



Title	AGAINST NATURE? On the Status and Meaning of the Natural World in J.G. Fichte's early <i>Wissenschaftslehre</i>
Author(s)	Breazeale, Daniel
Citation	Philosophia OSAKA. 2014, 9, p. 19-39
Version Type	VoR
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/26554">https://doi.org/10.18910/26554</a>
rights	©2014 by Daniel BREAZEALE. All rights reserved.
Note	

*The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

Daniel BREAZEALE (University of Kentucky)

## AGAINST NATURE?

### On the Status and Meaning of the Natural World in J.G. Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre*

Today I will be discussing the conception of nature that emerges from the writings of Fichte's early or so-called "Jena" period of philosophizing (1794-1800). This may appear to be an unpromising enterprise, inasmuch as the philosophy of nature -- though recognized by Fichte as one of the systematic divisions of his system, the *Wissenschaftslehre*<sup>1</sup> -- was the one division that he himself failed to develop; indeed, he even confessed at one point that he was personally incapable of developing this discipline.<sup>2</sup> One of his own students observed that "he knows nothing about many areas of philosophy, including the deepest grounds of natural science,"<sup>3</sup> whereas another contemporary, Franz Badder, characterized Fichte as "a true ignoramus in everything that has to do with physics and nature."<sup>4</sup> And, of course, the decisive break between Fichte and his erstwhile disciple, Schelling, came over Schelling's efforts to construct an a priori *Naturphilosophie* as an independent complement to transcendental idealism.

All of this might well seem to justify the widespread view that Fichte has an entirely *negative* view of nature and the natural world, understood as a realm utterly opposed to that of subjectivity: a mere hindrance to freedom, which we should strive ceaselessly to abolish as such. Hence one historian of philosophy has described Fichte's conception of nature as nothing more than "a punching bag for our moral energies."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the brief discussion of philosophy of nature in the "Divisions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" at the conclusion of Fichte's lectures on *WLnm*. See too the "hypothetical" Part III of *BWL*, in which Fichte promised that his "future *Wissenschaftslehre*" would make possible a new doctrine of the free obedience of nature to its own laws (*BWL*, *GA*, I/2: 150; *SW*, I: 66; *EPW*, p. 135).

<sup>2</sup> Thus Fichte remarks in his 1798/99 Platner lectures on Logic and Metaphysics that "even though it is possible to establish a philosophy of nature a priori, and even though this will be established, I, however, am not capable of doing this." Instead, he says, he will limit himself to a discussion of the most general laws of nature (*GA*, II/4: 257). See too A.L. Hülsen's December 18, 1803 letter to A.W. Schlegel, in which Hülsen observes that, in his deep investigations, Fichte has remained silent about nature (*FiG*, 3: 201).

<sup>3</sup> From Benjamin Höijer's Danish transcript of Fichte's 1798 Platner lectures (*GA*, IV/3: 222).

<sup>4</sup> Badder to Jacobi, June 16, 1806 (*FiG*, 3: 418).

<sup>5</sup> "The external world has largely a *negative* meaning in the philosophy of nature. It exists mainly as an arena for man's striving and for man's fulfillment. [...] The non-ego, or nature, Fichte asserted, is merely a limiting concept, almost a punching bag for our moral energies" (Frederick Mayer, *A History of Modern Philosophy* [New York: American Book Company, 1961], p. 336).

Though there is, as we shall see, ample evidence for such an interpretation, it is only part of the story regarding Fichte's unwritten philosophy of nature. His Jena writings also contain ample material for developing a far more positive conception of nature and of the relation between the realms of freedom and nature, even if Fichte's project does not countenance the possibility of the kind of robust *Naturphilosophie* conceived of by Schelling, Hegel, and the early Romantics.<sup>6</sup> Let us now consider the place of nature in the early *Wissenschaftslehre*.

**A. Nature as Not-I.** In its most fundamental sense, nature is understood by the transcendental philosopher as the domain of what is *excluded* from the I, and thus from the realm of life and freedom. So understood, nature is a profoundly *alien* domain, a realm of exteriority, multiplicity, and heteronomy rather than of identity, unity, and autonomy. To be sure, there are major differences in how this alien realm is viewed from the theoretical standpoint of cognition and from the practical standpoint of action. From the former, the natural world appears to be the determining ground of our representations and cognitions, a realm in which the cognizing subject invariably “loses itself” in its objects. From the standpoint of free agency, nature is what is *not* determined by freedom, but is simply *given* as subject to a mechanical necessity utterly indifferent to the ends of freedom. As Fichte puts it in his *System of Ethics*, nature “is what is fixed and determined independently of freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

It is the task of the first, foundational portion of Fichte's system (as presented first, in 1794-95, in *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and then, in a revised and much improved form, in his 1796-99 lectures on “The Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) *nova methodo* to provide a full, genetic account of precisely *how* the I comes to posit for itself an independent and opposing Not-I or natural world. According to Fichte's account, the I is to be understood as an original *conatus*, i.e., as a freely and spontaneously self-positing activity, which encounters an inexplicable limit or check (*Anstoß*) upon its range of activity. It experiences this check as an immediately given and purely subjective manifold of “feelings” -- in the absence of which it cannot posit itself *schlechthin* at all. In accordance with its own necessary laws of reflection (which characterize the I as an “intellect”), these originally encountered feelings or “sensations” are then posited and re-posed by the intellect or cognizing I: first as sensible intuitions in space and time, then as representations of features of material objects, etc. etc., until, finally, as Fichte puts it,

<sup>6</sup> For an ambitious and detailed effort to “reconstruct” a Fichtean philosophy of nature, see Reinhard Lauth, *Die transzendentale Naturlehre Fichtes nach den Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> *SS, GA*, I/5: 108; *SW*, IV: 109; *SE*, p. 105.

“something disengages itself from the I, something which, by means of further determination, will gradually transform itself [by means of what he describes as “a dark, unreflected intuition,”] into a universe, with all its characteristic features.”<sup>8</sup>

This, of course, is simply Fichte’s radically revised version of Kant’s transcendental deduction of the a priori conditions for the possibility of experience -- and thus simply a new way of explaining how the understanding can be “the lawgiver to nature.” This is possible, according to Fichte, because “nature in its entirety is a product of the [productive] power of imagination.”<sup>9</sup> But Fichte’s a priori deduction of nature goes well beyond Kant’s in two crucial respects:

First of all, it includes an a priori account of *organic nature*, and thus of purely natural teleology (that is of natural organisms as “real wholes,” acting in accordance with their own immanent ends. Like Kant in the third *Critique*, Fichte (in his *System of Ethics*) stresses the essential role of the reflective power of judgment in cognizing natural organisms and indeed nature itself as an organized and self-organizing system. Unlike Kant, however, Fichte treats such judgments not as merely regulative, “as if” claims concerning a natural world that we can truly *cognize* or *know* only under mechanical laws, but as *constitutive* of experience and thus of the natural world.<sup>10</sup> Fichte’s deduction of the systematic or organic structure of nature proceeds *from* his deduction of the human body as an articulated tool of the will. We are able to understand our own body only as a self-organizing product of nature, which is possible if and only if -- by means of our reflecting power of judgment -- we conceive nature as a whole not only as capable of *producing* such organized and self-organizing “real organic wholes,” but as actually *consisting* of the same.<sup>11</sup>

As an aspect of nature, organic purposiveness certainly differs from mechanical causation; nevertheless, it does not entail any genuine freedom on the part of these “natural

<sup>8</sup> *GEWL*, GA, I/3: 150; *SW*, I: 339; *EPW*, p. 250 and *GWL*, GA, I/2: 375; *SW*, I: 235; *SK*, p. 298. On this point, see Michael Vater, “The Construction of Nature ‘Through a Dark, Unreflected Intuition’,” *Fichte-Studien* (1997), p. 1-11.

<sup>9</sup> “If nature is your own product, then how is it that you are nevertheless able to learn things from nature? If nature is your own product, then how is any research into nature possible? {How could you perform any experiments? You must already be completely acquainted with nature. Therefore, despite what you claim, nature must also contain for you something more, something you did not expect to find. But this is the characteristic feature of *posited being*. Consequently, you cannot have produced nature. *Answer:*} Here we do no more than learn about ourselves and employ our faculty of judgment to analyze what is posited by the imagination. {Nature in its entirety is a product of the power of imagination}” (*WLnm*, GA, IV/2: 216; GA, IV/3: 490; *FTP*, p. 404).

<sup>10</sup> For a good discussion of this topic, see Thomas Sören Hoffmann, “... eine besondere Weise, sich selbst zu erblicken”: Zum systematischen Status der Natur nach Fichte,” *Fichte-Studien* 24 (2003). pp. 1-17.

<sup>11</sup> See *WLnm*, GA, IV/2: 259-60; GA, IV/3: 517; *FTP*, pp. 462-63 and *SE*, GA, I/5: 110-18; *SW*, IV: 112-22; *SE*, pp. 108-15.

wholes.” At most, it is an instance of what Kant called *arbitrium brutum*, and not genuine self-determination or *arbitrium liberum*.<sup>12</sup> All natural transitions, whether mechanical or organic, are equally “necessary and have their foundation in the laws of nature; they occur without consciousness and therefore without freedom.” Nature is thus incapable of bringing about any genuine change within itself.<sup>13</sup>

The second major difference between Fichte and Kant with respect to the a priori positing of the natural world pertains to the *content* of experience. Whereas Kant treats the manifold of sensibility as something simply “given” to the I (apparently -- if inscrutably -- by the operation of unknowable things in themselves upon the human mind), Fichte, influenced no doubt by Jacobi’s critique of the doctrine of the thing in itself, unequivocally rejects such a picture as an absurdity, and insists that it is the task of transcendental idealism to provide a deduction not merely of the spontaneously produced *form*, but also of the received *content* of experience. As already noted, Fichte proposes to explain the manifold of subjective feelings, with which his “deduction of representations” commences, as the product of a collision between the I’s original and spontaneous self-activity and certain inscrutable limits to the same (which are ultimately simply the particular limits of a particular finite I). This is the meaning of the famous and controversial doctrine of the *Anstoß*, which is simultaneous a *check* upon the practical activity of the I and an *incentive* for its theoretical activity to posit for itself (i.e., to become clearly conscious of) these limits.<sup>14</sup> The ultimate upshot of this process of positing on the part of the intellect is its positing of the Not-I as such: namely, as an independently existing natural world in which it happens to find itself.

In fact, Fichte’s Jena writings contain two rather different accounts of the ultimate origin of the limits encountered by the finite self-positing I: The more ambitious account, to which I will return at the conclusion of my remarks, traces these determinations back to the free and self-determining activity not of the finite I, but of the pure I, or, as Fichte renames it in his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, the “pure will” (which is also described, in Book Three of *The Vocation of Man*, as “the one eternal being, or God”). The alternative strategy, which, in my opinion, is better in keeping with Fichte’s injunction to the

<sup>12</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A533-34/B561-62. Animals, according to Fichte, never act on concepts, and thus he endorses Descartes’ view that they are -- with respect to their lack of freedom -- nothing but machines (see *Eigne Meditationen/Practische Philosophie*, GA II/3: 196).

<sup>13</sup> *WLnm*, GA, IV/2: 48; *FTP*, p.150. “Now on its own, nature -- which stands under mechanical laws -- cannot really bring about changes in itself. All change is contrary to the concept of nature. What appears to us as nature’s effecting change within itself occurs in accordance with its immutable [mechanical] laws, and would not appear to us as change at all -- but would appear to be constant instead -- if we knew these laws well enough” (*GNR*, GA, I/3: 407; *SW*, III: 115; *FNR*, pp. 10).

<sup>14</sup> Regarding Fichte’s controversial doctrine of the *Anstoß*, see Ch. 7 of Breazeale, *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte’s Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

transcendental philosopher never to transcend the domain of consciousness itself, is simply to confess one's insuperable ignorance on this point and rest content with a recognition that we are here in the presence of an "incomprehensible boundary," a surd element of inexplicable *finitude*, which not only lies at the foundation of our experience of the natural world but is at the same a necessary condition for the very possibility of any freely positing consciousness and self-consciousness.

Despite this ambiguity regarding the ultimate origin of such "feelings," Fichte is unequivocal in his claim that nature must nevertheless be understood transcendentally as a *product* of the theoretical activity of the I, more specifically, of its "absolute power" of productive imagination.<sup>15</sup> Nature is what the I posits for itself in its involuntary efforts, as it were, to explain to itself its own originally limited state.<sup>16</sup>

Though nature is a product of the activity of the I, the I is not (for reasons explained in the *Wissenschaftslehre*) originally or ordinarily conscious of this fact; instead, nature is originally experienced by the I as something that is merely *encountered* or *discovered* in the course of experience. It is precisely the task of the purely "theoretical" portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to explain "how the world is and must be, how the world is given to us."<sup>17</sup>

But if such results "exhaust" the realm of theoretical philosophy (i.e., philosophy of nature in the narrower sense), they do not exhaust that of philosophy *per se*, not to mention that of real life: the principle of which is not knowing but *acting*. So let us now consider how nature fares in the context of Fichte's practical philosophy and how it figures in his account of free -- that is, moral -- action.

**B. "Nature within me": the human body.** From the theoretical standpoint we have just described, nature appears as a realm of passive resistance, utterly distinct from and opposed to the cognizing subject. Just as the characteristic feature of the I is *activity*, so is that of the

<sup>15</sup> See *GEWL*, *GA*, I/3: 185; *SW*, I: 392; *EPW*, p. 284 and *GA*, I/3: 187-88; *SW*, I: 386-88; *EPW*, p. 288-89.

<sup>16</sup> See *GEWL*, *GA*, I/3: 168; *SW*, I: 360; *EPW*, p. 268.

<sup>17</sup> "When one attends to the discovered object, one obtains the theoretical *Wissenschaftslehre*, or so-called theoretical philosophy.} The object of theoretical philosophy is nature. Nature can be considered:

*either* as subject to merely mechanical laws of attraction and repulsion (as in Kant's 'Metaphysics of Nature'),

*or* as subject to organic laws (e.g.: the theory that deals with the basis of the existence of human beings, animals, plants, etc.).

Taken together, these two inquiries exhaust the domain of theoretical philosophy, or 'theory of the world.' In short, theoretical philosophy explains how the world is and must be, how the world is given to us. The result of theoretical philosophy is {a system of} pure empirical experience, and, with this, theoretical philosophy comes to an end" (*WLnm*, *GA*, IV/2: 262; *GA*, IV/3: 520; *FTP*, p.468).

Not-I, its inertia or lack of activity. As Fichte puts it in the *System of Ethics*:

The nature of a thing lies in its fixed subsistence, lacking any inner movement, passive and dead; and this is what you necessarily posit whenever you posit a thing and its nature: [...] something *fixed* and *unchangeable*. This is the nature of a thing, which does not depend upon the thing at all; for a thing is itself its own nature, and its nature is precisely the thing<sup>18</sup>

From this it follows that the behavior of a natural thing is only a necessary manifestation of its nature, and there is no place here for freedom whatsoever.<sup>19</sup> Nature is thus the realm of pure “objectivity,” or of mere “stuff,” in which there is no place for *action* (as that is understood by Fichte). Nature simply *is*, says Fichte, “and in no way *acts*”<sup>20</sup>; for, as Kant recognized, in order to conceive of the possibility of genuine (or transcendental) freedom, one has to imagine a being whose ground lies in something other than another being, a being that determine itself spontaneously. And if such self-determined freedom is to possess any real *Wirksamkeit* or *efficacy* -- i.e., if the freedom of the I is to be *real* -- it must, in determining *itself* also determine an entirely new chain of events beyond itself; i.e., it must determine occurrences *in nature*. Beyond *being*, however, there is only *thinking*. Free agency thus presupposes the real self-determination of the will by means of thinking: namely, by constructing a *concept* of an *end or goal of acting* and then acting upon this concept.

But if I am unable, by means of morally motivated, free acts, to create or to destroy the real stuff of nature, then how can my actions become *wirklich* or actual? Fichte’s answer to this question is as follow: Even though I cannot create or destroy the basic matter of nature, I am nevertheless able to *rearrange and to shape* this same matter in accordance with my own freely produced and purely intelligible goal-concepts. I can alter the “specific constitution”

<sup>18</sup> SS, GA, I/5: 50; SW, IV: 34; SE, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> “Every being that flows from being is a necessary being, and by no means is it a product of freedom” (SS, GA, I/5: 50; SW, IV, 34; SE, p. 39).

<sup>20</sup> “This resistance [on the part of nature] is represented as the opposite of activity, something that merely endures, lying there quietly and dead, something that merely *is*, and in no way *acts*, something that strives only to continue to exist and thus resists the influence of freedom upon its territory only with that degree of force that is required to remain what is, but is never able to attack freedom on its own territory. In short, resistance is represented as *mere objectivity*. The proper name for something of this sort is *stuff*.”

In the continuation this passage, Fichte explicitly notes the *indispensability* of such resistance (and hence of such natural “stuff”) for the very possibility of consciousness itself: “Furthermore, all consciousness is conditioned by consciousness of myself, which is in turn conditioned by the perception of my activity, which is itself conditioned by the positing of some resistance as such. Resistance of the sort just indicted thus extends necessarily throughout the entire sphere of my consciousness. It continuously accompanies my consciousness; and freedom can never be posited as able to do anything whatsoever about this situation, since otherwise freedom itself, along with all consciousness and all being would fall away” (SS, GA, I/5: 24-26; SW, V: 7; SE, pp. 12-13).

or “properties” of natural things.<sup>21</sup>

From this it follows that nature can -- and, from the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, understood as “the first system of freedom,”<sup>22</sup> must -- be viewed not merely *negatively* as the realm that opposes and hinders the freedom of the I, but also more *positively*, as the essential arena of genuine, efficacious action; for, as Fichte concludes, “a person is free only in the sphere in which objects are given” to him.<sup>23</sup> A free action is one guided by a freely constructed concept of an end. Such a goal concept presupposes cognition of the natural world as it is *given* to us and then posits a different state of the same: not as it *is* but as it *ought* to be. The whole point of a freely self-determined concept of an end of action is to determine some future state of nature. *Nature* is thus a necessary condition for the very possibility of free action.

The will itself is purely intelligible and is, as such, quite incapable of acting in the world; it is only as *embodied* that it can achieve its practical aim. In order to act upon and within the natural world of material “stuff,” I must be “stuff” as well. This is why, according to Fichte, the finite I is always a *materially embodied will*. Viewed as a principle of efficacy in the natural world, I am not simply materially embodied, but possess a distinctively *articulated body* -- that is to say, a body capable of executing in myriad ways various possible dictates of the will. My representation of my body is not simply a way of positing a particular portion of nature; instead, it is a representation of myself as a free cause in the world of bodies and is therefore,” says Fichte, “only a certain way of looking at my own absolute activity”<sup>24</sup> -- through the lens, as it were, of what is *given to me* as my own “nature” (my articulated body).

The will of the person enters the realm of the sensible world only insofar as it is expressed in a determination of his body. Thus in this [sensible] realm the body of a free being is to be regarded as itself the final ground of its own determination, and the free being -- as an appearance -- is identical with its body. (The body is the I's representative in the sensible world, and where only the sensible world is being considered, the body is the I itself).<sup>25</sup>

Nature is therefore not only outside but also *within me*, first in the form of a *natural*

<sup>21</sup> “The thing that can be changed as a result of my efficacious action, that is, the *specific constitution* or the *properties* of nature, is entirely the same as what cannot be changed; i.e., it is mere matter, simply viewed from a different side [...]. Viewed subjectively and in connection with me as an active subject or agent, what is changeable is nature; what is unchangeable is this same nature, viewed entirely and solely objectively” (*SS, GA*, I/5: 12; *SW*, IV: 12; *SE*, p. 17).

<sup>22</sup> This is how Fichte described his new philosophy in the draft of April/May 1795 letter to Jens Baggesen.

<sup>23</sup> *GNR, GA*, I/3: 406; *SW*, III: 114; *FNR*, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> *SS, GA*, I/6: 28; *SW*, VI: 11; *SE*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *GNR, GA*, I/3: 405; *SW*, III: 114; *FNR*, p. 104.

drive to self-preservation and enjoyment (which, along with my pure drive toward complete *Selbständigkeit* or independence from external influences, constitutes one-half of what Fichte calls the “original drive” of the finite I). But insofar as I am free and self-sufficient, I distinguish myself from this (natural) drive as from something objective within me, and hence I experience this drive as a mere *longing*, which I am free to satisfy or not. If, however, I decide to satisfy my natural drive it then becomes “mine” in a stronger sense than before, as something I have freely posited and appropriated, both theoretically and practically.

Whenever I decide to satisfy a prompting of my natural drive, this is because of a free self-determination to do so, which is not something that can occur in consequence of a simple force of nature. This is how Fichte proposes to avoid the problems associated with Kant’s Third Antinomy of Pure Reason and the relationship between the opposed realms of freedom and nature. Since the I’s original drive contains both a pure and a natural drive, and since the latter is itself a product of nature, my efficacy in the natural world is assured in advance. Were we not “natural beings” in this sense, it would be impossible to understand how it would be possible for us to act within the natural world.<sup>26</sup> My natural drive is thus to be understood as *nature within me*, by virtue of which *I am able to affect nature outside of me*, which is what occurs when this “nature within me” (i.e., my natural drive) is *guided by a freely designed concept of an end*.

Moreover, as the *Wissenschaftslehre* demonstrates, the I must always posit nature, whether external or internal to itself, as *filling space*. Hence this system of nature within me is posited as a *material body*, which is, on the one hand, immediately subject to the will and, on the other, related to and capable of exercising a causal influence upon other material bodies in the natural world. Fichte’s truly revolutionary claim is that such an articulated material body is *a condition for the very possibility of free self-positing and therefore of I-hood itself*. Without such a body, moral obligation could be no more than a certain way of *thinking*, and not of *acting*. Acting is possible only in the natural world, even though nature itself, as we have observed, is incapable of genuine action.

With respect to its *content*, every action is related to the natural drive, since even our freely chosen goals must be related to the natural world, with which we are in contact only by means of our body and the system of our natural drives. The human body is thus the indispensable instrument of all perception and cognition as well as the vehicle of all causality.

---

<sup>26</sup> On this point, see Claude Piché, “La concept de nature chez Fichte,” *Cahiers de la Revue Théologie et de Philosophie [La nature: Thèmes Philosophique Thèmes d’actualité. Actes du 25<sup>e</sup> Congrès de l’Association des Sociétés de philosophie de langue français]*, ed. D. Schulthess, Genève, Lausanne, Neuchâtel: La Baconnière] 18 (1996): 353-56.

In order to serve as such an instrument, however, this same body must also be an organized and self-organizing whole, i.e., an *organism*; and it is from this conclusion that Fichte then proceeds to derive -- by means of the reflective power of judgment -- the previously mentioned, "organic" dimension of nature itself, apart from the human body. So conceived, nature is not simply a realm of material stuff, but is a realm of natural, lawlike "alteration," albeit not of genuine intentional *action*. Nevertheless, says Fichte, "before I can alter myself by means of an act of self-determination, I must already have been altered. There must therefore exist some sort of intermediary thing, which we call 'nature,' some sort of force or principle of activity, by means of which I alter myself independently of my freedom and without any consciousness of my self-determination."<sup>27</sup>

Though the highest drive, the insatiable drive toward absolute self-sufficiency, is not a natural one, its goal can be approximated only by means of acting efficaciously -- that is, only within the natural world. The preservation and cultivation of the human body (as in indispensable tool of the will) is thus a *moral demand*. And, as we will see, the same applies to the cultivation of nature beyond the human body.

Not only is the body an absolutely essential instrument of the will, through which alone it can bring about those changes in the natural world that duty demands, it is also essential for that process of mutual recognition described in Fichte's *Foundations of Natural Right*, for it is only by recognizing the freedom of the other in the distinctive shape and behavior of his organized body (and through his speech as well) that I am able to recognize his "summons" upon me to limit my own freedom and thus to posit myself as an *individual* (which is, according to Fichte, the only way any I can actually posit itself at all). Thus, here again, we arrive at the same conclusion as before: no natural, material body, no absolute self-positing of the I.

**C. Nature, inertia, and the radical evil in human beings.** It is in reference to this "natural" dimension of the finite I that Fichte proposes to account for the troubling fact that we do not always act in accordance with the dictates of the pure will and thereby to explain our failure to act morally. Moral failing, he maintains, is always a sign that one has failed to cultivate a clear consciousness of the demands of the moral law (i.e., of one's pure drive) and has thus remained at a lower, "natural" level of reflection; moreover, many people can be expected to remain at this level. But why?

This expectation is based on the empirical observation that most people are simply too

---

<sup>27</sup> *WLnm*, GA, IV/2: 81; *FTP*, p. 205)

*lazy* to cultivate the requisite moral consciousness. Hence the “radical evil in human beings” is for Fichte just another name for “an original laziness or inertia” [*Trägheit*] with respect both to their reflections and to what follows therefrom (acting in accordance with one’s reflections).<sup>28</sup>

For Fichte, however, we do not need to rest our case simply upon empirical observations of human inertia, for there is a deeper, transcendental explanation for the same: namely, *the inertia of nature itself*. As you will recall, this is the fundamental difference between the I and the Not-I: only in the former is there any real change or action. Nature, in Fichte’s view, is a realm of *passivity*. Consequently, it is precisely because of man’s necessary natural drive, precisely because of the dependence of the will’s efficacy upon a material, natural human body, that human beings are, as it were, congenitally affected by the inertia of nature itself -- predisposed, as it were, to laziness and thus to “evil.”

Even after they are have been animated by freedom, our natural forces still have a tendency to retain the direction originally given to them by nature, and thus are affected by the inertia of nature itself and have a tendency to remain on the habitual track. This is why every human being, even the most active one, must constantly struggle against the original force of inertia within his own nature. To the extent that we too are natural creatures, we too are creatures of habit.

To be sure, it is Fichte’s central claim that we *ought* to tear ourselves free from this natural state of inertia, since, in accordance with our original, pure being as I’s, we are free and self-active and independent of nature, and thus we must be capable of resisting the secondary forces of our own nature. Here, however, we appear to be caught in a circle: in order to tear ourselves loose from our natural inertia we must exercise our free will, and yet it is this very freedom that appears to be fettered by the force of natural inertia. And indeed, according to Fichte, if we did not have *the moral law as a counterweight* we would, in fact, never be able to tear ourselves free in the manner demanded by morality. But here again, it is difficult to understand how one can, through a sheer act of willing, lift oneself to a clear consciousness of the demands of the moral law. Is this not yet another circle?

If we consider human beings purely in terms of their natural endowments, it appears to be *impossible* to grasp how one could ever overcome one’s own natural inertia. Consequently, if such an act of self-liberation is possible at all, it is not *naturally* possible; “instead, it emerges absolutely from a person’s self-activity.” Viewed in purely natural terms, it seems that a human being is simply incapable of morality and thus, as Fichte puts it, “only a *miracle* can save him” – albeit one that he himself must perform!<sup>29</sup> Thus, though our “nature” can explain

<sup>28</sup> (SS, GA, I/5: 182; SW, IV: 199; SE, p. 189)

<sup>29</sup> (SS, GA, I/5: 184; SW, IV: 291; SE, p. 191).

our *failure* both to recognize the moral law and to act in accordance with it, nature cannot explain our ability to act freely within the world.

**D. The practical dominion of reason over nature.** Viewed in the light of our practical (and, more specifically, our moral) ends, the natural world is nothing other than the necessary arena of moral striving, the *only* domain in which our freely constructed ends can ever be *realized* and hence *necessary* for the purposes of reason. (Here, of course, I am referring to our proximate ends, since our ultimate end as finite I's, total self-sufficiency, is one that can never be realized, even in principle, since this would involve abolishing the Not-I, and along with it, the self-positing I. All we can actually do is to strive endlessly toward this unobtainable goal.) So viewed, nature is not something that should be overcome or abolished as incompatible with the freedom of the I; instead, it represents that complement of finite I-hood as the domain within which alone freedom can be actualized.

In order to view myself as a freely active being, I must view the natural world as modifiable through freedom and (as we have seen) ascribe to myself a body that is determinable by my will, in accordance with freely constructed goal concepts, by means of which I can form and modify nature. Our task is therefore not to *overcome* nature, but to *cultivate it*.<sup>30</sup> This is one of Fichte's favorite themes, especially in his more popular writings: to exhort us to place our natural powers in the service of our moral ideals, which means that we should set to work making the natural world a more commodious home for human beings and their ends and should employ our scientific knowledge of nature as a tool for modifying it in accordance with our concepts of how it ought to be.

Note how this practical perspective on nature provides us with a radically new insight into the character of the same. No longer is nature viewed simply as a passive and dead realm of unchangeable stuff, which merely thwarts the ends of the free subject nor as a realm of externally cognizable objects related to one another according to natural laws. On the contrary, nature now appears to the I as “an infinitely modifiable, *originally given stuff* external to ourselves.”<sup>31</sup> By “originally given,” Fichte here means simply necessarily “posited by thinking itself, through its very form.” But here the emphasis is upon the fact that it is only in relation to the practical efficacy of the I that this natural world is “originally given” to us in the first place.

---

<sup>30</sup> This aspect of Fichte's conception of nature is stressed by Claude Piché in the previously cited paper.

<sup>31</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 88; *SW*, IV: 82; *SE*, p. 82.

Our consciousness proceeds from an immediately given consciousness of our own activity, and we find ourselves to be passive only by means of the later. It is not the Not-I that acts efficaciously upon the I, which is how this issue has customarily been viewed, but the other way around. The Not-I does not intrude upon the I, but the I goes out into the Not-I [...] We are therefore once again and in a still higher sense claiming the primacy of reason insofar as it is practical. Everything proceeds from acting and from the acting of the I. The I is the first principle of all movement and of all life, of every deed and occurrence. If the Not-I exercises an effect upon us, this does not occur within the domain of the Not-I; it operates efficaciously by means of resistance, which it could not do if we had not first acted upon it. It is not the Not-I that encroaches upon us, but we who encroach upon it.<sup>32</sup>

With this realization, nature now appears to us (that is, to the transcendental philosopher) as what it most truly is, according to the *Wissenschaftslehre*: i.e. as the indispensable domain of actual freedom, the sole realm in which those ends demanded by moral duty can actually be *realized*. As such, it is everyone's duty to employ the objects one encounters in nature, and indeed, to employ nature as a whole, for one's own moral ends -- though for Fichte this does not mean one's *particular* ends as a natural being, but rather the ends of *reason itself* (*or pure willing as such*), as these are related to one's particular (i.e., naturally determined) situation. From this general thesis, Fichte deduces not only a series of concrete duties with regard to our own bodies and those of others, but also the institution of private property, which is based on the demand that one respect natural things that others have previously modified in accordance with their ends.<sup>33</sup>

My freedom is not infringed upon by the particular circumstances in which I happen to find myself in the natural world nor by the fact that another rational being outside of me provides me with my first sphere of freedom by summoning me (physically) to limit my freedom out of recognition of his. These are conditions for the very possibility of freedom, not impediments to the same. Nor is my freedom limited by the existence of a realm of rational, spiritual beings outside me, since, as moral beings, we are all united by and share the same pure will, and thus all finite I's share the same final end with respect to the natural world: namely, "that reason alone should have dominion in the sensible world," that "all physical force should be subordinated to reason." and that "the entire sensible world ought

---

<sup>32</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 95; SW, IV: 92-93; SE, pp. 90-91.* "The world as such, including the world as a manifold, arises for us through this necessary way of viewing our own efficacy. All properties of matter – with the sole exception of those that stem from the forms of intuition [including the Kantian categories] – are nothing but the relationship of the latter to us, and in particular to our efficacy, for there is simply no other type of relationship to us. Or, to express this same thought transcendentally, these properties of matter are the relations of our determinate finitude to the infinity toward which we are striving" (*SS, GA, I/5: 100; SW, IV: 99; SE, p. 96*).

<sup>33</sup> See *SS, GA, I/5: 208-9; SW, IV: 229-30; SE, pp. 218-219.*

to come under the dominion of reason.”<sup>34</sup> This means that everything in nature ought to become the property of someone, since only then can it be purposefully used.<sup>35</sup>

These two commands -- that everyone work to improve the utility not only of his own but also the other’s property and that everything be someone’s property -- are particularly important for establishing the dominion of reason over the natural world. The first command unifies reason so that it becomes *one* in the minds of all, no matter how much we may differ empirically; hence it affirms the *universality* of the moral law. The second command serves “to comprehend and to grasp nature under this single, unified will. Reason is at one with itself, and the sensible world is subordinated to it. This is the end that has been set for us.”<sup>36</sup>

From this it directly follows that nature itself and purely natural beings possess, on Fichte’s view, no moral standing nor “rights” whatsoever, inasmuch as all moral actions must refer directly or indirectly to rational beings and their drive toward freedom for its own sake. And “just as there are no rights with regard to non-rational nature, so too are there no duties regarding nature”; instead it is *our* duty to fashion or shape (*bearbeiten*) nature -- but, again, only for the sake and ends of rational beings.<sup>37</sup> Yet even though reason’s “final end” is the unity of all finite wills and the complete dominion of reason over the natural world, the accomplishment of -- or rather, advancement toward -- this end of reason always remains the task of *individual* human beings engaged in determinate actions in the world. This, therefore, is precisely what the morally good person wills:

You first discover yourself as a product of the sensible world, chained to it because of your weakness, an immortal being in need of what is only dust and ash. There is only one way to free yourself from this condition: elevation to pure morality, and you are destined to take this path. From the moment you set out upon this path, nature, which was hitherto your governess, becomes subject to you and is transformed into your passively obedient instrument.<sup>38</sup>

Fichte, as a true child of the Enlightenment, was supremely confident that this necessary

<sup>34</sup> SS, GA, I/5: 245; SW, IV: 275; SE, p. 262 and SS, GA, I/5: 265; SW, IV: 299; SE, p. 285.

<sup>35</sup> “The entire sensible world is supposed to come under the dominion of reason, to be the tool of reason in the hands of rational beings. -- But everything in this sensible world is connected to everything else; hence no part of it stands entirely and without restriction under the dominion of reason unless all the parts do so.[...] This means that everything usable in the world must be used, and since it can be used purposefully only by becoming property, it must become property [...] Just as everyone ought to have some property, so ought every object to be the property of some human being” (SS, GA, I/5: 265; SW, IV: 299; SE, p. 285).

<sup>36</sup> SS, GA, I/5: 265; SW, IV: 299; SE, p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> See SS, GA, I/5: 246; SW, IV: 275; SE, p. 263.

<sup>38</sup> *Appelation an das Publikum*, GA, I/5: 451; SW, V: 236; *Appeal to the Public*, trans. Curtis Bowman, in *J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)*, ed. Yolanda Estes and Curtis Bowman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p. 123.

aim of reason (namely, dominion over nature) is one that will eventually be achieved. In Book Three of the *Vocation of Man* he describes as follows the way that nature appears to a person resolved to heed the dictates of morality -- namely, as something *in need of improvement*. "I do not feel at home in the present nor feel at ease their for a moment. [...] My whole life incessantly flows toward a future and better state of things."<sup>39</sup> To be sure, "mankind still toils to wring its existence from a recalcitrant nature, and immortal spirits have to direct their energies to figuring out how to do this. Weather ruins crops, floods and storms devastate communities, diseases plague populations." Yet it cannot be true that this situation cannot be improved, for:

No work that bears the imprint of reason and was undertaken to expand the power of reason can be completely lost in the course of the ages. [...] This resistance must gradually become weaker and finally be exhausted, since there can be nothing in this lawful advance that might renew its strength. That formation must finally be complete and our destined home be finished. Nature must gradually enter a condition that allows one to calculate and reckon safely on its regular pace, and which keeps its force steady in a definite relation with the power that is destined to control it -- the power of man. [...] In this way, nature is to become ever more transparent to us until we can see into its most secrete core, and human power, enlightened and armed by the discoveries of science, shall control nature without effort and peacefully maintain any conquest once it is made.<sup>40</sup>

**E. The final end of nature.** Illuminated by the light of freedom, not only our own bodies but the entire world of nature is transfigured. As we know, the natural world is posited as the domain of all that is Not-I, a realm that is, according to Fichte, "posited only in order to explain the limitedness of the I, and hence it receives all its determinations only through opposition to the I."<sup>41</sup> But the most distinctive predicate of the I is not its limited state qua finite I, but precisely its *freedom*, and *this* is not adequately reflected in any of the preceding views of nature. It is, however, reflected in nature when viewed from a still higher philosophical standpoint, i.e., insofar as we consider not merely the laws of our intellect, but "our freedom itself [as] *a theoretical principle for the determination of our world*."<sup>42</sup>

From this new and higher perspective there can be no ultimate conflict between the determining principles of theoretical and of practical reason. Instead, we can now see that the same law of freedom (the moral law) through which we determine our actions practically

<sup>39</sup> *BM*, *GA* I/6: 267; *SW*, II: 266; *VM*, p. 81).

<sup>40</sup> *BM*, *GA*, I/6: 269-69; *SW*, II: 267-68 *VM*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>41</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 77; *SW*, IV: 68; *SE*, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 68; *SW*, IV: 68; *SE*, p. 70.

can also be viewed as a continuation and expression of the same underlying law, which, as a theoretical determining principle, allows us to constitute that natural world in which we are also enjoined to act in accordance with duty. Thus, instead of distinct laws of theoretical and of practical reason, there is but a single, underlying law of reason. The implications of such a hypothesis are dramatic, as Fichte himself explains:

Were this conjecture -- that is, the conjecture that a part of the world we find is determined by freedom, as a theoretical principle -- to be confirmed, and were it to turn out that it is precisely this part of the world that constitutes the sphere of the objects of our duties, then it would follow that the law of freedom, which addresses consciousness as a practical law, would only be a continuation of what that same law, as a theoretical principle, had already initiated, though without any consciousness thereof on the part of the intellect. This law would have determined by itself the sphere over which it has dominion; it could not assert anything in its current capacity [as a practical principle] that it had not already asserted in its previous one [as a theoretical principle].<sup>43</sup>

Seen in the light of this conjectured harmony between freedom and nature, it becomes possible to consider natural things in terms of their true, final ends (which is not at all the same as their unfreely assigned natural ends as purposive organic wholes). The proper end of any natural object in the sensible world lies in its unique ability to serve as an appropriate means or tool for the finite I's advances toward the accomplishment of reason's final end: absolute independence from anything outside of the I, absolute self-sufficiency of the I. Thus, when I reflect simultaneously upon both my freedom and my original limitations, i.e., when I reflect upon a naturally given object in the light of my dutiful goals, I thereby obtain insight into the true purpose of that object: namely, "its usefulness for certain freely chosen ends" that I might set for myself with regard to this object.<sup>44</sup> In this manner, says Fichte, I am able to determine "the inner qualities of a thing in a state of repose," in relation to my moral drive, which is itself in motion, inasmuch as I am now engaged in moral deliberation for the purpose of acting in the world. And when I have "completely determined" my concept of the thing by grasping not only all of its sensible properties, but also its relation not merely to various arbitrarily chosen human end, but rather, to the end of reason as such, "then I am aware of the full range of its end, i.e., of its final end."<sup>45</sup> This view of natural objects contrasts sharply with my original, purely theoretical, conception of this same, inasmuch as this same natural object, the Not-I, was previously viewed (i.e., with respect purely to my cognition of it) as actively determining my representations, and the cognizing I was

<sup>43</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 77; SW, IV: 68-69; SE, pp. 70-71.*

<sup>44</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 159; SW, IV: 171; SE, p. 162.*

<sup>45</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 159; SW, IV: 171; SE, p. 163.*

previously viewed as passively limited and determined by nature.

What has now been derived is the concept of the ultimate end or purposiveness of a natural object in relation to the ends of *reason* or *freedom as such*, and not merely its relation to my ends as an individual. If I am only obscurely or partially conscious of my own “drive as such or in general” (that is to say of my pure drive, or of pure willing or pure reason “within me”), then I will have only a partial and one-sided consciousness of the final purpose of the object in question and may very well assign it an arbitrary end, rather than use it for its “proper” one.

The aim of my pure drive – and hence of my moral drive (which is simply the pure drive in relation to the natural drive) is, to repeat, the complete self-sufficiency and independence of reason or I-hood as such and thus the absolute dominion of reason over nature. Until I have clearly grasped this I have not fully grasped either myself or the things of nature; but once I have grasped this central truth, then I have also grasped the truth about both myself and the natural world, and, in doing so, am in position to view all the objects contained in the latter, and indeed nature as a whole, in terms of *their Endzweck* or final end.

The aim of the [original] drive, when apprehended in its totality, is the absolute self-sufficiency of the I. The way to discover the material content of the moral law is by synthetically uniting the concept of [finite] I-hood and the concept of absolute self-sufficiency. I am supposed to be a self-sufficient I; this is *my* final end. I am supposed to use things in a way that will increase this self-sufficiency; that is *their* final end.<sup>46</sup>

A “complete cognition” of a natural object thus goes well beyond the kind of purely theoretical cognition of it that is characteristic of the natural sciences; to be sure, it includes all that is included in the latter, but also includes a practically-mediated cognition of the “final end” of this object. Indeed, Fichte claims that a particular moral conviction cannot be “sanctioned by conscience” until it includes an insight into the final end of the thing: its purposiveness for the freely prescribed ends of reason.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> SS, GA, I/5: 193; SW, IV: 211-12; SE, p. 201.

<sup>47</sup> “Only because of the practical drive are there any objects for us at all [...]: My drive is limited, and as a result of this limitation I posit an object. Obviously, I cannot posit and characterize this object without characterizing in some determinate manner the drive that it limits, for a determinate object is nothing else whatsoever and cannot be described in any other way than as what limits a determinate drive. This is how I obtain the given properties of the thing, since I place myself and the thing in mutual states of rest or repose. But I can also reflect on freedom, and when I do this my limitation by means of the object becomes something that can be expanded in a regular manner and in a certain order; moreover, such an expansion of my own boundaries would also serve to change the object. I posit, e.g., that the object can be modified in a certain way, and in doing this I determine *its purposiveness* [*Zweckmäßigkeit*], *its usefulness for certain freely chosen ends or purposes* [*beliebigen Zwecken*] that one might set for oneself with regard to this object.

“In this case one will notice, first of all, that the determination of purposiveness is none other than a determination of the inner properties of the thing in a state of repose, nor can it be any other kind of

In this manner, the principle of morality (the pure will or the drive to utter self-sufficiency, i.e. what Kant called “practical reason” and Fichte often calls “the pure I”) acquires an objective reality and meaning far different from what it had previously acquired: for now it can be understood as the source not only of the *form* of the moral law (understood, in the Fichtean manner, as a specific command to act in this way or that in a specific, concrete situation) but also of the *content* of the same (inasmuch as practical reason, understood now as a theoretical determining principle of the natural world, would have originally provided itself with the *matter*, or determinate content of the general law (i.e., the objects of nature, along with their final ends). This is why Fichte can boast that, with this last step, we have arrived at the “ultimate point of origin of all reason.”<sup>48</sup>

Were all of this confirmed, then the principle of morality would acquire a reality and objective meaning entirely different from what has previously been maintained, and the question raised above -- namely, where do the objects for the required activity come from, and what is their principle of cognition? -- would be answered. The principle of morality would itself be both a theoretical and a practical principle: in the former capacity it would provide itself with the *matter*, the determinate content of the moral law, and in the latter capacity it would give itself the *form* of the law, the command. This principle would revert into itself, would stand in reciprocal interaction with itself, and from a single starting point we could obtain a complete and satisfying system. Something outside of us would have the final end that it has because we ought to treat it in a certain way; and we ought to treat it in this manner because it has this final end. We would thus have found both the *idea* we have been seeking – that is, the *idea of what we ought to do* – and the *substrate in which* we ought to approximate the realization of this idea [namely, nature itself, as originally determined by the pure will].<sup>49</sup>

What this amounts to is nothing less than a radical recasting of the results of the first Kantian *Critique* in the light of those of the second and third ones, which is, I submit, the program of the entire Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*.

This new conception of the relation of nature to freedom directly implies that

---

determination. This [new] determination is simply undertaken from a different point of view [than from the previous, purely theoretical determination of the properties of a given thing]. In both cases, the object is determined by means of the drive it is supposed to limit; the difference is that in the previously discussed case one pays no attention to the possible liberation [of the drive] from the boundaries associated with the object, whereas in the second case one does attend to this. [...] Hence all complete cognitions, all cognitions upon which one can rely and rest content, are necessarily cognitions of the final end of objects; a conviction is not sanctioned by conscience until it includes an insight into the end of the thing, and such cognitions are at the same those that guide moral conduct. The moral law therefore aims to treat every thing in accordance with its final purpose. This furnishes us with an easy way to present in a scientific manner the content or material of the moral law” (*SS, GA, I/5: 158-60; SW, IV: 170- 71; SE, pp. 161-63*).

<sup>48</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 78; SW, IV: 68; SE, p. 70.*

<sup>49</sup> *SS, GA, I/5: 78; SW, IV: 70; SE, p. 71.*

“the possibility of satisfying the moral law is here found to be determined not by any foreign principle lying outside of this law (heteronomously) but by the moral law itself (autonomously).”<sup>50</sup> We can therefore reject in advance any suggestion that it might ultimately prove to be *impossible* to carry out the (proximate and concrete) demands of the moral law, since this *possibility* is, as it were, hard-wired into the original constitution of nature.

With such speculations, we have moved beyond the domain of both theoretical philosophy and ethics into that of philosophy of religion, the discipline that, according to Fichte, deals with “the postulate that practical philosophy addresses to the theoretical realm, to nature, which, by means of a supersensible law, is supposed to accommodate itself to the end of morality,” which is none other than that of reason itself.<sup>51</sup> But this same move also raises a series of new questions concerning the *ultimate ground* of the postulated harmony of nature and freedom.

In the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* and elsewhere, Fichte describes this ultimate ground as the “pure will,” understood as the final link in the ever-ascending chain of syntheses which constitutes his genetic derivation of ordinary experience and self-consciousness. This “pure will” is just another name for the “pure I” introduced in § 1 if the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* as that unitary whole, within which a further distinction is made between the finite I and the finite Not-I. In the *System of Ethics*, the same pure will is identified with “reason itself,” as present within the finite I in the form of its “pure drive,” and in the 1798 essay “On the Basis of our Belief in the Moral Governance of the World,” this same ultimate ground of the harmony between freedom and nature is described as the “moral world order,” a providentially harmonious lawlike *structure* of reality as a whole.

In a “Concluding Remark” as the editor of the *Philosophical Journal*, Fichte goes even further and maintains that “it is both true and philosophically demonstrable that the assumption of a purposiveness (which is not at all the same as a mere *regularity*) within nature presupposes the assumption that there is a rational creator of nature.”<sup>52</sup> This conclusion is made even more explicit in Book Three of *The Vocation of Man*, in which Fichte claims not only that a conscientious moral agent must recognize and believe in the existence of a “divine law” governing both the sensible and the supersensible worlds, but also in the existence of a “sublime, infinite will” or “divine lawgiver,” who not only promulgates the moral law but is also the ultimate source of both the limited, finite I (and hence of the natural world) and of the entire spiritual world order, as well as the mediator between the

<sup>50</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 81; *SW*, IV: 74; *SE*, p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> *WLnm*, *GA*, IV/3: 522; *FTP*, p. 471.

<sup>52</sup> *GA*, I/6: 414; *IWL*, p. 181.

two. It is this “eternal One,” he insists, who speaks to us through the voice of conscience.<sup>53</sup> And even in the *System of Ethics*, i.e., two years earlier, Fichte had noted that the idea of the necessary *dominion of the moral law within nature* and of the purposiveness of that law with respect to nature, is one that can only be adequately realized in “the idea of Godhead” -- though this, he adds, is “something we need not discuss this here.”<sup>54</sup>

Near the end of his *System of Ethics*, Fichte presents his vision of a purely secular “church,” understood as a social institution for promoting and preserving clear awareness of a genuinely moral disposition among human beings. This Fichtean church possesses neither holy scriptures nor theoretical doctrines. Its creed is a purely practical one and is expressed through an ever-changing array of “symbols,” the basic meaning of which always remains the same: namely, that “there is something or other that is supersensible and elevated above all nature.”<sup>55</sup>

It is evident that we have now traversed a long road indeed, from the bare view of nature as the domain of the Not-I, a realm opposed and antithetical to human freedom, to a conception of nature as a realm that exists only to be shaped and cultivated by physically embodied human beings, while possessing no real moral significance or meaning in its own right, to an affirmation of the ultimate harmony between what Leibniz called the “realms of nature and of grace.”

Fichte’s final word on this topic (at least so far as the early *Wissenschaftslehre* is concerned) is perhaps best encapsulated in the following lines from “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Moral Governance of the World,” with which I too shall conclude:

The sensible world proceeds peacefully along its own path, in accordance with its own eternal laws, in order to constitute a sphere for freedom. But it exercises not the least influence upon morality or immorality, and it has no power over a free being. Autonomous and independent, the latter soars above all nature [...] The world is nothing more than our own inner action (*qua* pure intellect), made visible to the senses in accordance with comprehensible laws of reason and limited by incomprehensible boundaries within which we simply find ourselves to be confined. This is what is asserted by the theoretical portion of transcendental philosophy [...] Granted, the origin of these boundaries is incomprehensible; but, replies practical philosophy, what is it that bothers you about this? Nothing is clearer or more certain than the *meaning* of these boundaries. They constitute your determinate place in the moral order of things [...] Our world is the material of our duty made sensible. This is the truly real element in things, the true, basic stuff of all appearance. The compulsion with which belief in the reality of the world forces itself upon us is a moral compulsion -- the only kind of compulsion that is possible for a free being.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> See *BM*, *GA*, I/6: 289-93; *SW*, II: 295-99; *VM*, pp. 103-07.

<sup>54</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 248; *SW*, IV: 277; *SE*, p. 264.

<sup>55</sup> *SS*, *GA*, I/5: 218; *SW*, IV: 242; *SE*, p. 230.

<sup>56</sup> *GA*, I/5: 353; *SW*, V: 184; *IWL*, p. 149-50.

## NOTES

The following abbreviations are employed in this paper:

*BM* = Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* [*The Vocation of Man*] (1800).

*EPW* = Fichte: *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

*FiG* = Fichte *im Gespräch: Berichte der Zeitgenossen*, ed. Erich Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978ff.).

*GA* = *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth†, and Hans Gliwický† (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964ff.).

*GEWL* = Fichte, *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre in Rücksicht auf das theoretische Vermögen* [*Outline of the Distinctive Character of the Wissenschaftslehre with Respect to the Theoretical Faculty*] (1795; English trans. in *EPW*).

*FNR* = Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

*FTP* = Fichte: *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992). Trans. of *WLnm*.

*GNR* = Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts* [*Foundations of Natural Right*] (1796/97; English trans. = *FNR*).

*GWL* = Fichte, *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* [*Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*] (1794/95; English trans. = *SK*).

*SE* = Fichte, *System of Ethics*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Trans. of *SS*.

*SK* = Fichte: *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre), with First and Second Introductions*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 [orig. NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970]). Trans. of *GWL*.

*SS* = Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre* [*System of Ethics*] (1798; English trans. = *SE*).

*SW* = Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämmtliche Werke, ed. I. H. Fichte, eight vols. (Berlin: Viet & Co., 1845-46); rpt., along with the three vols. of Johann Gottlieb Fichtes nachgelassene Werke (Bonn: Adolphus-Marcus, 1834-35), as *Fichtes Werke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971). Citations from this edition are in the following form: *SW*, X: 22 = Vol. X, p. 22.

*VM* = Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987). Trans. of *BM*.

*WLnm* = *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796-99; student transcripts of revised versions of Fichte's private lectures on the foundational portion of his system; English translation = *FTP* ).

*Note on annotations and translations:* references are provided as follows: first, the abbreviation of the *title* of the work, then, the abbreviation of the reference to the *German* edition of the text, and, finally, the abbreviation of the reference to the *English* translation of the same. All translations are by the author, though reference is provided to standard translations, where they exist.

©2014 by Daniel BREAZEALE. All rights reserved.