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Streben of the I as the Fundamental Form of Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that Fichte's concept of Streben or striving of the I is the necessary condition of finite or individual consciousness. The I posits itself absolutely, but in doing so it posits the not-I as well, therefore it posits itself absolutely as self-limiting I. If there was no limitation on the infinite striving of the I's activity, then there would be no I, at least as we know it. Firstly, the paper emphasizes why this activity or striving needs to be infinite, and at the same time determined. Then, why is it necessary for theoretical self-consciousness, regarding the idea of Anstoss, divided self and absolute I. Finally, why is it also necessary for practical standpoint, considering the ideas of practical striving, tendency, longing, drive, and desire (both in individual striving towards self-coherence and social drive for intersubjectivity). It will be concluded that the I possesses a "dual nature" or divided character: it is finite, but it strives towards infinity. The tension arising from this contradiction should be the moving force of the I.

Keywords: *absolute I; consciousness; drive; not-I; self-consciousness; striving; tendency; the I*

I. Introduction: The Fichtean I as *finite*

One of the main misinterpretations of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is, ironically, one regarding its fundamental notion – the concept of absolute I. It stems mostly from the view which Schelling ascribes to Fichte's transcendental idealism: "gnostical metaphysics,"¹ or "grotesque narcissism,"² a

¹ Allen W. Wood, "Fichte's Philosophical Revolution," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 2 (1991): 13.

² Daniel Breazeale, "Check or Checkmate? On the Finitude of the Fichtean Self," in *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. D. Sturma, and K. Ameriks,

“pantheistic supra-personal speculative Absolute.”³ The origin lies in understanding the pure I only as absolute I, and the latter as Absolute, a kind of metaphysical or god’s consciousness. Newer interpretations have shown that this is almost surely not the case.⁴ Fichte’s I is always a concrete and individually existing I, while the absolute I is an idea that lies in its basis, and/or something towards the I strives.

The goal of this paper will be to show exactly this, in light of Fichte’s understanding of I’s infinite *striving* (Streben), *tendency* (Tendenz) for reflection, *longing* (Sehnen) to overcome the obstacle, *drive* (Trieb) and *desire* (Begierde). Striving will first be analyzed from a theoretical standpoint or part of *Wissenschaftslehre*, and then from the practical sphere. In the end, it will be concluded that for the I to exist concretely it needs to be in tension and contradiction between its finite and infinite activity – thus limited, but also open for determination, concrete and actually existing. As Fichte puts it,

The Science of Knowledge is therefore *realistic*. It shows that the consciousness of finite creatures is utterly inexplicable, save on the presumption of a force existing independently of them, and wholly opposed to them, on which they are dependent in respect of their empirical existence.⁵

II. Infinite activity of the I in theoretical consciousness

Fichte begins the presentation of his system from theoretical self-consciousness.⁶ If that is not unified, then there could be no practical activity whatsoever.⁷ The I is always activity and, simultaneously, a product of it.⁸ Meaning that it is not some kind of static or passive *substance*, an *ego* that *is* active, ‘doing’ this or that; not something active (ein *Handelndes*) – rather, it is the activity itself.⁹ There is

87-114 (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 87.

³ Wood, 8.

⁴ Alex Guilherme, “Fichte: Kantian or Spinozian? Three Interpretations of the Absolute I,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2010): 4ff.

⁵ J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, eds. and trans. P. Heath, and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 246.

⁶ Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52.

⁷ J. G. Fichte, “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. D. Breazeale (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 112.

⁸ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 97.

⁹ J. G. Fichte, “First introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in J. G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. D. Breazeale (Indianapolis, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 26; J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. F. Neuhouser, trans. M. Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge

nothing 'before' the I. In this way, the I is primarily being actively produced as a result of its active doing.¹⁰

What is this activity? In *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte posits two opposite activities: *ideal* and *real* (or in other contexts centripetal and centrifugal). It should essentially mean that in any given consciousness (or mental state), there are two 'sides': the subject side or the I, and the object side or the not-I.¹¹ It is the same activity, but with different directions.¹² He also differentiates between two acts: self-positing and repeating of that positing, i.e. positing for itself:

The self posits itself absolutely, and is thereby complete in itself and closed to any impression from without. But if it is to be a self, it must also posit itself as self-positing; and by this new positing, relative to an original positing, it opens itself, if I may so put it, to external influences; simply by this reiteration of positing.¹³

Only this second, or reiteration of positing, is the necessary condition for reflection. To posit the I is to posit the not-I at the same time, therefore if we have one activity, we immediately have two.¹⁴ For example, if we say that this object *is* red in color, it is also saying that it is *not* of any other color. Being red means that it is limited and determined (that it *is* something, and *isn't* something else).¹⁵ But, in self-reference a paradox occurs: the I is at the same time that which 'speaks' and that about what something is 'said.'

If the I wasn't, so to say, 'larger' than itself in this way, then it wouldn't be able to find itself as limited and to determine itself, while also 'knowing' that it's determined and that it's free to be more, or different.¹⁶ The I is both active and passive, *determinant* and *determinate*, its passivity is determined

University Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁰ Neuhausser explains this self-production in analogy with the motion of electrons that "produces" the electric current: current both "is" and "is a product of" its own activity, in Neuhausser, 108.

¹¹ This could also be interpreted as Fichte's take on the intentionality of consciousness, that it is always about something, i.e. the not-I.

¹² Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 243. In this paper I will be treating terms "the I" and "self" as synonyms, especially considering the translations, even though the self is a lot broader term than what Fichte had in mind with "das Ich."

¹⁴ Wood, 12.

¹⁵ J. G. Fichte, "Outline of the Distinctive Character of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with Respect to the Theoretical Faculty," in *Early Philosophical Writings*, 283.

¹⁶ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 132.

through its activity and its activity through passivity. In Fichte's words, the activity of the I is infinitely striving, for it to be able to find itself as limited.

a. Infinite striving

The striving of the I must be infinite, for there would be no objects for the I. In other words, the infinite character of striving is the prerequisite for the positing of objects; i.e. its 'directedness outwards' is the condition of possibility for there to be an object at which the I is, in the end, directed. And, its character is necessarily infinite, for if it was limited (in advance), then the 'sphere' of possible objects would be also.

The result of our inquiry so far is therefore as follows: *in relation to a possible object*, the pure self-reverting activity of the self is a *striving*; and as shown earlier, *an infinite striving* at that. This boundless striving, carried to infinity, *is the condition of the possibility of any object whatsoever*: no striving, no object.¹⁷

The striving is towards 'filling out' the infinity. Wood calls this "unconscious striving,"¹⁸ because it just 'is' – in reflection it is limited, but not in striving. When we are 'staring' into the distance, we are not actually looking (at anything), it is rather an unconscious activity; but when we 'snap out' of it, in reflecting we realize that we *were* in fact staring. This kind of striving is *infinite* and *insatiable*. When the striving has a "fixed, determinate and definite" character, it's called a *drive*.¹⁹ Infinite striving doesn't even have an object:

The indeterminate striving in general – which to that extent should really not be called striving, for it has no object, though we neither have nor can have a name for it, since it lies beyond all determinability – is infinite; but as such it does not attain to consciousness, nor can it do so, since consciousness is possible only through reflection, and reflection only through determination.²⁰

It is insatiable as it is 'against' every and any object – no object can *satisfy* it.²¹ Striving is opposed to any object because it 'pushes' against it. "The

¹⁷ Ibid., 231.

¹⁸ Wood, 14ff.

¹⁹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 253.

²⁰ Ibid., 237.

²¹ Just like, while looking, our "sight" as an activity is directed "from" the eye, towards and "object"

self initially contains a striving to fill out the infinite. This striving resists termination in the *individual object*.²²

It cannot be fulfilled, because “striving is never to have causal efficacy.”²³ Seen in this way, Wood believes that Fichte’s concept of striving leads directly into Schopenhauer’s concept of Will and Nietzsche’s Will to Power.²⁴ This activity of the I isn’t actually *infinite*, but only in its striving:

The self is infinite, but merely in respect to its striving; it strives to be infinite. But the very concept of striving already involves finitude, for that to which there is no *counterstriving* is not a striving at all.²⁵

Now, for there to be genuine consciousness – for that I to *be* an I – this undefined and undetermined activity that strives towards infinity needs to be limited.

But now the infinitely outreaching activity of the self is to be checked at some point, and driven back upon itself [...] it must occur, if a genuine consciousness is to be possible.²⁶

Therefore, something to *limit* that infinite tendency is “[r]equired – if I may so put it – is the presence of a check on the self, that is, for some reason that lies merely outside the self’s activity, the subjective must be extensible no further.”²⁷

In other words, the I posits itself absolutely, but it does so not in an undetermined way – it posits itself absolutely *as* the I, i.e. “it can posit itself only as limited and standing in a relationship with something foreign to itself.”²⁸ The idea is that the I cannot be in consciousness without something else also being present with it, i.e. not-I, but this is precisely what the I needs to be distinguished from.²⁹

in front of us (at a table, or a tree, or into the distance) the activity has a direction: from eye towards object, whatever that object may be.

²² Ibid., 256.

²³ Ibid., 265.

²⁴ Wood, 16.

²⁵ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 238.

²⁶ Ibid., 242.

²⁷ Ibid., 189. We will see later why this check *must* come from the outside.

²⁸ Breazeale, 89.

²⁹ Wood, 27, note 22. Woods mentions different instances in Fichte’s work where this idea is

We can see Fichte's dialectics at work here: something that is infinite (absolute, striving) isn't something that *is* or *can* be determined – infinity isn't 'defined.' To be determined, to be some-thing (any-thing at all), it first needs to be limited.

b. *Anstoss*: limitation of infinity

This *check* is, what some interpreters believe, Fichte's solution to the Kantian problem of thing in itself. It is, so to say, an 'essence' of the not-I, but not as a thing existing outside of and independently from the I.³⁰

The activity of the I that strives towards infinity – we will later see why it *must* strive infinitely – is necessarily, at some point, limited in order to be 'something' at all, i.e. something determined. Nothing can be determined which is not first limited.³¹ The I posits itself absolutely, but it does that only *as* finite and limited I, and *exists* in this way.³² It is thus because the I is only in *relation* (and as determined by) the not-I. Therefore, the limiting 'point' or 'moment' at which the I (as absolute spontaneity) differentiates between itself and the other, or objective, is necessary. "Hence something must in general be present, wherein the active self traces out a boundary for the subjective, and consigns the remainder to the objective."³³

It is limited by *Anstoss* which usually translates as *check*. It means both an 'obstacle,' a 'hindrance,' but also an 'impulse' or 'stimulus' to overcome it. The *Anstoss* must be something "beyond I's control."³⁴ *Anstoss* both *limits* and *stimulates* – stimulates the tendency towards comprehending it, or reflecting about itself as infinite.³⁵ "[T]he necessary finitude of all subjectivity and the unavoidable element of contingency – 'facticity,' if you will – at the heart of the Fichtean self."³⁶

Representation also cannot be explained only through the pure activity of the I, only as a product of reciprocal interaction of the I and not-I.

explicitly stated.

³⁰ J. G. Fichte, "Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*," in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, §6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74-89. From the possibility of the I, the limitation can be deduced, but not "specific determinacy." Also, Fichte, "Some lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation," in *Early Philosophical Writings*, 148ff. The absolute self-identity is the form of the pure I. The characteristic of the not-I is multiplicity, whilst the I is complete unity.

³² Breazeale, 89.

³³ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 186.

³⁴ Breazeale, 93.

³⁵ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 267.

³⁶ Breazeale, 98.

For we could in no way think representation to be possible at all, except on the assumption that an *Anstoss* occurs to an undetermined and infinitely outreaching activity of the I.³⁷

If it were the product of the absolute activity of the pure I it would be, firstly, *solipsistic* explanation and, secondly, we wouldn't be able to explain the representations followed by the feeling of necessity (which is the experience), i.e. that what is represented is outside of our control and will. The I is unable to produce representations on its own.³⁸

Anstoss is, therefore, not a fact about the world, or an effect of thing in itself (for it would revert Fichte to Kantian dogmatism) – it is a fact about the mind itself; a fact about the I, not about the not-I.³⁹ The *Anstoss* doesn't limit the activity of the I itself, rather it puts a task, or a demand on it to limit itself. It is, therefore, both a hindrance (obstacle), but also an *impetus* for self-limitation. We could say that the infinite activity of the I 'stumbles' upon, so to say, a 'no.' That 'no' is to be posited as a not-I in the same act with which I am posited as that which has encountered a 'no' – same act brings about both as determined by each other. A 'no' that means: "[F]or some reason that lies merely outside the self's activity, the subjective must be extensible no further."⁴⁰

A 'no' is just a mere *resistance* (not yet determined as a resistance of 'what').⁴¹ A not-I in its core contains a 'no,' as '[no]t-I.' This 'what' is actually the positing of not-I for the reason of explaining the feeling of limitation.

Feeling is the most primordial interaction of the I with itself, and even precedes the not-I, since of course a not-I must be posited to explain feeling. (We are speaking, naturally, of a not-I *in* and *for* the I.) The I strives toward infinity; it reflects upon itself and thereby limits itself.⁴²

The *Anstoss* 'provokes' or 'motivates' the I to self-limitation. It can also limit the practical striving of the I. What is important here is that *Anstoss* can't occur if there isn't an infinite activity of the I.

³⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 220.

³⁸ Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 8.

³⁹ Breazeale, 99.

⁴⁰ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 189.

⁴¹ J. G. Fichte, *The System of Ethics According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, trans. and eds. D. Breazeale, and G. Zöllner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 89. *Anstoss* could also be understood as *Widerstand*, a resistance.

⁴² Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 274. Cf. Fichte's critique of Kant's thing in itself as a thought trying to explain a feeling, ending up as *circulus vitiosus*, in Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 51ff.

The check (unposited by the positing self) occurs to the self insofar as it is active, and is thus only a check insofar as there is activity in the self; its possibility is conditional upon the self's activity: no activity of the self, no check. Conversely, the activity of the self's own self-determining would be conditioned by the check: no check, no self-determination.⁴³

The infinite striving of the I and *Anstoss* upon it are mutually-dependent. Self-limitation need not be voluntary: productive imagination reflects upon original *Anstoss*, posits it again until it finally obtains determinate consciousness (of the not-I).⁴⁴ It also is only *for the I* – *Anstoss* is not a thing in itself, that comes to subject from outside, some external source; rather, it is that which “happens to” the activity of the I.⁴⁵ If there were no outwardly striving activity of the I (that can also reflect into itself), then no *Anstoss* could occur to the I.⁴⁶

[T]his check did not occur without concurrence of the self, but took place, rather, in consequence of the latter's own activity in positing itself; that its outward-striving activity was, as it were, thrown back (or reflected) into itself, from which the self-limitation, and hence everything else that was called for, would then very naturally follow.⁴⁷

The infinity of activity, but also the necessity of its limitation, is a motif that we can see in different places and contexts in Fichte's work, for example, in the “Second introduction”:

Just as surely as I think at all, I think of something determinate; for otherwise I would not have been engaged in an act of thinking and would have thought of nothing. In other words, my freedom of thinking, which I posit as capable of having been directed at

⁴³ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 191.

⁴⁴ Breazeale, 91.

⁴⁵ When we hear knocking on the door, we (who are sitting inside the room) only hear the sound which is coming to us from the door, but we can't know who or what is knocking. That someone or something *is* knocking, we have to posit as the not-I. Just as the sound is something that “occurs” inside of the room, *Anstoss* is something that ‘happens’ to the activity of the I. The activity got ‘indented,’ and we can only witness the indentation from the inside.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 191.

an infinite number of objects, is now directed only upon this limited sphere, viz., the sphere that is involved in thinking about my present object. My freedom of thinking is restricted to this sphere.⁴⁸

The activity of thinking is *free*, I can think this or that, but if I don't actually engage in thinking something, then I wouldn't be thinking at all. The freedom is absolute, but if it's not realized, then it just stays an infinite possibility – nothing real or actual. The meaning of this is *twofold*: firstly, it must be absolutely free (or striving), and secondly, it must be always limited in that absolute activity (for it to be actualized, and be something real). I need to *be able* to think different things, and I also must *think* something – to think at all.⁴⁹

c. Dialectic of infinity and *Anstoss*

The activity of the I “left to its own devices” must strive towards unbounded, indeterminate and indeterminable, that is, towards infinity.⁵⁰

If the I wasn't infinitely striving ‘outwards,’ “if the I did not constantly strive to extend itself it could not be *angestossen* (checked).”⁵¹ The *Anstoss* is an occurrence, a happening on the activity of the I. It's a ‘re-action’ of the activity, something that is spontaneous, not an act of volition. If it weren't able to return into itself, the activity of the I would be “mindless”

⁴⁸ Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 78.

⁴⁹ If I have understood Fichte correctly, then the next analogy is in place: we can imagine a human eye, metaphorically speaking, its ‘activity’ is *looking*, and it, so to speak, ‘goes away’ (or is directed) from the eye. When we are simply looking into the distance, our look goes to ‘infinity’ because it's not limited by anything – we are not looking at *anything* (or *something*), we are simply looking. Paradoxically, at the same time, we are not exactly looking – in the common usage of the term – we are *staring*, and our mind wanders lost in our thoughts and not actually ‘there.’ Now, place an object in front of us at which our look is focused, for example, a tree, and now we have a proper looking, i.e. a *seeing*: we are focusing on a concrete object before us – the object is ‘seen’ by us, and we are ‘seeing’ the object. Therefore, only when an activity is determined from both sides, do we have a proper activity, one that has form and is not just some undetermined, undefined staring, but focused seeing. There is no object as ‘seen’ if there is no one to see it, and *vice versa*, there is no ‘seeing’ subject if there is nothing to be seen. See, for example, Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 168: “it is the law of consciousness: *no subject, no object; no object, no subject.*” Note that this “object” isn't yet something, a not-I, even less is it a thing in itself – as *Anstoss* its firstly some “objection” that snaps us out from daydreaming by suddenly entering our field of vision, we ‘feel’ interrupted; only in reflection do we posit ourselves as seeing (the I), and object as seen (not-I), to explain this interruption.

⁵⁰ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 192.

⁵¹ Breazeale, 91.

and “directionless.”⁵² “If the self’s activity did not extend into the infinite, it could not itself set limits to this activity.”⁵³

On the other end, if the activity of the I *was* infinitely striving, but is *without Anstoss*, there would again be no genuine consciousness:

The absolute self is absolutely identical with itself: everything therein is one and the same self, and belongs (if we may express ourselves thus figuratively) to one and the same self; nothing therein is distinguishable, nothing manifold; the self is everything and nothing, since it is nothing *for itself*, and can distinguish no positing or posited within itself.⁵⁴

Therefore, if the I wasn’t *infinite* (in its striving), but only *finite*, there would be no concrete, actual I at all; conversely, if the I was infinite, but without limitation (*Anstoss*), again there would be no actual consciousness – distinguishable and determinate. This is the moment where *tendency* comes into play: the I has a tendency to reflect upon itself and to posit itself. But, something alien, different or heterogenous is necessary to occur in absolute striving, as to ‘push’ it back, into itself and to realize its tendency. Therefore, we could say that striving is an activity, but the tendency is a possibility to revert that activity into itself (if the right conditions are met, namely *Anstoss*). If it does not, then no self-limitation could be made possible regarding the *Anstoss*. The reason for this is: “[T]hat which actively posits this boundary must itself – simply as active – be one of the clashing elements.”⁵⁵

If this never happens, there would be no reason to ponder about an object – with which we never ‘made a contact’ – also, there would be no need to realize ourselves, or to think about oneself as ‘that which feels’ this or that, because there is no feeling whatsoever, and therefore, no need for the not-I (to explain it), and for the I.⁵⁶ The *Anstoss* is a ‘spark’ to *ignite* the consciousness.

⁵² This activity still isn’t a ‘fully formed’ consciousness, therefore it lacks any notion of will or Hegel’s concept of *Willkür*, i.e. arbitrariness. It lacks intentionality, being “about” something determined, rather, its insubstantial directedness. Albeit their *modus operandi* could be compared, the scope of such comparison would require its own paper.

⁵³ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 192.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 191-192. Here, we have opted for Breazeale’s translation, found in Breazeale, 104-105, note 13.

⁵⁶ We can imagine being confined in a dark room trying to navigate our way out. What reasons are there to assume that there are other objects in the room or that the room was empty? – None. We could try walking in any direction and sooner or later we could hit our leg on something. Now, Fichte would point out that we didn’t hit our leg on ‘something’ (not-I), rather we felt the impact (and possibly still feel the pain) and therefore conclude that there *is* something on which

In Breazeale's interpretation, this means that consciousness possesses original "openness" towards the world.⁵⁷

d. The divided or split character of the self

Wissenschaftslehre shows the "necessarily *divided* character of the self."⁵⁸ It is divided, 'split' between its finite and infinite activity. In this happening of *Anstoss*, the I posits itself and not-I, but, there is a twist: the I is one of the elements of this interaction, i.e. the activity of the I, infinitely striving outwards – is, at the same time this posited I in contrast with the not-I. This is the meaning behind the I being *for itself*. But Fichte is quick to point out that these 'two' I's are in fact one and the same: "Both the limited and the limiting I, synthetically united by absolute spontaneity, are posited – and posited as the same I."⁵⁹

"The self in general is a self; in virtue of its own self-positing, it is absolutely one and the same self."⁶⁰ We could say that the I is simultaneously 'split' and again, the same.

[W]e have the self in a dual aspect: partly, insofar as it is reflective, and to that extent the direction of its activity is centripetal; partly, insofar as it is that upon which reflection takes place, and to that extent the direction of its activity is centrifugal, and centrifugal out to infinity at that.⁶¹

Simply put, the I, striving infinitely, must posit itself (for itself) together with the not-I. A paradox occurs: the I is simultaneously *infinite* and *finite*. "[N]o infinity, no limitation; no limitation, no infinity. Infinity and limitation are united in one and the same synthetic element."⁶²

If I am, for example, writing an autobiography, I'm at the same time the writer, having literary freedom, and the main protagonist that has events and

we stumbled upon. We 'evoke' this something (not-I) in order to explain what we feel. The concept of feeling is very important, because it is something entirely *subjective* (so to speak, they are 'only' my mental events), and yet – it doesn't have an *origin* within me, because I can't voluntarily feel or stop feeling pain. It is something exclusively subjective, yet outside my control. Thus the need for *Anstoss*, but not as a thing in itself – and if not for this, there would be no reason to suppose that there are other objects, to think that it was the table and not the chair that we stumbled upon, or to think ourselves as *those-who-feel-pain*.

⁵⁷ Breazeale, 99.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁹ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 274.

⁶⁰ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 219.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 192.

things ‘happening’ to him. I am (as the protagonist) for myself (as the writer), just the same as some event in the book that I’m writing about (not-I). In the end, the protagonist (the I) and an event (not-I), are both products that are *posited* by the writer (absolute I). This, so to say, ‘dual aspect’ of the I is the essence of Fichte’s concept of the I: it *is*, but it is *for itself*. It cannot be otherwise, because if the ‘link’ between *I-as-the-writer* and *I-as-the-protagonist* is severed, there would be no *auto*-biography. There needs to be, at all times, this self-reference, or *auto-referential* act. There is no autobiography if the writer constantly forgets that he is writing about himself.⁶³ Of course, the writer doesn’t have to constantly and explicitly think of himself *as* the author and *as* the protagonist – he can be lost in his thoughts, visualizing things and events happening to him and thinking about his reactions – but he *is*, and at any given moment can become explicitly (self-)conscious about it.

If the I wasn’t infinite in this way (and, at the same time, finite), there would be no I at all, because it wouldn’t be able to ‘have’ itself; i.e. if I was only the protagonist, then there wouldn’t be any autobiography being written (because I would be ‘living’ those events); and if I was only the writer (writing about something else and not himself), then again, there would be no autobiography. Therefore, the I posits itself *as* posited, and also remains something ‘more.’

Put differently, if the I were *only* finite, then it would not be able to posit itself *as* an I – even as a finite I. [...] the concept of a subject conscious of its own finitude – implies that one and the same I must be simultaneously limited (with respect to the sheer occurrence of the *Anstoss*) and unlimited (with respect to the necessary positing thereof), or, in Fichte’s somewhat hyperbolic language, finite and infinite at one and the same time.⁶⁴

[W]hat is active in bounding must itself, and simply *as* active, be one of the parties to the encounter [...]. This is possible only if the activity in question, in and by itself, and left to its own devices, reaches out into the unbounded, the indeterminate and

⁶³ I believe that this is also the meaning behind Fichte’s later formulation of the I as I-Subject and I-Object in his later texts, and *Nova methodo*. In short: I-Subject would be ‘the writer,’ and I-Object ‘the protagonist,’ and the synthesis is the realization that it is *one* and the *same* I. That realization cannot be a product of reflection, because I don’t infer that I am writing about myself, rather, at every point of the book, I *am* (self-)conscious that I’m writing about myself. See Fichte, “A Comparison between Prof. Schmid’s System and the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *Early Philosophical Writings*, 323: “*The I is what cannot be the subject without, in the same undivided act, being the object, and cannot be the object without, in the same undivided act, being the subject. And conversely, anything which can be characterized in this way is the I.*”

⁶⁴ Breazeale, 92.

the indeterminable, that is, into the infinite. If it did not extend to infinity, it would follow not at all from a bounding thereof, that a check to its activity would have occurred; it could well be the boundary set by its own mere concept.⁶⁵

This is an almost paradoxical way to eliminate solipsism or the I not as absolute, but as *the Absolute*: if this activity didn't extend to infinity, then the limitation set by *Anstoss* need not be real – it could well be set by its own concept, it would be absolutely posited finite I. Only this infinite striving guarantees that we will eventually encounter something real, or that *Anstoss* or check originates from something different than ourselves.

Both are to be one and the same; this signifies, in brief: *no infinity, no bounding; no bounding, no infinity; infinity and bounding are united in one and the same synthetic component.*⁶⁶

Another important reason why the I must have, so to speak, 'dual nature' is its self-knowledge. The I is not 'produced' by reflection, rather, it finds itself in it, because it has a reflective character.⁶⁷ Fichte's critique of the reflection model of self-consciousness is that reflection presupposes that which it wants to explain, i.e. the I. If I 'reflect' upon myself, I ought to already exist and 'be' me. If I stand in front of the mirror in order to see my own reflection, I ought to already know what I look like, or I wouldn't be able to 'recognize' myself in the reflection. Therefore, if the I reflects upon itself, then it already has to 'be' there, to be posited. Also, the object of reflection is always something determined (when I am thinking, I'm thinking of something: this table or that tree). When I think of myself, I find myself as 'this person,' a human being, etc., but I am also 'more' than this because I'm also a free activity that is right now thinking itself to be this person.⁶⁸ When the I reflects upon itself, it finds itself *as* determined. "As surely as the self reflects upon itself, it is in fact limited, that is, it fails to occupy the infinity which it nonetheless strives to fill."⁶⁹

If the I wasn't 'larger' than what it found (in its reflection) then it wouldn't be able to find itself at all, i.e. be for itself. For all the same reasons, I can't infer or deduce myself.

⁶⁵ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 191-192.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁷ Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, 201-202ff.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 257.

e. Absolute I

What then is absolute I? As we have seen in the above quote, the absolute I is absolutely 'identical with itself,' and therefore there is nothing distinguishable or manifold in it, nothing *positing* or *posited*.⁷⁰ The absolute I is *nothing* (determinate or defined) because it is nothing *for itself*.

The absolute self of the first principle is not *something* (it has, and can have, no predicate); it is simply *what* it is, and this can be explained no further. But now, by means of this concept, consciousness contains the *whole* of reality; and to the not-self is allotted that part of it which does not attach to the self, and *vice versa*.⁷¹

But the absolute I is also an idea that is posited by the practical striving of the I, as the result of its demand to encompass all reality and exhaust the infinite.

This demand of necessity rests on the idea of the absolutely posited, infinite self; and this is the *absolute* self, of which we have been talking. [Here the meaning of the principle, *the self posits itself absolutely*, first becomes wholly clear. There is no reference at all therein to the self given in actual consciousness; for the latter is never absolute, its state being invariably based, either mediately or immediately, upon something outside the self. We are speaking, rather, of an idea of the self which must necessarily underlie its infinite practical demand.⁷²

The actual consciousness (individual I) is never absolute because its being is always based by something outside of itself. The I as an *Idea* is in the basis of practical, infinite demand. In other words, the actual I is always finite and concrete, but in its basis lies the infinite idea as an absolute I, so it strives to encompass all of the not-I back into itself – ultimately resulting in abolishing the difference between the I and not-I, positing and posited, again becoming indistinguishable.

III. Limitation of the practical striving of the I

This dialectic of infinitely going outwards (*thesis*), being limited by something outside of our control (*antithesis*), and resulting in returning back or reflecting (*synthesis*), is also the foundation of practical striving.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 244.

Both infinite and finite activity of the I presuppose a *practical striving* to fill out the infinity and to overcome all external and internal obstacles, to make itself independent.⁷³ It is this activity of infinite, practical striving, to which the demand of *Anstoss* is directed. As we have seen in the feeling of limitation: in the determination of practical striving, *Anstoss* is accompanied by the idea of feeling or *Gefühl*, as its content.

[T]he self never feels an object, but merely feels itself; yet can only produce the object through ideal activity [...]. But the self cannot conjure up feelings in itself; for if so, it would have causality, which it is not supposed to possess.⁷⁴

Feelings are purely subjective states, but are not free willing; therefore, Fichte uses the concept to satisfy both ends: it is subjective, but not *of* the subject. The I feels itself as limited, ‘unable’ and constrained, which serve to stimulate reiteration of positing acts, to overcome the limitation. The consciousness of this infinite striving Fichte calls longing:

Hence it is an activity *that has no object whatever*, but is nonetheless *irresistibly driven out towards one*, and is merely *felt*. But such a determination in the self is called a *longing*; a drive towards something totally unknown, which reveals itself only through a *need*, a *discomfort*, a *void*, which seeks satisfaction, but does not say from whence.⁷⁵

Longing is the means by which the I, confined in itself, is driven “*out of itself*,” and only thereby is the external world revealed within it.⁷⁶ Similarly, as *Anstoss* is an ‘impulse’ on the activity of the I, longing is also without an object; it originates from the *restriction* that is felt.⁷⁷ If it is determined by an individual object, longing becomes *desire*.⁷⁸ We have noted above that *striving* also doesn’t have an object, but a *tendency* (amongst others, for reflection), which manifests itself in different, determinate forms:⁷⁹ (1) to overcome the not-I,

⁷³ Breazeale, 93.

⁷⁴ *The Science of Knowledge*, 268.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷⁷ Breazeale, 98.

⁷⁸ Wood, 15.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Man's ultimate and supreme goal is complete harmony with himself and – so that he can be in harmony with himself – the harmony of all external things with his own necessary, practical concepts of them.⁸⁰

(2) to appropriate objects,

[T]he I strives to make what is intelligible dependent upon itself, in order thereby to bring that I which entertains representations of what is intelligible into unity with the self-positing I.⁸¹

Or (3) to make them conform to the I.

Hence, what is required is the conformity of the object with the self; and it is the absolute self which demands this, precisely in the name of its absolute being.⁸²

Therefore: striving, tendency, drive, longing, and desire are all intrinsically intertwined and, basically, the same. The tendency is also interpreted as the ability to 'return,' and longing is the 'need' to overcome the obstacle. That means the I is limited in opposition with not-I, some object as a hindrance, and therefore, there is a longing to overcome that hindrance. Because it just *is* and is the condition of possibility for consciousness (in reflection), it itself is unconscious:

[T]he I produced (for the possible observer) a not-I and did so without any consciousness. The I now reflects on its product, and in this reflection it *posits* this product *as* not-I, and posits it as such absolutely and without any further specification. Again, this positing occurs unconsciously, because the I has not yet reflected upon itself.⁸³

What was said above, means that the I is *constituted* by its striving: the activity that posits the not-I is the activity of the absolute I (which, in turn, is

⁸⁰ *Early Philosophical Writings*, 150.

⁸¹ J. G. Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus*," in *Early Philosophical Writings*, 74.

⁸² Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 230.

⁸³ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 270.

interpreted as the spontaneity of reason).⁸⁴ The I is necessarily reflective (i.e. able to think of itself as the I), but it's not 'created' through reflection. The world (similarly like in phenomenological tradition) is constituted 'world-for-us.' Therefore, it has "meaning only in relation to the human self's infinite striving."⁸⁵

The activity that constitutes the world (or our representation of it) is the real activity, as opposed to the ideal activity which reverts back into itself and constitutes the I. As mentioned in the introduction, the real and ideal activities, or centrifugal and centripetal, are one and the same activity that has two 'directions': outside and inside (it could be represented as 'action and reaction.' in the same activity).⁸⁶

As we quoted above, the I strives to encompass all reality, and this demand rests on the idea of absolutely posited, infinite I, or absolute I. Centrifugal force – the one going 'outwards' – is that of the absolute I (the activity of reason), that constitutes the demand that all reality should be in the I.⁸⁷ It strives, to realize it, but it's unachievable. Yet, it continues to lay in the basis of the I, as practical demand. The goal in itself is contradictory because it means 'to realize the infinity.'

In the "Second introduction," Fichte opposes the I as *intellectual intuition* and the I as an *Idea*: both are not actual, finite I's. First is just a form of the I that the philosopher finds (i.e. it's not a 'complete' I, but its necessary form); second, is the idea that exists for the I (not for the philosopher):

The I exists in this form only *for the philosopher* [...] But the I is present as an *Idea for the I* itself, i.e., for the I the philosopher is observing. The philosopher does not portray this as his own I, but

⁸⁴ Guilherme, 10.

⁸⁵ Wood, 13.

⁸⁶ Parallels could be drawn with Hegel's master-slave dialectics, about *Anerkennung*, i.e. recognition. Fichte proclaims: "No Thou, no I; no I, no Thou," in *The Science of Knowledge*, 172-173. For Hegel, two opposite, independent self-consciousnesses encounter one another in a life and death struggle and mutual recognition, cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108ff. Albeit explaining the intersubjectivity similarly, but with less conflict, Fichte puts greater importance on the generative aspect of pre-reflective self-consciousness by its innate and necessary structure, whilst for Hegel self-consciousness is a product of society and culture. Therefore, we could make a distinction here, in my opinion, between *self-consciousness* understood as a pre-reflective, structural component of consciousness, i.e. original self-givenness, and *consciousness of or about (one)self*, in which the subject (the I) is taken as an object, which also implies knowledge or 'truth' of oneself, etc. Development of self-consciousness, at least at this place, isn't an intersubjective achievement. However, delving deeper into this comparison far outreaches the scope of this paper.

⁸⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 241-242.

rather as the Idea of the natural, albeit completely cultivated, human being [...]. The I as an Idea is identical with a rational being. [*Das Ich, als Idee, ist das VernunftWesen*]. The latter is nothing but an Idea. It cannot be thought of in any determinate manner, and it will never become anything real; instead, it is only something to which we ought to draw infinitely nearer.⁸⁸

The I as Idea is the rational being if (1) this being has become ‘rational through and through,’ if exhibits universal reason within itself; and (2) if it also completely realized reason outside of itself, in the world. In other words, it is realized if and only if one becomes a paradigm of the universal reason (thus stops being an individual), and shapes the outside world in the ‘image’ of reason. But this idea is unachievable, we can only infinitely strive towards it: to become *more* rational and to shape a *more* rational world. Realization of this Idea can be exhibited only in the practical part of philosophy and is the ultimate aim of reason’s striving.⁸⁹

a. Limitation of striving in intersubjectivity

Anstoss puts out the demand to the I to limit itself in its infinite striving. It can limit the I not only as intelligence but also in its practical striving.⁹⁰ In *Foundation of Natural Right*, Fichte introduces the notion of *Aufforderung* (equivalent to *Anstoss* in theoretical part) – it is a consciousness of being externally summoned to exercise one’s freedom through voluntarily limiting it.⁹¹ *Anstoss* in the sphere of practical is (1) immediate sense of other’s freedom and (2) moral obligation to act in accordance with that freedom.⁹² This is immediate consciousness about the freedom of other free rational beings.⁹³ Self-limitation is a necessary part of the structure of consciousness, but also the structure of intersubjectivity – in both, I limit my infinitely striving activity.

In both cases it is a demand on the I to limit itself, coming from the ‘outside.’ *The Other* is limited by me in the same way I am limited by *Him*: our freedoms limit each other. It’s the basis of interaction with others, based on *Erziehung* (education and upbringing). We are “internalizing” the demands of others;⁹⁴ *recognizing* others as autonomous, free, and self-conscious agents (like ourselves).

On top of this, Fichte builds reciprocity of relation and recognition, and

⁸⁸ Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 100-101.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁰ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 190; Breazeale, 91.

⁹¹ Breazeale, 97; Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, 31.

⁹² Breazeale, 96.

⁹³ Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, 31-32.

⁹⁴ Wood, 19.

also, the relation of rights.⁹⁵ Mutual recognition is the basis of the relation of rights between two rational beings that recognize each other as such.⁹⁶ Notions of practical are expressed in the not-I, therefore the need for others, and harmony and coherence with them. It becomes a fundamental requirement for there to exist others: “One of the things that man requires is that rational beings like himself should exist outside of him.”⁹⁷

But that relation is not the same as relation towards objects, because relations with others are based on coordination.

[T]he social drive is one of man’s fundamental drives. It is man’s *destiny* to live in society; he *ought* to live in society. One who lives in isolation is not a complete human being. He contradicts his own self.⁹⁸

Interaction, reciprocal causality, mutability, communication, education and upbringing, etc. – all rely on the social drive and recognizing others as myself. This mutual recognition also plays a part in constituting self-consciousness: recognizing others as free agents and being recognized as such.⁹⁹ Only as limited and in this tension, the I can be finite and in-the-world, in society and among other material things.

b. Finite I: drive towards absolute self-unity

The I can’t be an absolute I – it is always limited and determined (this person). If it is always limited, it needs to be immersed into concrete and actual situations, contexts, practical options, etc. The finite I only interacts in finite projects, situations, obligations. I, as finite I, can’t be described by this infinite, undetermined, undifferentiated striving. Therefore, the I must also have a drive towards *determining* itself.¹⁰⁰

Properly speaking, who am I? I.e., what kind of individual am I?
And what is the reason for my being *who* I am? To this question,
I respond as follows: from the moment I become conscious, I am
*what I freely make myself to be, and this is who I am because this
is what I make of myself.* – At each moment of my existence, my

⁹⁵ Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, 44-45, 111.

⁹⁶ Wood, 20.

⁹⁷ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 155.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹⁹ Breazeale, 97.

¹⁰⁰ Wood, 17.

being is through freedom, if not with respect to its conditions, then at least with respect to its *ultimate* determination.¹⁰¹

We can't stay undefined or undetermined as an insatiable striving – just the same as our freedom to think this or that must be realized by actually thinking something. In this, we gain our identity because we unify ourselves coherently. The idea of a system – that which is defined by a single principle – or unity of reason is present here also: all drives must be united into a single one; all strengths into one, single strength, etc. It is represented by a drive towards self-coherence, or to be a single coherent or harmonious system. “This drive may be described as the self's *drive to interdetermination* through itself, or the drive to absolute *unity* and completeness of the self within itself.”¹⁰² This is not a characteristic of humans, but all rational beings.

The ultimate characteristic feature of all rational beings is, accordingly, absolute unity, constant self-identity, complete agreement with oneself. This absolute identity is the form of the pure I and is its only true form; or rather, in the conceivability of identity we *recognize* the expression of the pure form of the I.¹⁰³

It is the *form* of the I. If we are in situation A led by principle X, and in situation B by principle Y, etc. – we are self-contradictory.¹⁰⁴ In the end, we could also be a hypocrite and biased. Without this drive, there exist self-deception, despair, and conflict with oneself. But, for Fichte, the reason is and can only be one. This also means harmony with the world through notions of practical. Therefore, becoming more self-coherent, we at the same time become more like one another – in infinity, losing our individualities; this way a finite, rational being exhibits ‘universal reason within itself.’

This tendency belongs to the essence of the I – it can't be eliminated without eliminating the I itself. On the basis of self-limitation, Fichte deduces the relation of the I with the outside world, embodiment of the I, his fundamental drive towards self-unity, and intersubjectivity.

Only free, reciprocal interaction by means of concepts and in accordance with concepts, only the giving and receiving of knowledge, is the distinctive character of humanity, by virtue of

¹⁰¹ Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, 211.

¹⁰² Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 284.

¹⁰³ Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 149.

¹⁰⁴ Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, 333. Our life should not contradict our teachings.

which alone each person undeniably confirms himself as a human being.¹⁰⁵

IV. Conclusion: The I as constituted by striving

Fichte shows that the character of the I is ‘necessarily *divided*,’ and that unity of consciousness isn’t just posited on the first principle, but also practically demanded even as forever unachievable goal of human striving.¹⁰⁶ Undifferentiated unity of the I, homogeneity, can’t be more than an *Idea*: if it was to happen, then self-consciousness as we know it, our finite I would be destroyed.

We see more definitely here that the self must be finite and limited. No restriction, no drive (in the transcendent sense): no drive, no reflection, (transition to the transcendental): no reflection, no drive, and no limitation and nothing that limits, etc., (in the transcendental sense): so runs the circuit of the self’s functions, and the inwardly linked reciprocity of the latter with itself.¹⁰⁷

The circle goes from the drive towards reflection – the striving, through reflection, comes into the transcendental sphere. This conflict within the I itself, this tension is the condition of possibility of the I in the first place. Yet, this infinite striving towards self-harmony, self-unity is unachievable. The I needs to be in contradiction with itself in order to *be* at all. The drive towards self-unity is the drive towards self-destruction, a drive towards death (of finite and concrete, individual I). The undifferentiated unity of consciousness is always an infinite goal, and actual consciousness remains a striving towards that goal – an infinite striving for an infinite goal. A contradiction, to be sure, but a necessary one, because it is the *moving force* of both theoretical self-consciousness and practical self-activity.¹⁰⁸ Only the tension between opposites produces these dynamics. If consciousness was to be only finite or only infinite, there would, effectively, be no consciousness at all. The paradox is that the I must count on itself (take itself) as absolute, but also to recognize that it is (to be) limited.

This dialectic between infinity and finitude, freedom and necessity, striving and reflection, etc. is at the heart of Fichte’s philosophy. It is also the

¹⁰⁵ Fichte, *Foundation of Natural Right*, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Breazeale, 93.

¹⁰⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 258.

¹⁰⁸ Breazeale, 100-101.

original duality of the self, therefore being embedded into the structure of consciousness, i.e. subjectivity. The tension caused by contradiction is both the limiting factor and the mover of the I – contradiction with itself and the endless struggle to overcome this self-contradiction. But that unity is a necessary albeit infinite idea.

The nature of the I is henceforth determined in this manner, insofar as it can be determined at all, and the contradiction therein is resolved, insofar as it can be resolved at all: The I is infinite, but only with respect to its striving: it strives to be infinite. But finitude is already contained within the very concept of striving, since that to which there is no *counterstriving* is no striving at all. If the I were more than a striving, if it possessed an infinite causality, then it would be no I; it would not posit itself, and therefore it would be nothing. But if it did not possess this endless striving, then again it could not posit itself, since it could not posit anything in opposition to itself; thus it would also not be an I in this case, and hence it would be nothing.¹⁰⁹

This kind of self which is not infinite, and not finite (but *just right*) is the finite kind of self, limited, but not determined, dependent, but not absolutely, and independent, but not absolutely. Only in this way can it be a practical agent, acting in the world – at the same time ‘in’ the world, and opposed to it. It constantly (re-)affirms its freedom, through struggle.¹¹⁰ Striving of the absolute I forces the I to encompass the whole reality, so there was no not-I.¹¹¹ But, that is not possible, because the not-I is needed for the I to reflect itself and be limited and determined. Breazeale interprets this characteristic as Sartrean “striving to be God”¹¹² – therefore being a self-contradiction, because if somehow, we do become God, we would stop being who we are – finite, concrete, and determined, this and not that person.

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¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 102.

¹¹¹ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 137.

¹¹² Breazeale, 101.

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