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Author(s)	Yoshime, Michihito
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Osaka University

Michihito YOSHIME (Osaka University)

The Second-Person Standpoint and the Fichtean Not-I¹

Introduction

In his book *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Darwall [2006] 2009), Stephen Darwall argues that the second-person perspective has its own significance in moral obligation and authority, such that it is irreducible to the third-person perspective. In doing so, Darwall refers to Fichte's argument of the summons (*Aufforderung*; *GNR*, GA I /3, 342; *FNR*, 31). Ware (2009), Nance (2012), Pauer-Studer (2014), Altman (2018), Igor (2019), and others have commented on this interpretation.

I have presented arguments linking the transcendental pragmatics and discourse ethics of Karl-Otto Apel to Fichte's philosophy (named *Wissenschaftslehre* by himself) elsewhere, and I agree with Axel Honneth (2021, pp. 581-2) that Darwall's theory is compatible with that of Apel and his ally Habermas. Although Apel's theory takes communities of intersubjective communication as its main theme, in my opinion, a theory to mediate between the perspectives of the subjective individual and intersubjective communication communities is still lacking. In other words, we need a theory to bridge the gap between "I" and "we." Darwall's theory seemingly has the potential to fill the gap.

In fact, Habermas emphasized the importance of the second-personal reciprocity of perspectives in the context of his early criticism of Husserl's phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations* (cf. Habermas [2001] 2003, p. 41). However, there seems to be no place in their (and especially Apel's) writings where the reciprocity of perspectives itself is thematized philosophically. Habermas's theory of communicative action focuses on speech acts by the speaker and responses by the hearer. However, it is simply based on the idea of the reciprocity of perspectives, rather than elucidating and grounding the idea. In this sense, it would be worthwhile to refer to Darwall's theory.

On the other hand, it is also true that Darwall cites Fichte's argument without a detailed reference to *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre (GWL)*. He does not go as far as the concept of the mutual restriction of the I and the Not-I (cf. *GWL*, GA I/2, 283ff.: *FEW*, 225ff.), which seems to form the background of Fichte's theory of the other, but only briefly reconstructs the argument in *Grundlage des Naturrechts (GNR)*. While Fichte's theory of the

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at the XI. Congress of the International Johann Gottlieb Fichte Society held in Leipzig.

other, represented by summons and mutual recognition, is certainly a groundbreaking one, it is questionable to use a part of this argument without considering the whole of the system.

However, Darwall's insistence on the importance of the second-person standpoint inevitably faces a problem of justification. This is probably because he does not suppose any underlying principle which precedes and grounds the theory of the other.

Therefore, it is important to clarify the fundamental ideas that should underlie the notion of the summons in Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre* and the internal connections between them. This is not a new territory for Fichte studies. As far as the second-person perspective is concerned, Fichte's relation to Martin Buber's notion of "I-Thou" (cf. Buber [1958] 2000) has been pursued by, for example, Hans Düesberg (1970) and Wilhelm Weischedel (1973) even before Darwall's interpretation attracted much attention. In addition, the relationship between Fichte's *GWL* and his theory of the other is one of the traditional points of contention in Fichte studies. For example, Ludwig Siep (1979) and Weischedel (1973) believe that the *GWL* forms the basis of the *GNR*, whereas Peter Baumanns (1972) takes a negative position on the same.²

It is not possible to discuss these previous studies in detail in the present paper. Rather, I reconstruct Darwall's theory of the second-person standpoint with a special interest in its similarities to and differences from Buber's thought, and reread Fichte's Not-I with the second-person perspectives in mind. It is doubtful whether Fichte himself was aware of the distinction between the second- and third-person perspectives in Darwall's sense, when he wrote *GWL* as lecture handouts for his students. In that respect, this study may not be a literal reconstruction of the path of Fichte's own thinking. However, we will find some clue to the theory of the other in Fichte's description of *GWL*, referring to *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten (BG)*.

The argument proceeds as follows: First, I summarize Darwall's theory of the second-person standpoint and confirm that there is a problem in its justification. Second, I compare the situation to the case of Buber's *I and Thou*, and investigate Fichte's arguments on the Not-I with a special interest in its potential to ground his theory of the other in *GNR*. Finally, a temporary conclusion is given.

1. Significance and problems of the second-person standpoint

Darwall ([2006] 2009) points out the significance of the second-person standpoint

² For this summary of situations of debates, see Williams (1992).

in moral obligation and authority, which is “irreducible” (*Ibid.* p. 13). According to him, the second-person standpoint is “the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will” (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

This standpoint is to be distinguished from the third-person standpoint, which takes others into account “objectively” or “agent-neutrally” (*Ibid.*, p. 9). The third-person standpoint does not assume that some normative relationship of authority or responsibility is established between you and me. Rather, it is a perspective that cognizes the fact that there is such normativity in our community. In other words, there is no room to represent specific interests of parties to the issue in this standpoint. For example, it would be based on the second-personal authority if someone steps on your foot and then you give them a reason to remove their foot from on top of yours to stop causing you pain. The situation is not third-personal, that is, it is not such that there is a mere state of the world that they could change if they, knowing that it is generally a bad thing if someone is in pain, noticed that they are somehow able to affect the state, and thus remove their foot from on top of yours. Here, you are addressing your complaint to the very person who was causing you pain. Darwall also presents as an example what P. F. Strawson calls reactive attitude, such as resentment and guilt. The resentment that a victim of violence or discrimination feels toward the perpetrator must be different from the feelings of a third party who perceives the fact of violence objectively. If this third party feels the same resentment as the victim, they are, so to speak, adopting the same second-person perspective of the victim. Darwall believes that moral authority, obligations, accountability, etc., are also based on the same second-person perspective as these feelings.

Unlike the first state- or outcome-based reason, this second is second-personal in the sense that, although the first is conceptually independent of the second-personal address involved in making claims and holding persons responsible, the second is not. A second-personal reason is one whose validity depends on presupposed authority and accountability relations between persons and, therefore, on the possibility of the reason’s being addressed person-to-person. Reasons addressed or presupposed in orders, requests, claims, reproaches, complaints, demands, promises, contracts, givings of consent, commands, and so on are all second-personal in this sense (*Ibid.*, p. 8).

The second-person perspective thus enables us to explain various things concerning morality, and in this sense, is not reducible.

On the other hand, however, there seems to be a problem for explication of this irreducible perspective. That is, the problem of its justification. Why is this standpoint so

special? Where does such authority or accountability come from? Further, is this perspective actually irreducible to third-personal explanations? Darwall admits that those second-personal notions “comprise an interdefinable circle; each implies all the rest”, and “there is no way to break into this circle from outside it” (*Ibid.*, p. 12). Therefore, the second-person standing itself “must be justifiable from within a second-person standpoint” (*Ibid.*, p. 13). However, he does not provide a justification of the same in the form of argument or proof, nor does he detail the source of the second-person standpoint. He seems to consider that we could be satisfied with the notion of the interdefinable circle, but it is not enough to simply say that it must be justified within the circle, to make clear how it is justified within this circle.

Let us compare the situation to that of Buber’s “I-Thou” relation. Darwall’s notion of the irreducibility of the second-person perspective to that of the third-person, including the moral significance of the former, should remind us of Buber’s classic arguments. Indeed, Darwall cites Buber’s words as an epigraph of the third chapter of the above book (*Ibid.*, p. 39). However, this is only for illustrative purposes, to make it easier for the reader to understand the uniqueness of the second-person perspective. Darwall does not intend to discuss Buber in detail. Indeed, there are many differences between the two.

One of the main points of Buber’s concept of “I-Thou” is that the first-personal “I” can never exist alone (Buber [1958] 2000, p. 20). The I always exists as an I that confronts “Thou” or “It” in one of two mutually irreducible relationships: “I-Thou” or “I-It.” For the I, “It” always exists neighbored by another “It,” whereas “Thou” can only be confronted with the whole being of “I” (cf. *Ibid.*, 19-20). Moreover, the word “Thou” always contains an affirmation of the being addressed (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 30). Buber believed that it is in this “I-Thou” relation that human ethics is established. In this sense, Darwall’s discussion of the second-person perspective is distinctively reminiscent of Buber.

The major difference between them lies in how they conceive of the source of the second-person perspective or the “I-Thou” relation. In our daily lives, we have time to be with others and times not to. For Buber, this means the fragmentation of the “I-Thou” relationship. “[T]his is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every Thou in our world must become an It” (*Ibid.*, p. 30). This is why our daily encounters and interactions with “Thou” are precious.

Every particular “Thou” is a glimpse through to the eternal “Thou”; by means of every particular “Thou” the primary word addresses the eternal “Thou.” [...] [T]he inborn “Thou” is realised in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the Thou that by its nature cannot become It (*Ibid.*, p. 77).

As above, Buber grounds the significance and irreducibility of the “I-Thou” relation by the notion of “the eternal Thou,” namely God. In contrast, Darwall does not describe the metaphysical background of the second-personal perspective, and thus has no support that can ground the circle of second-personal perspective within itself, whether it is metaphysical or not.

Therefore, I would like to focus on the relation between Fichte’s theory of the other and his original thought on the “I” and the “Not-I.” While Darwall evaluates Fichte’s theory of the other highly, which is rare for contemporary philosophers, he does not mention to *GWL* at all.

What is striking in Darwall’s aforementioned book is the repeated references to Fichte throughout Chapter 10, titled “Dignity and the Second Person: Variations on Fichtean Themes.” In doing so, Darwall has in mind Fichte’s theory of the other, which is famous for its concept of “summons.” Fichte argued that a subject must have been determined to be self-determining to be a subject. This is “a summons to the subject, calling upon it to resolve to exercise its efficacy” (*GNR*, GA I/3, 342; *FNR*, 31). Therefore:

[T]he rational being cannot posit itself as such, except in response to a summons calling upon it to act freely. But if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general [...] (*GNR*, GA I/3, 347; *FNR*, 37).

This was the core argument of the theory of the other that Fichte presented in *GNR*. And now, with reference to Kant’s dictum that a human being “possesses a dignity [...] by which he exacts respect for himself” (Darwall [2006] 2009, p. 243), Darwall interprets Fichte’s thought as follows:

[S]econd-personal address always presumes, as such, to direct an agent’s will through that agent’s own free choice (*Ibid.*, p. 245).

Based on this notion, he argues, the following point should be brought. Namely, there are two things that must always be presupposed to address claims to someone second-personally.

The first is that the addresser and the addressee share an equal authority to make claims of one another as free and rational. And the second is that they share a freedom to act on claims that are rooted in this authority. (*Ibid.*, p. 246).

From this he exercises his own discussions focused on human dignity, and admits that he extends Fichte's claims and arguments farther than the latter would (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 252). Meanwhile, when using the concept of "summons," Darwall surely looks not only at Fichte's theory of the other, but also at the thought on the I that lies behind it, but only so far as it is developed in *GNR*, and he does not refer to *GWL* or other discussions of Fichte's early writings. This is because Darwall's interest was not in the philological reading of Fichte. After all, he is not trying to explain Fichte's thought, but to explain the significance of the second-person standpoint. Therefore, we might not profit much were we to point out that his arguments are not strict as a reading of Fichte's work. We should rather focus on whether Darwall's argument itself goes well and succeeds in presenting the moral view from the second-person perspective. Moreover, it is our task to investigate the internal connection of Fichte's thoughts on the other and the I. In particular, we may be able to make new discoveries by referring to *GWL*, as Fichte does not explicitly discuss the other there. I will, therefore, investigate how the theory of the Not-I could be read if we have the argument of "summons" in *GNR*. In doing so, I will also cite *BG* as supporting material.

2. The Not-I understood in the context of the theory of the other

It is well known that Fichte discussed the mutual restriction of the I and the Not-I in *GWL*. Nonetheless, there is no visible traces of Fichte himself presenting this as a theory of the other. The situation is the same as the classical interpretation. For example, in Oscar Bensow (1898), it is emphasized that the Not-I is not the thing in itself. In other words, the Not-I was understood solely as the source of the representation of things in cognition, or as the material thing that the I transforms through action, but which cannot be a thing in itself alongside the absolute I.

On the contrary, in *BG*, which consists of a series of lectures given at the same time as *GWL*, Fichte clearly expressed his need for a theory of the other and his determination to take on that task.³ That is, there are two questions that philosophy must first answer.

First of all, by what right does a man call a particular portion of the physical world "his body"? How does he come to consider this to be his body, something which belongs to his I, since it is nevertheless something completely opposed to his I? And then the second question: How does a man come to assume that there are rational beings like

³ According to Williams (1992, p. 53), Reinhard Lauth had already made this point early on.

himself apart from him? And how does he come to recognize them, since they are certainly not immediately present to his pure self-consciousness? (*BG*, *GA I/3*, 34: *EPW*, 153).

The answer to this second question was the theory of the other in *GNR*. It is thus clear that the argument on the Not-I in *GWL* is not meant to answer the question raised above, even though he declares in a passage “no thou, no I; No I, no thou” (*GWL*, *GA I/2*, 337: *FEW*, 275).⁴

Still, it would not be pointless to ask the question: Is it possible to assume a distinction between things and other selves in the concept of the Not-I of *GWL*? Even if, at that time, Fichte was not ready to answer the question of the other set forth in *BG*, there is no doubt that he believed that the answer must be given on the basis of the system of *Wissenschaftslehre*. Therefore, it is of some significance to see the concept of Not-I in *GWL* as a hint that later develops into the theory of the other.

I will attempt to do this below. However, it should be noted that this will not be based on a strict philological reading, but rather a schematic interpretation. This is partly because Fichte himself does not explicitly suggest such a possibility in *GWL*.

As is well known, from the three principles established in the first part the following two theorems are deduced as foundations of the theoretical and the practical:

The first theorem

[T]he I posit itself as restricted by the Not-I (*GWL*, *GA I/2*, 28: *FEW*, 227).

The second theorem

[T]he I posits the Not-I as restricted by the I (*GWL*, *GA I/2*, 285: *FEW*, 227; cf. *GWL*, *GA I/2*, 385-386: *FEW*, 320).

These propositions are, in my opinion, not phenomenological descriptions of the situation as seen from the viewpoint of the I itself, which is actually restricted or restricting. These are, so to speak, descriptions of the state of the human spirit, as seen from the standpoint of *Wissenschaftslehre*. In other words, they are the products of self-reflection by the human spirit that has arrived at the standpoint of *Wissenschaftslehre*.

For example, in the case of the first theorem, the subject as active nature, which is, the

⁴ According to Williams (1992, p. 53), Philolenko (1966) picked up these words to argue that the problem of intersubjectivity was already thematized in *GWL*. I cannot go in details of his argument here.

party to the current restriction, does not feel that “the I is restricted by the Not-I” but simply feels the “check or impulse (*Anstoß*)” (*GWL*, GA I/2, 355: *FEW*, 292). When the anonymous subject reaches, through the check, the stage of self-reflection or self-consciousness, the I becomes aware that it is the I for the first time, and grasps the check as the restriction caused by the Not-I, i.e., something that is not the I. Fichte states, “[t]he I can posit itself in no other way than as determined by the Not-I. (No object, no subject.)” (*GWL*, GA I/2, 362: *FEW*, 299). We can thus safely say that it is only when one encounters the check that one’s active nature awakens to self-awareness as the I.

If it is not mistaken to understand Fichte’s argument on the Not-I in this way, then the check here plays much the same role as the “summons” in *GNR*. In fact, it is stated as follows in *GNR*. The subject finds itself “as determined to be self-active by means of an external check” (*GNR*, GA I/3, 343: *FNR*, 32).

It is possible that Fichte had not yet discovered the idea of summons in the *GWL*, or that he was not convinced it could be fully developed. However, it is fair to say that the notion of summons presented later was an expansion or extension of the theory of check in *GWL*. Williams (1992), while acknowledging that the two concepts are not clearly distinct, believes that the discussion in *GWL* is incomplete and that *GNR* presents a more developed version of Fichte’s thought (cf. p. 58).

Still, what is characteristic of the *GWL* is the derivation of the existence of the Not-I through three principles: the *Wissenschaftslehre* always starts from the fact of consciousness, ascends to its ground, and from that ground explains and justifies experience once again. The possibility of the theory of the other, which should be found in the *GWL* must, therefore, be grounded by the absolute I, as well. It also carries with it the moral imperative of unity with the absolute I as regulative idea.

Taking the arguments in *BG* into account, this means a lot. The unity with the absolute I is the vocation of each rational being in society, and the ultimate and highest goal of society is the complete unity and unanimity of all of its members (*BG*, GA I/3, 40: *EPW*, 159). Such unity is thus not to be established alone by an individual.

[O]ur social vocation consists in the process of communal perfection, that is, perfecting ourselves by freely making use of the effect which others have on us and perfecting others by acting in turn upon them as upon free beings (*BG*, GA I/3, 40: *EPW*, 160).

Therefore, if we would make a distinction within the Not-I in *GWL* between things and other selves, we could say that each individual subject will find within their Not-I, which originally

seemed to be merely Not-I, some mixture of something that will turn out to be other rational beings and something that is throughout Not-I for all such beings. Making this distinction may not be easy for an I, not only for those who have just reached self-determination as an empirical I, e.g., children, but also for those who have already been firmly determined, e.g., adults. We are always more or less biased concerning who to count as the other, i.e., as our potential partners. So, we can, and we should, become ever capable of making this distinction, that is, recognizing others by being acted upon, namely educated, by others, and we also educate others through acting upon them.

In Darwall's context, it seems that by supplementing the argument on summons in *GNR* with arguments made in *GWL* and *BG*, the second-person perspective can also gain a grounding for its existence and the normative nature inherent in this perspective from the (unattainable) ideality of the moral community. This would be a different solution from that of Buber, who sees God in the foundation of "I-Thou" relation.

The idea of a moral community has also been considered by Darwall (Darwall [2006] 2009, p. 171), who tries to ground this community by means of the second-person perspective. From the Fichte's standpoint and that of discourse ethics, it is the ideal nature of this community that should be considered prior to the second-person perspective. However, it must also be noted that such an ideal community cannot have its own place in our real communication, even as mere regulative idea, without being mediated by the second-person standpoint between you and me as members of the community. An ideal concept of community in which any two meet as "you" and "me" is useless for an individual who stays in the third-person standpoint throughout. In this sense, I contend, that the second-person perspective could mediate "I" and "We." Further, it may also be possible to understand the relation of the moral community and the second-person standpoint as being such that the former is the *ratio essendi* of the latter, and the latter is the *ratio cognoscendi* of the former.⁵

Of course, a more detailed investigation and discussion is needed to demonstrate this, and what I have described here is only a very rough perspective, but these are my tentative conclusions.

⁵ What I have in mind here is Kant's notion of the relation between freedom and moral principle (cf. *AA*, V, 4n).

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Abbreviations

AA = *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften. Herausgegeben von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.*

BG = *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, 1794.

EPW = *Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale, Ithaca: Cornell

University Press, 1988.

FEW = *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794-95)*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Breazeale, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

FNR = *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. by Frederick Neuhauser, trans. by Michael Baur, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

GA = *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. by Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Hans Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1964-2012.

GNR = *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, 1796.

GWL = *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794/95.

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