

Review of Imhof (2014)

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Fichte's philosophy is still among the darkest of the German-language tradition. One approach to understanding it is through Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the discussion that followed it. In his study, *Der Grund der Subjektivität*, Silvan Imhof follows this path—and with resounding success. Imhof shows how Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* can be understood as the preliminary endpoint of a discourse that was essentially concerned with overcoming skeptical arguments. Already Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* can be understood in that way. In particular, in the *Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding*, Kant tries to fend off Hume's attacks on the legitimacy of central concepts such as causality and substantiality. Kant's attempt, however, remained inadequate according to the diagnosis of some contemporaries such as S. Maimon and G.E. Schulze. This motivated first Reinhold, and then Fichte to search for a foundation of philosophy that is in fact indubitable. Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* can thus be understood, according to Imhof's central thesis, as an attempt to overcome skeptical objections from the post-Kantian discussion.

Imhof substantiates this thesis by tracing the discourse leading from Kant's *Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding* (=“TD”) to Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (=“GL”). This discourse is curiously shaped by a misunderstanding that Maimon commits in his interpretation of Kant's TD. Namely, as Imhof demonstrates, Maimon believes that Kant's TD takes its beginning from the fact of experience, without further substantiating it. It is this dogmatic assumption of the fact of experience that Maimon criticizes, claiming that such a fact is not a suitable starting point for a TD, because it is dubitable. However, according to Imhof, this criticism misses Kant's point, since his TD does not start from the fact of experience, but rather from subjects having ideas (= “*Haben von Vorstellungen*”).

Although Maimon's skeptical critique is based on a misunderstanding, Reinhold is so impressed by it that he sets out to find a new basis for a transcendental deduction. He finds one in his theorem of consciousness, according to which in consciousness the ideas are related to subject and object and are

distinguished from both. But even this theorem is not suitable as a basis for a transcendental deduction, as first Schulze and then Fichte note. For it expresses a mere *fact*. But facts can always be doubted. Thus, Reinhold's search for an indubitable basis also fails.

Fichte's GL now begins at this point of discussion. Its fundamental insight, according to Imhof, is that because every fact can be doubted, a skepticism-resistant philosophy must be built on something other than a fact. Fichte finds this other in the self-positing ("*Selbstsetzung*") of the I, which he conceives as "*Tathandlung*" ("fact-action" or "(f)act"). Fichte claims in Imhof's reconstruction that this *Tathandlung* has a special character, which makes it indubitable.

With the conception of the *Tathandlung*, Fichte overcomes the weaknesses of Reinhold's attempt at a foundation of philosophy. But how does Fichte's foundation of philosophy relate to Kant's TD? Since Reinhold's attempt, and with it its improvement by Fichte, is based on Maimon's wrong understanding of Kant, the question arises whether Fichte improves Kant's TD at all if properly understood. At first glance, this is not the case. For, Imhof argues, Kant already succeeded in building his TD on a foundation resistant to skepticism, namely on the mere having of ideas, which is expressed in Kant's phrase of the *I think that must be able to accompany all my ideas*. The indubitability of the mere having of ideas is conceded at least by skeptics like Hume and Schulze. Thus, it seems at first as if Kant's TD already stands on a secure foundation and therefore needs no improvement by Fichte.

But this view is wrong according to Imhof. For although Kant's TD starts from an indubitable foundation, it still fails. The reason for this is that Kant elaborates this foundation incorrectly: The having of ideas refers to a subject. Therefore, an adequate conception of the having of ideas requires an accurate theory of subjectivity. However, Kant does not provide such a theory. Its development is hindered by Kant's dogma of the strict separation of sensibility and understanding. This dogma prevents Kant from conceptualizing subjectivity by means of the figure of intellectual intuition. Because Kant refuses to resort to that figure, he arrives at an inconsistent characterization of subjectivity: on the one hand, the subject is conceived as a transcendental entity, which cannot appear sensually and therefore cannot be an object of insight. On the other hand, Kant speaks of an empirical subject that appears in the inner sense. According to Imhof, what one has to do with the other remains completely unclear in Kant.

Fichte overcomes this conceptual weakness by characterizing the subject through the figure of intellectual intuition. Since the subject is the basis both of understanding and of sensibility, it seems obvious that it must be the union of these two faculties, and this union is nothing other than intellectual intuition. Fichte does not yet express this thought in the GL, but all the more emphatically in his “*Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*” of 1797.

With this revised understanding of the subject, Fichte now succeeds, according to Imhof, in actually finding a basis for philosophy that is resistant to skepticism. The further progress of the *Wissenschaftslehre* then consists in nothing else than deriving a multitude of central concepts of philosophy from this basis.

By tracing the philosophical development from Hume through Kant, Maimon, Reinhold, and Schulze to Fichte, Imhof provides the reader with a historical approach to Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. However, in order to make it plausible that Fichte’s philosophy can indeed be seen as overcoming its historical predecessors, Imhof also offers systematic reconstructions of central pieces of Kantian and Fichtean philosophy. It is primarily these systematically oriented exegetical offerings that make Imhof’s study so particularly valuable. One such offer is Imhof’s proposal to understand Fichte’s self-positing of the *I* centrally as an *intentional act*, and thus to view the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a *theory of intentionality*. Another innovative idea in Imhof’s reconstructions is the way in which Imhof derives the indubitability of the *Tathandlung* from an interpretation of positing. Imhof understands positing—following Strawson—as the presupposition of the subject in a sentence. Such a presupposition is found in every ordinary statement of the form “*x* is an *F*”. In such a statement it is presupposed that there exists an *x* to which *F* can be attributed. The statement itself, however, cannot ensure the fulfillment of this presupposition. Imhof now understands the self-positing of the *I* as that specific presupposition that guarantees its own fulfillment. Thus, because in the self-positing of the *I* a proposition is established whose content is real by virtue of merely being thought, the self-positing is indubitable.

Imhof’s project is highly ambitious in both historical and systematical terms. Historically, by discussing Kant’s TD and Fichte’s GL Imhof treats two of the most difficult texts that the philosophical tradition has to offer. Systematically, Imhof not only reconstructs the central ideas of these texts, but also examines their validity. What is admirable is Imhof’s argumentative concentration: he does not lose himself in out-of-the-way exegetical battles, but consciously

highlights core elements of Kant's and Fichte's argumentations. As a result, Imhof's reflections achieve exemplary clarity and stringency.

It is in the nature of such an ambitious undertaking that it is not immune to further inquiries. One question concerns Imhof's thesis that Fichte in his *Wissenschaftslehre* is essentially concerned with overcoming skepticism. This thesis would suggest itself if Fichte succeeded in such an overcoming. Imhof argues that he does, since the *Tathandlung* is a skeptic-resistant basis of philosophy. However, Imhof does not make it fully clear why this should be the case: first, it remains unclear in Imhof's reconstruction whether the foundation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is supposed to be the *performance* of the *Tathandlung*, or the *description* of such performance. In the first case, the assumption of immunity to skepticism might be convincing, because only statements or propositions, but not actions, can be doubted. Usually, however, philosophical systems are regarded as networks of propositions. But only the description, not the performance, of an action can be a proposition. This suggests that the *Wissenschaftslehre* starts with the *description* of the *Tathandlung*. But then it is hard to see why such a description should not be exposed to skeptical objections in the same way as the description of a fact. For example, it can be doubted that anything at all corresponds to Fichte's descriptions of the *Tathandlung*. Such a doubt even suggests itself in certain respects, for these descriptions contradict familiar patterns of thought to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine how anything could correspond to them. Thus, despite Imhof's interpretations, it remains unclear whether Fichte actually succeeds in finding a skeptic-resistant foundation of philosophy.

If this is uncertain, the question arises as to whether Fichte actually aimed for immunity to skepticism with the vigor that Imhof attributes to him. Imhof's interpretation may well draw on relevant quotations from Fichte. However, there are also passages in Fichte's works that point in a different direction. In the introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, for example, Fichte points out that, at least in real life, no human being ever doubts the reality of the external world. Nevertheless, a foundation of the external world is necessary. But not because skepticism poses a serious threat to our belief in the external world. It is necessary solely because with skepticism our thinking is in danger of colliding with the obvious fact of the reality of the external world. Such a collision would be a scandal to reason. Thus, a foundation of our belief in the external world is necessary to save confidence in our reason, but not to save our belief in the external world. The goal of such

a foundation, then, is to reconcile reason with itself, not to escape skeptical threats.

Accordingly, it is not entirely evident that Fichte's conception of subjectivity springs essentially from the attempt to meet skepticism. Imhof believes that Fichte's conception of subjectivity escapes skeptical objections to which, among others, Reinhold's system fell victim. These objections point out that even if something must necessarily be thought, it need not be real. According to Imhof, the essential point of Fichte's conception of subjectivity is that it refutes this objection. It does so by conceiving of subjectivity as something that is necessarily real if it is only thought.

However, Fichte is not forced to respond to such skeptical objections with a special conception of subjectivity. Rather, he can assert more broadly against these objections that they are based on false presuppositions: they presuppose that something could not exist even though it must be regarded as existent by necessity of thought. But this presupposition could be wrong because reality could be in its essence nothing else than a certain form of necessity of thought. This is exactly how Fichte conceives reality when he reconstructs it as the boundedness ("*Gebundenheit*") of our thinking. The external world arises through the reification of this boundedness. Therefore, the objection that in reality nothing could correspond to something we necessarily have to assume fails to recognize that reality is only a reification of what we are bound to think. Since this is so, everything that is contained in this boundedness must be real. A skepticism resulting from the assumption that necessary thoughts and reality could go different ways is to be met not by developing a special form of subjectivity, but by clarifying the misunderstanding that underlies it.

But such considerations show no more than that even Imhof cannot clear up all ambiguities with respect to Fichte's philosophy. What he does succeed in doing, however, is to make an extremely plausible and well-comprehensible offer for understanding Fichte's philosophical approach. And this alone is an achievement of inestimable value in the case of an author like Fichte.

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