

Fichte's Wild Metaphysical Yarn

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ABSTRACT: I review Adrian Moore's lucid account of Fichte's contribution to the *Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*. I support Moore's contention that Fichte should indeed be considered a metaphysician, but I propose an adjustment to Moore's interpretation, guided by Fichte's own claim that the infinite I is an unattainable ideal, rather than a fact about the constitution of reality as it actually is. The resulting position embeds Fichte's metaphysics firmly within his ethics and politics. In reconstructing Fichte's position I demonstrate the centrality of *work* in Fichte's proposed resolution of Kant's third antinomy.

I propose to approach Adrian Moore's colossal history of modern metaphysics by way of one of his many rich and revealing footnotes. The footnote that I have in mind is appended to a passage in the main text where Moore provides a concise sketch of Fichte's overall metaphysical position:

In Fichte's developed system there is an infinite self, whose infinite activity involves, first, the positing of itself; second, the positing of a finite field of activity distinct from itself in which it is to act; and third, the positing of a finite self set over against and in opposition to this non-self. (151)¹

This is a familiar summary of Fichte's notoriously extravagant and apparently metaphysical commitments. A few pages further on, Moore notes wryly that it has "the appearance of a wild metaphysical yarn."² Moore himself has a number of interesting contributions to make in interpreting Fichte's yarn, most importantly in connection with the technical notion of "positing," which figures at every stage in Fichte's elaboration of his programme. I shall return to this matter below. But for now my concern is with Moore's footnote to this passage, in which he observes: "There is no *locus classicus* for this." (151n20) There is something odd about this fact. Is there really no passage in which Fichte simply states this famously Fichtean position? If not, then why not? And how exactly should we make sense of that?

In his footnote, Moore goes on to explain that this set of claims "occupies pretty much the whole of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" – by which Moore is referring primarily to the early (Jena) version of Fichte's philosophical system. In some sense this is surely correct. The *Wissenschaftslehre* traffics very heavily in the notion of a self-positing and infinite ego or I, and certainly one of Fichte's most fundamental philosophical commitments is to a view of the world as, first and foremost, the correlate

of our moral consciousness and the sphere for the exercise of our duties. Moreover, he talks again and again about the I's act of positing the not-I in opposition to the I, which must in turn be understood as a finite, rather than an absolute ego. These are the major recurring themes in Fichte's madly cacophonous philosophical *opera*. Despite all this, however, there are some recurring notes within that cacophony that raise doubts about whether Fichte's overall metaphysical position is best captured by Moore's concise summary. In the spirit of metaphysical creativity that Moore himself both exemplifies and celebrates, I propose to explore some of these alternatives, which in turn connect with some of the larger themes in Moore's own project.

I will start with a passage that comes at the end of the famous opening paragraphs of the 1794 *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. These are the paragraphs in which Fichte formally introduces the foundations of his system, starting with the puzzling movement from the principle of identity ($A=A$) to the principle of the self-positing ego ($I=I$). This is perhaps as close as one can come to the *locus classicus* for which Moore searched in vain: we are introduced, over these first few pages, to the idea of the absolute or infinite self-positing I (§1), to the positing of the non-I by the I (§2), and then finally to the principle of finitude and mutual limitation (§3).³ At the very end of this stretch of text we find a dense and fascinating set of reflections in which, among other things, Fichte considers the consequences of these first principles for logic, compares his own position to that of Kant and Spinoza, and invokes his notorious image of a stubbornly “dogmatic” opponent. I cannot here try to reconstruct all the details of these remarks, but I do want to dwell on one important idea that makes its appearance there, particularly in connection with Fichte's remarks about Spinoza.

The idea that there is a systematic connection between Spinoza and German Idealism is a common one, and Moore himself explores this connection in his discussion of Hegel. The leading thought there is one that Hegel himself cultivates, most famously in his remark in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself,
everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but
equally as *Subject*. (1807, 9-10, §17)

If we take our lead from Hegel-on-Spinoza then we will think of German Idealism as taking over Spinoza's metaphysical monism, but insisting, as Moore puts it, on the “*personhood of substance*” (179).⁴

We find an anticipation of this Hegelian thought in Fichte's remarks about Spinoza at the end *Grundlage* §3. In one long parenthetical Fichte describes Spinoza as looking for the “absolutely primary, ultimate unity,” and finding it in substance. He contrasts this to his own position, which is to look for this primary unity “in consciousness,” or in the I (I, 121). In a similar vein he says of dogmatism:

At its utmost limit, as in Spinoza's system, it extends to our second and third
principles, but not to the first absolutely unconditioned one. (I, 122)

That is, Spinoza has no place for the idealist principle of the absolute, self-positing subject.

But there is a second element in Fichte's divergence from Spinoza that ultimately also points us towards a divergence from Hegel as well. What all three have in common is the commitment to some ultimate principle, variously identified as God, Substance, the Absolute, the Ultimate Ground of Unity, the infinite, self-positing I But whereas Spinoza and Hegel take this principle to be something real or actual, Fichte insists here that it is "rather the object of an Idea, viz., something that *ought* to exist, and that we ought to bring about" (I, 121).

With this in mind, let's return to Moore's pithy summary of Fichte's metaphysical position. Recall how it begins: "In Fichte's developed system *there is* an infinite self, ..." (151, emphasis added). What I want to suggest is that we need to hesitate over the word "is" in this formula. If we take our orientation from Fichte's remarks about Spinoza then a correction – or at least an adjustment – suggests itself. According to Fichte, *there is not an infinite self*. The selves that *are* (you, and me, and yes: even Adrian Moore!) ... – we are all finite selves. The infinite, self-positing self for which Fichte is notorious, is at most an Idea, an object of striving and longing, perhaps even of moral duty. But it is *not* something that *is*.

It would not be enough of an adjustment to allow that the infinite I does not exist *now*, but nonetheless *is* in a tenseless sense, or *will be* in the future. For Fichte also seems to hold that the infinite I *cannot* be, since it contains a contradiction (I, 117). So there is no Fichtean infinite self, and there never will be! There is nonetheless one sense in which Moore's pithy summary is compatible with the interpretation I am exploring here. As I have emphasised, it is perfectly true that Fichte's developed system *makes reference to* an infinite self; in this sense there is indeed an infinite self in his developed system. This is compatible with the claim that such a self does not *exist* – that it serves rather as an essential-but-impossible-goal.

If we come this far in rethinking the modality of Fichte's philosophical commitments then a number of further questions immediately come in to view. Once again I shall be ruthlessly selective and focus on just one of them: *Is it in fact proper to think of Fichte as belonging to the history of metaphysics at all?* Here I have to confess that I had mixed feelings when I first saw Moore's Big Book. On the one hand I was pleased to see Fichte recognised there with the big boys: Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Dummett ... *and Fichte*. If you spend a chunk of your career trying to bring an obscure and caricatured philosopher into the mainstream philosophical conversation, that feels like a not-insignificant victory. On the other hand, part of me would in one way prefer that Fichte be *left out* of the history of metaphysics. In the past, part of my own strategy for rehabilitating Fichte was precisely to bring him into a philosophical conversation that unfolded, so to speak, *after metaphysics*. But after reading Adrian's book I have changed my mind. Let me try to explain my thinking on this question.

Start from the point that I have just been pressing. If Fichte's theory of the absolute I is not a theory of how things are but of how things ought to be, then there is one straightforward sense in which it is *not* a contribution to metaphysics. At least one traditional conception of metaphysics (not

Moore's, to be sure) casts it as the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the ultimate constituents and constitution of reality. So if the Fichtean absolute I is not part of the real, then (by this standard) it doesn't belong to metaphysics. Where does it belong? In an earlier life I have tried to argue that it belongs to existential phenomenology – it is the name for a fundamental structure of experience.⁵ But in light of the point I have been making here we might instead think of it as belonging to ethics, or to politics, or perhaps (this may be the most accurate typography) to normative political economy. Fichte's theory of the absolute I is, on this accounting, an attempt to tell us what we ought to do, what we properly strive for. Keeping in mind that this is a theory first proposed in 1794, it should also be understood as an attempt to say what progressive revolutionaries should be doing – what the moral *telos* of the French Revolution consists in. We may or may not like Fichte's answer to that question; we might even hate it. But the proper place to contest it would not be in metaphysics but in practical philosophy and the political arena.⁶

I am keenly aware that with these last remarks I am probably not winning any friends for Fichte's philosophical cause. Who could possibly sign up to a revolutionary movement that sets out to produce an Absolute I?!? ... For now I would only ask that you suspend judgement while I follow this out two steps further. You may well still hate Fichte's proposal, but at least you will know what to hate!

Once again let me frame this in terms of Fichte's place in the history of metaphysics. So far I have offered one reason for keeping Fichte's I out of that history, on the grounds that it is not a contribution to the theory of the ultimate constitution of reality. But I want to balance that against two reasons why we should nonetheless *include* it in the history of metaphysics. This in turn will help us to understand something of what drives Fichte's normative commitments, and how he fits into Moore's history of sense-making.

The first point here pertains specifically to the theory of freedom. To put the point concisely: Fichte belongs to the history of modern metaphysics because the theory of freedom lies at the heart of that history, and because Fichte's account of the absolute I is intended as a contribution to that theory. Fichte himself famously wrote that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is “the first [philosophical] system of freedom.”⁷ (The remark appears, notably, in a letter soliciting a stipend from the French revolutionary government!) So one way to see how Fichte's project is metaphysical is to bring in to view the way in which the notion of the Absolute I is intended specifically as a contribution to the theory of freedom.

This is a big topic, so I can here offer nothing more than the barest outline of Fichte's position, as I understand it. For Fichte, we can distinguish two fundamental components of realised freedom. Taken together they can be summed up in terms of a single controversial slogan: *The essence of freedom is work.*⁸ Take the two components in turn. One crucial aspect of my freedom, according to Fichte, lies in my ability to use my body in order to transform an object in accordance with my judgement as to how it ought to be. On Fichte's analysis, this process begins with a representation, and culminates in the production of a state-of-affairs that conforms to that representation. Freedom is actualised in purposive, transformative action.⁹

But this is at most one half of Fichte's story. The second element in his understanding of freedom lies in his distinctive response to the challenge provided by Kant's third antinomy (A444/B472-A451/B479). Like all of the post-Kantian idealists, Fichte takes very seriously the antinomical tension between determination-by-self and determination-by-world. And like everyone else, he was not satisfied with Kant's dualistic strategy for coping with this tension. So what is Fichte's solution? How can freedom be real in a world where the I is determined by the not-I? The nub of Fichte's answer is shockingly simple: since freedom requires that the I determines itself, and since the I is always in some measure determined by the not-I, freedom can only be realised *insofar as the not-I that determines the I is itself determined by the I.*

As *locus classicus* for this bold idea I propose the following passage from the first of Fichte's Sunday morning lectures at Jena:

A person ought to determine himself and not permit himself to be determined by something alien. He ought to be what he is because this is what he wills to be and what he ought to will to be. ... But feeling, as well as representation (which presupposes feeling) is not something free, but depends instead upon things external to the I – things whose characteristic feature is not identity at all, but rather multiplicity. If the I nevertheless ought always to be at one with itself in this respect too, then it must strive to act directly upon those very things upon which human feeling and representation depend. Man must try to modify these things. He must attempt to bring them into harmony with the pure form of the I. (VI, 297-298)

In Fichte's philosophical sermon we can hear both elements of his conception of freedom. Freedom is realised in work ("man must ... modify things"), and that labour is oriented toward a state of affairs where the "alien something" is "brought into harmony with ... the I." Fichtean work, and Fichtean freedom thus has both a local and a global element. Locally, I work to transform an object in accord with my judgement as to how it ought to be. Globally, the task is ultimately to transform the entire world through labour – never satisfied until we reach the point where, in being determined by something other, we are determined by nothing other than ourselves.

It is worth noting that the notion of work that is in play here is not synonymous with the general concept of action. Fichtean work is a variety of action, but not all action amounts to work. As the Sunday sermon makes clear, Fichtean work must be such as to result in the modification of things. It must change the world, in order to bring it closer to the way that it ought to be. It is only action that meets this requirement that is relevant to the realisation of freedom. So if, for example, there are forms of human action which simply perpetuate the world in its current wrong configuration, these would not amount to work of the sort that concerns Fichte. Moreover, if there are forms of mental action that are *strictly* contemplative or cognitive, lacking any impact on the extra-mental world, then this also would not amount to work, even if it involved significant exertion. The point of Fichtean work is to change the world, not simply to understand it.

The passage upon which I have so far relied comes from Fichte's popular writings, so it will be useful to supplement it with textual evidence in which this extravagant trajectory appears within the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself. Here is one such passage, in which Fichte is addressing his own variant of the Kantian antinomy:

And so it would go on forever, if the knot were not cut, rather than loosed, by an absolute decree of reason, which the philosopher does not pronounce, but merely proclaims: since there is no way of reconciling the not-self with the self, let there be no not-self at all! (I, 144)

Care must certainly be taken with this passage, which presents a number of difficulties. Allow me to start with a few comments on the Heath and Lachs translation, which I have followed here.¹⁰ Fichte writes of a *Machtspruch der Vernunft*, which Heath and Lachs have rightly captured with the phrase “decree of reason.” But what does Fichte mean by saying that this decree is not “pronounced” by the philosopher, but only “proclaimed”? Here we really do need to look behind the translation. Fichte’s point is that this decree is not one that is somehow *issued* by the philosopher. The verb which Heath and Lachs translate as “pronounce” is in fact *thun* – to do. Rather, the philosopher’s role is simply to describe or indicate a decree (the German verb is *aufzeigt* – to point out) that has its source in reason or subjectivity itself. But in addition to these important issues about the modality of the decree, it is also important to clarify its content. In reporting on the demand that there should be no not-I at all, Fichte is not proposing that everything other than me should be destroyed, still less that it never existed at all. His proposal is rather than everything other than me *should be as it ought to be* – that we cannot properly be free until the world is transformed to conform to the standards established by the I. It is in this sense, I submit, that Fichte thinks that the Infinite I should be the aim of our endeavours, both individual and collective.¹¹

With this we have one way to fit Fichte into the evolution of modern metaphysics – despite his insistence on the non-existence of his infinite I. He contributes to that evolution a novel understanding of the nature of freedom, a novel strategy for reconciling freedom and determinism, and a novel account of the place of freedom in the sphere of human activity. But there is a second way in which I would now propose to include Fichte in the history of metaphysics, and this pertains specifically to Moore’s way of understanding the metaphysical project as “the most general attempt to make sense of things” (1). For Fichte, our ways of making sense of things are themselves inextricably tied up with what he calls our “vocation” [*Bestimmung*], and that vocation is itself inextricably tied up with a sense of our own status as agents, or would-be agents. And the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself, as a very general attempt to make sense of our making sense of things, is itself perhaps best understood as a form of philosophical labour through which we come to terms with that sense of agency.

This is a theme that plays out in many different ways in Fichte’s writings, and in Moore’s own accounting of Fichte’s project. The crucial point here lies in the paradoxical combination of the ineliminability, and the fragility, of our sense of ourselves as agents. The two opposed philosophical options with which Fichte famously presents his readers offer different responses to this paradox. The

so-called dogmatist pronounces that our sense of our own free agency is ultimately an illusion, that our so-called actions are simply responses of a complex thing to a complex natural and social environment. But Fichte's idealist treats that sense of agency and freedom and moral constraint (what together we might call Fichte's Fact of Reason) as the ultimate non-negotiable. Fichte famously describes the phenomenon as a form of intellectual intuition (I, 463-468). In this we have a Fichtean example of the sort of non-propositional metaphysical insight with which Moore himself is deeply concerned in his book. However at the same time Fichte recognises that our sense of agency is threatened by the inescapable fact that we are, in his terms, "determined by the not-I" (I, 127). One of the richest veins in Moore's history lies in his exploration of the strategies available for coping with the non-propositional substrate of the metaphysical enterprise. On this matter it does strike me that Fichte pioneers a distinctive response.

At this stage, my accounting of Fichte's strategy will not surprise you. His proposed response to this non-propositional sense for our own agency is *work*. In individual intentional action we can manifest and express our agency and subjectivity; in collective political and economic action we can reform our world as one in which freedom can be progressively realised; and in philosophical work we seek to come to terms with (and even, within limits, articulate) that non-propositional sense of our intuited vocation as agents.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to one of Moore's distinctive interpretative proposals. For although Moore allows that Fichte's position may *sound* like a wild metaphysical yarn, he ultimately concludes that this appearance is misleading. Moore's strategy for taming the yarn involves a novel and intriguing interpretation of an important piece of Fichtean jargon: positing. "To posit" is the standard English translation of one of Fichte's central terms-of-art: "*setzen*." So what exactly does it mean, within Fichte's technical vocabulary, to say that the I posits itself, or that the I posits the not I? The crux of Moore's proposal is to distinguish "positing" sharply from "causing" or "creating." On this line, to say that the I posits itself is decidedly *not* to say that the I is somehow self-creating, or that it causes the not I to come into existence. Moore's alternative is to understand positing as an intentional phenomenon. To say that "the I posits itself" means in effect: "the I *asserts* itself," or "the I *expresses* itself;" to say that the I posits the not I means: "the I *acknowledges* the not-I."¹²

This is an intriguing and original proposal, and one that will undoubtedly provoke serious discussion among specialists. It is one of the many pleasures of this remarkable book that it is punctuated at every turn by promising leads such as this one. For present purposes I confine myself to two observations about Moore's proposal. First, I note that on Moore's reading, there would seem to be a systematic equivocation in Fichte's use of "*setzen*." In the context of the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, where Fichte's concern is with the I's positing of itself, positing is a form of *assertion*; the I in effect makes a claim about itself, it insists on its own status as an I or subject. But it would seem that this same sense of "*setzen*" is not at work in the second principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, where positing the not-I is not a form of assertion but of *acknowledgement* of the not-I. So Fichte would, on this reading, lack a unified conception of positing. I do not necessarily

mean this as an objection to Moore's proposal, but it is an issue both of interpretation and of substance that would have to be worked through in a fuller elaboration of Moore's interpretative strategy.

On my own interpretation, however – and here I come to my second observation – there is indeed a causal dimension to the I's acts of positing and counter-positing. This is not to say that Fichte's I somehow creates itself and its object *ex nihilo*. I too want to tame the yarn. But this is compatible with allowing that there is nonetheless a productive element in the I's acts of positing. An act of self-assertion is itself a kind of gambit; it is a game at which one can either win or lose. On Fichte's view, success at self-assertion requires that I *make myself* into an I – into a free, self-determining subject. If Fichte's response of the third antinomy is correct, this in turn requires that I exert my causal powers on the not-I, transforming it into what it ought to be. The not-I that results (roughly: the built environment, in the very broadest sense) is indeed *created by me* – or rather: *by us*, by the I of which you and I are both parts. Understood along these lines, the I's twin acts of positing (positing of I and positing of not-I) does indeed involve a form of creation-through-work; we *make ourselves* into free subjects by a suitable *remaking* of the world in which we act.¹³

Wivenhoe Park
2 August, 2013

¹ Unadorned page references in this format refer to A.W. Moore (2012).

² Moore:

At the very beginning of the previous section I provided a sketch of Fichte's system. That sketch gave it the appearance of a wild metaphysical yarn in which the subject, enjoying a kind of infinitude, does indeed create all the objects of its knowledge – though only first have created itself, and prior to creating a second, finite version of itself. (156)

³ The passages of the *Grundlage* are, respectively, (I, 92-101, 101-105, 105-122). Unless specified otherwise, references to Fichte's writings are provided in parentheses and refer to the volume and page number of Fichte (1971). Citations to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given using the usual A and B numbering.

⁴ For an account of German Idealism that is guided by this lead, see Beiser (2002).

⁵ See my *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project*, Martin (1997).

⁶ This is very much in keeping with one strand of Moore's own strategy for coping with Fichte's "wild metaphysical yarn"; he emphasizes, particularly in the final few pages of the Fichte chapter, that the yarn is "supposed to be a fundamentally practical exercise" (156). Here it is worth noting that Frederick Beiser has proposed a compelling interpretation of Fichte's position as a form of "practical idealism"; for a concise summary see Beiser (2002, 218-19). However Beiser nonetheless treats Fichtean idealism as opposed to realism, and in the service of a refutation of external-world skepticism,

thereby retaining a fundamentally metaphysical and epistemological framing for understanding Fichte's project.

⁷ Draft of a Letter to Baggesen, April/May, 1795. (Fichte 1962, series 3, vol, 2, 298).

⁸ One cannot use this slogan responsibly without acknowledging its hideous appropriation into the architecture of Auschwitz. Worse still, there is reason to suspect that its use at Auschwitz can itself be traced indirectly back to Fichte's influence in German culture between the first and second world wars. For an analysis of this influence, see Sluga (1993, 29-41).

⁹ Modern readers, particularly those that have learned from Heidegger and Ryle, may well balk at Fichte's insistence that the exercise of agency always begins with a representation. For better or for worse, however, this seems to be Fichte's view. See, for example §2 of the Introduction to his *System of Ethics*; (IV, 2).

¹⁰ See Fichte (1982, 137)

¹¹ An additional comment is in order concerning the verb that Heath and Lachs translate as "reconcile." Reconciliation is of course an important concept in Hegelian philosophy. See Hardimon (1994). The key German term there is *Versöhnung*. But it is crucial to appreciate that it is *not* this Hegelian concept, nor indeed this Hegelian language, that is in play here. Fichte's claim is that *unification* of the I and not-I is impossible: "*das nicht-Ich mit dem Ich auf keine Art sich vereinigen lässt.*" There are two differences from Hegel here. The reconciliation provided by Hegelian philosophy is always retrospective – coming to terms with something that has already happened. The Fichtean *Machtspruch* is by contrast essentially *prospective*: telling us something about what ought to be attained. That is the first difference. The second is that Hegelian reconciliation is something that, at least according to Hegel, is indeed something attainable and indeed (if Hegel was right) already attained. By contrast, the "unity of I and not-I" is, according to Fichte, something that remains in principle out of reach. Taking into account all these observations as regards Fichte's language in this very important passage, I would propose the following as an alternative to the Heath and Lachs translation:

And so it would go on forever, if the knot were not cut, rather than loosed, by an absolute decree of reason, which is not a decree that the philosopher somehow issues, but which he simply points out: since the not-I can in no way be unified with the I, let there be no not-I at all!

¹² For Moore's account of the meaning of "setzen", see (156-158).

¹³ I am grateful to James Rodwell for his assistance in the preparation of these remarks for publication, to Joseph Shear and Manuel Dries for their organization of the symposium to which they were originally a contribution, to Lauren Brown and Georgina Hawtin for helpful discussion of Moore's reading of Fichte, and to Sebastian Gardener, Josiah Sanders and David Batho for their comments and questions in response to an earlier draft.

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