

ARTICLE

FICHTE ON FAITH AND AUTONOMY

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J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) articulates and defends a conception of autonomy as rational self-identification. This paper reconstructs this conception and examines various difficulties recognized by Fichte during the earliest phases of his career (1780s–1790s), with the heterogeneity of natural drives and freedom as the principal threat. Theoretically, this heterogeneity is overcome for Fichte by his deduction of the compound nature of humanity as a condition of rational agency. But, from the standpoint of the deliberating agent herself, this deduction is not sufficient. The harmony of nature and freedom is, for Fichte, a desideratum of practical rationality, and so must be addressed as such. Fichte's argument at this point is that a further perspective on oneself must be at least implicit in the moral outlook of a deliberating agent in order for this harmony to be attained on a practical level. This is because the harmony that is achieved at the deliberative level is occasional, temporary, and fundamentally uncertain. The required perspective turns out to be religious faith, the idea that the 'infinite task' of morality is eternally realized in divine reason, or that there is a 'moral world order' in which nature and freedom are reconciled.

KEYWORDS: J. G. Fichte; autonomy; religion; God; practical rationality

Speculation must be killed by speculation. Through freedom, and with our knowledge, we must again reoccupy the standpoint upon which we stood previously through mere natural instinct. [Philosophy] exists for the sake of raising ourselves to true autonomy, so that we are everything that we are through ourselves.

(II/4, 46)¹

¹References to Fichte's works are given parenthetically in the text, according to the system of abbreviations detailed in the bibliography. I would like to thank the following people for providing helpful comments and suggestions regarding earlier drafts of this paper: Elijah Millgram, Rick Furtak, James Reid, participants in the 2011 Southwest Seminar for Continental Philosophy in Denver, Karin Nisenbaum, two anonymous referees for the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, and members of the University of Utah's Undergraduate Philosophy Club.

The concept of autonomy is recognized as one of the driving forces in the development of post-Kantian idealism.² This is particularly true for Fichte, who takes himself to be completing what he saw as the unfulfilled promises of Kant's philosophy.³ In the course of executing this project, Fichte eventually faced charges of atheism.⁴ The aim of this paper is to re-examine the relationship between Fichte's self-professed 'system of freedom' and his theory of religion. I argue that Fichte's commitment to autonomy as a moral ideal leads him to embrace the further claim that religious faith actualizes this ideal.

My reconstruction of Fichte's position proceeds as follows. First, I argue that autonomy is a compound notion, particularly in Fichte, and that the part of the notion most relevant to my account involves wholeness or self-integration. Second, I examine some little known texts from the 1780s in which Fichte first articulates and defends both the ideal of wholeness and the claim that religious faith instantiates this ideal. Next, I discuss a transitional work in the development of Fichte's thinking about autonomy and faith, the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. In Section 4, I examine Fichte's mature account of his ethics of autonomy in the 1798 *System of Ethics* (and related texts), focusing on the attainment of wholeness as complete autonomy. Finally, I show how, in writings on religion from the latter half of the 1790s, Fichte adopts the strong claim that religious faith is necessary for this attainment. The central point throughout is that, despite otherwise important shifts in his thinking during the 1780s and 1790s, Fichte remains committed to defending religious faith as a condition for leading an autonomous life.

1. THE SENSE OF AUTONOMY

'Autonomy' means many things; the *Leitmotiv* is, roughly, that one's life ought to be 'one's own'. Autonomy is deployed to address a collection of normative, psychological, and metaphysical issues; there are many different

²For some examples, see (1) Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, especially Part I; (2) Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*; (3) Beiser, *German Idealism*, especially Chapter 4 on Fichte; (4) Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860*; and (5) Kosch, *Freedom and Reason*. On Fichte in particular, see Wood, "'I' as Principle of Practical Philosophy"; Ameriks, 'The Practical Foundation of Philosophy'; and Pippin, 'Fichte's Alleged Subjective, Psychological, One-Sided Idealism'.

³In a draft letter from the spring of 1795 to Jens Baggesen Fichte observes that

My system is the first system of freedom; just as France has freed human beings from external chains, so my system frees them from the fetters of the thing in itself, from external influences with which every previous system – including the Kantian – have more or less fettered him.

(III/2, 298; EPW, 385)

⁴Others have explored the relationship between autonomy and religion in Fichte's thought. For two recent examinations, see di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion* and Wittekind, *Religiosität als Bewußtseinsform*.

ways of conceptualizing the basic notion.⁵ In reconstructing Fichte, I focus on how he regards wholeness or the integration of a person's motivational structure as an essential feature of complete autonomy. In this section, I will first make a case for why we should not insist upon a single, univocal conception of autonomy. I then turn directly to Fichte. I argue that there are two strands within Fichte's thinking about autonomy. The first, roughly, reflects what for many might be the guiding metaphor behind the idea, i.e. 'self-legislation'. The second is a more expansive notion of 'self-governance'. The relation between these two strands is that the first is a view about the source of the authority of one's principles, whereas the second is a view about how a principled life, ideally, ought to look.⁶

In part, this more selective focus on integration or wholeness reflects the lessons of some more recent discussions. For example, Deligiorgi, in her reconstruction of a Kantian ethics of autonomy, stresses the compound nature of the concept and identifies at least three variants just within the Kantian tradition (as self-governance, self-mastery, and self-authentication) (Deligiorgi, *Scope of Autonomy*, 19–24.). While Deligiorgi certainly thinks that a consistent ethics of autonomy can be developed, she does not think that the concept can be reduced to any one of these existing formulations.

In the recent literature on German Idealism, Pippin articulates one way of conceptualizing autonomy as an ideal:

I can, at some second-order level identify with the intentions I form and the deeds and projects thereby produced at the first level, all such that they don't seem alien, as if belonging to someone else or as if fated or coerced or arbitrary or practically unavoidable, and so forth.

(Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, 12)

I understand part of the normative point to be that a person should strive to attain a kind of unified agency; the intuition is that a person is free when her actions express a motivationally integrated self. Deligiorgi agrees that the ethics of autonomy must say something about this, and treats of the issue in terms of moral psychology (*Scope of Autonomy*, Chap. 5).

Focusing now on Fichte, Neuhausser has also argued that autonomy is a compound notion, and that it includes this element of self-integration. Under the label of 'substantive self-determination', Neuhausser explains how Fichte requires that three conditions be met in order for the norm of autonomy to be fulfilled. First, 'the subject [must] determine the maxims according to which it acts' (Neuhausser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 122). Second, this determination 'should involve more than merely arbitrary

⁵For some of the relevant history, see Schneewind, *Invention of Autonomy*, and the recent collection of essays in Brender and Krasnoff, eds., *New Essays on the History of Autonomy*.

⁶This way of stating the relevant distinction is inspired by introductory comments in Bratman, *Structures of Agency*.

choice; it must proceed, rather, in accord with higher-level standards' (ibid.). Third, 'the subject is self-determined in a substantive sense only when these norms themselves originate in a significant way from the subject itself' (ibid., 122–3.). Collectively, these conditions are most fully met when I reflect upon my 'true nature' and make 'choices that are in accord with that nature, choices that are in some sense expressions of "who I really am"' (ibid., 135). Thus, as in Pippin's formulation, the key to instantiating autonomy lies in avoiding or minimizing alienation from oneself. Yet, even this fairly cohesive notion of 'substantive self-determination' is a compound. Moreover, as Neuhouser discusses in detail, there are at least two plausible alternative interpretations of just what this one notion involves. Rather than looking for a single governing concept of autonomy in Fichte's work, my focus here will be on his ideal of wholeness or self-integration as a further element of autonomy in a complete sense.

This selective strategy also makes sense in light of the fact that, in just one work, the 1798 *System of Ethics*, Fichte uses the language of autonomy to capture a number of distinct ideas. One of these is clearly a metaphysical issue, i.e. the will's 'absolute indeterminacy through anything outside itself', its 'tendency to determine itself absolutely without any external impetus' (I/5, 45; SE, 33). Then again, there is the normative concept of autonomy as the very content of the moral law, which for Fichte is just that 'we are supposed to determine ourselves consciously, purely and simply through concepts, indeed, in accordance with the concept of absolute self-activity' (I/5, 61; SE, 52). A still further claim is that the rule that an agent imposes upon herself must also be 'designed for itself', i.e. constructed, by that agent (I/5, 66; SE, 57). In a longer passage from near the end of Part I of the *System of Ethics*, Fichte distinguishes three senses of the concept of autonomy. These include (1) the exercise of one's own judgement in governing one's actions; (2) the normative content of the law itself (as seen above); and (3) the fact that we can derive this law through 'absolutely free reflection of the I upon itself in its own true essence' (I/5, 67; SE, 58). A final, very broad sense of the concept can be seen in another passage from later on in the same work, where Fichte maintains that 'the absolute autonomy of reason' is the central principle of *all* (i.e. not merely of moral) philosophy (I/5, 69; SE, 60). A common thread uniting many of these passages is the idea of *self-legislation*; that is, the authority of one's principles is supposed to be derived, in some sense, from oneself. This means that external forces or others' opinions are excluded from the range of authoritative reasons (cf. Neuhouser's account, as discussed above). Relatedly, Fichte insists that principles should not be adopted unreflectively, but rather are subject to reflective endorsement.

Autonomy also connotes, over and above self-legislation, the ideal of *self-governance*. That is, once one's principles are in place (via self-legislation), there is the further question as to how one is to conduct oneself in accordance with them. Fichte recognizes this distinction as well. For instance, in the

System of Ethics, Fichte devotes a considerable portion of his discussion to the application of moral principles. In general, Fichte thinks that, in governing oneself, it is essential to aim at a kind of agential wholeness or integration. An autonomous life in this sense is a matter of being at one with oneself. As Fichte puts it in a popular series of lectures given in 1794, ‘A human being is always supposed to be at one with himself; he should never contradict himself’ (I/3, 30; EPW, 149). Similar comments can be found in many of Fichte’s writings from the 1790s (several of them will be discussed in more detail below). Why does Fichte think of autonomy as self-governance in this manner? His reasoning is not fully explicit, but a plausible reconstruction can be offered. In a lecture course that comprises the basis for the published *System of Ethics*, Fichte describes the content of the moral law as ‘simply be you yourself [Sey schlechthin Du selbst]’ (IV/1, 16). What this means is spelled out in the *System of Ethics* as ‘the unification of the higher and lower powers of desire’ (I/5, 126; SE, 125), which satisfies the ‘fundamental drive [Grundtrieb]’ of a rational agent (I/5, 136; SE, 137). The underlying intuition is that to follow the injunction to ‘be you yourself’ requires that a person’s thoughts and actions express precisely who that person is (rather than some other agent or entity); but for this condition to be met, it must be the case that the internal sources of one’s thoughts and actions are integrated in such a manner that one fully identifies with them. As self-legislated, the demand to satisfy the ‘fundamental drive’ for unification has normative authority. As a principle of self-governance, the same demand requires the pursuit of a kind of wholeness or integrity.

2. FAITH AND THE UNITY OF THE SELF IN FICHTE’S *JUGENDSCHRIFTEN*

In order to understand where Fichte winds up, one must begin earlier, in the still largely obscure decade preceding his rise to fame. Anglophone scholars in particular typically pass over this period in silence.⁷ The result is that Fichte’s *Jugendschriften* have not received the level of scrutiny that has been applied to the young Hegel, for example. Few today would seriously contest the claim that, in Hegel’s case, understanding his early work is important for a sure grasp of his more well-known mature system. What holds for Hegel is also true, I argue, for Fichte. The problems that Fichte poses, and the solutions at which he eventually arrives, both have their roots in his earliest writings. More specifically, Fichte develops a conception of autonomy on which living a life of one’s own entails the harmonization of

⁷Rainer Preul’s study is still the classic account of Fichte’s youthful writings. See *Reflexion und Gefühl*. For more on Fichte’s early education and intellectual context, see also Bacin, *Fichte in Schulpforta*.

rational convictions and one's deepest moral sentiments, and he experiences a personal crisis in the pursuit of this ideal.

The context for these developments is furnished by the young Fichte's efforts to articulate a rational, Enlightened form of Christianity. In this early period three important influences come into play for Fichte. First, his writings from the 1780s show that Fichte has deeply absorbed a sentimentalist outlook in moral philosophy (partly derived from Rousseau). Second, Fichte endorses the Enlightenment's critique of arbitrary theological authority. Finally, in a way congruent with the influences of Rousseau, Fichte also seems to have imbibed a sentimentalist strand of German theology, represented by G. F. Gellert, which typically linked the genuine acceptance of religious belief with heartfelt 'warmth' (see Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl*, 19–24; Verweyen, 'Fichtes Religionsphilosophie', 194). These influences converge in the young Fichte's efforts to spell out an ideal, 'true' religion. Rather than being a matter of deference to authority, Fichtean religion is based on genuine personal conviction. At the same time, the doxastic side of faith must be harmonized with one's sentiments in a way that leads to a kind of total identification or wholeheartedness.

This ideal religion is explicated by Fichte both negatively, in polemical contexts, and positively, in more hortatory style, in Fichte's early writings. An example of the former can be found in an early letter to his future wife, Johanna Rahn, dated to February 1790. Here, Fichte lambastes 'pious hypocritical ladies [*Frömmlerin*]' whose religion is a matter of 'pointless mechanical devotional exercises' and 'orthodoxy of belief', all rooted in what he calls 'false-heartedness [*Schiefheit des Herzens*]' (III/1, 61). These judgements also appear in a fragmentary text from 1788 called 'Random Thoughts on a Sleepless Night'. Here, Fichte outlines a satirical essay in which the central conceit is the discovery of a hitherto unknown people living at the South Pole. As it turns out, these people embody all the worst traits of Fichte's actual contemporaries, including their penchant for rote, superficial piety (II/1, 104–5). In both of these texts, Fichte is taking aim at a kind of religion that falls short of wholehearted identification. The problem with such religiosity is that it is alienated from the centre of its practitioners' moral personalities.

Fichte articulates his ideal more positively in several sermons dated to the mid-1780s. His comments in these sermons prove to be somewhat more informative than the purely negative presentation of his ideal in the texts considered above. The first is for the Annunciation, most likely composed in 1786. Here, Fichte presents a basic moral psychology in order to articulate what he thinks of as true religion. Two faculties of the mind are relevant to the acquisition of true religion, of which Fichte takes the Virgin Mary to be exemplary. These are the 'understanding [*Verstand*]', whereby a person cognizes the propositional content of Christianity, and the 'heart', the locus of sentiments like love and obedient reverence. In the ideal case, and with God's help, these two aspects of the mind are harmonized to produce a stable character capable of overcoming temptations (II/1, 59–61). The

shape of this kind of character is brought out in a rhetorical question that Fichte addresses to his audience: ‘Has the feeling [*Gefühl*] of the great truths [of Christianity] not become as necessary to you, as intimately linked with your nature, as the feeling of your own existence?’ (II/1, 58). True religion is thus a matter of total identification with a set of principles and the harmonizing of one’s sentiments with them, to the point that one’s very *self* is inseparable from these. This is clearly a far remove from the mechanical piety and dry orthodoxy condemned by Fichte elsewhere.

A second important text, difficult to date with any accuracy, is apparently a set of notes for another sermon, entitled ‘On the Aim [*Absicht*] of Jesus’ Death’. The argument of the text is that Christ’s manner of death was actually necessary in view of the religion that he aimed to propagate, one that involves the following elements: ‘conviction’ through reason and not through ‘compulsion [*Zwang*]’, ‘enthusiasm for truth and for the spiritual’, ‘annihilation [*Ausrottung*]’ of sensuality, and the awakening of the ‘gentle inclinations of human beings, goodness, kindness, goodwill [*Gefälligkeit*]’ (II/1, 75). True religion is the optimal condition of both the understanding and of the heart. However, when arbitrary authority comes to form the foundation of such a religion, it is inevitably corrupted, to the point that it ‘has become a merely *external* religion, not a religion of the heart’ (II/1, 75; emphasis added).⁸ To avoid this decline, Fichte argues, Christianity must be presented in the right way. The *pathos* of Christ’s death for his cause is central to the presentation that Fichte thinks is required. Fichte tries to sum up the spirit of Christianity in the following remarks:

[Christianity] is the only [religion] that is not in any way concerned with externalities, the only religion of the heart. According to it, *worship* is the perfecting [*Vervollkommnerung*] of the entire person [*des ganzen Menschen*]; its lofty goal is the *illumination of the understanding and the improvement of the heart*. It *illuminates the understanding*, though not through evident, deep reflections or rigorous demonstrations. This would transform it into the religion of a few *clever people*, into a *mere science* [...], and because it would have little influence on the practical, it would contribute little to the happiness of its individual adherents or to the collective. It illuminates the understanding in *warming* it through the heart, and a genuine conviction of its truth must always arise from the goodness of our sentiments [*Empfindungen*].

(II/1, 87)

Here, deploying the moral psychology sketched in the sermon on the Annunciation, Fichte maintains that Christianity requires a mutually reinforcing reciprocity between understanding and heart. As he puts it further on, ‘The improvement of both features of a human being must proceed at the same pace, neither should outpace the other, but rather they should extend the hand of friendship to one

⁸Cf. Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl*, 31–50.

another' (II/1, 88). Unless this happens, one runs the risk of allowing true Christianity, in the form intended by its founder, to degenerate into the kind of merely 'external' religion that Fichte so vigorously denounces. In its degenerate form, religion is either not grounded in rational insight (i.e. is an alien system of belief grounded in external authority), or it is a 'mere science', a system of belief with which a person has no heartfelt identification. In either case, such a religion is not properly one's own. One can say that a religion of this lesser quality is thus inconsistent with autonomy in a fundamental way.

True religion requires that two aspects of the personality be in harmony. His concerns with the failings of his contemporaries and with renewing true religion indicate that this harmony cannot be regarded as a matter of course. People can fall into a state of alienation. It is therefore important for Fichte to be able to show how this can be avoided. Interestingly, while the moral psychology that Fichte uses to explicate his ideal of true religion is ultimately replaced in the 1790s, this concern with the unity of the personality remains. The differences between the sentimentalist moral psychology of the 1780s and the Kantian picture found in works like the *System of Ethics* will be explored more fully below; but the basic ideal of a unified self survives this shift. For example, in a letter of 1 March 1794 to Reinhold, Fichte explains their commonality as rooted in a mutual concern with unifying reflection and the 'heart' (III/2, 77; EPW, 376). Writing to Goethe on 21 June of the same year, Fichte declares that 'Philosophy will have yet to achieve its goal as long as the results of reflective abstraction still do not conform to the purest spirituality of feeling' (III/2, 143; EPW, 379). In an important letter to Reinhold dated 29 August 1795, he says that

The highest drive in a human being aims at absolute agreement [*Uebereinstimmung*] with himself, of the theoretical with the practical faculty, of head with heart; if I do not recognize practically what I must recognize theoretically then I place myself in clear contradiction with myself.

(III/2, 386; EPW, 408)

Fichte did not in any way abandon the ideal that had motivated his youthful efforts. By 1790, however, it was no longer clear to him how he could defend an account of the realization of this ideal.

3. FICHTE'S CRISIS

Fichte's correspondence around 1790 reveals the lingering effects of a crisis. Writing to Weißhuhn in the late summer of 1790, Fichte relates how he has recently overcome a bout of self-deception, brought on by wayward reasoning (III/1, 167). In the months following, his letters speak of a new found 'peace' (III/1, 190), of having 'the antidote for the source of my ills' (III/1, 193). Many of the details of this apparent crisis are obscure or else entirely missing.

However, given that his discovery of Kant in the summer of 1790 provided some sort of resolution, the nature of the crisis can be partly reconstructed from his letters after the fact.⁹ In a letter of 5 September 1790 to Johanna Rahn, Fichte says: ‘Tell your dear father, whom I love, how I am thinking. We have misled ourselves in our investigations regarding the necessity of all human actions, *however correct our inferences*, because we *argued from a false premise*’ (III/1, 171). Fichte had apparently become a determinist. Reading Kant eventually altered these convictions in a way that brought him peace of mind; previously, Fichte apparently shared only the *feelings* of his friends, which resulted in the severance of his convictions and his sentiments.

A remarkable fragment called ‘Some Aphorisms on Religion and Deism’ fills in part of the story. While this work is of uncertain dating, it must have been written prior to Fichte’s first reception of Kant and abandonment of determinism. The ostensive theme of the text is the opposition between a religion of speculative reason and a religion of the heart. As the fragment unfolds, the inner conflict is apparent, along with changes in Fichte’s thinking about religion. Regarding the latter, he writes:

These first principles of religion are grounded more on sentiments than on convictions: on the need to be united to God; on the feeling of one’s sinful wretchedness and offense, etc. The Christian religion thus seems more defined for the heart than for the understanding; it does not seek to force itself through demonstrations, but rather to be sought on account of need; it seems to be a religion of good, simple souls.

(II/1, 288–9)

Previously, Fichte had stressed the harmony of reason and sentiment as a condition of true religion, and had argued that Christianity accomplishes this harmony. Now Fichte seems to take Christianity as a religion of sentiment *as opposed to* one of reason. This is because Fichte now holds a view that he calls the ‘pure deistic system’, which includes a rigid determinism according to which ‘every thinking and feeling being must necessarily exist just as it does’ because everything that exists at all follows from God with the same necessity as God’s own existence (II/1, 290). While he suggests that this view is compatible with the more affective piety outlined in the long passage quoted above, the apparent reconciliation soon gives way. Fichte writes:

Nevertheless, there can be certain moments when the heart avenges itself upon speculation; when it turns to the God known to be beyond entreaty [*unerbitlich*] with burning longing, as if God could change his vast plan on behalf of an individual. Here, the sensation of being assisted in a tangible manner, an incontrovertible instance of the hearing of a prayer, rocks [*zerüttet*] the

⁹Preul argues that Fichte’s early thought provided a very fertile ground for his reception of Kant around 1790; see *Reflexion und Gefühl*, 137–44. On the role of the Leipzig philosopher K. H. Heydenreich in Fichte’s reception of Kant, see my ‘Theismus des Gefühls’.

foundations of the whole system – and, if the feeling of the displeasure of God at sin is pervasive, a forceful longing for reconciliation arises.

(II/1, 290–1)

This is a person divided. Reason tells Fichte that God is ‘beyond entreaty’. Yet, he cannot disavow the ‘burning longing’ of piety. Fichte can no longer license his deepest religious sentiments. On the other hand, however, he cannot fully accept the results of his reflections. Yet, an appeal to these sentiments cannot alter his opinion:

How ought one to deal with such a person? He appears incapable of being vanquished in the field of speculation. He cannot be bested with proofs of the truth of the Christian religion, which only has a claim on him to the extent that it can be demonstrated to him. But he notes the inapplicability of these proofs to him as an individual. He can grasp the advantages that he will thus miss; he can wish for them with a burning longing, but it is impossible for him to believe. The only means of salvation for him would be to cut off all speculation beyond the boundary line. But can he do that at will? If the truth of these speculations still proves to be so convincing – can he do it? Can he do it if this manner of thinking is already natural, already interwoven with the whole turn of his mind?

(II/1, 291)

A situation of fragmentation and self-alienation has been reached. Reason and sentiment are supposed to be integrated in a sufficiently strong way, such that a person can be said to identify with her beliefs (over and above simply holding them) and her sentiments (over and above simply feeling a certain way). This kind of integration is not simply a given; it may well be for a particular person that there is some relevant part of her that *disowns* either the belief or the sentiment. In the case of a person like the ‘pious hypocrite’ that Fichte attacked in a letter to his fiancée, what happens is that the person acts upon either the belief or the sentiment without really owning it. In Fichte’s own case, his reason has convinced him that his traditional religious beliefs are false, but his heart ‘avenges itself’ on his reason. If he chooses to identify with his heart, then he is choosing something that he himself does not fully endorse. If he chooses to identify with his reason, then the same thing is true. Fichte’s confidence in Christianity as the religion that unites ‘head’ and ‘heart’ has collapsed.

4. RELIGION AND AGENCY IN *ATTEMPT AT A CRITIQUE OF ALL REVELATION*

Following his crisis of 1790 and subsequent conversion to Kantianism, Fichte published his first major work, the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. The first edition of 1791 was in fact so Kantian that the work was famously mistaken for Kant’s own. This text marks an important transition

point in the development of Fichte's thinking about autonomy and religion. I can focus here on only two parts of his discussion. The first is a marked shift in Fichte's conception of agency (and a correlative shift in his basic moral theory), from a Rousseau-inspired sentimentalism to a more recognizably Kantian framework. Second, Fichte also describes how the unification of agency is something over and above doing what is right, and further suggests that religion in its *practical* function furnishes a condition for this unification.

In the 1793 edition of the *Attempt*, Fichte includes a new section called 'Theory of the will in preparation for a deduction of religion in general', in which a Kantian conception of agency is articulated for the first time. Fichte begins by analysing the notion of an 'impulse', eventually arguing that the objects of a sensible impulse are given under a form that excites in us a 'feeling of the beautiful' (I/1, 136; ACR, 10). Such objects include those given by the inner sense. Thus, the domain of sensuous impulse is not limited to external objects of desire. Fichte explains:

The activity of understanding in thought, the lofty vistas that reason opens to us, the reciprocal communication of thoughts among rational beings, and the like – these are certainly fertile sources of enjoyment. But we draw from these sources precisely as we are affected by the tickling of the palate: through sensation.

(I/1, 137; ACR, 11)

Though Fichte does not explicitly say so, it is reasonable to suppose that the kinds of moral sentiments he had appealed to in writings from the 1780s (such as those evoked by the spectacle of Christ's death) belong among the impulses deriving from these interior sources. Collectively, all of these feelings belong under the 'concept of *happiness* [*Glück*]' (I/1, 138; ACR, 12). This collection is governed by rules in so far as it is possible to make judgments about the relative values of these different feelings, with the pleasures of the mind perhaps being ranked higher than those of the senses. Nevertheless, it is important that, for Fichte, there is no real distinction in kind between these different pleasant feelings. Hence, it is in principle possible to construct a 'finished system according to this outline', which would be a 'doctrine of happiness – as it were, an arithmetic of sense-enjoyment' (I/1, 138; ACR, 12). In an important note to this comment, Fichte remarks that this sort of system was '[f]ormerly also called *doctrine of morals*' (I/1, 138; ACR, 12).

At least by the 1793 edition of the *Attempt*, Fichte had adopted a modified Kantian picture of the foundations of morality. Morality is grounded not in sense-enjoyment, but rather in our spontaneity, in a faculty that is able to give itself its own object, the so-called '*higher faculty of desire*' (I/1, 141; ACR, 16). The object that it gives itself is not what is pleasant, but rather what is 'absolutely right' (I/1, 141; ACR, 16). Fichte thinks that only such a faculty can account for the 'fact of consciousness' that we often experience

‘a suppression of the presumption of the impulse to determine the will’ (I/1, 142; ACR, 17).

The second point of interest in this text flows out of this shift in the conception of agency. Fichte thinks that the suppression of the sensuous impulse for the sake of the absolutely right does not exhaust the content of morality. For one thing, Fichte wonders how the object of the higher faculty can positively determine a person to act (I/1, 142–3; ACR, 17). Fichte’s initial answer in this text is that the higher faculty of desire makes possible a feeling of respect, which can take either the positive form of ‘self-satisfaction’ or the negative one of ‘shame before oneself’ (I/1, 143; ACR, 18). In either form, the feeling of respect represents a kind of convergence between the ‘rational’ and the ‘sensuous’, or between the higher and lower faculties of desire (I/1, 142; ACR, 17). Fichte goes on to argue that his conception of the role of the feeling of respect represents a revision of the strict letter of Kantian moral theory (I/1, 145–6; ACR, 20–1). The presence or lack of a sense of satisfaction with oneself as a moral agent is to play a positive determining role (I/1, 143; ACR 18). This is precisely because human agency is bifurcated between lower and higher faculties of desire (I/1, 143; ACR, 18).

Restraining the sensuous impulse may be essential to morality, but it is not all that needs to be said to provide a complete account. Without a further account of ‘the *positive* determination of the sensuous impulse by the moral law’, we are left with an inadequate position that Fichte calls ‘stoicism in the doctrine of morals (the principle of self-sufficiency)’ (I/1, 149; ACR, 24). The more complete view, which Fichte himself advocates, insists that the moral law ‘bring unity to the whole man’ (I/1, 149; ACR, 24). Putting it slightly differently, Fichte maintains later on that the highest good is not simply a matter of conforming the will to what is right, but also entails the harmonization of the sensuous inclinations and what is right (I/1, 152–3; ACR, 27). Thus, here in the *Attempt*, Fichte reintroduces the ideal of wholeness that had figured so prominently in his writings from the 1780s, albeit in a new, more Kantian package. The unflattering picture of ‘stoicism’ that Fichte presents here harkens back to his concerns about wrote piety without warmth of feeling.¹⁰

Indeed, as in the 1780s, Fichte argues in the *Attempt* that religion best achieved the harmonization of higher and lower faculties of desire. Theology (as a philosophical theory) helps us consider how this reconciliation might be attained (i.e. through divine reason), while religion actually goes some of the distance to attaining it (I/1, 23; ACR, 32). That is, religion affects an agent’s moral psychology so as to bring about (or at least approximate) the desired harmonization. In Section 4 (according to the 1793 edition; this is Section 3 in the 1791 edition), Fichte discusses various ways in which this can happen. He describes the most optimal outcome in the following passage:

¹⁰This judgement of stoicism reappears in a 1796 lecture course that eventually formed the basis of the *System of Ethics*, published two years later (IV/1, 67).

This effect *may* take place [first] in our entire faculty, in order to produce a harmony in its different functions by setting theoretical and practical reason in agreement and making possible in us the postulated causality of the latter. In this way, unity is first brought about in the person, and all functions of his faculty are guided towards a single final purpose.

(I/1, 36; ACR, 45)

How exactly, does religion accomplish this unification? To understand this key point in Fichte's mature conception, it is necessary to turn to writings from the latter half of the 1790s. While these texts do not provide all of the answers, the picture becomes considerably clearer than in the elliptical discussions in the *Attempt*.

5. SELF-INTEGRATION IN THE *SYSTEM OF ETHICS*

In Part I of the *System of Ethics*, Fichte is concerned to show how the moral law can be derived from an analysis of subjectivity. In Part II, Fichte turns to a further set of issues about the 'reality' of the concept deduced in Part I. The need for this further discussion is based on the abstract purity of the 'concept of morality' (i.e. the moral law) (I/5, 74; SE, 67). Fichte goes so far as to say that the content of the law, i.e. autonomy as 'absolute self-sufficiency', is something that 'can only be an *idea* [*Idee*], a mere thought *within us*, with no claim that anything in the actual world *outside us* corresponds to this concept' (I/5, 74; SE, 67). What the moral law obliges us to do is thus to pursue 'an infinite goal ... a goal I could never realize and which therefore never *is*, but always only *ought to be*' (I/5, 75; SE, 68). The infinity of this goal, however, does not mitigate the obligation we are placed under by the moral law. Rather, 'I at least always ought to act efficaciously in a manner that advances me along the path toward my goal' (I/5, 75; SE, 68). Thus, the major concern in Part II is with showing how the moral law can actually be realized or instantiated in a person's life. Fichte clearly regards this as an issue distinct from both the content of the law and the question of the origin of the law. A clue as to how Fichte wants to answer the question of 'reality' comes later on in the text, where Fichte says quite explicitly that 'The only way to obtain an ethics [*Sittenlehre*] – which must be real – is through the synthetic unification of the higher and lower powers of desire' (I/5, 126; SE, 125).

As in the *Attempt*, the realization of autonomy must, for Fichte, be accomplished by a person with a bifurcated nature. The division that must be overcome is articulated at various points in the *System of Ethics*. For example, Fichte observes how our moral experience involves the recognition that

I am a natural being [*Naturwesen*] (for there is no other I for me); at the same time, I am also for myself the reflecting subject. The former is the substance,

and the act of reflection is an accident of this substance, a manifestation of the freedom of this natural being.

(I/5, 127; SE, 126)

As in his writings from the 1780s, Fichte takes a bifurcation in human nature to be fundamental to our being the kind of agents that we are. In the 1790s, however, the bifurcation is not into rational conviction and sentiment, but rather into the rational will and natural desire. This transition is made in the *Attempt*; as described above, along with this shift in the conception of the nature of agency; Fichte also abandons his earlier sentimentalist moral theory. Morality is a matter of what is right, which is determined by pure practical reason rather than by natural sentiments. Still, as Fichte remarks at one point ‘I cannot will anything other than what nature would also will, if it could will’ (I/5, 140; SE, 141). The desires, motivations, aims and the like that comprise the ‘stuff’ of our practical identities are largely given, or at least develop out of capacities that are part of our constitution as natural beings.

At the same time, actions that aim at fulfilling these desires are only genuine *actions* under a very specific condition, namely that human beings are also intellectual creatures. In an earlier passage, Fichte spells out this condition in terms of *reflection* (I/5, 125; SE, 124). Reflection is what allows us to achieve self-integration, a state in which ‘we are everything that we are through ourselves’ (II/4, 46). Integration is something over and above the kind of minimal autonomy involved in obeying the moral law. Integration is also not a given; rather it is a task, indeed, *the* task of human life, which Fichte elsewhere describes as the task of rendering the natural self and the reflecting self the same ‘I’ (I/5, 127; SE, 126). Given the overwhelming value that Fichte places upon self-integration, it makes sense that he wants to show how it can actually be achieved, how ‘an agreement between two things that are completely heterogeneous and independent of each other is even possible’ (I/5, 127; SE, 126).¹¹ How can this unification be achieved *practically*? Or, as Fichte puts it, how is a ‘real ethics’ possible? (I/5, 126; SE, 125).

What Fichte needs to do, as he is well aware, is to show how the ‘synthetic unification of the higher and lower powers of desire’ could be a genuine *desideratum* of practical deliberation (I/5, 126; SE, 125). Fichte endorses a broadly coherentist picture of good moral deliberation.¹² Before we

¹¹Elsewhere Fichte brings out the depth of the problem that he has posed for himself:

What is incomprehensible is how the mutually independent modes of acting of these two can be in harmony with each other and how they could arrive at *the same thing*, since the intellect does not legislate for nature, and nature does not legislate for the intellect.

(I/5, 127; SE, 126–7)

¹²Cf. Wood, ‘“I” as Principle’, 105.

undertake some action, we must compare our present conviction regarding what duty requires with ‘my possible conviction as a whole’ or ‘the entire system of my convictions, to the extent that I can represent the latter to myself at the present moment’, acting only when there is ‘agreement’ between the two (I/5, 152–3; SE, 155).

There are two features of this picture of practical deliberation that deserve to be highlighted. First, there is a *temporal* component to Fichte’s coherentism. Since my life is spread out temporally, it is not sufficient that my natural desire and my rational will cohere episodically; what I need to do is to achieve coherence across my life as a whole. However, given the temporal gap between what I am doing now and my life as a whole, I could simply be wrong about what my ‘convictions as a whole’ commit me to. ‘Just as I can err in my judgment of an individual case, so can I also err in my judgment concerning my overall judgment as such: that is, in my conviction concerning my convictions as a whole’ (I/5, 153; SE, 156). Second, it is important to be clear about what Fichte means by my ‘convictions as a whole’. The best reconstruction, I submit, is that my ‘convictions as a whole’ represent some idea of who I feel obliged to be as a whole.¹³ Thus, what a person is ultimately required to do is not only to obey the moral law, but also to achieve a more systematic integration, across time, between what she wants to do and what she thinks she ought to do. As Fichte points out, the achievement of this kind of integration is no easy matter. I could be deceived about how what I want to do actually fits in with what I ought to do. Without any clear way to tell if this is true of a particular case, ‘my morality, and hence my absolute self-sufficiency and peace of conscience, remains forever dependent upon chance’ (I/5, 153; SE, 156). Nevertheless, ‘I must either take a chance and act, or else I am not permitted to act at all and must spend my entire life in a state of indecision, constantly swaying back and forth’ (I/5, 153; SE, 156).

Fichte first tries to solve the difficulty by distinguishing the kind of feeling that results from genuine integration from the kind of feeling that results from satisfying a natural desire. In effect, the attempted solution is to say ‘you’ll know it when you see it’. The feeling in question is the ‘feeling of truth and certainty’ (I/5, 156; SE, 159). To act with confidence that we are furthering our moral vocation, we must rely on a feeling of approval. When one’s overall self-definition (or ‘practical vocation’) coalesces with

¹³Neuhouser describes how this can be rendered in either ‘universalist’ or ‘individualist’ forms, where the former involves some commitments about ‘a universal essence of subjects per se’, and the latter is restricted to commitments about ‘an individual’s particular nature’. For this way of summing up the distinction, see *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*, 143. The details of each reading are laid out in Chapter 4 of the same book. I tend to agree with Neuhouser that Fichte’s formulations are genuinely ambiguous between the two. The question of whether a consistent line can be articulated is beyond the scope of the present discussion. For my purposes, ‘who I want to be’ can equally well involve universalist or individualist commitments, or some mixture of both.

a *particular* deliberative outcome, the result is supposed to be a sense of satisfaction. Otherwise, we have a ‘feeling of disapproval connected with contempt’. The feeling of self-approval is, according to Fichte, to be distinguished from a feeling of pleasure occasioned merely by the satisfaction of a natural drive. In this latter case, we have ‘a pleasure that tears me away from myself, alienates me from myself, and in which I forget myself’ (I/5, 138; SE, 139). In the case of self-approval, however, the pleasure in question ‘does not lead me outside of myself but rather back into myself. It is *contentment*, and this is something that is never associated with sensory pleasure; it is less arousing than the latter, but more heartfelt, while at the same time it supplies us with new courage and strength’ (I/5, 138; SE, 139). Self-approval is supposed to be the mark of the integration of a particular action (or decision to act) with one’s overall self-definition.

It is unclear, however, how far this appeal to feeling can really go to address the issue at hand. Certainly, at any particular time, it is possible for a person to feel a sense of self-approval, or of identification with her own motives and the resulting actions, by seeing how a particular action fits with one’s sense of how one’s life is supposed to go as a whole. The latter is ultimately supposed to be captured by the ideal of absolute self-sufficiency. But, as discussed above, Fichte is quite clear that this goal is an ideal one. For Fichte, ‘the fulfillment of our entire vocation is not possible in any time’ (I/5, 141; SE, 143). But what is the ground of our assurance that we are actually approximating this incomprehensible goal? Moreover, how can we be sure that there is an actual connection between our present action and some infinitely distant goal?¹⁴

6. FAITH AND THE INTEGRATION OF THE SELF

Fichte’s account in the *System of Ethics* requires that we have some ground of assurance that we are indeed approaching the infinite goal of reason. Since we are bifurcated creatures, this assurance is supposed to mark the unification of two sides of our natures. In the *Attempt*, Fichte had suggested that religion in its practical function helps to ground this unification and thus provide the required assurance. In writings from the late 1790s, he develops this account more fully.

The *Appeal to the Public* provides a fairly direct link between Fichte’s philosophy of religion and the issue that confronts us in the *System of Ethics*. Indeed, Fichte explicitly cites the *System of Ethics* in an attempt to show that his view on religion has been consistent all along (I/5, 432). Summarizing his basic moral theory, Fichte says:

¹⁴Elsewhere, Fichte argues that, since our actions are spread out over time, we need to understand how a current intention, the action it produces, and the outcome of the action are linked together (WLNm, 263–4).

This system shows that it is the end [*Zweck*] of our whole existence and of all our action, which is never attained in time, and yet which is ceaselessly promoted – that the rational being become absolutely and completely free, self-sufficient [*selbstständig*], and independent of everything that is not itself reason. [...]. This, our vocation, proclaims itself through a longing [*Sehnen*] that is not satisfied by any finite good.

(I/5, 426)

As in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte also argues that, when a person acts conscientiously, one can be assured that one is approximating this lofty goal, or that ‘one has already entered into the series demanded by this ineradicable longing’ (I/5, 426). But how can we warrant this assurance? Here, Fichte makes a crucial move. He argues that we must assume some ‘rule [*Regel*]’, a ‘fixed order’, which makes it the case that a conscientious action is indeed part of this series. This rule governs an order ‘of which I myself am a member [*Glied*], and upon which is based the fact that I occupy this position in the system of the whole’ (I/5, 427).

Other essays from the period include similar claims. The deduction of religion in ‘On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World’ turns on the claim that a dutiful disposition involves one’s having actually posited the attainment of the moral end (I/6, 351; IW, 146–7). A person must somehow come to see that ‘all of the actions that I ought to accomplish, as well as my own states [...] are related to the goal I have set for myself as a means to the same’ (I/6, 353; IW, 149). Collectively, this series expresses one’s ‘determinate place in the moral order of things’ (I/6, 353; IW, 150). In ‘From a Private Letter’, Fichte argues that moral agency entails the assumption of a ‘law’ that produces an ‘interconnection [*Zusammenhang*]’ or ‘system’ in the series of one’s actions and their results (I/6, 382–3; IW, 171).

In a manuscript of lectures given in connection with Ernst Platner’s *Philosophical Aphorisms*, Fichte writes:

[I]t is simply commanded that I promote *x*; I cannot dismiss this command without canceling [*aufzuheben*] my entire vocation and dignity. The end *x* is given by reason; I therefore adopt it, and act accordingly. But with this undertaking I at the same time necessarily adopt the belief in the possibility of the realization of this end. Thus – belief belongs within the dutiful character [*Gesinnung*] [...].

(II/4, 298)

Later on in the same manuscript, Fichte puts it this way: ‘This belief accompanies [*begleitet*] the moral character. [...]. Whoever works towards his own and others’ improvement takes this to be possible, and so he has faith’ (II/4, 299). Fichte’s consistent view is that I can be assured that a particular action that I undertake is indeed promoting the ultimate, infinite end

of reason only to the extent that I assume a moral world order.¹⁵ Notice, however, that Fichte is not claiming that people need to, or even are capable of having rational insight into how one's particular actions and one's infinite vocation cohere. This is why Fichte takes himself to be demonstrating the rational necessity of *faith* [*Glaube*].

God, the object of this faith, is 'what mediates *finitude* and *reason* as such' (II/4, 289). God is the 'rule' that links the actions of a finite being with the attainment of the perfection of morality. God is 'the *cause* of the *progress* [*Fortganges*] of *morality*' (II/4, 302), that 'which promotes [*befördert*] our freedom *before* and *after*' (II/4, 310), or a 'link' in the '*world of freedom*' (II/4, 320). As such, God is the ground of confidence or approval of the particular decisions that we make.

Fichte maintains that we have to see ourselves, in faith, as continually sustained and surrounded by God in order to have confidence in the course of our life. He observes:

Reason posits that free action and nature, which is the object of action, lack the capacity for unification in concepts and in the understanding – but it is possible [that they are capable of unification] in something higher, which unifies concept and action but which itself cannot be conceived of.

(II/4, 291)

Fichte insists upon the incomprehensibility of God as the moral world order. We cannot comprehend the unification of reason and nature, but we can 'posit it in a *partial* manner' (II/4, 291). God is something that 'cannot be defined' (II/4, 291). What Fichte is defending is not transparent knowledge of God and His ways, but rather *faith*. As he puts it elsewhere, '[o]ne is unable to think of God in any determinate fashion; one can only assume that God exists. There is no concept of God, but only an Idea' (WLnM, 230).

God is 'the *reason* upon which ours is *rooted* [*aufgepflanzt*]' (II/4, 289), that 'without which I neither live nor move' (II/4, 303), the 'highest, ultimate ground of all things; the truly absolute being' (II/4, 322). Fichte seems to have been particularly fond of the second way of putting it, which clearly paraphrases Acts 17:28. In a transcript of a 1797 lecture course, he even says that his view is identical to that of F. H. Jacobi, who would have been quite surprised at this claim, given his hostility towards Fichte's idealism. Fichte is reported as saying that 'It is from God alone that we come into being, in whom we live, move, and exist' (IV/1, 434). In the *Appeal to the Public*, he calls the 'supersensible God' the 'all in all', the 'only thing that *exists*, and all of us other rational minds live and move only within it' (I/5, 440).

¹⁵Fichte thinks that his reasoning here is importantly different from Kant's argument for the postulates of practical reason, since Fichte does not include the attainment of happiness as part of his deduction (IV/1, 417).

Revisiting his suggestion in the *Attempt* that religion as practical has an important role to play in fulfilling the moral vocation, Fichte observes that 'Religion is something inward: a confident, courageously good way of life. Faith is the firm conviction of a moral rule of the world. [...]. In faith one has his heaven already on earth' (II/4, 302). This sentiment is repeated in the *Appeal to the Public* (II/5, 429). Elsewhere, Fichte expresses much the same idea in terms of resignation [*Ergebung*] to the will of God (II/4, 304). The idea is that, in faith, one is assured that one's discrete actions are unified in a mysterious way into a totality that approximates the ultimate goal of morality. Such assurance is the key to being at one with oneself, since it is the only thing like the required kind of perspective on one's life as a whole that a finite being can hope to achieve.¹⁶

7. CONCLUSION

Fichte's efforts to articulate and defend the possibility of a particular conception of autonomy thus conclude, by the late 1790s, in a surprising way. Autonomy, with its connotations of self-governance and self-ownership (all clearly present in Fichte), is typically taken to be the quintessentially *modern* ideal, by way of contrast to pre-modern notions of realizing one's divinely ordained nature or the like. Yet, something very much like the latter view seems to be the outcome of Fichte's reflections, sparked by the crisis of 1790. In order to identify with one's life, and to possess the kind of self-assurance that this entails, one must, on Fichte's considered view, think of oneself as part of the divinely ordained moral order of things.¹⁷ This unification of the personality constitutes what

¹⁶George di Giovanni argues that Fichtean faith is a sleight of hand, in that Fichte redefines the traditional conception beyond recognition. Fichtean faith is 'no longer "vision through a glass darkly", but a commitment to abide by Kant's moral vision whatever the existentially impossible consequences for the individual that it entailed' (*Freedom and Religion* 27). Similarly, according to di Giovanni, while Kant at least retains the idea that faith seeks fulfilment in a 'transcendent beyond', Fichtean faith entails a fulfilment 'immanent to experience' (214). Finally, di Giovanni also maintains that Fichtean faith is a commitment to 'interpret an otherwise given nature as the work of man', rather than as God's creation (238). As regards the first point, I have shown above how Fichte stresses the *incomprehensibility* of God as the moral world order. I have argued that it is better to read Fichte as claiming that faith resolves or responds to the 'existentially impossible consequences' of being a moral agent. Regarding the second point, the content of Fichtean faith is certainly something 'transcendent', at least in so far as God is not an empirical object. Moreover, the object of faith's being transcendent is hardly inconsistent with faith providing someone with some satisfaction here and now. Finally, Fichte conceives of the object of faith as a moral world order that is clearly prior to my particular agency. Were this not the case, faith could not solve the problem that Fichte believes it does.

¹⁷Wittekind adopts a different though complementary approach to the question of how Fichte reconciles theism with a philosophy of freedom. He does so by first of all situating the philosophy of religion systematically within the overall project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,

Fichte calls the 'highest good', and it is a state that goes beyond autonomy as acting on a principle of which one is the author.

Submitted 20 February 2012, revised 14 September 2012 and 11 January 2013, accepted 23 April 2013
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- ACR: Wood, Allen, ed., Garrett Green, trans. *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- EPW: Breazeale, Daniel, trans. *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- IW: Breazeale, Daniel, trans. *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
- SE: Breazeale, Daniel, and Günter Zöller, eds. *The System of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
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showing how religion is the cornerstone of Fichte's effort to legitimize our consciousness of freedom via transcendental deduction of its conditions (*Religiosität als Bewußtseinsform*, 128–9). He also points out that faith is, for Fichte, a product of moral culture (192, 198–217). My approach here diverges from Wittekind in focusing not on our putative awareness of freedom, but rather on the *ideal* of freedom.

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