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Locke and Fichte on the Act of Differentiating^{1, 2}

Modern European philosophy is preoccupied with the foundation of human knowledge and, in giving an adequate account of it, various philosophers offer their foundational project that is typically anchored in a special activity of the mind and its associated principles. Locke and Fichte are two modern philosophers that are no exceptions to this trend and they pay a particular attention to the way that the mind is involved in giving an account of the foundation of the human knowledge with a special reference to mental operations. In particular, they postulate special mental operations that serve as the cornerstone of their respective account of the generation of the knowledge of the world as part of their foundational project. For example, Locke invokes discerning as the most basic operation of the mind by which it distinguishes one idea from others while Fichte employs the act of opposing (*Gegensetzen*) to construct the origin of human knowledge and the principles of knowledge. Yet they come up with radically different conclusions about the status of the operation of ‘differentiating’ responsible for the generation of the knowledge of the world. This is a paper that examines their view of the underlying operations of discerning and opposing respectively found in Locke and Fichte. In the end, however, I will suggest that Fichte’s view has important insights that are neglected by Locke. In Section 1, I will introduce and discuss Locke’s view on discerning. In Section 2, I move on to Fichte’s view of opposing, and finally Section 3 discusses both view briefly in a comparative frame.

¹ I dedicate this work to Prof. Irie Yukio for his lifetime achievement in philosophy.

² In this work the following abbreviations will be observed: Essay = Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979); A/B = Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ak = Kant, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols., ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900-); CPrR = Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); EPW = Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); G = Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); GA = Fichte, J. G. Fichte – Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 42 vols., ed. Reinhard Lauth et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-); IWL = Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994); FTP = Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy: (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). SK = Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970). As is standard, with Kant’s works I cite the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (Ak), which are included in the margins of the translations. With Fichte references, I cite both the English translation (where applicable) and the original German as collected in GA or K.

1. Locke on Discerning

Locke is a master of the human mind in its interaction with the world. With his “historical-plain method (Essay, I.i.2),” he gives a thorough and comprehensive examination of the operations of the mind. To put it somewhat anachronistically, perhaps we can even say that he offers a thorough phenomenological description of the mental activities not only to account for the nature of ideas but also for thought, language and logic. In this way, he gives rise to a “new way of ideas.” However, it is unfortunate that not much discussion has been given to Locke’s discussion of discerning as the cornerstone activity justifying the first principles of human knowledge. The concept of discernment, despite being truly fundamental and integral to Locke’s foundationalist approach to knowledge, has been largely ignored in the literature.

First, let us expound the background of Locke’s theory. As is well-known, Locke is an empiricist and opens the second book of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with a question: “How comes [the Mind] to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store..?” To this, Locke answers, “in one word, From Experience” (II.i.2) and goes on to suggest that “First, *Our Senses*, conversant about particular sensible Objects, do *convey into the Mind*, several **distinct Perceptions** of things according to those various ways, wherein those Objects do affect them. ...This great source ... I call SENSATION” (I.i.3; my bold). Secondly, Locke proceeds to point out that there is “the other Fountain, from which Experience furnishes the Understanding with Ideas,” which is “the *perception of the Operations of our own Minds* within us” (II.1.4). Thus, for Locke, the two sources from which any ideas for knowledge derives are sensations and reflection upon the self and experience of the external world. While Locke believes in the external world of bodies with their prominent qualities (e.g., primary and secondary qualities) there is no question Locke puts a great stress on the activities of the mind in constructing knowledge of the external world as well as the internal world of the mind itself. After all, the external world is known to us insofar as bodies in it may incite ideas in our mind. The mind, then, must be the pivotal center of force with which we understand the world and exercise all the faculties directed at it.

But how do you initiate your cognitive explorations of the world in the first place? As expected, Locke suggests that it all begins with perceptions. In Chapter IX in Book II of the *Essay* Locke points out that perception is the first faculty of the mind exercised about the world. Indeed, the idea of perception itself is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection. And later in section 11, he suggests that this faculty of perception is “that, which puts the distinction betwixt the animal kingdom and the inferior parts of Nature” (II.ix.11). And then in Chapter X of the same book, he introduces retention as the next faculty of the mind, whereby it makes a farther progress towards knowledge. This is a faculty that “keeps

those simple ideas which from sensation or reflection it hath received (II.x.10).” In this way, the mind is described as “laying up and retaining the ideas that are brought into the mind, several other animals seem to have to a great degree” (ibid.).

Later in Book IV, Locke offers the well-known ‘comparison theory of knowledge.’ Locke defines knowledge as the perception of the agreement or disagreement between two ideas, and goes on to point out that there are four different ways (‘modes’) in which the ideas agree with each other. These are identity or diversity, relation, co-existence and real existence (IV.i.3-7). For our purpose, it is the first kind of knowledge, identity and diversity, that is most directly relevant. This mode depends on the immediate perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, being founded in the mind’s having *distinct* ideas. This mode thus affords us as many self-evident propositions as we have distinct ideas.³ For example, some knowledge expresses identity (‘red is red’), others diversity (‘white is not black’).

Also, relevant to our discussion here is Locke’s theory of the three degrees of knowledge in the same book (IV.ii.1-15.) According to Locke, we have the three degrees of knowledge, intuitive, demonstrative and sensitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately, i.e., without the intervention of any other ideas. For example, the knowledge that red is red. For Locke, intuition is most certain, irresistible, and indubitable as it serves as the foundation of all our other knowledge. On the other hand, demonstrative knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas but not immediately, i.e., with the intervention of other ideas. For example, the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles. Demonstration is certain and information-generative but depends on intuitive knowledge. Finally, sensitive knowledge is the perception of the mind concerning the particular existence of finite things external to us. For example, “the rose exists” or “the wormwood is bitter.” This relies on sensation and thus it is not certain but more than probable. It also depends on intuitive knowledge.

At this point it is important to note that, according to Locke, the perception of the truth of the whole proposition is a function of the perception of the constituent terms (i.e., ideas.) Given his view of knowledge as perception of ideas, it follows that to know that a man is a man is to recognize its constituent ideas (those of man) and perceive the agreement of the idea of man (the subject term) with another idea of man (the predicate term). In the same way, to know that whatever is is – the so-called the principle of identity - amounts to perceiving the agreement of the idea of being (the subject term) with the idea of being (the predicate

³ The other three modes are as follows: Relation, which expresses knowledge of a complex relation (‘the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles’); co-existence, which expresses the relation of a substance to one of the qualities that ‘co-exist’ in it (‘gold is yellow’); real existence which expresses the idea of a thing and its corresponding real existence (‘God exists’).

term). A maxim or principle then is merely an assertion of an intuitable relation between relatively general ideas. It is clear that, for Locke, the intuition involved in instances is separate from that involved in the general maxims. Since there are infinitely many instances, there are infinitely many, mutually independent, intuitions that the mind is capable of. Even though the mind's intuition is infinitely powerful, the mind itself is limited to finite numbers of ideas. Given the constraints imposed by his empiricism, a particular truth of identity ("black is black") is in no sense less evident than the general maxim (or axiom or principle) of which it is an instance. Particular instances ("a man is a man") simply do not have any relation to general maxims ("whatever is is"). They are separate and independent truths. For they involve different ideas. We may say that for Locke a proposition is prior to others when it is first apprehended by an individual. So, particular instances are prior to general maxims since particular ideas are apprehended by the individual earlier than general ideas, which requires an abstraction as the highly advanced operation of the mind.⁴

This is also true of other general principles. For example, we also apprehend the truth of the principle of non-contradiction by perceiving the disagreement or difference between the idea of being and the idea of not-being. For him, then, knowledge of truths of identity or diversity involves a direct perception of the agreement or disagreement of the ideas involved in each case.

Now, even though perception is the act of the mind that Locke first offers his philosophical analysis on, which is followed by a discussion of retention as the latter is based on the ideas received through perceptions, any perception as well as retention would be impossible without the power of discerning (II.xi.1-3). Obviously, not all perceptions are clear. If perceptions are not clear, i.e., obscure, then, knowledge would be impossible. But in order to have clear perceptions, you would need the activity of 'differentiating,' which is provided by the power of discerning. Indeed, in a decisive move in the *Essay*, Locke points out that the human knowledge of the world crucially depends on the mental operation of discernment as he discusses in Chapter XI.

Locke thus offers his view on discernment as part of his general account of the operations of the mind. Underlying this attempt is the insight that the content of our mind is transparent to us. We have a privileged access to our mind. For Locke, after all, like Descartes earlier, we can never know the world as clearly as we can know our own minds and souls. But this does not mean that discernment itself can give rise to knowledge all by itself. Above all, discernment is not propositional.⁵ We can discern whiteness from blackness

⁴ See Halla Kim, "Locke's Abstract General Ideas as Images: Some Questions," this journal (2016: Number 11), 41-54.

⁵ Benjamin Hill, "Intuition and Demonstration," in S.-J. Savonius-Wroth, Jonathan Walmsley, Paul

but in order to have the knowledge that white is not black we need the operation of intuition that helps us to affirm the proposition, thus giving rise to intuitive knowledge. The faculty of intuition then is the power that enables us to construct propositions on the basis of discerning. Perception thus involves intuition as its essential component because perception is propositional. To be sure, we also need other operations such as collecting the data of our knowledge by way of receiving simple ideas from the two sources mentioned above and also constructing complex ideas from the simple. It is clearly for the sake of an epistemological project, i.e., that of giving a most adequate account of knowledge that Locke attempts to give a comprehensive examination of the various operations of the mind such as perception, retention, compounding, comparing, abstracting, so on.

Now, in a critical passage on maxims of the Book IV of the *Essay*, Locke says:

Every one that has any Knowledge at all, has, as the Foundation of it, various and *distinct ideas*; And it is the first act of the mind, (without which, it can never be capable of any Knowledge,) to know every one of its *ideas* by itself and distinguish it from other. Every one finds in himself, that he knows that *Ideas* he has, that he knows also, when any one is in his understanding, and what it is; And that when more than one are there, he knows them *distinctly and unconfusedly* one from another, Which always being so (it being impossible but that he should perceive what he perceives,) he can never be in doubt when any idea is in his mind, that it is there, and is that idea it is; and that two *distinct Ideas*, when they are in his Mind, are there, and are not one and the same idea. So that all such Affirmations and Negations are made without any possibility of doubt, uncertainty or hesitation and must necessarily be assented to as soon as understood (my bold IV.vii.4).

In this passage Locke makes it clear that the first act of the mind consists in knowing every one of its ideas by itself and distinguishing it from others. Locke's view of discernment thus can be summarized rather simply: "No knowledge without discernment" (II.xi.1 section heading). He reiterates such a view by stating that (at the end of the section, after his descriptions of the many operations of the mind): "These are the beginnings of human knowledge." Locke indeed suggests: "I have given a short, and, I think, *true History of the first beginnings of Human Knowledge*; (II.xi.15)." He then continues: "whence the Mind has its first Objects, and by what steps it makes its Progress to the laying in, and storing up, these Ideas, out of which is to be framed all the Knowledge it is capable of" (ibid). Thus we can

see that for Locke discernment, given these statements and others, is a vital operation of the mind despite the narrow space in which the discussion of the faculty is granted. Of this power of discernment, Locke indeed has this to say:

Another Faculty we may take notice of in our Minds is that of *Discerning* and distinguishing between the several Ideas it has. It is not enough to have a confused Perception of something in general. Unless the Mind had a distinct Perception of different Objects, and their Qualities, it would be capable of very little Knowledge.

On this faculty of Distinguishing one thing from another, depends on the *evidence and certainty* of several, even very general Propositions, which have passed for innate Truths; because Men overlooking the true cause, why those Propositions find universal assent, impute it wholly to native uniform Impressions; whereas it in truth *depends upon this clear discerning Faculty* of the Mind, whereby it perceives two *Ideas* to be the same or different (II.xi.1).

What then is the ultimate purpose of discernment? Locke apparently employs it as a tool for his empiricist account of knowledge. Locke writes it is “that of discerning and distinguishing between the several ideas it [the mind] has...Unless the mind had a distinct perception of different objects and their qualities, it would be capable of very little knowledge” (ibid.). Discernment is the process through which one distinguishes a couch from a hippopotamus, squareness from whiteness, etc. Suppose that there is a white square in front of us. According to Locke, we can discern the two qualities of the whiteness and the squareness. That is to say, we can identify and distinguish the one quality from the other as they exist in the single idea of a white square.⁶ Discernment can be exercised not only between objects, but also qualities within that object, such that one discerns shape, color, smell, and further sensory qualities. All qualities of the five senses are thus made distinct in line with Locke’s empiricist tendencies.

Note further that discernment is Locke’s replacement for the innatist account of the knowledge and its fundamental principles or maxims.⁷ Discernment is an ability to recognize the sameness or difference among the ideas received without the interference of any other faculties. In this sense, it is analogous to sight, but we should not put too much emphasis on this analogy because we can exercise discernment in the application of other sensory modes. Thus, it is an ability that is exercised with respect to colors, shapes, textures, patterns, so on. Discernment enables us to attend to ideas in such a way that they have no qualities in

⁶ Hill, 172.

⁷ For an examination of Locke’s campaign against innatism, see Halla Kim, “Locke on Innatism,” *Locke Studies*, Volume 3 (2003), 15-39.

common, that they bear some resemblance but are not the same thing. Locke even goes so far to suggest that in all of these processes, there is an exercise of reason, or judgment involved as the means by which our natural ability to discern is gradually tailored. Locke writes that “it suffices to take notice, that this is one of the Operations that the Mind may reflect on and observe in itself. It is of that consequence to its other Knowledge, that so far as this faculty is in itself dull, or not rightly made use of, for the distinguishing one thing from another,- so far our Notions are confused, and our Reason and Judgment disturbed or misled. If in having our *Ideas* in the Memory ready at hand consists quickness of parts; in this, of having them unconfused, and being able nicely to distinguish one thing from another, where there is but the least difference, consists, in a great measure, the exactness of Judgment, and clearness of Reason, which is to be observed in one man above another” (II.ix.2). In other words, Locke is prepared to give discerning the foundational status for all our judgment and reasoning. Reason then is not some mysterious faculty of abstruse inference but a process that is readily available to anyone with the natural operation of discerning. None of the operations of human reason can be completed until you can discern two ideas separately and begin to compare them, compound them, and abstract them further or less.

2. Fichte on Opposition (*Gegensetzen*)

Fichte’s philosophical enterprise originates from the insight that the human subjectivity plays a decisive role not only in the construction of our knowledge but also of the world itself.⁸ At the center of this subjectivity lies the unconditioned nature of the I as an absolute foundation of knowledge. On this view, the I not only grounds itself but also in grounding itself it also grounds the world. Fichte describes this grounding act of the I as “positing.” Thus, Fichte postulates the self-positing I as the explanatory ground of all experience. But this positing is not that of a Cartesian *res cogitans* nor a stationary Aristotelean substance. Nor is it a description of any fixed property or essence. Rather it is a primordial *act* of constituting itself. Not knowing how to call it, Fichte coins the term “fact-act (*Tathandlung*).”⁹ The I posits itself insofar as it is aware of itself, not only as an object but also as a subject. The starting point of Fichte’s radical project in philosophy is the activity of the I that is self-

⁸ For the purpose of Fichte’s program in general, see Halla Kim, “Fichte on the Standpoint of Philosophy and the Standpoint of Life” in Steven Hoeltzel, ed. *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); see also Halla Kim, “Dichotomous Monism: Fichte’s Case for the Idealism of Original Duplicity” in Joshua Ferris and Benedikt Paul Göcke, eds. *Rethinking Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁹ See Halla Kim, “Fact-act (*Tathandlung*)” in M. Bykova ed. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Fichte* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

conscious where the thinking I (i.e., the conscious I) is the same as the thought I (i.e., the I that is the object of its own thinking.) Fichte famously claims that “all consciousness is nothing but self-consciousness” (GA IV/3: 481, GA IV/2: 197-198; FTP, 381). This in no way means that such is what we actually experience in our empirical self-consciousness. In actual consciousness, the subject and the object of consciousness are always distinct from each other and thus diametrically opposed to each other but in original consciousness, there is no distinction between the subject and the object. They are one and the same. This is why it is posited as an adequate ground of giving an account of actual consciousness. Otherwise, any account of the latter would lead to a vicious circle, ending with an incessant series of ever higher acts of reflection.¹⁰

The I then posits itself as a primordial ‘subject-object’ out of which a subject and an object are generated. By this primordial act of positing, the I thus not only legislates the laws for itself but also finds itself subject to these laws in both theoretical and practical realms, e.g., the law that the I must believe and act free of contradictions. This shows that the I posits itself as free and autonomous. In the process, the I notices that there are representations of the independent world of objects existing in separation from our consciousness of it, i.e., “representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity” as well as representations that arise out of our own conscious activity, i.e., “representations accompanied by a feeling a freedom.” But to make this distinction is eo ipso to posit the distinction between the I and the not-I, i.e., the self and whatever exists independently of it. In other words, the I comes to posit itself as limited by something other than itself, even though it initially posits itself as free, for in the course of reflecting on its own nature the I encounters limitations on its activity.

In order to give a precise account of the nature of the I, Fichte actually invites us to consider “A = A” (GA I/2: 259, SK, 98-9). He in effect argues that this means that if A is given, then A must be the case. The identity statement turns out to be a conditional statement. But this also crucially depends on the legislative authority of the I who asserts it, entailing the existence of the I, i.e., entailing the proposition that I am or I exist. Fichte thinks that the validity of “A = A” depends on that of “I = I.” In other words, *pace* Leibniz, Fichte claims that, even though “I = I” may be a logical instance of “A = A,” philosophically, it is not derived from the latter. In fact, it makes the latter possible. Without the I endorsing the validity of “A = A,” it would lose its logical force.

Furthermore, in order to spell out the self-positing nature of the I, in the *Science of Knowledge*, Fichte develops the content of fact-act (*Tathandlung*) in three different yet related

¹⁰ This is basically how D. Henrich sees Fichte argue against Locke’s view of reflective awareness. See Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967); trans. David Lachterman, “Fichte’s Original Insight,” *Contemporary German Philosophy*, 1 (1982): 15-52.

modes of a primordial act, which can serve as the foundation of his entire philosophical system which he calls “*Wissenschaftslehre*” (hereafter WL.) The highest forms of fact-act (*Tathandlung*) are then expressed as the three basic principles of WL. The first principle says: The I originally and unconditionally posits its own being (GA I/2: 259, SK, 98-9).¹¹ The nature of the I consists in nothing other than its activity that the I posits itself as its own being. “If it is to be an I, it must also posit itself as self-positing,” (GA I/2: 408, SK 241), as Fichte puts it. This is obtained by an intellectual intuition, a direct act of inner intuition of itself on the part of the I, preceded by a careful process of abstraction¹² away from any mode of ordinary awareness.¹³ The I “posits itself absolutely,” but in reflection it “reiterates this positing” or “reverts into itself” (GA I/2: 408, SK 243; GA I/4: 212-213). The I’s free activity essentially involves a “capacity for reflection” (GA I/2: 423, SK 258).

But more relevant to our topic is the second principle, which states: Against the I the not-I posits itself (GA I/2: 266, SK, 104). Thus, the act of positing itself immediately entails the act of opposing (*Gegensetzen*). When the I posits itself, it posits itself as an object of its thought. But to think of something as an object means to think of it as opposed to others. Thus, in order to posit itself, it immediately posits the other in opposition to itself. When you think of something as potentially real, you also think of the same thing as potentially absent. The I that is thus posited is what it is as opposed to whatever is not the same as itself. It is because of the act of opposition or negation that the I can think of itself (GA I/2: 264, SK 103). As we have observed in the previous section, Locke points out that it is the first act of the mind to distinguish an idea from others. But, in order to distinguish one object from another, Fichte suggests, the I must think of itself as distinguished from others. In other words, the ability to distinguish various things in the world is not conditioned by the structure of the world but rather presupposes a fundamental act of opposing in the I that makes such distinguishing possible. We are able to represent things as distinct from each other only when we can engage in the original act of opposing.¹⁴

In reflecting on itself, the I then forms a concept of itself (GA I/4: 213, I/3: 329). Each time the I thinks of anything, the former distinguishes latter by bringing the latter under a given concept from those excluded from it. Therefore, when the I is reflectively self-conscious, it finds itself limited by itself: the I must distinguish itself from what it is not.

¹¹ “The I or self (=ego) posits itself” (GA I/2: 257, SK 96)], or more simply, “I am” (*Ich bin*. [ibid.]).

¹² For an analysis of Fichte’s view of abstraction, see Halla Kim, “Abstraction in Fichte” in Rockmore and Breazeale, eds. *Fichte and Transcendental Philosophy* (London, Palgrave Macmillan).

¹³ Philosophically speaking, from this fact-act (*Tathandlung*), the principle of identity ($A=A$) is deduced. As for the categories, Kant’s category of reality may be deduced from this.

¹⁴ From this second principle, the logical principle of contradiction is deduced and the category of negation is also derived.

From this, Fichte goes on to suggest that the very possibility of the I requires its limitation by the not-I. As he puts it, “the I posits itself as limited by the not-I” (GA I/2: 285, SK 122). To posit the I is at the same time to “counterposit” a not-I (GA I/2: 268, SK 105; I/3: 330). This means that the activity of the I must be twofold: that of the I, directed toward a not-I and that of a not-I, directed back against the I as a “hindrance” or “check” (*Anstoß*) of the I’s activity (GA I/2: 354-362, SK 189-196). Since both are conditions of the I’s existence, Fichte regards both as activities of the I: the former is an “ideal” activity, the latter a “real” activity (GA I/2: 402-404, SK 236-238).

In the later *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, Fichte goes on to point out that in order to think anything, the I must think of it in opposition to others. In other words, in order to be conscious of anything at all, the I must oppose it to something else that is different from it.¹⁵ As he puts it, “it is only through opposition that it is possible to obtain a specific and clear consciousness of anything whatsoever (GA IV/3: 348, FTP 116).” Fichte then call this “the principle of reflective opposition (Reflexionsgesetz des Entgegensetzens) (ibid.).” For him, thinking consists in determining an object for oneself but for the purpose of determining an object for itself (and this includes determining itself for itself), the I must posit something else as indeterminate yet determinable.

In this respect, we can say that for Fichte thinking is an act of determination, and this means that thinking consists in contrasting the determined with something determinable. Thinking thus proceeds by determining something contrastively against the sphere of the determinable. This idea actually goes back to Spinoza’s view that determination is negation (*determinatio est negatio*).¹⁶ In all thinking then the other is posited or opposed in contrast to something. All thinking is contrastive in this sense. This is indeed a fundamental feature of the I that governs all our thinking.

As we have seen, the first principle suggests that the I must posit itself as self-positing, i.e., as a pure activity that is both at once an act and its product. The I is an activity that goes back to itself. But this also means that I must move away from the previous state of repose and transition to the new state of activity. In other words, the I must tear away from a passive state of the determinable to the determinate self-activity.¹⁷ In order to build the concept of the I, the I must have the concept of the not-I.

But how can the I both posit itself and then at the same time posit the not-I at once? How can one and same I consistently posit both the I and the not-I simultaneously? The I so

¹⁵ D. Breazeale, “The Wissenschaftslehre of 1769-99,” in D. James and G. Zöller, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 105.

¹⁶ G. Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77.

¹⁷ Breazeale, 108.

posited is cancelled by the not-I, it appears, and the not-I so counterposited is cancelled by the I. The first principle and the second principle are then to be reconciled.

Since both the I and the not-I are opposing each other within the (original) I itself, they are to be posited as mutually limiting. In other words, they are to be posited as mutually annulling its own portion, i.e., they are to be posited as being divisible (*teilbar*). The first principle states that the I is nothing but a pure, self-posting act, but the second principle states that the I is a determinate something that is related to an object different from it. In other words, the I is not only an absolute, self-sufficient act but also a determinate something with consciousness. Accordingly, the I is both finite and infinite, something determinate and beyond any determination at the same time. This is why Fichte suggests that a third principle is required to introduce a *synthetic* act to resolve the conflict between the mutually limiting I and not-I via negation. Thus the third principle states: In the I, the I opposes a divisible not-I to the divisible I [GA I/2: 269, SK 110].¹⁸ Simply put, the I (without its opposing not-I) as such and the not-I (without its opposing I) as such are indeterminate respectively and thus infinite. By the third principle, they are now determined as the divisible I and the divisible not-I and, being posited as opposite, they are now mutually determining and determined, respectively. This is also how the Kantian category of limitation can be derived.

Fichte immediately points out that the third principle presupposes a dynamic relation: the original synthesis of the I and the not-I involves the idea that they mutually reduce the activity of the other, giving rise to ‘passivity’ in the other (GA I/2: 287; SK 124). Fichte then calls this “the principle of mutual determination (*Wechselbestimmung*).” The I is here characterized as theoretical when the I conceives itself as determined by the not-I (affected by the not-I). This is the perceptual relation to an object. The I in this respect is a theoretical subject. When the I conceives itself as determining the object, it regards itself as an agent, who is able to transform the not-I through the actions. The I here would be a practical agent.

Fichte thus claims that, within the third principle, there are two sub-principles that are included:

- (A) The I posits itself as determined by the not-I.
- (B) The I posits itself as determining the not-I.

This suggests that the I has two opposite, directional powers within itself. The power as a

¹⁸ From this third principle, the logical principle of reason (*der Satz des Grundes*) follows, for that principle contains the reason for the synthesis of the I and the not-I, giving rise to the synthetic unity of the I. The category of determination (*die Kategorie der Bestimmung*) is derived from this. (GA I/2: 283; SK 119).

whole in the I is the striving to infinity. This is its centrifugal power. It also has the limitless productive power. On the other hand, this infinite act of the I is checked by the not-I and bends back to itself. This is its centripetal power. Principle 3a) deals with the cognitive activity of the I, while 3b) deals with the practical activity of the I.¹⁹

As is pointed out earlier, from the outset, Fichte's overall goal of transcendently giving an account of our experience has to start with the *Tathandlung*. Fichte offers WL as a "science of science as such" (GA I/2: 117-118, EW 105-106) and sees it grounded on a principle which is claimed to be absolutely certain, and to impart the same certainty to all the propositions grounded on it (GA I/2: 116, EW 104). As the fundamental transcendental philosophical science, the WL is supposed to ground all other particular sciences, including both theoretical and practical sciences (GA I/2: 150-152, EW 133-135). WL then must consist in giving an account of how the pure I comes to know itself and realize itself as an autonomous individual subject. The I as a pure activity going back to itself is not only the absolutely first principle of the WL but also of all sciences. Indeed, all our ordinary states of conscious experience presuppose a primordial self-consciousness on the part of the I as the source of unity for our experience: "No object comes to consciousness except under the condition that I am aware of myself, the conscious subject" (GA I/4: 274-275).²⁰

But in an important step, Fichte goes on to suggest that this principle of unity is originally and primordially dual. In other words, according to Fichte, the *Tathandlung* as the self-constitution of the I can be essentially characterized by the equi-primordial thinking and willing from the very outset. Fichte's I thus has original duality (*Zweifachheit*) (GA, I/2: 423; SK 258), so to speak. In this respect, we may say that the I is originally and constitutionally theoretical and practical at the same time, which are yet seamlessly united in the I. On this view, practical reason and theoretical reason are originally and constitutionally identical in the I. This also suggests that the real, i.e., practical, activity of the I presupposes the ideal, i.e., theoretical, activity of the I, and, vice versa. Intelligence and will are *integrated* as an original duality in the active I.²¹

Fichte further holds that, despite this duality in the I's nature, theoretical activity is

¹⁹ The first, second and the third basic principles in turn thus give rise to the categories of reality, negation and determination respectively the last of which Kant called "limitation."

²⁰ Fichte seems to have in mind here what Sartre was later to call the "pre-reflective" or "non-positional" self-consciousness we have even when our attention is focused on objects entirely distinct from the self. If I am reading a novel, for example, my attention is not on myself (or my reading activity) but on the characters in the story, and what they are doing. But if my reading is interrupted by someone asking me what I am doing, I reply immediately that I am (and have for some time been) reading; and the self-awareness on the basis of which I answer the question is not something acquired at just that moment but a consciousness of myself which has been present to me all along.

²¹ Zöllner, 110.

founded on the practical activity in its function. After all, it is the act or doing of the I that makes all our conscious experience possible. So, practical reason has explanatory primacy.²² At the same time, Fichte adamantly insists that there is a mutual interdependence between the awareness of one's striving and that of resisting objects. In other words, consciousness is inseparably and at every moment both theoretical and practical. When you are aware of resisting objects, you are also aware of your striving. Infinite striving, i.e., striving without an object, is impossible. We strive toward the idea of unrestricted self-determination for the purpose of freedom but this cannot be realized unless we are constrained by objects that are intrinsically different from us.

The I then is an activity of thinking having willing as its object yet at the same time it is also a willing that has thinking as its goal or guide. There is no thinking without willing and no willing without thinking. The world is none other than the objectification and the realization of thinking/willing.²³ This entails that there is a unity of consciousness and its object, while the former is opposed to the latter.²⁴

Now, this necessarily and irreducibly dyadic structure of the I-hood also suggests that the dichotomous unity of the I is always "a synthetic unity, and hence a unity that always presupposes a genuine difference at the heart of the I."²⁵ This means that the original duality of the I is not constituted analytically but synthetically. For Fichte, then, our original thinking-cum-willing, instead of being passive, is productive and, in this sense, he describes it as 'synthetic'. It is because the original self-consciousness makes itself into an object that it can serve as the starting point of the deduction of our experience. The original thinking-cum-willing then, is not an externally given datum or some sort of a fixed first principle. It is an ongoing, dynamic process of self-making. Indeed, the pure I is operating actively at every moment of our ordinary experience, underlying and anchoring all our empirical acts of consciousness. *Tathandlung* then entails a self-positing of the I that is the ultimate condition of all our knowing and willing, making possible every act of empirical self-consciousness. There is no further underlying mental subject to which it belongs. Being a primordial, immediate, self-conscious activity, it knows of no prior subject or object.

All in all, for Fichte, what is crucial about our consciousness is that our ordinary consciousness is conditioned by a primordial self-consciousness that we are not typically

²² This is sometimes called "the doctrine of the primacy of the practical."

²³ Breazeale, 114.

²⁴ Thus, we may call Fichte's dynamic philosophical idealism "dichotomous monism." For details of this interpretation, see Halla Kim, "Dichotomous Monism: Fichte's Case for the Idealism of Original Duplicity" in Joshua Ferris and Benedikt Paul Göcke, eds. *Rethinking Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming)

²⁵ Breazeale, 108.

conscious of. This primordial self-consciousness is certain and foundational. In every thought, “you directly note activity and freedom in this thinking, in this transition from thinking the I to thinking the table, the walls, etc. Your thinking is for you an acting” (GA I/4: 271-272). The Fichtean I is nothing but this awareness of our own activity, and in being the foundation of all our experience, it makes possible not only our everyday conscious experience but also our awareness of our freedom.²⁶ The original I in Fichte is simultaneously the transcendental unity of apperception, which is the foundation of Kant’s theoretical philosophy as well as the practical postulate of freedom, which is the foundation of his practical philosophy.²⁷ But while the Kantian transcendental apperception is conceived as the condition of the possibility of our experience (B 132-136), the Fichtean I has an advantage because it has the character of unconditioned nature established by an intellectual intuition. The Kantian I lacks this unconditioned nature.²⁸

3. Conclusion

We learned that discerning is an integral part of Locke’s campaign against innatism. In other words, it is his replacement for the innatist account of the knowledge and its fundamental principles or maxims. Discerning for Locke then turns out to be an ability in us to recognize the sameness or difference among the ideas received without the interference of any other faculties. It is the first act of the mind to distinguish an idea from others. But, in order to distinguish one object from others, Fichte suggests, the I must think of itself as distinguished from others. In other words, the ability to distinguish various things in the world is not conditioned by the structure of the world but rather presupposes a fundamental act of opposing in the I that makes such distinguishing possible. We are able to represent things as distinct from each other only when we can engage in the original act of opposing. Fichte goes so far to point out that in order to think anything, the I must think of it in opposition to others. In other words, in order to be conscious of anything at all, the I must oppose it to something else that is different from it. After all, this is why Fichte claims that “it is only through opposition that it is possible to obtain a specific and clear consciousness of anything whatsoever.”

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²⁶ For a development of Fichte’s holism based on this insight, see Yukio Irie, “Fichte and Semantic Holism,” in Halla Kim and Steven Hoeltzel, eds. *Kant, Fichte and the Legacy of Transcendental Idealism* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014).

²⁷ For more on Kant’s view of freedom, see CPR A 539/67-A 558/B 586; G III 4:445ff; CPrR 5:28-49.

²⁸ For Fichte’s criticisms of Kant’s view of the I, see Michihito Yoshime, “The Problem of “können” in Kant’s B-Deduction and Its Significance for Fichte,” *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte* 17 (2018).