clear that he regards the awareness of other I's as one of these necessary thoughts. In the *Grundlage* of 1794 he declares: "No thou, no I; No I, no thou" (SW 1:189). But Fichte began to develop transcendental arguments for the other I only in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796), and he tried fully to integrate the theme of intersubjectivity into his Doctrine of Science only in the second main stage of thinking about his system, as it emerged late in his Jena period (1797-1799). This includes the first and second new *Introductions to the Doctrine of Science*, the *System of Ethics*, and the lectures customarily named *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.

There the transcendental ordering of thoughts begins with the I's self-positing (or as he also calls it, "self-reverting" activity) and argues that forming a concept of this activity requires distinguishing it from an opposed activity, that of the object or "not-I" (SW 1:492; cf. SW 3:17-28, 4:89-93). We first acquire our concept of the I as an acting being through the concept of its interaction with the not-I (the material world). The I as an acting *thing*, therefore, must also be material, a body (SW 1:495; 3:56-61). The body is not an empirical accompaniment but a transcendently deduced requirement for being an active I at all: "Experience could not teach us that we have a body. That we have a body and that it is ours is something we have to know in advance, as a condition for the possibility of experience" (GA 4:2:169). A disembodied Cartesian thinking substance is

therefore incoherent, a transcendental impossibility. “Apart from connection with a body [an I] would not be a person, but would be something quite inconceivable (if one can still refer to a thing which is not even conceivable as ‘something’)” (SW 6:295).

An active I “finds itself” (to use a favorite expression of Fichte in this connection, SW 3: 33; 4:18-21, GA 4:2:181-182) only as *willing* (SW 4:18), and its willing takes the form of a striving against a material world on which it acts, and to which it is at the same time also passive. At a general, indeterminate (and also unconscious) level, this willing is already present at every point at which the I finds itself, in the form of an indeterminate striving (SW 1:65, 261-271, 285-291, GA 4:2:77). But the I’s awareness of itself as active is also an awareness of its activity as the determinate activity of this I. And it is at this still very fundamental point in the transcendental deduction of the conditions for the possibility of being an I that Fichte regards it as necessary to form the concept of other I’s besides ones own, and to expect to encounter them in experience. For it is only through the experience of a certain kind of object, which is essentially distinguished from all *merely* material objects, that the self-consciousness of the I as a determinate form of activity can be thought of as possible at all.

The basis of Fichte’s argument is the “self-limitation of the I,” or the fact that any I is aware of itself not merely as rational activity or desire in general, but as an individual I freely choosing determinate modes of activity and having determinate ends or goals. At times, Fichte seems to mount a very short argument for his conclusion, inferring from the I’s individuality directly to the necessity of opposing it to other individual I’s:

“Now the I is characterized by a free activity as such; hence the free activity must also be limited. That free activity is limited, means: one quantum of it is

opposed to free activity in general, and to that extent to other free activity. In short, the I can appropriate to itself no free activity absolutely, without this activity being one quantum; and consequently, without immediately positing simultaneously with that thought other free activity, which to that extent does not apply to it – since, indeed every quantum is necessarily bounded” (SW 4:218-219).

Elsewhere (in a text that dates from about the same time), he uses similar reasoning to argue that Kant’s unity of apperception cannot involve any individuality on the part of the I, which (he claims) can arise only when one I is thought of as opposed to others: “Nor can Kant understand by this pure apperception the consciousness of our individuality, or confuse the one with the other; for the consciousness of individuality is necessarily accompanied by another consciousness, that of a ‘thou’, and is possible only on this condition” (SW 1:476).

IV. The Summons

Fichte himself realizes that this argument taken by itself is too short to be convincing: “From this alone, however, the positing of individuality would not follow, for it would indeed be possible that the I should posit that free activity outside its own solely through *ideal* activity, as a merely *possible* one – possible to it itself, if it contained something perhaps beneficial, or also to other free beings” (SW 4:219). I can sufficiently individuate my individual I, in other words, without supposing actual rational beings outside myself, by thinking of alternative *possibilities* to my individual agency, adopted either by other possible beings or even by myself. But he does not find this reply decisive

either, since it ignores the fact that what I must account for is not merely *thinking* of my I as an individual, but *finding* myself as an individual, as a determinate object. This finding, Fichte claims, is possible only through an *experience as an object* of the free activity constituting my individual I; and this experience is possible only through the instantiation in my consciousness of a distinctive concept, which Fichte calls the concept of a ‘summons’ (*Aufforderung*). And this is a concept, he argues, that requires for its explanation an origin in a rational being other than myself.

Here it is important to realize that what I have to be aware of in order to be aware of my individual I is not so much activity in which I have already engaged as *possible* activity in which I *might* engage. For me, my individuality consists not merely, and not fundamentally, in *facts* that distinguish me from others but in *possibilities of acting* through which I actively determine who I am. In other words, the awareness of my individuality must be fundamentally *normative*. This is so even if, as Fichte believes, the fundamental norms of rational agency are every bit as objective or universally binding as the objective truths about the material world. For what makes me an individual is the specific way I apply these universal norms to my actions, in my unique situation and from my unique perspective.

Thus Fichte connects the concept of my individual I with the concept of a determinate *end or goal* (*Zweck*) of activity, and he regards the concept of an end as that through which an individual I can make a transition from (as he puts it) “determinability to determination” (GA 4:2: 47, 57-58, 175-176) – that is, from the plural possibilities of what I might be to the free decision that determines who I am. This transition involves setting an end for myself, constituting my reason for making this transition, and then

actualizing that end. The concept of an end, therefore, involves that of a possible way of acting that I have a rational ground for making actual. It is this concept, Fichte argues, that can present itself to me only in the form of a ‘summons’; and the concept of a summons is something that requires the actual existence of another rational being as its explanation. “The summons would thus contain within itself the real ground of a free decision; i.e. it would be the determining agency that intervenes between that is determinable and what is determinate” (GA 4:2:179). “How is the concept of an end possible?” (GA 4:2:173). “The end is given to us along with the summons... From this it follows that individual reason cannot account for itself on the basis of itself alone” (GA 4:2:177). “I never find myself except insofar as I find myself summoned to act freely” (GA 4:2:184). Therefore, “consciousness begins with consciousness of a summons” (GA 4:2:189).

In other words, my own self-consciousness begins with my consciousness of another’s consciousness as addressing me (“summoning” me). This means that the mental states of others, as perceived by someone other than the I whose states they are, are as transcendently necessary to the self-consciousness of an I as are its own states. Fichte’s argument is that transcendently, the nature of mind is constituted as much by my awareness of the mentality of others as by my awareness of my own mentality.

In order to understand this argument, we need to understand more precisely what Fichte means by the word ‘summons’ (*Aufforderung*). This term in German is broader in its meaning than the English ‘summons’ – which perhaps suggests a command of some kind, such as a legal subpoena to appear in court. The term *Rechtsaufforderung* does cover that notion, but *Aufforderung* means something much less official and usually not

in the least tinged with coercion. In many contexts, it is better to translate it as ‘invitation’, as in Carl Maria von Weber’s *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, op. 65. German dictionaries report that the meaning of *auffordern* ranges all the way from *bitten* (request or beg) to *verlangen* (demand or require). Fichte’s use here seems rather closer to the former end of the spectrum than to the latter. For he specifically emphasizes that an *Aufforderung* (as he means it) leaves us free *either to do or not do* as we are summoned (or invited) to do. “Either I act in accordance with the summons or I do not act in accordance with it. If I have understood this summons, I can, of course, still decide not to act [as the summons represents]” (GA 4:2:179; cf. SW 3:34).

The whole point of the summons, in fact, is that it is what first makes our individuality possible for us, through presenting us with the concept of our own individual free action in the form of an object of our consciousness. I think Fichte chooses the term *Aufforderung* because its meaning is delicately balanced between the idea of something we merely can do and the idea of something we *should* do, or at least have some reason to do. What is clear, however, is that it *cannot* mean something we are *compelled* to do or have no choice about doing. Thus if the translation ‘summons’ suggests legal coercion, then that is positively misleading as to Fichte’s meaning.

The decisive difference here is between an object that merely restricts our freedom and an object that makes freedom possible. This for Fichte is what is most basic to distinguishing the concept of another I from the concept of the mere not-I (the material world). The not-I resists our ends or may be brought into conformity with them. It may compel us to take one means to them rather than another, or it may make them impossible. But it cannot be the source from which we draw the concept of those ends. A

summons, however, is precisely an object of consciousness which makes the concept of an end possible.

How can a summons, in this sense, be considered a transcendental condition of free activity? We have seen that Fichte describes the summons as “contain[ing] within itself the real ground of a free decision” (GA 4:2:179). To act freely, on this conception, is to act in response to *grounds* or *reasons*. Reasons have the peculiarity that they are the only possible *determinant* of what we do that does not compel or causally necessitate what we do, or restrict in any way the possibilities we have open to us. A good reason explains why I do what I have reason to do, but never takes away from me the possibility of doing otherwise. In fact, it makes sense *as a reason* only as long as this possibility exists.

Accordingly, there are two fundamentally different ways that facts in the world might be given to us as agents: first, there are facts that causally necessitate what we do, restricting our freedom to do otherwise; second, there are facts that determine what we do by presenting themselves as reasons for acting. I think Fichte was struck by the fundamental importance of this difference, and inferred from it that there must be something quite distinctive about the way that facts are given to us as reasons. His bold thought is that such facts can be given to us only through a distinctive kind of not-I that we regard as containing within itself the understanding of a reason, and hence free activity – in other words, through a not-I that is itself an I, namely, an I other than my own I. Only another rational being would be capable of having the concept of a free action and a ground or reason for free action. This is in fact the claim through which Fichte establishes this part of his argument.

“I could therefore find a certain self-determination only through ideal activity; through imitation of one that is present at hand, and present at hand without my doing (*Zuthun*)...I cannot comprehend this summons to self-activity without ascribing it to an actual being outside me that wills to communicate a concept of the action demanded, and hence is capable of the concept of that concept; but such a being is a rational being, one that posits itself as an I, hence an I” (SW 4:220-221).

At times Fichte gives this last point what we may call a *genetic* presentation: Being an individual I, placing before oneself an end, is something a rational being must be *educated* to do, through the influence of another rational being. “A human being becomes a human being only among human beings.” Freedom is possible only through *upbringing* (*Erziehung*) through the influence of other free beings (SW 3:39-40; cf. SW 4:221).

The summons should be understood as that kind of object through which something like a reason for a free action can first be given to us. Fichte’s argument is that application of the concept of another I is the transcendental condition for the possibility of our awareness of a reason for acting.

“It follows that if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one...The concept of a human being is not the concept of an individual – for an individual human being is unthinkable – but rather the concept of a species” (SW 3:39). “Self-consciousness therefore originates with my act of selection from a general mass of rational beings as such...[A free individual] subsists only in the whole, and by means of the whole, as a portion of the whole” (GA 4:2:177).

Acting rationally, even acting autonomously, in other words, is not something a human being could do alone. Autonomy thus consists not in rejecting the influence of others, but in being influenced by others in the right way. Education, and being given reasons for action, constitute an essentially different way of being influenced by the world from any merely causal influence, through which one may be coerced, or manipulated, or conditioned to behave, but not enabled to act freely or autonomously. If we embrace some conception of mind and action that cannot distinguish what Fichte calls a ‘summons’ from being causally influenced in general, then we should not expect to understand human freedom or rational action at all. Fichte’s argument implies that those who think of human individuality and freedom as somehow distinct from, or even in opposition to, human community, understand neither the nature of individual freedom nor the nature of community.

Fichte’s view here, if correct, would also have some important implications for our conceptions of reason and rationality. Giving oneself a reason for acting is derivative from being given a reason by others and from giving others a reason. Giving others a reason is the internalization of being given a reason by another, and giving oneself a reason is only an application to oneself of giving others a reason. Just as the nature of a mental state is not known exclusively by its owner, so a reason for me is not something answerable only to my perspective. Kant is right that rational thinking is thinking for yourself, but also from the standpoint of everyone else.⁵ It follows that there is something fundamentally wrongheaded about developing conceptions of rationality that are oriented exclusively to the agent’s standpoint (the agent’s desires, beliefs and preferences). The ideally rational person cannot therefore be conceived of (as often seems to happen in the

theories of rational choice theorists, game theorists, and economists) as a calculating sociopath with a gambling addiction.

Fichte's approach to intersubjectivity also has important implications for the theory of human communication, and for the nature of language. Fichte developed some of these himself, both in his *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation* (1794) and in a brief essay on the origin of language written the following year. Our drive for rationality is transcendently connected to our drive to find other rational beings in our experience, and to communicate with them, with the aim of achieving common agreement on the truth. This involves reciprocal effect or "interaction" (*Wechselwirkung*), which means both influencing them to accept our own views and being open to their influence (SW 6:308). The same drive, Fichte argues, gives rise to the very possibility of sharing thoughts with others through meanings understood in common. Fichte thus goes beyond the Cartesian and Lockean semantic theory based on the premise that linguistic signs originally refer to "ideas" perceived by an individual mind, replacing that theory with one whose foundation is the transcendental claim that meanings are necessarily created by the I in its interaction with others. The idea "of indicating [our] thoughts through arbitrary signs, in a word: the idea of language. Hence the drive to find signs of rationality outside themselves harbors the particular drive to create a language" (GA III/1: 103). As with many of Fichte's insights, this one was left to others to develop. It was the inspiration for the Romantic theory of language, especially as developed in the writings of August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Hardenberg (Novalis) and especially Wilhelm von Humboldt. According to this theory, the transcendental conditions for being an I are conditions for the possibility of an understanding between human beings that makes

possible not only the means of communication, but even the desire to communicate. As Schlegel put it: “Not even the desire to communicate could be communicated if, before any agreed upon understanding takes place, humans did not already understand each other.”⁶

V. Fichte’s Argument for the I’s Intersubjectivity

These are some of the implications of Fichte’s transcendental deduction of the other through the concept of a summons. The main question, however, may still not seem to be sufficiently answered: Why must the concept of an end, or of our possible free activity, be given to us from outside, through a summons? Why isn’t it simply part of our *internal* equipment as free rational agents? But let us recall, first of all, where we began and how far (or rather, how short a way) we have come from that beginning. We began with the I not as a full blown empirical self, but simply as freely self-positing activity. This drove us to recognize certain other presuppositions or transcendental necessities required by this starting point. An I must be opposed to a not-I, or a material world, and it must therefore itself take the form of a material body. It must find itself as striving in opposition to this world. And then it must think of this striving as individualized through the concept of determinate possible activity and the corresponding normative concept of an end. The determinacy of self-positing in general requires the concept of something *external to* the I which is given in opposition to it – the not-I, the material world.

Likewise, it seems reasonable to Fichte that this new determinacy, through which the I is individualized, should also be thought of as something given from outside.

Fichte's first thought (the "very short argument") was that the thought of one individual I requires that of other individual I's characterized by different free activities from that of this individual I. This argument, he says, can be avoided by suggesting that the different free activities might be thought of as only *possible*, in contrast to the free activity of this individual I. But, he claims, that raises the new question of how it is possible for us to form the concept of alternative *possibilities* of free activity as something "found" in experience, since these are also not yet contained in the concept of a self-positing I, embodied and striving against a material world. Fichte's claim is that the concept of such possible free activity amounts to the concept of a summons, a distinctive kind of object, in which the possibility of free activity, and the givenness in the world of possible reasons for acting in that possible way, is present to us. That, in turn requires positing, as its source, other rational beings or I's distinct from and in relation to the individual I, since only such a being could contain in itself the concept of a possible mode of free activity or the concept of a reason for choosing it. The necessity and power of this argument, if I may report my own reaction to it, grows on you the more you think your way into the transcendental questions it is meant to answer, and the more you see how these questions undermine the set of Cartesian and empiricist prejudices about the nature of mind and free action that we find so hard to resist, at least on our bad days.

Of course to many, the whole project of transcendental philosophy in general, and therefore also Fichte's system of positings, counter-positings and the system of concepts arising from it in particular, may seem like an arbitrary invention of fancy rather than a necessary rational progression. If that's how it strikes you, then none of this argumentation for the necessity of the summons and of other I's will seem the least bit

convincing or illuminating. But it is one of the chief purposes of transcendental philosophy, as Fichte does it, to change our way of looking at ourselves and our experience, to ask fundamental questions about them that we never thought to ask before, and in response to provide a more fundamental grounding to familiar concepts than we had before, and in the process to reshape and reorder those concepts. If Fichte is right, then the concept of other rational beings and our relationship to them plays a much more fundamental role in both our experience and our agency than was recognized by traditional philosophy, especially by the philosophy of mind we have picked up from Descartes and the empiricists -- much as we might have picked up our alcohol addiction from our parents' bad habits and degenerate way of life. Fichte's transcendental arguments certainly provide us with no Twelve Step Program, and any pretense that we can rely on a "higher power" is as fraudulent in the one case as in the other. Whether or not they are capable of putting us on the road to a better way of doing the philosophy of mind, at the very least they open up for us a new way of looking at things that might help us to a future of more good days than bad days.

Notes

¹ Antonio Damasio. (1994) *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Harper-Collins Avon Books). No doubt the chief thing Damasio wants to criticize as “Descartes’ error” is Descartes’ alleged partitioning of intellect or reason from emotions and their rootedness in the body. But this is based on a (common, but nonetheless egregious) error about what Descartes’ actually thought on this question, perhaps due to ignorance (or misreading) of his late treatise *The Passions of the Soul*. The misreading is typically occasioned by the drawing of (fallacious) inferences from the conjunction of Descartes’ metaphysical dualism and some of the strictures of his philosophical method to very general conclusions on his behalf about how the human intellect works best. In fact, Descartes recognized the influence of the body on the mind, and especially emphasized the role of the passion he calls “generosity” in helping the intellect to function well in the general affairs of life. It is true that Descartes did not formulate what Damasio calls the “somatic marker hypothesis” in his account of the intellect, but he certainly anticipated the general idea when he recognized that certain passions, which for him are motions of the animal spirits in the brain, help the intellect to keep other passions in check and constitute a kind of bodily infrastructure for the intellect’s control over our life. Once Damasio’s misreading of Descartes is set aside, what seems to be left of “Descartes’ error” is therefore mainly the metaphysical dualism from which Damasio mistakenly inferred that he held the erroneous views that Damasio wants most to criticize.

² R. Descartes [1645] (1964-1976) *Oeuvres*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin), 8:7.

³ E. Husserl [1929] (1960) *Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff), Fifth Meditation; see especially § 52, in which the “style of verification” appropriate to experiencing the mental states of others is discussed. However, as I will mention presently, there are signs elsewhere in Husserl of an approach to the question that is much closer to Fichte’s and not open to the objections I am presenting here. I am grateful to Dagfinn Føllesdal for bringing this side of Husserl’s thinking to my attention.

⁴ Fichte's writings will be cited according to the following system of abbreviations:

GA (1962-) *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann. Cited by part/volume:page number.

SW (1970) *Fichtes Sammtliche Werke*, edited by I. H. Fichte. Berlin:deGruyter. Cited by volume: page number.

⁵ Kant [1790] *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:294-295; [1798] *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint* 7:200, 228-229; *Logic*, Ak 9:57. Cited by volume:page number from (1902-) *Kants Schriften*. Akademie Ausgabe (Berlin: Walter deGruyter).

⁶ This tradition, and its origin with Fichte, is discussed by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, “Language Theory and the Art of Understanding,” in Marshall Brown (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 162-184.