

# THE I THAT GIVES MUCH FOOD FOR THOUGHT. DIETER HENRICH'S AFTERTHOUGHTS ON "FICHTE'S ORIGINAL INSIGHT"

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Dieter Henrich. *Dies Ich, das viel besagt. Fichtes Einsicht nachdenken*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2019, XIII und 305 S. (Dieter Henrich. *This I that implies much. Reflecting on Fichte's insight*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2019, XIII and 305 pp.)

Dieter Henrich's treatise "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht" (*Fichte's Original Insight*) was first published in 1966.<sup>1</sup> Half a century on, Henrich has now presented this text once again unchanged and followed it with an extensive commentary. Those familiar with Dieter Henrich's philosophical life's work<sup>2</sup> will be excited to read the retrospective reflections on his early interpretation of Fichte. To anticipate: Henrich's afterthoughts impressively reveal the unbroken fascination of Fichte's 'original insight'. At the same time, they offer a decisive plea for the topicality of Fichte's epochal discovery in the context of founding a theory of subjectivity. Compared with the early treatise, however, the critical distance of the author's own theory on the connection between self-consciousness and life is profiled more sharply in relation to the systematics of Fichte's philosophy. Before this can be explored in more detail, it is useful to recall the motives and central theses of the 1966 treatise.

*Fichte's original insight* was an 'untimely meditation'. It was aimed against the prevailing *Zeitgeist* in academic philosophy. In the long shadow of Hegel and the continuing impact of Heidegger, as well as the increasingly assertive language-analytical philosophy, Fichte's philosophy was considered obsolete and outdated. His theory of subjectivity and its principle of the selfconscious

- 1 D. Henrich, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht", in: *Subjektivität und Metaphysik. Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer*, Frankfurt a. M. 1966, 188–232; the text was published as a separate print in 1967. The first, shorter version is based on a lecture given in French at the Collège de France in spring 1966: "La découverte de Fichte", in: *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (1967), 154–169. It first appeared in German in: D. Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse*, Stuttgart 1982, 56–82.
- 2 On this, see U. Barth, "Letzte Gedanken. Ihr epistemischer Status in "Religion und Philosophie", in: D. Korsch, J. Dierken (Hg.), *Subjektivität im Kontext. Erkundungen im Gespräch mit Dieter Henrich*, Tübingen 2004, 187–210. ("Last Thoughts. Their Epistemic Status in Religion and Philosophy", in: D. Korsch, J. Dierken (eds.), *Subjectivity in context. Explorations in conversation with Dieter Henrich*, Tübingen 2004, 187–210.)

subject was thus disdained and largely ignored. Henrich countered this by demonstrating that in this way a problem was lost from view that is of eminent importance not only for research in the history of philosophy, but also for systematic philosophy. This is to be seen in the way Fichte described (the first to do so) the logical structure of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, as Fichte's early thesis can be summarised, cannot be described, as was the case until Kant, according to the model of an intentional-reflexive act through which the subject makes itself the object of its consciousness. Such a description, Henrich shows, presupposes what is to be explained or leads to infinite regresses. Self-consciousness is instead to be understood as a performative self-referential act in which its reality and the knowledge of it are immediately one. This is the content of the proposition: "The I originally posits its own being unconditionally" ("Das Ich setzt ursprünglich schlechthin sein eigenes Sein"). It is the expression of Fichte's original insight.

Starting from this formula, Henrich shows the difficulties that arise in the question of how to explain the logical structure of this self-consciousness. Although Fichte, like Kant, emphasises that the I as such has no descriptive predicate, this does not mean that formal components of its constitution are not to be distinguished in it, whose relationship to each other is to be determined. The question is how to describe the internal constitution of self-consciousness and how its coming into being is to be understood. Henrich's thesis is that Fichte seeks to resolve these difficulties with two further formulas that build on each other and mark stages in the development of Fichte's philosophy, without arriving at a satisfactory conception. The late commentary adheres to this thesis, but develops, especially with regard to the third formula and Fichte's philosophy after 1801, the sketch of an alternative theoretical draft that nevertheless seeks to preserve Fichte's insight.

If the first formula expressed the spontaneity of self-consciousness and the immediate unity of the act and knowledge of it, the second formula makes the character of knowledge explicit. The subject of self-consciousness has a thematic knowledge that includes a conceptual component, that the act through which it constitutes itself is its own act: "The I posits itself unconditionally *as* positing itself" (19ff.) ("Das Ich setzt sich selbst schlechthin *als* sich setzend."). The third formula chosen by Henrich corresponds to the state of Fichte's philosophy from the years 1801/02 onwards. It metaphorically expresses the circumstance, which had not been made clear before, that the moment of explicit knowledge in self-consciousness cannot be logically *derived* from the performative act through which it constitutes itself, but only occurs together with the act: self-consciousness is now to be described as "an activity into which

an eye is implanted (*eingesetzt*)” (23ff.). This formulation brings into view the circumstance that the previously so-called unconditioned positing of the I is in that sense an *unconditioned* positing that the existence of the moment of knowledge cannot be logically deduced from the spontaneous activity, but only occurs together with the activity in the same original way. If it were logically deducible, it would be conditioned, which is not the case. This explains the contrast between Fichte’s talk of an unconditioned positing (*setzen*) and an implanting (*einsetzen*).

Now, one may easily perceive that an analysis of this self-relation starting from one of the two moments, or by way of showing their mutual relation, misses the integration of the moments into the real *unity* of the self-relation that is transparent in itself, due to the fact that they are each different aspects. This shows that the internal structure of self-consciousness, more precisely the specific character of its being-for-itself, resists discursive analysis. Rather, according to Fichte, being-for-itself is to be realised in the form of an intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*).<sup>3</sup> It marks a limit of discursive rationality.

In a methodologically different course of analysis based on this, however, Fichte develops another idea in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801/02. Whereas previously it was a matter of a “reflection of the teacher of science” (§ 15), the analysis now takes place from the perspective of knowledge itself. It can be described in a very abbreviated way as follows: As *knowledge*, it seeks to provide a sufficient ground from which it can comprehend the status of its reality. However, the factuality of its reality cannot be sacrificed in the process, and this means that the activity itself cannot be identified as a logical ground. The factual reality of knowledge can then only be explained from its own perspective in such a way that it points to a ground which, precisely because it cannot be identified with the activity, is to be presupposed by it, and as whose unconditional *manifestation* knowledge now conceives itself. This is the idea of Fichte’s doctrine of the I as the appearance of an absolute being. This would be the fourth formula. It is thematic in section V of the early treatise (35ff.). Henrich’s comment on the eye formula, that “the I-form as a whole is not a positing grounded on itself alone, insofar then also not an absolute positing” (167), would therefore have to be supplemented as follows with regard to the thought leading to the fourth formula: Precisely from the motive of grounding

3 J. G. Fichte, *Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre aus den Jahren 1801/02*, ed. by R. Lauth, Hamburg 1977, § 15, 40ff. Hereafter referred to with the siglum “WL” and page number. On Fichte’s concept of intellectual intuition in the WL 1801/02, see J. Stolzenberg, *Fichtes Begriff der intellektuellen Anschauung. Seine Entwicklung in den Wissenschaftslehren von 1794/94 bis 1801/02*, Stuttgart 1986.

itself on itself alone follows the insight that the unconditioned positing of the I-form is not a self-sufficient positing after all, but a manifestation of a ground that must be presupposed. Therefore, the I understands itself as the appearance of an absolute being.

This brings to mind the set of formulas on which the early treatise focused. The isolation of a unified strand of problems and the formulas on the structure of self-consciousness detached from their contexts was accompanied by a restriction of topics that is only mentioned in an ‘outlook’ (47ff.). It concerns the relationship between particularity and generality in the thought ‘I’. This relationship comes to the fore in the late commentary, and from it Henrich grounds the outline of an alternative conception (268ff.). This is done in a twofold way: on the one hand, starting from the difference between uniqueness and generality in the thought ‘I’, and on the other hand, with reference to the state of Fichte’s reflections from 1801 onwards.

With the thought ‘I’, which is always produced by a single subject, is expressed at the same time that this thought represents an invariant form that is also valid for all other subjects. Fichte’s well-known injunction to think the thought ‘I’ demonstrates the unity of singularity and generality, so to speak, by the act. The interest of the early treatise was in the structure of self-consciousness of a single subject. The reference to the general form, which allowed Fichte to use the expression of an absolute ‘I’, was not central to the considerations. This difference was therefore not thematic in the early treatise. The conversion of the basic principle of the 1801/02 *Wissenschaftslehre* from the ego to the *eidos* knowledge, to which the form of self-reference under the title of “I-ness” (*Ichheit*) and further characters of the structure of self-consciousness are remarkably attributed, makes Fichte’s consistent orientation towards the generality of the thought ‘I’ also terminologically clear.

This conversion had also not been at the centre of the early treatise. It necessitates a new reflection on the relationship between particularity and generality in the thought of “I”. It can be summarised as follows: The analysis of the internal structure of the knowing self-relation, which is and always remains that of an individual subject, led to the insight that it can only understand its own structure adequately from its own perspective if it grasps it from a ground that is prior to it and manifests itself in it. This means that in the course of understanding its basic constitution, the subject comes to the insight that as an individual subject it is related to precisely that dimension that was introduced with the terminological switch from ‘I’ to the general form of knowledge and the theory of the appearance of an absolute being (187). The individual subject thus acquires a key position for the justification of a theory of finite subjectiv-

ity, which was not granted to it by Fichte and which is also not envisaged in the layout of his system.

In Henrich's view, this option can be justified with another obvious argument. It starts from the fact that the basic form of knowledge is essentially tied to the individuality of subjects and their conscious achievements. It is realised by individual subjects through the fact that knowledge is acquired in specific cases and that judgements about facts are held to be true through justifications and recognised as such. Therefore, the particularity of self-consciousness cannot be *derived* from the basic form of knowledge, as Fichte envisages with his system. Against Fichte's privileging of the general form of knowledge, the primacy of finite subjectivity is to be brought into play (231). Only in this way – and that is the point of Henrich's alternative proposal – can Fichte's original insight be done justice to (273).

Henrich leaves no doubt that this is not merely a repair of the foundation. Rather, it is the framework for "the profile of another conception" (268ff.). In it, the project comes into play that Henrich has outlined elsewhere under the title "Bewusstes Leben" (*Conscious Life*).<sup>4</sup> It is the draft of a theory of finite subjectivity whose basic principle is individual and finite self-consciousness. Fichte's conception is preserved insofar as the subject, conscious of itself, is not only the centre of the appropriation and attribution of all contents of consciousness, but also forms the idea of an 'absolute' in the reflection on its basic constitution, which eludes discursive explanation, but as whose manifestation it conceives itself. This self-understanding finds its concretion in the dynamics of a life path which, under diverse, even conflicting patterns of interpretation, arrives at a meaningful integration of the disparate interpretations and tendencies. In this conception, which combines Fichte's "Bestimmung des Menschen" (*Destiny of Man*) with Hölderlin's reflections on the eccentric trajectory of a life course, the idea of philosophy and conscious living, which Kant called the "world concept of philosophy", is preserved. It is the orientation of rational practice towards the realisation of ultimate ends that represent what, according to Kant, "necessarily interests everyone". Henrich's late meditations on Fichte's original insight end with a review of "Kant's statements on self-consciousness" (283ff.) and an appreciation of Kant's philosophy in its concept of the world.

*Fichte's original insight* was a parallel action. It wanted to make Fichte's philosophy heard once more, and it wanted to reclaim a factual problem for philosophy. The treatise achieved both intentions. For research on Fichte and idealism, it has remained relevant to this day, and in the philosophy of mind,

4 D. Henrich, *Bewusstes Leben (Conscious life)*, Stuttgart 1999.

*self-consciousness* has become a central theme. Henrich has contributed significantly to this, among other things in the discussion of Ernst Tugendhat's critique of idealist theories of self-consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The book then contains a concise overview of some of the most important analytical approaches to the problems of Fichte's treatise (133ff.). Over the decades, the double intention has developed its own dynamic with one result. It is the outline of an alternative project of a theory of self-consciousness and life, the outlines of which have now been clarified once again in retrospect.

Overall, the late review is impressive because of the diversity of the topics addressed and the perspectives associated with them; these cannot all be mentioned and appreciated in the present framework. They are prudently prepared explorations motivated by the ramifications and interconnections of the problems. Anyone who picks up the early treatise in the future, as anyone still must do who is interested in classical German philosophy after Kant, especially Fichte's philosophy and problems of a theory of subjectivity, will not get past Henrich's late reflections.

But it is precisely in retrospect that the question of the relationship to Fichte's philosophy, which has led to an intensified critical distance, must be asked again. This question does not concern internals of Fichte research, nor does it concern the selection of formulas, variations of which can be thought of, from which a modified assessment of Fichte's development results. This is justified by the systematic approach to interpretation, as Henrich rightly points out. In retrospect, and that means in view of the now formed profile of the innovative project of a philosophy of conscious life, Fichte's philosophy must nevertheless be given back its independence, whereby neither the truth nor the open question of its final form is to be decided. The subject of Fichte's philosophy is the general form of self-consciousness, its precondition and the forms of theoretical and practical knowledge. The individual subject is definitely in play here. This is shown by the role it plays as the subject judging according to the proposition "A is A" in the action-theoretical introduction of the fundamental principle of the first *Wissenschaftslehre*, which expresses the "pure character of activity in itself". The same applies to its presence in the demonstration of the general form of knowledge through a geometrical construction he carried out in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801/02. In both cases, it represents in itself the

5 E. Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, Frankfurt a. M., 1979, and D. Henrich, "Noch einmal in Zirkeln. Eine Kritik von Ernst Tugendhats semantischer Erklärung von Selbstbewusstsein" (*Once More in Circles. A Critique of Ernst Tugendhat's Semantic Explanation of Self-Consciousness*), in: C. Bellut/U. Müller-Schöll (eds.), *Mensch und Moderne*, Würzburg 1989, 93–132.

unity of particularity and generality. But it does not have the main role, nor does it have to have it, because only that which constitutes its general form is the subject of Fichte's philosophy: "For with individual subjects and objects," according to Fichte, "no tr[anscendental]. Ph[ilosophy] has to do."<sup>6</sup> Under this condition, the existence of a corporeal individual and a plurality of individuals is nevertheless thematic in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801/02.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the interest of a philosophical theory that takes its starting point from Fichte's original insight does not necessarily have to be directed towards the dynamics of the life course of a single subject. The retrospective shows a different picture. It shows two quite different philosophical projects that emerged from Fichte's original insight. Their themes each have their own characteristic profiles that share decisive traits, but they are not in competition with each other.

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6 WL 1801/02, 201.

7 See WL 1801/02, 201f. and frequently.