



Title	Fichte's Empirical Realism : A Preliminary Study to Explore the Connection with his Doctrine of the Bild
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Citation	Philosophia OSAKA. 2021, 16, p. 47-56
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/78343
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Fichte's Empirical Realism: A Preliminary Study to Explore the Connection with his Doctrine of the *Bild*¹

Introduction

Johann Gottlieb Fichte called his philosophy “*Wissenschaftslehre (WL)*,” which aims to describe the system of human knowledge toward its absolute ground, assuming that there must be such a system. However, even if there really is a system of human knowledge, the actual description of *WL* does not necessarily hit the mark². Thus, Fichte repeatedly rewrote the *WL*. The contents of these works are usually distinguished as the former period (the Jena period, 1794-1799) which supposes as the ground *das absolute Ich* (the absolute I), and the later period (the Berlin period, 1800-1814), which supposes *das Absolute* (the absolute), and studies on Fichte often focus on *WL* in a specific year.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Fichte retained one aspect through those rewrites. Namely, in each moment, he placed *WL* as idealism, and in particular, “transcendental idealism” (or “critical idealism”). As is well known, transcendental idealism is the term that Kant assigned to his position in *Critique of Pure Reason (KrV)*, and Fichte continued to assert that *WL* is transcendental idealism and such that stands at the point that Kant should have reached³.

Incidentally, Kant developed an interesting argument in the section “Fourth Paralogism, of Ideality (of Outer Relations)” in the first edition of *KrV*. He asserted that the opponent of transcendental idealism is “transcendental realism,” which regards outer things as things in itself, and this is also “empirical idealism,” and in contrast, transcendental idealism can be “empirical realism” (cf. *KrV*, A369f.). Regardless of the meaning of this contrast, the following question arises by comparing it with Fichte’s assertion: If Fichte’s transcendental

¹ An earlier version of this work was read on September 10, 2015 at the IX. Congress of the International Fichte Society.

² “If our *Wissenschaftslehre* is an accurate portrayal of this system of the human mind, then, like this system itself, it is absolutely certain and infallible. But the question is precisely whether and to what extent our portrayal is accurate...” (*BWL*, GA I/2, 146; *EPW*, p. 130).

³ “I have always said, and here I repeat, that my system is none other than the Kantian system. I.e., it contains the same view of the subject, though it proceeds in a manner that is entirely independent of Kant’s presentation.” (*VNDWL*, GA I/4, 184; *IW*, p. 4) “I know full well that Kant has by no means actually constructed a system of this sort... Nevertheless, I am equally certain that Kant has entertained the thought of such a system... and that his assertions make coherent sense only on this assumption.” (230; pp. 62-63)

idealism follows as an extension of Kant's system, it is also expected to have the aspect of empirical realism. However, it is also certain that his idealism gives the impression that it is stronger than Kant's. Then, to what extent and in what meaning is it empirical realism?

One easy solution may be to argue that they cannot be simply compared to each other, even if the same term is used between them. However, such an answer will never be satisfactory, because it will result in ignoring the opinion of Fichte himself. For instance, in a part of the *Second Introduction to Wissenschaftslehre*, he oppugns the contemporary tendency that regards Kant as a realist, and explains his original interpretation of empirical realism (cf. *VNDWL*, GA I/4, 243; *IW*, pp. 75-76). In addition, in a passage in the *TL* lecture from his Berlin period, he states that *WL* is transcendental idealism as well as empirical realism (cf. *TL*, GA II/14, 372).

Thus, we must also consider Fichte to be an empirical realist, though this will inevitably give rise to the question of whether the radicalization of the Kantian system may result in criticism of transcendental realism different from the original. I believe that this problem has not been investigated sufficiently.

Based on the aforementioned interest in the issues, this paper aims to examine the empirical realistic aspects of the Jena and the Berlin years of Fichte's *WL*. The argument proceeds as follows: (1) I briefly reconstruct Kant's position in “Fourth Paralogism,” (2) I verify Fichte's understanding of empirical realism in the *Second Introduction*, (3) I contrast the view on thing in itself between Kant and Fichte, and then, (4) I investigate Fichte's new idea about empirical realism in *TL*. My aim is to obtain a clue to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of the Berlin period, especially the idea of the *Bild*, which I found extremely difficult to understand.

1. Transcendental Idealism and Empirical Realism

Kant's original purpose in “Fourth Paralogism” was to refute the idealism that argues that the existence of outer objects is doubtful⁴. The argument on transcendental realism was proposed in the middle of it. The discourse of this part is somewhat entangled, and it seems that Kant himself was dissatisfied with its persuasion. In fact, after the defense in *Prolegomena* against the criticisms, this passage was deleted in the second edition of *KrV*, and a new argument called “Refutation of Idealism” was added in other parts. However, I do not intend to verify if his refutation of idealism is indeed successful, but will briefly

⁴ Therefore, it is not supposed here such a radical idealism that simply deny the existence of outer objects, what Kant named “dogmatic idealism.”

reconstruct Kant's argument in "Fourth Paralogism" to approach the issue.

Kant begins with the two presuppositions shareable by the opponent, that is, idealist; (A) only something that is in ourselves can be perceived immediately, and (B) only my own existence can be an object of mere perception (cf. *KrV*, A367). Herein, Kant aims to demonstrate the reality of outer objects, relying on his own argument on space and time in "transcendental aesthetics," though it initially seems that an idealistic conclusion is to be derived from the aforementioned presuppositions—that we will never be able to be sure of the existence of outer objects because they are not perceptible immediately, and so we can only infer their existence (cf. A368f.).

According to Kant, however, this is false because a wrong presupposition is added that outer objects must be things in themselves that exist independently without our sense. Kant termed this wrong position "transcendental realism." A transcendental realist will consider that the reality of outer existence to be merely the reality of things in themselves. Then because of (A) and (B), we are not able to immediately perceive things in themselves, but only to infer its being from its presentation. Thus, an idealistic conclusion is inferred, that is, "even with our best consciousness of our representation of these things, it is obviously far from certain that if the representation exists, then the object corresponding to it would also exist" (A371). Kant termed this view that argues about the limitation of empirical perception "empirical idealism," which is the consequence of transcendental realism.

In contrast, the position of Kant himself is "transcendental idealism," which is the doctrine that regards all appearances as mere representations, not as things themselves, and space and time as the subjective form of our intuition (cf. A369). According to this position, matters are merely representations. These representations are called outer, not because they are in relation to objects that are outer in themselves, but relate perceptions to space, in which all the external are, but which itself "is in us" (A370).

Kant asserts that transcendental idealism is also an empirical realism that admits the existence of outer things, and can therefore be dualism. Because the outer things are also my representations, I perceive my representations immediately. "I am no more necessitated to draw inferences in respect of the reality of external objects than I am in regard to the reality of the objects of my inner sense (my thoughts)" (A371). Thus, the empirical-idealistic anxiety that the existence of outer objects might be doubtful is not valid. The outer objects are empirically "substance in appearance" (A379).

What does it mean, incidentally, that the outer objects are also my representations? It is obvious that this does not mean that the representations regarding outer things are also what I represent, because what Kant expects as the ground here is the immediacy of the perception of myself, namely, of self-consciousness. In short, Kant considers that the representations of

outer things belong to self-consciousness. “All possible appearances belong, as representations, to the whole possible self-consciousness” (A113), and “all objects with which we can occupy ourselves are all in me, i.e., determinations of my identical self” (A129).

Thus, according to Kant’s statements in the first edition of *KrV*, we do not have to assume that the cognition of outer things must be related to things in themselves, which is outside us. This opinion resulted in considerable criticism and misunderstandings, and it was Fichte who trusted nevertheless in it and pursued to get through with it to a more comprehensive form⁵.

2. The Empirical Realism in *Second Introduction to Wissenschaftslehre*

Fichte criticizes his contemporary tendency to interpret Kant’s philosophy as dogmatic (realistic). Kant declared that we are affected by the object (cf. A19/B33), and those dogmatic readers understand this object as a thing in itself. However, Fichte declines this and asserts as follows:

What, then, is the object? That which is added to appearances by understanding, a mere thought.—The object affects us; something that is merely thought affects us. What does this mean?... [I]t affects us insofar as it exists, that is, it is merely thought of as affecting us. ... [C]ertainly, our knowledge all proceeds from an affection, but not affection by an object. This is Kant’s view, and also that of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. (*VNDWL*, GA I/4, 241; SK, 59-60)

This *prima facie* inconsistent assertion reflects Fichte’s view of empirical consciousness that forms the starting point of philosophy. What he means here are the following two points. (1) In general, to exist means nothing more than we must consider so. (2) We start from the fact that we are specifically determined in the empirical consciousness, but it does not contain the moment of “by what” (yet). In the first place, we should note that Fichte prefers the term “determinacy” (as meaning to be determined) to “affection,” and here uses the latter only to explain Kant’s statement.

According to Fichte’s thought, the determinacy in consciousness “appears as the absolutely contingent, and provides the merely empirical constituent of our cognition” (242;

⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, Fichte also has sympathy rather with Kant’s A-deduction than the B-deduction, as to the concept of transcendental apperception. See Michihito Yoshime, “The Problem of “können” in Kant’s B-Deduction and Its Significance for Fichte,” *Revista de Estud(i)os sobre Fichte [Online]*, 17, 2018, connection on 20 September 2020 (URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ref/914>).

61). It is a feeling of, for example, sweet, red, cold, and the like. These dogmatic Kantians try to explain this feeling as efficacy of thing in itself. However, it is difficult to solve the problem of how objective things in itself become the cause of subjective presentations.

In contrast, Fichte lays down as the ground of experience, not the thing in itself but the “self in itself” (190; 10). Presentations of outer things appear for us as accompanied by a “feeling of necessity” (186; 6)—in particular, we get to see the presentations accompanied by feelings of necessity as presentations of outer things—and this should be regarded as the consequence of the self-determining of the self in itself through giving itself a law (self-legislation) and acting in a specific way obeying the law (cf. 199ff.; 20-22). However, this is a transcendental explanation, and the empirical self does not explain its own feeling as such.

[B]y intuition it [the empirical self] creates for itself an extended matter, to which it carries over, by thought, this purely subjective element of feeling, as to its ground, and by this synthesis and explanation of its own state gives it its system of the world; and observation of the laws of this explanation provides the philosopher with the science. Herein, Kant's empirical realism, which is also a transcendental idealism. (243; 61-62)

Thus, we may conclude that empirical realism consists of science, in that the empirical self is forced to see the subjective feeling as an extended matter. Fichte asserts that his view is the same as Kant's. Is that indeed so?

3. Fichte's Kant-interpretation and the Problem of Thing in itself

Fichte's criticism of the dogmatic Kantians is combined with his strong belief that Kant denied thing in itself, or, at least, he should have. However, was the view that Kant intended to maintain not more complicated than Fichte considers it to be?

It is fact that Kant declined transcendental realism. However, he did not declare that thing in itself does not exist at all. Even in “Fourth Paralogism” he referred to a “transcendental object” as follows: “We can admit about our outer intuition that its cause is something what may be outside us in a transcendental meaning...” (*KrV*, A372). What Kant asserted, to be precise, was only that thing in itself is for us unknown. Kant in *Prolegomena* and the second edition of *KrV* seems apparently more positive about thing in itself. In the former, he states that “both [space and time] are not determinacy that belongs to thing in itself, but just the determinacy that belongs to the relation of the thing in itself to sense” (*P*, AA IV, 284), and “our sensitive representations are definitely not the representations of things in themselves,

but only the representation of how they appear to us”(287, n.1).

Moreover, with regards to the latter, the following passage is famous:

However, the reservation must also be well noted that we must at least be able to think of them as things in themselves. Otherwise, there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears. (*KrV*, BXXVI)

Kant cannot deny the existence of thing in itself—or “*noumena*” (B306)—due to the necessity of transcendental ideas such as freedom, god, and immortality, postulated by practical reason. However, needless to say, theoretical reason is not able to have cognition of them. Therefore Kant characterized them as unknown and that we can neither affirm their existence, nor their nonexistence.

However, Fichte did not consider that such a complicated position could be maintained. The primary idea of transcendental idealism, which was shared with Kant, that “all consciousness is consciousness of ourselves” (*WLnm*, GA IV 2, 197) is in Fichte mediated by the idea that we must choose either thing in itself or the absolute I and arrive at the following conclusion: “Nothing outside me, nor thing in itself, but I can be the object of my consciousness. This is the primary maxim and the deepest spirit of transcendental idealism” (163).

However, how does Fichte preserve the transcendental ideas? Regarding freedom, Fichte preserves it by thinking a great deal of the unity of the theoretical and practical reasons, and placing the absolute activity of selfhood (that is, freedom) as the supreme principle of the two (cf. *SS*, GA I/5, 27). However, it must become difficult to explain god as a being if the selfhood is placed at the top of the system—even if the self would be distinguished clearly from individuality and understood as “our mental nature” (*VNDWL*, I/4, 257) in general. In the *Wissenschaftslehre nova method*, Fichte states that god and the world “depend upon our reason” (*WLnm*, GA IV/2, 97). Even if this was not the immediate cause of the atheism debate⁶, such a position could barely practically maintain him on the assumption of *das Absolute* in his Berlin years.

⁶ As is well known, the immediate cause was the paper “On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World-Governance.”

4. Empirical realism in “Transcendental Logic” lecture

Fichte referred to Kant's same argument in his *TL* lecture in autumn 1812. According to this, opponents of *WL* consider that *WL*, as an idealism, denies the categorical “is,” which is just a misunderstanding. *WL* does not deny expressions such as “there is a stove in front of me.” We then have further the concept of a real being outside the intuition of “is,” and precisely this real being is denied in regard to the empirical phenomenon. It must be distinguished between being and its *Bild* (image). Based on this, Fichte states that:

Kant wanted to say this, or at least should have wanted it, when he says that his system is empirical realism, but transcendental idealism, and we can acquire this expression as well explained. Empirical realism: The categorical *is* [is] admitted. Transcendental idealism: We raise ourselves over all phenomena to a pure concept of being, and when we collate the empirical with this, we find the empirical not as being, but as *Bild*. (*TL*, GA II/14, 372f.)

Here again, similar to Kant's system, Fichte's transcendental idealism is declared to have the aspect of empirical realism, however, different from the statement in Jena period, the concept of *Bild* is used here. In addition, it is common knowledge that Fichte in this period refers to *das Absolute* (the absolute) and this lecture is no exception. Therefore, we must confirm what these terms mean and verify how *WL* can be empirical realism.

According to Fichte, Kant stands against the philosophy that regards *Wissen* (knowledge/knowing) as mere pure faculty of images to which, through itself, would be given no figure and no determination, and thus, the philosophy considers all figures as given by the effect of the thing—specifically, transcendental realism. However, Fichte continues, in the figuring of *Wissen* at least some part, and according to *WL*, the all, is given by *Wissen* itself. In *WL*, therefore, all of the thing or being is itself the figure of *Wissen*, and there is nothing at all outside *Wissen* (cf. 210). In short, to *be* is nothing other than *known*.

Then, what is *Wissen*? It consists of an indivisible combination of intuition and concept (cf. 209). According to Fichte's explanation in this lecture, intuition is the *Bild* (a) of content of the absolute appearance, and concept is the *Bild* (b) of that (a) is not being itself, but its *Bild*. Therefore, *Bild* is something not a being, while it has the same content as being. Therefore, a being is supposed to be something that does not form an image of its content toward outside, that is, something does not appear, so is “the absolute closed nature in itself” (222), “absolute immanence in its imagelessness” (227). On the contrary, *Bild* is “absolute *sich äußern, als sich äußern* [expressing itself as expressing itself]” (ibid.)

What is to be made the issue of here is how the content of *Bild* (a) can be described, assuming that the *Bild* (a) really and actually express itself as “the *Urbild* [ur-image] (the absolute appearance)” (229). It is wrong to consider that here the being of this *Bild* has been already posited and this *Bild* gives itself its content somehow inside its being (cf. 234). In such a case, the being of the *Bild* must have been the being itself than its *Bild*.

Rather, the ur-image appears to itself and understands itself—to understand is “further to determine a being in its *Bild*” (330)—not as being but as *Bild*, and this is the only way for it to be. The ur-image intuits its content in the form of *Werden* (becoming). But why is no other than this content attained through the becoming? The ur-image is the appearance of the absolute (cf. 240-241). “All the content of *Wissen* [is] simply and fundamentally through the immediate appearance of the absolute in it” (247). How can these two ideas be compatible?

For Fichte’s standpoint to be an empirical realism, it needs to be explained at least that the rejection of transcendental realism is compatible with the assumption of the absolute, and in what sense the categorical *is* is admitted. What must be emphasized here is that Fichte strongly denies the idea of the absolute being as substrate behind its appearance. Certainly, he noted that there must be an objective independent being outside the *Bild*; however, the primary principle states, “not outside the *Bild*” (252). Although this might seem to be a paradox, Fichte does not think of a transcendental-realistic model after all. These “outer must be subordinated to the not-outer; [this] outer [is] an inner outer” (*ibid.*) Specifically, the image is an image of imaging and states on itself explicitly, by locating the necessity of imaging within itself, that it is “mere afterimage and separated reflex” (255) of being, the absolute. In other words, an intuition that it is not the absolute itself but its afterimage brought by imaging accompanies the image of the absolute, identical to the transcendental apperception.

There is no being which corresponds to the *Bild* of the absolute. It indicates to us the pure world of *Bild* from which the being is excluded (cf. 264). The being is only *Bild*, and “is only considered as being or the absolute through ununderstanding” (330). The world of *Bild* is the true absolute world, and the world of being *is* in so far it appertains to the world of *Bild* (cf. *ibid.*). However, the sensible world is the world of “the appearing *Ich* [‘I’] and the world of the *Iche* [‘I’s] likewise the world of object of the consciousness of the *Iche*” (333-334), and “merely the material for a *Bild* of the *Ich*” (334). Although similar to the dogmatist, Fichte also claims a firm, standing being, not as being, but as *Bild* (cf. 336).

Then, what does Fichte consider under the categorical *is*? A formal *Bild* in intuition. This intuition is, in the fundamental *Wissen* whose *Bild* is completely and simply formal, especially the sense. The sense gives the *is* (cf. *Ibid.*). In the factual *sense*, this is always *what is*. For example, there is a stove, or something similar. This means that its mere *Bild* is not to be without posited as really being. However, it will never mean that it is not the *Bild*, but its

being itself. This is the summary of Fichtean empirical realism in his Berlin years.

Lastly, I make a comment on the temporary conclusion we have attained. Unlike Kant, Fichte did not consider it necessary to preserve the possibility of thing in itself for transcendental ideas. This is valid not only for his Jena years, but also for his Berlin period in which he mentions the absolute, at least in the introductory lectures. However, his empirical realism seems less complicated than Kant's. This is because in the condition that thing in itself is thoroughly excluded, empirical idealists do not appear as strong opponents. In other words, defending empirical realism was important to Kant because of his delicate position to thing in itself. Moreover, the *TL* lecture, on the basis of which we have followed the argument, is only one of those introductory lectures to the *WL*. To understand his empirical realism in the Berlin years in relation to his theory of *Bild*, it is necessary to explore his latest *WL* lectures from 1810 to 1814 in detail, though I have to leave it here as a future task.

Abbreviations

Kant

KrV = *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/87) (*Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, reprinted, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017 [1998])

P = *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können* (1783)

Fichte

BWL = *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder sogenannten Philosophie, als Einladungsschrift zu seiner Vorlesung über diese Wissenschaft* (1794/98)

EPW = *Early Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale, Ithaca/ London, Cornell University Press, 1988.

IW = *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings* (1797-1800), Edited and Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by Daniel Breazeale, Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994.

WLnm = *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1798/99)

SS = *Das System der Sittenlehre nach den principien der Wissenschaftslehre* (1798)

VNDWL = *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (inkl. *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* und *Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, für Leser, die schon ein philosophisches system haben) (1797/98)

TL = *Vom Unterschied zwischen der Logik und der Philosophie Selbst, als Grundriss der Logik und Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1812)

SK = *Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. by Peter Harth and John Lachs, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge/New York/Port Chester/Melbourne/Sydney, [1970] 2003.

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