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Fact and Fiction in Fichte's Theory of Religion

BENJAMIN CROWE

ACCORDING TO A POPULAR VIEW, shared by the great atheists of the nineteenth century (Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) and by students in introductory courses on the philosophy of religion, religious belief is, at best, an edifying fiction. Given that it has apparently lost the ability to edify large sections of the population (the so-called “death of God”), it has also lost its only real claim to credibility. Following Hegel’s famous account of the “unhappy consciousness” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Feuerbach and his successors diagnose religion as a symptom of “alienation.” Human beings have a tendency to compensate for their own shortcomings, and those of the harsh environment they inhabit, by projecting an image of human perfection and (unconsciously) endowing this projected image with a life of its own, thereby impeding our ability to make up for these shortcomings by our own efforts. But, so the story goes, modern intellectuals have pierced through the veil erected by human psychology, economics, and religious institutions and have seen the ideas of God, heaven, and the like for what they really are—illusions that, at best, edify the weak-minded, and, at worst, perpetuate intellectual and material bondage. Call this view atheistic fictionalism. According to the received wisdom, J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) should occupy a prominent place in any account of the pedigree of atheistic fictionalism. On the received view, Fichte is a sort of extreme subjectivist or solipsist. So one is not surprised to learn that this Fichte was accused of atheism in 1798, and forced to relinquish his chair at Jena the following year, entering the pantheon of persecuted freethinkers alongside Giordano Bruno, Galileo, and Spinoza.

A substantial portion of this received wisdom has, however, been seriously challenged by a cohort of scholars in the United States and Europe.¹ Fichte the

¹See, for example, the following English-language literature: Wayne M. Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project [Idealism and Objectivity]* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Günter Zöllner, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will [Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Daniel Breazeale, “Fichte's Abstract Realism,” in *From Transcendental Philosophy to Metaphysics: The Emergence of German*

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heroic solipsist of legend has been replaced by a philosopher who argues that self-consciousness is impossible without the “check” (*Anstoß*) or “summons” (*Auforderung*) of mind-independent reality and the moral demands of other rational beings. The broader aim of the present paper is to contribute to this reassessment of Fichte’s thought by focusing on one particular, and particularly contentious, element of his larger system, viz. the philosophy of religion. My thesis is that, far from being an ancestor of Feuerbach and Freud, Fichte actually turns atheistic fictionalism on its head.

That said, a few general qualifications of this thesis must be made at the outset to avoid possible misunderstandings. First of all, the question of whether Fichte thought of religion as illusory must be separated from the question of Fichte’s theological orthodoxy. In other words, in defending my core thesis, I have no intention of making the additional claim that Fichte’s philosophy of religion maps onto or is even remotely compatible with the mainstream theological commitments of his age.² A second, related point is that I will defend my own thesis without taking a position on the famous “Atheism Controversy.” Doing the latter with any claim to plausibility would require a detailed analysis of what counted as “atheism” in the late eighteenth century, what counts as “atheism” more generally, and of what Fichte thought counts as “atheism.” The claim that Fichte is no proto-F Feuerbachian can be defended without taking a position on any of these issues, and therefore without taking a position regarding Fichte’s alleged “atheism.” Finally, it is worth pointing out that my primary focus is on Fichte’s interlocking views of the nature of religion (prior to philosophical reflection) and the status of his own philosophical explanation of religion. Thus, the various sketches of a deduction of religion that Fichte presented in the late 1790s will receive a somewhat cursory treatment. This is certainly not because these deductions are unimportant, but rather because the question that I raise here can be addressed independently of any detailed analysis of these deductions themselves. A further paper would be required in order to treat them in a way that does justice to their (1) internal complexity, (2) relationships to other parts of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and (3) evolving formulations.³

The reading of Fichte that I defend here goes as follows. For Fichte, religion is a “fact of consciousness,” i.e., a member of a particular class of representations

Idealism, ed. Michael Baur and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 99–115; and Breazeale, “The Spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel*, ed. Sally Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171–98.

²Specifying just what is meant by “mainstream” or “traditional” theology is much more difficult than many commentators assume. One must first of all distinguish academic theology from both popular belief and from official creedal formulations. Moreover, any careful student of the history of Christianity will see immediately that there is an impressive diversity in the tradition. It may well be that Fichte’s philosophy of religion is quite compatible with *some* aspect of that tradition, while not with others. To take just one example, several notable parallels can be drawn between Fichte’s views and the rationalism, apophaticism, moral theories, and penchant for allegory found in Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers. That is, however, a topic for another paper. I have examined this issue of Fichte’s position *vis-à-vis* traditional theology in “Revisionism and Religion in Fichte’s Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (2008): 371–92.

³For a discussion of some aspects of Fichte’s deduction of religion, see my “Fichte’s Transcendental Theology” (forthcoming).

that are (1) immediate (i.e., non-inferentially justified), (2) universal (i.e., built-in features of human mental life), and (3) necessary (i.e., expressive of a tacit recognition of norms that make coherent, intelligible experience possible in the first place). One could no more eliminate religion than one could the belief in the external world or in other minds. Atheistic fictionalism, for Fichte, is both misguided and futile. In fact, according to Fichte, philosophical theories of religion, including his own (!), are fictions. *Pace* Feuerbach and friends, philosophical theories do not describe the deep truth about “what is really going on.” Instead, they are (when properly understood and executed) explanatory models whose credibility rests upon their internal logical structure. Thus, it turns out that philosophical theories of religion are, in fact, edifying fictions.

I. RELIGION AS A “FACT OF CONSCIOUSNESS”

Fichte’s philosophy of religion, while explicitly billed as the crowning element of his entire system (II/4, 289), is also one of its more challenging components.⁴ One principal reason for this is that it is incomplete. Due to the “Atheism Controversy” (1798–99), disputes with publishers (1800–06), and protracted illness (1807–09), as well as to the demands of his other professional duties and activities, Fichte never provided the sort of comprehensive treatment of religion that he gives for natural right (1796) and ethics (1798).⁵ My focus in this paper is on the so-called Jena Period (1794–1801) of Fichte’s career (which, somewhat confusingly, also overlaps with his residence in Berlin by a year or so). The choice of this focus rests upon several things. First, this period (aside from his time in Berlin between 1810 and his death in 1814) contains by far the bulk of Fichte’s extant treatments of religion. Second, his time at Jena (and shortly thereafter) coincides with the height of Fichte’s fame and of his subsequent influence. Finally, the work of many scholars, particularly in recent decades, has also focused on this period, with the result that this portion of Fichte’s career is perhaps the best understood of all.

⁴References to Fichte’s works are given parenthetically in the body of the text, beginning with the critical edition, *J. G. Fichte—Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacobs, Hans Gliwitzky, and Erich Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964–). Citations refer to *Reihe* and *Band*, followed by the page number. When applicable, reference is also made to the relevant English translations according to the following abbreviations:

EPW Daniel Breazeale, trans., *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

GNR Frederick Neuhouser, ed., *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* [*Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

IW Daniel Breazeale, trans., *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

SE Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöllner, eds., *The System of Ethics* [*Das System der Sittenlehre*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Wlnm Daniel Breazeale, ed., *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo* (1796/99) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁵Aside from a few brief essays and polemical exchanges from the late 1790s, the only published work on religion from Fichte’s philosophical maturity is *Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* (1806). His first noteworthy philosophical work, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (1791–93), reflects his views prior to the breakthrough to the *Wissenschaftslehre* in 1793–94. Fichte began to have doubts about this work almost immediately (III/1, 318; III/2, 49–50). In addition, neither of these works comes close to providing a complete presentation of a philosophy of religion.

Unfortunately, this situation does not extend to Fichte's philosophy of religion. Part of the blame for the general lack of sympathy and understanding here no doubt rests upon the fraught history of the reception of Fichte's work. But a substantial portion rests upon Fichte's own shoulders. His pronouncements about religion can appear, at least in one important instance, equivocal. That is, while (as will be shown in detail below) a substantial majority of his comments on the subject clearly distinguish his views from those of Feuerbach and others, there is at least one important passage that might support a contrary reading. This passage serves as an excellent introduction to the complexities and ambiguities of Fichte's theory of religion. It comes from an important letter to F. H. Jacobi, dated August 30, 1795. Fichte writes:

From [the practical point of view] there is a world that exists independently of us, which we can only modify; from [this point of view] the pure I, which does not completely vanish even for this point of view, is posited outside of us and called God. How else could we have arrived at the properties that we ascribe to God and deny of ourselves if we had not found them in ourselves and then only denied them of ourselves in a certain respect (as individuals)? (III/2, 392)

Upon a first reading, this passage looks like something that could just as easily have come from the pen of Feuerbach as from that of Fichte. One can well imagine how Jacobi would have responded! The letter as a whole, however, presents Fichte's view in an ambiguous light. This apparently Feuerbachian analysis of common religious belief is balanced by other comments that pull in an entirely different direction. First of all, unlike Feuerbach and friends, Fichte never asserts that the positing of the "pure I" outside of us is a *mistake*, an *illusion*, or a *deception*.⁶ Second, the claim that we arrive at the attributes of God by starting with the attributes of finite things, particularly ourselves, and then abstracting away our limitations, is found in Anselm of Canterbury, long before Feuerbach tried to turn it into a weapon in the atheist's hands.⁷ Third, this passage must be read within the context of the letter as a whole. Fichte locates the concept of God within what he calls the "practical point of view," what we might prefer to think of as "common sense." Indeed, Fichte himself asserts this synonymy when he comes to the crucial question of the intentions of philosophy *vis-à-vis* the ordinary point of view: "The complete reconciliation [*Aussöhnung*] of philosophy with common sense, promised by the *Wissenschaftslehre*, will result from the deduction *and recognition* [*Anerkennung*] of this standpoint by *speculation itself*" (III/2, 392; emphasis added). Rather than trying to debunk or eliminate (to use the language of contemporary reductionists) common-sense views, Fichte wants to reconcile common sense with philosophy, to reach "that highest point from which the speculative and the practical appear as one" (III/2, 392). For Fichte, this aim is manifest above all in the "striking

⁶Peter Thielke has pointed out how, with regard to Maimon's skepticism, Fichte was willing to accept everything *except* the claim that the application of the categories to objects of sense is a mere illusion. The central argument of my paper here is that this reticence regarding some aspects of skepticism extends also to the philosophy of religion. See Peter Thielke, "Getting Maimon's Goad: Discursivity, Skepticism, and Fichte's Idealism" ["Getting Maimon's Goad"], *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 101–34.

⁷See the enormously influential §15 of the *Monologion* in Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 26–28.

similarity” that he sees between himself and—of all people—Jacobi! Philosophy is not meant to compete with, much less replace, what Fichte elsewhere calls our “holy convictions” (III/2, 77).

Atheistic fictionalism, at least in the hands of its most famous proponents, can hardly be said to treat religious convictions as “holy,” much less to aim at some sort of reconciliation between them and philosophical analysis. On the contrary, the express goal of Feuerbach and his successors is to do away with religion entirely. Indeed, how else should one treat something that one regards as being pathological? Despite the apparently Feuerbachian message that Fichte conveys to Jacobi at the beginning of his letter, the remainder of his remarks place him at some distance from atheistic fictionalism. What is it that motivates Fichte to conceive of his project in terms of “reconciliation,” rather than eradication? What must be true of the *explananda* (the “holy convictions” of common sense) and of the *explanans* (the deductions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*) in order for this project to have a hope of success? The goal of what follows is precisely to answer these questions, which cut to the heart of Fichte’s entire philosophical project.

The key to answering these questions, and thus to coming to terms with Fichte’s complicated theory of religion, lies in understanding his view of the nature of religion as a phenomenon of first-order or “ordinary” human experience. His claims on this score are unequivocal, forceful, and not a little counterintuitive. Perhaps not surprisingly, recent commentators on Fichte’s Jena system have mostly failed to examine these claims and their significance within the *Wissenschaftslehre*.⁸ This is not to say that Fichte’s philosophy of religion has been neglected. To the contrary, an entire issue of the journal *Fichte-Studien* is dedicated to the topic. Scholarly attention has been focused particularly on the so-called “later” or Berlin *Wissenschaftslehre*, which has long been viewed as involving a significant shift in Fichte’s views on a number of issues, particularly on religion.⁹ Despite this volume of exceptional scholarly work, something has still been overlooked, namely, Fichte’s insistence that religion is a “fact of consciousness” or a “representation accompanied by a feeling of necessity.” As will become clear in what follows, this amounts to much more than the relatively innocuous sociological observation that human beings are occasionally religious. Instead, Fichte’s surprisingly strong claim is that human beings are essentially or necessarily religious, that religion is as essential to the cognitive make-up of a human being as is the belief that there is an external world.

My discussion of this startling assertion proceeds as follows. First, I establish the actual content of Fichte’s view of the nature of religion as a “fact of consciousness.” Here, my aims are primarily expository; that is, a substantial portion of this

⁸For an exception that largely proves the rule, see Folkart Wittekind, *Religiosität als Bewußtseinsform: Fichtes Religionsphilosophie 1795–1800* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1993), 28–37.

⁹This reading of the religious elements of Fichte’s later *Wissenschaftslehre* originates in Emanuel Hirsch, *Fichtes Religionsphilosophie im Rahmen der philosophischen Gesamtentwicklung Fichtes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1914). It has recently reappeared, for example, in Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy*, 39, 109. For detailed studies of Fichte’s later philosophy of religion, see Christoph Asmuth, *Das Begreifen des Unbegreiflichen: Philosophie und Religion bei Johann Gottlieb Fichte 1800–1806* (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1999); and Dirk Schmid, *Religion und Christentum in Fichtes Spätphilosophie 1810–1813* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

first part of my discussion involves the introduction of textual evidence, much of which has received little or no comment from English-speaking scholars. Along the way, I also address some apparent difficulties regarding the plausibility of the view that I attribute to Fichte. Second, after clarifying the content of Fichte's position, I turn to the question of what might have motivated him to hold this view in the first place. Here, I must resort to rational reconstruction, since Fichte himself is content to simply assert the view that I describe below. As in all reconstructions, some speculation is inescapable here. Nevertheless, a plausible account is available. This account itself consists of two elements. The first element is largely historical; it involves locating Fichte within the reaction to the "Pantheism Dispute" of the 1780s. The second element takes its cue from Fichte's brief discussions of the content of first-order religious feelings in order to further articulate the motives behind his novel and surprising position.

Hints that Fichte regards religion as somehow "necessary" emerge as early as the *Review of Aenesidemus* of 1794, generally regarded as signaling the breakthrough to his mature philosophical position. Answering G. E. Schulze's objections to Kant's "moral theology," Fichte vigorously asserts the credibility of the two "practical postulates," i.e., belief in God and in immortality. In a passage apparently overlooked by his later enemies in the "Atheism Controversy," Fichte writes:

[I]t is the innermost conviction of this reviewer anyway that this belief has the same degree of certainty as the immediately certain "I am"—a certainty that infinitely transcends that objective certainty which becomes possible only through the mediation of the intelligent I. (I/2, 65; *EPW* 76)

What Fichte seems to be saying here is that he has more confidence in our religious beliefs, or our beliefs in the Kantian "practical postulates," than in our beliefs about the external world. The *source* of this confidence, is, however, unclear from this brief discussion. Perhaps Fichte finds himself wholly convinced by Kant's arguments for the postulates in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In view of later developments, however, another reading seems more likely correct. Notice that Fichte likens the certainty of religious belief to the certainty of the "I am." The latter is glossed as being "*immediately* certain." In the parlance of the age, 'immediate' usually implies "not mediated by inference." That is, one is certain of the proposition "I am" not because of some argument, but because one simply *knows* that it is so. Fichte's suggestion is that religious belief is like that, that is, that religious belief can be held without inferential support. Fichte's talk of the so-called "moral proof" for the existence of God in his response to Aenesidemus is, therefore, potentially misleading. In fact, Fichte entirely rejects Aenesidemus's call for an "objective proof" (I/2, 65–66; *EPW* 76). The important point, for present purposes, is that the immediacy of belief in God rules out the necessity of any "proof," for we are, according to Fichte, as certain of God's existence as we are of our own. This is indeed a startlingly bold claim. It suggests that, when Fichte later comes to talk of religion as a "fact of consciousness," he has in mind something much more than a mere sociological fact.¹⁰

¹⁰Here, Fichte's view anticipates more recent Reformed epistemology. Reformed epistemology rests upon the claim that belief in God is justified even in the absence of any propositional evidence

In writings composed during the “Atheism Controversy,” Fichte echoes the position first articulated in the early *Review of Aenesidemus*. In his polemical *Appeal to the Public*, an early salvo in the increasingly bitter war of words with his critics, Fichte says of a “moral world order” that “we must know it as immediately as we know ourselves. It is as certain as our own existence” (I/5, 425). The sense of ‘immediacy’ in play here is made explicit in the somewhat later *Legal Defense (Verantwortungsschrift)*: “According to our philosophy, belief in a supersensible world belongs among the immediate truths; indeed, it is the immediate truth *par excellence*; it is therefore capable of *no* demonstration *whatsoever*, no mediation through or on the basis of other truths” (I/6, 53). In *Concluding Remark by the Editor*, Fichte writes that belief in the supersensible world “must be innate [*einheimisch*] within us and can by no means be acquired through argument and inference [*keineswegs erschlossen und erworben*]” (I/6, 413; *IW* 180).

This claim about religion being “innate” (*einheimisch*) links up with what is perhaps the most original and surprising aspect of Fichte’s position, viz. the claim that religion is one of a set of “necessary representations,” including belief in an external world, other minds, and moral obligations, that do not require any rational justification. In his lectures on Platner’s *Philosophischen Aphorismen*, in which Fichte provides his most sustained discussions of religion in any of his extant writings from the Jena period, one repeatedly encounters this surprising claim. In a lecture manuscript dating from 1796, Fichte asserts: “That God is believed in, and that belief in God is *necessary*, is allowed to stand as a *fact*” (II/4, 279; emphasis added).¹¹

By calling religious belief “necessary,” Fichte is clearly departing from the views of his erstwhile colleague Forberg. Forberg’s position, while not particularly noteworthy in itself, does seem to anticipate later atheistic fictionalism. According to Forberg, religious belief is an optional assumption that one might choose to adopt in order to firm up one’s moral convictions. Religion is either false, or, at best, incapable of rational justification; still, Forberg allows that it could be useful. Fichte’s “Divine Governance” essay was, as he makes clear in a September 28, 1799, letter to Reinhold, intended as a refutation of Forberg’s view, presented in the same number of the *Philosophisches Journal* (III/4, 90). For Fichte, as will become more clear below, Forberg’s view makes about as much sense as would the claim that belief in other minds is an optional assumption that one might (or might not) make in order to successfully negotiate with loan officers or to carry out a romantic courtship. In one of his lectures on Platner, Fichte makes clear his

in its favor. Proponents of this view appeal to a tradition stemming from Aquinas and Calvin, as well as to more contemporary developments in externalist epistemology. Fichte, naturally, appeals to neither of these sources in presenting his view. The import of this passage from the *Review of Aenesidemus*, however, clearly comports with the heart of the Reformed epistemologists’ position. Alvin Plantinga is arguably the most well-known proponent of this view. He developed Reformed epistemology in the following essays: (1) “Is Belief in God Rational?,” in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 7–27; (2) “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?,” *Noûs* 15 (1981): 41–51; and (3) “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–63.

¹¹Cf. a similar comment from an undated manuscript (most likely from the winter term of 1795–96): “[Belief in God] is something that is absolutely present for us, and for *everyone*: the first, highest [belief]” (II/4, 289).

unequivocal rejection of this view: “[Belief in God] is not a voluntary assumption [*Annahme*] that one could just as well not make—a private idea [*Einwilligung*], a wish, a hope, or the like—as both the disciples and the opponents of idealism imagine—rather, it is *absolutely necessary*” (II/4, 320; emphasis added). Fichte repeats this point in “Divine Governance”:

[Religious] belief should not be represented as, so to speak, an arbitrary assumption one may adopt or not adopt as one pleases, that is, as a free decision to consider true whatever the heart wishes and to do so because this is what it wishes. Nor should this belief be represented as a hope that supplements or takes the place of sufficient (or insufficient?) grounds of conviction. (I/5, 348; *IW* 144)

In the 1797 *Logic and Metaphysics* lectures, he reiterates his surprising position several times, asserting that “it is assumed that human beings believe in God in just the same way as they accept that there is an external world, and both are equally necessary,” and again that “it is as necessary to believe in God as in a world. There are and can be no atheists” (IV/1, 401). After offering some criticisms of other approaches to the philosophy of religion, particularly “physico-theology” (i.e., the use of the so-called “cosmological argument” in apologetics and philosophical theology), Fichte again repeats his own view, lest someone had failed to take note of it the first three times:

But the belief in the moral world order or in God is something that simply belongs to our nature and cannot be separated from it, it is something given, just like belief in the world. The most resolute idealist himself assumes in acting that there is a world, and even while speculating, precisely when he wants to convince people of idealism, he assumes that they exist. With the same certainty the belief in a moral world order forces itself upon us, and it is woven into [*verwebt*] our inner nature. (IV/1, 416)

Here, the idealist is like the atheist; no one, according to Fichte, could *really* be an idealist or an atheist. By “idealist,” Fichte may have in mind something like the caricature of Berkeley found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, i.e., as an “empirical” or “subjective” idealist who holds that only an individual’s mental representations exist. On the other hand, Fichte might be invoking his own distinction between philosophical theory and the standpoint of ordinary life. Of more interest here, of course, is Fichte’s comment regarding atheism, which is reiterated throughout his lectures at Jena, and is by no means only a feature of his more “popular” presentations of philosophy.¹² This passage also provides a clue about the “necessity” involved in these so-called “necessary representations.” In order to act in the world in a recognizably human way, one must simply assume that there is an external world that obeys certain causal regularities and which, while independent of human

¹²The practice of appealing to a distinction between Fichte’s “popular” and “systematic” writings in order to dismiss or explain away recalcitrant passages has a venerable history in Fichte scholarship. For example, Tom Rockmore employs this strategy in “Fichte’s Idealism and Marx’s Materialism,” *Man and World* 8 (1975): 189–206, and “Remarks on Fichte’s Relevance: Hegel and Circular Epistemology,” in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System: Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen 1794 und 1806*, ed. Albert Mues (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1989), 105–16. This strategy seems misguided, given Fichte’s own stringent insistence on consistency, which implies, at the very least, that his so-called “popular” views are entirely compatible with his so-called “philosophical” views. For a comprehensive case to this effect, see Peter L. Oesterreich and Hartmut Traub, *Der ganze Fichte: Die populäre, wissenschaftliche und metaphysische Erschließung der Welt* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2006).

intentions, can be modified in accord with them. This is not to say that, on Fichte's view, one merely acts "as if" there is an external world, all the while knowing that this is a "mere" assumption. Instead, the belief in an external world is *necessary* to human experience, properly so called. Put another way, our practical conceptions of ourselves as agents (which are, according to Fichte, at work in all of our cognitive and volitional activities) include a tacit conception of the external world as exhibiting certain regularities, and as being somewhat recalcitrant to our purposes. To have a consistent first-person experience of the world as an agent of a certain type, I must both expect the world to behave in a certain way and find that it does so. Fichte's claim is that the same is true of religion, only more so. Religion *forces itself* upon human beings in that it is a requirement for human action. As such, it is *universal*. The phenomenon to which Fichte is pointing here might be called *practical undeniability*. To call something a "representation accompanied by a feeling of necessity" is, in part, to claim that an idea or belief is *constitutive* of human experience as such, in the sense that it helps to constitute the intelligibility or rational structure of experience and of human action in the world. For now, it is sufficient to simply establish that this is indeed Fichte's view. Below, I will turn to the more difficult issue of why he might have held it.¹³

The preceding discussion sets forth the essence of Fichte's view. To help locate it historically, and at the same time to capture it in more detail, it is useful at this point to introduce the notion of a "fact of consciousness." In twenty-first century parlance, a "fact" is simply something that is the case, the obtaining of a proposition, a state of affairs that is taken as given. Read in this way, all Fichte seems to be saying is that, as matter of fact, people just happen to believe in God, much as they just happen to believe Junichiro Koizumi became the Prime Minister of Japan in 2000. In the 1790s, in the context of early German idealism, talk of "facts" had a much more specialized meaning. This meaning emerged in debates about skepticism and about Kant's philosophical achievement. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant had grounded the claim of the moral law on what he calls the "fact of reason," which Fichte, in a review of a work by Friedrich Heinrich Gebhard, glosses as "the existence within consciousness of a feeling of a necessary 'ought'" (II/2, 264). The feeling of simply being obliged to do something or to refrain from doing something, even contrary to one's inclination, is, in his early writings, Fichte's principal example of a "fact of consciousness" (II/2, 270). For Kant, it is not just that we sometimes happen to feel obliged to do something. Instead, the "fact of reason" is constitutive of what it means to have a moral outlook or to be a moral agent. Of course, one might very well fail to discharge one's obligations. But, in order for this to be a morally relevant possibility, for it to be the case that

¹³Fichte also makes it clear that religion is such a "necessary representation" in his lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* "according to a new method" from the late 1790s. At the outset of his discussion, while introducing his conception of philosophy as the scientific derivation of "necessary representations" (*WLn*m 89), Fichte writes, "The philosopher asks how the representations of things outside of us arise—as well as how the representations of duty, God, and immortality originate" (*WLn*m 102). Moral and religious ideas, then, are included in the particular purview of philosophical inquiry as *necessary* representations. Later on in this same text, Fichte asserts, "Objective validity pertains just as much to our representations of God, morality, right, etc. as it does to our representations of the world" (*WLn*m 230).

one's failure is really a failure *vis-à-vis* some obligation, one has to be the sort of creature that can have obligations in the first place. That is, one must be capable of conceiving of oneself as subject to standards or norms that are not reducible to private interests.¹⁴ The "fact of reason" is simply Kant's term for this essential element of our self-conceptions as moral agents.

For K. L. Reinhold, who played an important role in disseminating this vocabulary of facts, a fact is not simply a descriptive statement about what happens to show up in one's mental life. Instead, at least one way in which Reinhold talks about facts is as structures that are constitutive of consciousness itself.¹⁵ Thus, on both the Kantian and Reinholdian accounts, a fact is (1) underived, (2) certain, and (3) constitutive of consciousness (in Reinhold's case, of consciousness in general; in Kant's case, of a properly moral outlook). Fichte, following this general usage, defines a "fact of consciousness" as "a specific determination of our consciousness" (I/3, 249; *EPW* 318). Like both Kant and Reinhold, however, Fichte is not interested in just any mental events, but rather in those that "occur in consciousness necessarily" (I/3, 258; *EPW* 327). 'Facts of consciousness' and 'representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity' are interchangeable designations for the *explananda* of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹⁶ This synonymy is strongly suggested by passages in the *nova methodo* lectures from the late 1790s, where Fichte describes "experience" (the *explanandum* of the *Wissenschaftslehre*) as both "[w]hat is present within consciousness and accompanied by a feeling of necessity" (*WLnm* 90) and as a "fact" (*WLnm* 90). Similarly, in the *System of Ethics*, he describes a "fact of consciousness" as precisely that which the transcendental philosopher seeks to explain (I/5, 110; *SE* 107).

Fichte's usage of the language of "facts" is, however, his own, as is already suggested by the fact that he includes belief in God among the "facts of consciousness" that the *Wissenschaftslehre* explains. Unfortunately, Fichte never takes the time to expand upon the relatively thin definition of a "fact of consciousness" referred to at the end of the preceding paragraph. Instead, one has to look at the places where he uses this phrase, examine the context of this usage, and, above all, piece together the significance of the *examples* of "facts of consciousness" that Fichte explicitly discusses. Following Kant, the preeminent example of a "fact of consciousness" in Fichte's Jena writings is what he calls, in *System of Ethics*, the "moral or ethical nature" of human beings, the fact "that the human mind finds itself

¹⁴This is an element of Kant's position that has been emphasized by contemporary Kantians. See, for example, Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁵For a brief and clear examination of Reinhold's use of the term 'fact', see Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism [All or Nothing]* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 231.

¹⁶That "facts of consciousness" are *explananda* is a crucial point. Beginning in 1793, Fichte is highly critical of the attempts of erstwhile Kantians to avoid having to justify themselves by an appeal to "facts." See his letter to F. I. Niethammer of December 6, 1793 (III/2, 20). About the same time, Fichte's doubts about such appeals to "facts" are expressed quite clearly in his review of a work of moral philosophy by Gebhard (II/2, 264). For a discussion of Fichte's suspicions in this regard, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, 25–29.

to be absolutely compelled to do certain things entirely apart from any extrinsic ends" (I/5, 33; SE 19). A bit further on, Fichte writes:

If, as has been claimed, the morality of our nature is something that follows from our rationality according to necessary laws, then for perception itself the compulsion noted above is something primary and immediate, something that manifests itself without any help from us, and we cannot freely change this manifestation in the least. (I/5, 34–35; SE 21)

In other words, our conceptions of ourselves as properly moral agents (conceptions that, according to Fichte, are simply given) necessarily include the sense of obligation or the recognition of norms that transcend our interests.¹⁷ The passage above suggests, first of all, that Fichte uses ‘fact of consciousness’ interchangeably with ‘representation accompanied by a feeling of necessity’. In addition to this point of usage, Fichte also makes it clear that a “fact of consciousness” is something that we find *immediately* in our consciousness. This means that a “fact of consciousness” is not *derived*, it is not the conclusion of an inference, but is more like a direct experience. Fichte’s example of a “representation accompanied by a feeling of necessity” from the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* lectures also makes this clear. Fichte describes how, upon feeling a blow to the back of the head, we automatically set out to find the cause (*WLn* 89). It is not that one consciously reasons from the feeling to the necessity of a cause; rather, one is compelled to assume that there is such a cause. In this example, it is not the recognition of moral norms that is essential to our first-person experience as agents, but rather the recognition of causal regularities. In other words, to think of ourselves as agents we must also think of ourselves as beings that inhabit a world that operates according to certain regularities. This is also suggested by the August 30, 1795 letter to Jacobi cited at the beginning of this section. “A finite being,” he writes, “can think of itself only as a sensible being within a sphere of sensible beings, part of which (that which cannot *initiate*) is subject to its causality, while it stands in reciprocal interaction with another part (to which it attributes the concept of a subject)” (III/2, 392).

Another discussion of the “fact” of moral obligation brings out another important feature of Fichtean “facts of consciousness.” Fichte argues, first of all, that one may well deny that one ever feels oneself constrained by the thought that there is a certain way one ought to behave. Such a person can easily reject the claims of “a defender of this fact [of the moral law] who does not sufficiently understand himself” (I/5, 71; SE 62). The latter is a person who confuses the “fact of consciousness” with “a universally expressed moral law,” as if what is being claimed is that everyone is actually aware of the normative force of, say, Kant’s third formulation of the categorical imperative. Such a claim is indeed implausible, though not because there is a theoretical difficulty with Kant’s system. Rather, as Fichte is quick to point out, “something of this sort,” that is, an abstract principle, “by its very nature, simply cannot be an immediate fact.” However, disputing a point of moral theory is not the same as denying a “fact of consciousness.” In this case, the

¹⁷Fichte uses the term ‘fact’ (*Faktum* or *Tatsache*) throughout his discussion of the experience of moral obligation or normative constraint (I/5, 42; SE 30; I/5, 65; SE 55; and I/5, 71; SE 62–63).

skeptic tacitly acknowledges this fact in applying norms to the behavior of others. Fichte illustrates his point as follows:

He does not, for example, become indignant toward and infuriated with the fire that engulfs his house, but is indignant toward and infuriated with the person who set that fire or who was careless. Would he not be a fool to become infuriated with this person if he did not presuppose that he could also have acted otherwise and that he ought to have acted otherwise? (I/5, 71; SE 62–63)

Fichte's claim is that, even if one denies the applicability of a norm to oneself, one implicitly recognizes it in evaluating any person's behavior. In other words, "facts of consciousness" possess practical undeniability. Moreover, this example helps to bring out the core of Fichte's conception of "facts of consciousness." What he is talking about here is the universal (even if tacit) recognition of a rational norm, of something that Fichte's system will reveal to be a necessary condition for self-consciousness. That is, there are certain constitutive elements of human experience that embody the recognition of normativity. This is most obvious in the case of feeling a sense of moral obligation. But it is also true in the case of the blow to the back of the head; causation is understood here as a *norm*, as a principle of judgment that enables, along with other, similar principles, the intelligibility of human experience. "Facts of consciousness" are "appearances" of these norms, points at which what Fichte calls the "supersensible" shows up *in* the empirical world. The assumption that guides the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that the norms disclosed in "facts of consciousness" constitute a system, and that the unity of this system derives from the further assumption that all of these norms are conditions for self-consciousness.

So what would it mean to say that belief in God belongs to this category? A 1798 lecture manuscript offers some clarification here. Fichte likens belief in God to "the similar inference to the presence of a rational being outside of us. It could be otherwise; but *it is so*, we *feel it*" (II/4, 310). When we form the belief that there are other minds, we experience a sense of compulsion, a feeling of being constrained by a norm, akin to a logical "must" that one encounters in making inferences. When we have religious belief, we are also encountering a normative constraint, one that Fichte will reconstruct in his *Wissenschaftslehre*. And so, to say that religion is a "fact of consciousness" is to ascribe to it the following features: (1) it is immediate, (2) it is certain, (3) it is constitutive of experience as an intelligible whole, and (4) it possesses practical undeniability. Like our belief in the external world, in other minds, and in moral obligation, our belief in God discloses an *a priori* system of norms that makes human experience rational. That this is Fichte's view is, I take it, well-established by the preceding discussion. But then another question arises, *viz.* why would Fichte have found this view compelling? Before offering a plausible answer to this question, one rather glaring difficulty faced by Fichte's view must first be cleared up.

The truly puzzling thing about Fichte's view of religion as a "fact of consciousness" is not so much that it challenges the received view of his philosophy, but rather that, read superficially, it seems to be manifestly false. One might be quite prepared to grant that the idea that there is an external world is universal and necessary (in some sense of these qualifying terms). But it is hardly true that, as

Fichte boldly claims, there are no atheists, in the sense of people who explicitly deny that God exists (or who might even simply lack the concept). To understand why Fichte could hold that religious belief is universal, in the same way as belief in an external world, some further reconstruction is in order. This will, eventually, help in the task of understanding why Fichte was moved to include religion among the “facts of consciousness” in the first place.

In a number of texts from the second half of the 1790s, Fichte asserts that the concept of God originates in reflection upon a feeling. He presents this view, for example, in one of his more “popular” works, *Concerning the Difference Between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy* (II/3, 317–19; *EPW* 194–96). This position recurs in the *nova methodo* lectures of 1796–99 (*WLNm* 230–31). Finally, in *Recollections, Answers, Questions*, written during the late 1790s but never published by Fichte in his lifetime, he specifies that the feeling in question is a “moral feeling” (II/5, 128, 142, 146). Ramified concepts of God, which vary in detail and analytic rigor from the level of the “ordinary” believer to that of the theologian, and finally to that of the transcendental philosopher, are the results of reflection.¹⁸ In the *nova methodo* lectures, Fichte suggests that reflective powers are unevenly distributed across human beings (*WLNm* 321).

What this implies is that Fichte’s startling claim that there are no atheists is actually compatible with the facts on the ground. For Fichte can certainly maintain that not everyone has explicit belief in God, to say nothing of highly ramified theological views. That this is the case is reiterated by Fichte himself throughout his discussion of religion in the Platner lectures. To take just one example, Fichte points out:

[T]here is a great deal within us that we constantly presuppose without being clearly conscious of it precisely because we do not reflect upon it. The same is true here: everyone who really thinks morally and adopts ends in the world of freedom presupposes it necessarily; he cannot do otherwise; but he need not necessarily know it himself; indeed, even if it is pointed out to him by someone else, he can still deny it on the basis of a misunderstanding. (II/4, 320)

This is possible, according to Fichte, because of a distinction between “belief” as “theoretical insight” and “what one accepts practically” (II/4, 301). His example is the law of causality, something which we accept “practically” regardless of whether or not we get around to formulating it explicitly in propositional form (II/4, 302).¹⁹ That is, everyone applies the concept of causality, or assumes that there

¹⁸See, for example, the following remark in *From a Private Letter*: “This then is, in my view, the *locus* of religious belief [within the system of human thinking]: this necessary way of thinking and demanding an intelligible order, law, or arrangement—call it what one will—an order according to which true morality, the inner purity of the heart, necessarily has results. I maintain that all belief in God and in something divine develops [*entwickelt sich*] and has always developed in the minds of all good human beings from this necessary way of thinking (necessary, that is, on the presupposition of the freely produced moral disposition) and that their belief is never anything other than belief in this order, the concept of which they have merely *further developed and determined*, albeit unconsciously and guided by the instructions they have received within society” (I/6, 386–87; *IW* 174–75).

¹⁹This analogy appears in another place, though in a sketchier form. “This belief accompanies [*begleitet*] the moral disposition. It is in no way necessary that someone reflect on it or become aware that he has it. [Marginal comment: Thus it is in all of our representations, e.g., the *not-I*. We do not think of it. Causality. Substantiality. Accordingly, all philosophy is such analysis.]” (II/2, 299)

are causal regularities in nature, regardless of whether or not he or she has bothered to get hold of an analysis of this concept. Furthermore, a person's behavior (except, perhaps, in pathological cases) exhibits the recognition of causation as normative for experience. Like the moral skeptic, a skeptic about causation belies her own skepticism through her characteristic ways of making judgments and of interacting with the empirical world. So similarly, according to Fichte, in acting morally, in making moral judgments, and in taking oneself to have moral obligations (or a "vocation," as Fichte liked to say), one applies the concept of a "moral world order," i.e., the concept of God. In fact, in *From a Private Letter*, Fichte argues that there is a close analogy between our application of the concept of causality in the natural world and that of a "moral world order" in the "supersensible world" (I/6, 379–83; *IW* 168–72). He says as much when he asserts, in *Recollections*, that "I believe—even if I do not myself clearly think of it in this formulation—in a principle according to which the furthering of the end of reason certainly results from the determination of the will in accord with duty" (II/5, 162).

Atheists, Fichte suggests, are either confused about what it is that they claim to deny, or they are denying a particular, ramified conception of God, while "practically" recognizing that there is a "moral world order" in their daily lives. Fichte makes this point in the 1797 *Lectures on Logic and Metaphysics*: "That many think they are atheists is based on the fact that they do not accept a specific God, e.g., the Jewish [God]; or because they cannot understand certain concepts, e.g., that God has particular preference [*Vorliebe*] for a particular nation" (IV/1, 401).

Still, there is some confusion in Fichte's formulations of religion as a "fact of consciousness." On the one hand, he talks about the "feeling" that, upon reflection, generates more ramified conceptions of God. Perhaps this "feeling" is what is a "fact of consciousness." That this is so is rendered more plausible by the fact that, at least in his early writings, Fichte takes moral feeling to be the paradigmatic "fact of consciousness," following widespread philosophical usage in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. At the same time, Fichte also describes belief in God as the application of a concept, viz. that of a "moral world order." Like other concepts, e.g. causality, substance, etc., one need be neither aware that one is applying a concept nor aware of a rigorous propositional formulation of its content. In *Recollections*, Fichte seems to link these two formulations when he writes: "This is a feeling—I absolutely ought to posit this end for myself, and ought to regard this end as attainable" (II/5, 150). There is, however, something awkward about giving such detailed conceptual content to a *feeling*. Perhaps, in that case, Fichte's view is that the feeling arises from the application of the concept. However, he simply fails to clarify his position on this matter in a satisfactory way.

Why, then, did Fichte adopt this surprising position? One way to reconstruct a plausible response to this question is to consider Fichte within his own historical context. In his case, the *philosophical* context in which he wrote had been decisively shaped by the so-called "Pantheism Dispute" of the late 1780s. The basics of this debate are well-known, so I will not rehearse all the philosophical and personal details here. In short, the heart of the debate began when, against the Berlin rationalists, F. H. Jacobi argued that speculative systems undermine common sense convictions about any number of important matters, including the existence and

nature of God. Absorbing, and re-channeling, the influences of Hamann and of the Scottish “Common Sense” philosophers, Jacobi argued that belief in God, like belief in one’s own free will, is an item of pre-reflective “faith.”²⁰

Jacobi’s intervention led to a decades-long attempt in German philosophy to clarify the respective rights of speculative reason and common sense. Two figures who took up this project and who, along with Jacobi himself, influenced Fichte, were K. L. Reinhold and K. H. Heydenreich. In his famous *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, Reinhold announced that, with the advent of Kantianism, “reason ceases to be presumptuous and faith ceases to be blind, and instead of opposing one another as before, they mutually support one another in perpetual harmony.”²¹ Reinhold’s efforts in this respect are predicated on a sort of *consensus gentium*, i.e., that “all eras and peoples” have asserted the existence of a deity, and that it is “therefore a judgment of common sense and must rest on irrefutable and universally evident grounds.”²²

Less well known than Reinhold among contemporary scholars, the Leipzig professor K. H. Heydenreich also played a decisive role in the discussion following the “Pantheism Dispute.”²³ Fichte was no doubt made aware of Heydenreich during his time in Leipzig (1789–91). In a draft of a letter to Lavater, dated February 1794, Fichte refers to Heydenreich’s most extensive contribution to this discussion, *Betrachtungen über die Philosophie der natürlichen Theologie* (III/2, 59). Prior to that, Fichte also explicitly mentions Heydenreich in his 1793 review of Leonard Creuzer’s *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freiheit des Willens mit Hinsicht auf die neuesten Theorien dieselben* (I/2, 8). In the forward to his *Betrachtungen*, as well as in the first section of it, Heydenreich asserts that belief in God is something universal, which, “like an innate instinct,” exercises profound effects on the human psyche entirely independently of rational reflection.²⁴ The difficulty arises from the fact that philosophical systems, founded on rational reflection, tend to conflict with or undermine this immediate, instinctual faith. As with Reinhold and, to a certain extent, Fichte himself, Heydenreich’s attempt at a reconciliation is based upon the further assumption that anything with such immediate, instinctive appeal must rest upon “necessary” needs and, therefore, cannot admit of contradiction (*Widerspruch*) or “nonsense” (*Widersinnige*).²⁵

²⁰Regarding the reception of Scottish thought by the so-called “Counter-Enlightenment” trio of Hamann, Jacobi, and Herder, see Manfred Kuehn’s excellent study, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987), 141–66. On Jacobi’s well-documented debts to Hamann, see, for example, George di Giovanni, ed., *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwilt* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 60–65.

²¹K. L. Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

²²*Ibid.*, 17.

²³For a rare contemporary treatment of Heydenreich’s impact on his period, see Hans-Jürgen Gawoll, “Karl Heinrich Heydenreich: Spinozismus als Metaphysik und Vernunftglaube,” in *Spinoza in Deutschland des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Eva Schürman (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002), 407–28. I have explored Fichte’s connections with Heydenreich in more detail in “Theismus des Gefühls’: Fichte, Heydenreich and Transcendental Philosophy of Religion” (forthcoming).

²⁴Karl Heinrich Heydenreich, *Betrachtungen über die Philosophie der natürlichen Religion*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: In der Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1790–91; reprinted by Culture et Civilisation, 1968), 1:1–3.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 1:12.

Both Reinhold and Heydenreich played a central role in mediating Kant's critical philosophy to the young Fichte. Like them, Fichte was captivated by the promise of Kantianism as, in his words, "a philosophy that puts my head and my heart into agreement" (III/2, 342). For Fichte, anything short of such a harmony between rational reflection and practical commitments would degenerate into absurdity (II/2, 386).²⁶ Like both Reinhold and Heydenreich, Fichte seems to have also been first moved to explore Kant's philosophy because of his religious interests.²⁷ And, like Reinhold and Heydenreich, Fichte seems to have accepted the claims that (1) religion belongs among the immediate, "natural" beliefs of common sense, and that (2) philosophical reflection must take these beliefs as its touchstone.

Fichte does not, however, provide any direct account of why he adopted these two claims in the first place. Here, one must leave behind documented history and undertake a reconstruction. Two passages, both from Fichte's most lengthy treatments of religion during his tenure at Jena (i.e., his lectures on Platner), provide a useful hint for such a reconstruction. Following some oblique references to none other than Jacobi, Fichte offers what appears to be a brief sketch of the content of the pre-reflective feeling that comprises religion as a "fact of consciousness." In the first passage, he refers to God as that "without which I neither live nor move [*werbe*]" (II/4, 303). In the second, he describes religion as a trust in God, who "promotes [*befördert*] our freedom both before and after" (II/4, 310). Fichte seems to be saying that religion, as a "fact of consciousness," is a sort of immediate *trust* in the efficacy of our moral agency. In this regard, his view also comes close to that of Hamann in the seminal *Sokratischer Denkwürdigkeiten* of 1759. Hamann had asserted in that essay: "Our own existence and the existence of all things outside of us must be believed and cannot be determined [*ausgemacht*] in any other way."²⁸ Such faith or trust is indispensable for our practical agency, and yet it is not the product of any inference or argument. Its very indispensability also renders it, as it were, immune from skeptical attack. For Fichte, it is simply given that we conceive of ourselves as moral agents who operate in a world of other agents and non-personal entities. These first-person conceptions of ourselves as beings who realize rational purposes in such a world must, according to Fichte, include some assurance, however dim or unformulated, that these purposes have a reasonable likelihood of realization. The normal functioning of human agency is simply inconceivable to Fichte without such trust. In a revealing passage in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte argues that religious belief is essential to moral cultivation in much the same way that trust in one's parents is essential to normal human development (I/5, 296–97; *SE* 320–21). Belief in a "divine governance" of the world or in Providence

²⁶For a superb examination of this aspect of Fichte's thought, see Daniel Breazeale, "Philosophy and the Divided Self: On the 'Existential' and Scientific Tasks of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*," *Fichte-Studien* 6 (1994): 117–47.

²⁷It is telling that Fichte's first venture into the philosophical public eye was the thoroughly Kantian *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*.

²⁸J. G. Hamann, "Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publikums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile: Mit einer doppelten Zuschrift an Niemand und an Zween," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1950), 73.

is something that must stand as a “fact of consciousness” for Fichte, unless we are willing to repudiate our most fundamental conception of ourselves.

The upshot of all this is that Fichte could hardly be said to endorse atheistic fictionalism. For Fichte, religious belief is certain, immediate, universal, and practically undeniable. Belief in God is essential to the intelligibility of human experience as such. In his polemical *Appeal to the Public*, published as a response to the confiscation of his “Divine Governance” essay by the officials of the Duke of Saxony, Fichte makes this point rather dramatically: “Whoever says to me ‘You do not believe in God’ says to me ‘You are incapable of what is genuinely distinctive of humanity, of what forms its truly distinctive character; you are nothing more than an animal’” (I/5, 416). Far from trying to undermine religious belief, Fichte endeavors to show that, like belief in an external world, in other minds, and in moral obligation, it is expressive of *a priori* norms that are necessary and universal.²⁹

2. PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES OF RELIGION

The preceding discussion has established that, between 1793 and his dismissal from Jena in 1799, Fichte consistently maintains that religious belief is a “fact of consciousness” or a “necessary representation.” This means that it belongs to a general category that includes beliefs about the external world, about other minds, and about moral obligations. Philosophy is in the business of deducing these “holy convictions” *a priori* from the structure of reason. Fichte’s startling view is that there are not, nor could there ever be, any atheists, just as there could never be someone who seriously doubts the existence of the external world. It seems unlikely, then, that Fichte would embrace his successors’ project of exposing the psycho-social origins of religious belief in order to overcome it in the name of a more enlightened humanity. For Fichte, religion is an immediate expression of the system of norms that renders human experience rationally intelligible. As his shrill protest from the *Appeal* suggests, deleting religion from the system of experience would render it unrecognizable *as* experience.

Indeed, in an intriguing passage from a lecture given in the winter of 1796–97, Fichte seems to suggest that the whole spirit of atheistic fictionalism is quite alien to his philosophical project. Fichte writes:

²⁹With respect to this crucial point, there are a number of debates regarding the nature of Fichte’s project and of the arguments it employs. First of all, there is the question of the relationship between Fichte’s project and skepticism. Neuhauser and Beiser hold that Fichte’s project is motivated by a concern with refuting skepticism, particularly skepticism about Kantian philosophy. See Neuhauser, *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*, 23, 58–60; and Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 252–55. Wayne Martin, on the other hand, expresses some compelling reservations about the idea that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is a justificatory project. See *Idealism and Objectivity*, 16–21, 68–74. Second, there is debate about the nature of transcendental arguments in Fichte’s Jena project. Neuhauser presents a more traditional, Strawsonian reading of transcendental arguments as *regressive*. See *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*, 36. Paul Franks rejects Neuhauser’s reading explicitly, arguing that transcendental arguments should be seen as *progressive*. See *All or Nothing*, 275–77. My sympathies on this issue lie with Martin and Neuhauser respectively. However, while these debates certainly bear on the proper understanding of Fichte’s philosophy of religion, they are peripheral to my central concerns in this paper.

There are three epochs of humanity: the state of nature, that of culture [*Bildens*], and that of perfection [*Vollendung*]. It is the same with knowledge. Philosophy returns us to our naïve belief in what is outside of our consciousness, in that it resolves noted contradictions in it. Its result is stability [*Festigkeit*], unshakeability of the manner of thought, on the basis of conviction. (What Kant still concedes, namely, that illusion [*Täuschung*] returns, concedes too much. Only if one is still not completely pure does it return. Whoever is pure, knows that *the* belief [*Glaube*] is no illusion: and he certainly does not see it otherwise. Of course, the point of view of speculation is not the practical [point of view]). (II/4, 54–55)

This passage is certainly difficult to interpret, given its manifestly sketchy quality. But it is clear enough that Fichte is making reference here to Kant's famous doctrine of the "transcendental illusion" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, Kant argues that some rules or maxims required for reason appear to be "objective," that is, to obtain of the empirical world. The resulting illusion is not simply a mistake of reasoning, but rather, according to Kant, is something "natural and inevitable." But it is *still* an illusion, and reason is charged with continually reminding wayward philosophers of this fact (A296–98/B353–55).³⁰ Fichte certainly agrees that the scope of rational criticism extends to our most entrenched, habitual patterns of thought. But he departs significantly from Kant in apparently holding that a naïve pattern of thought or belief is *not* exposed as an illusion, *because it is incorrect to think of it as one*. In other words, Fichte charges reason with uncovering and correcting what Kant calls "logical illusions," i.e., mistakes of reasoning, inconsistencies among beliefs, etc. But the naïve beliefs we have, once logically "purified," become even more entrenched than before. It is, of course, not immediately clear from this passage what beliefs or patterns of thought Fichte has in mind. However, the fact that he refers to "our naïve belief in what is outside of our consciousness" suggests he is talking about "facts of consciousness."

While Fichte was not able to present a completely articulated account of religion during his time in Jena, largely due to the disruptions (both personal and professional) brought about by the "Atheism Controversy," he does not simply stop with the assertion that religious belief is a "fact of consciousness." Instead, in both published and unpublished writings, Fichte outlines his deduction of religious belief. This deduction constitutes the properly *philosophical* part of his work on religion during the period at Jena. For Fichte, philosophy, or *Wissenschaftslehre*, as he famously names it, just *is* what he calls "a genetic deduction of what we find in our consciousness" (I/2, 159; *EPW* 97). Philosophy, he asserts in his *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), "has to display the basis or foundation of all experience" (I/4, 187; *IW* 9). As one element of *Wissenschaftslehre*, the philosophy of religion applies this project to religious belief, as Fichte makes clear at the outset of the "Divine Governance" essay (I/5, 348; *IW* 143). That his treatment of religion is supposed to cohere with his approach to other "facts of consciousness" is evident from a remark in the contemporaneous "Concluding Remark by the Editor." In a revealing comment, Fichte explains that his project

³⁰Reference to the *Critique of Pure Reason* follows the standard pagination of the first (A) and second (B) editions. See Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–).

amounts to providing “a deduction, a genetic explanation (that is to say, an explanation based upon the nature of the system of reason as such) of some specific consciousness that is presupposed to be already present” (I/6, 412; *IW* 179).

Fichte presents his “deduction” of religious belief at numerous points, most famously in the “Divine Governance” essay itself. He writes:

To the extent that I adopt this goal that is posited for me by my own nature and make it into the goal of my real acting, I at the same time posit that it is possible to accomplish this goal through real acting. These two propositions are identical, since “I propose a goal for myself” means “I posit it as actual at some future time.” But possibility is necessarily posited along with actuality. Unless I want to disown my own essence, I must propose for myself the former, that is, the accomplishment of this goal. Accordingly, I must also assume the latter, namely, that this goal can be accomplished. Indeed, this is not actually a case of what comes first and what comes second, but rather of an absolute unity. In fact, here we have not two acts, but one and the same indivisible act of the mind. (I/5, 352; *IW* 148)

Fichte goes on to say that this second assumption, that the goal of morality can be accomplished, amounts to the assumption that there is a “moral world order,” and this, Fichte argues, is “what we take to be *divine*” (I/5, 354; *IW* 150).³¹ Rather than linger over the different formulations of this deduction (a task for a different paper), I will instead focus here on what Fichte has to say about the *status* of deductions such as this one. That is, given that the details of the deduction can be worked out, what is it that such an explanation actually accomplishes? For the purposes of the present discussion, there is one element of this “deduction” that is particularly important. At the conclusion of the passage cited above, Fichte makes it clear that religious belief, or belief in a “moral world order,” as he styles it, is not arrived at *inferentially*. Instead, as he somewhat mysteriously puts it, there is “one and the same indivisible act of the mind” at play here. Now, according to Fichte, philosophy is in the business of deriving “facts of consciousness” from such “acts.” Indeed, he had criticized Reinhold for making a “fact of consciousness” the ultimate *explanans* of experience, and drew a famous (or, perhaps, infamous) distinction between a “fact” (*Tatsache*) and an “act” (*Thathandlung*), agitating on behalf of the latter as the proper starting point of a philosophical explanation.

The curious thing about these “acts” is that they are accessible *only* from the avowedly *artificial* standpoint of philosophical reflection. As early as 1794, Fichte makes it clear that no one is ever “clearly conscious” of such acts, nor need one be

³¹This is not the only, nor even, perhaps, the most promising “deduction” of religion offered by Fichte during this period. The structure of this alternative formulation is suggested by Fichte’s striking assertion that the moral world order is “the ground of all other certainty, and the sole absolutely valid objective [truth]” (I/5, 152). The deduction proceeds roughly as follows. First, self-awareness as a rational agent depends upon moral feeling, a feeling of one’s desires being constrained by the claims of another person, or on the fact “that I discover myself to be one individual among many spiritual beings” (*WLn* 302). Put another way, awareness of one’s own rational agency means that “I produce myself as an individual by selecting myself from the kingdom of rational beings” (*WLn* 436–37). The “moral world order,” in turn, is what holds this “kingdom” together, and makes possible the interactions between its members. See Zöller, *Fichte’s Transcendental Idealism*, 92. This idea is spelled out most clearly in a letter to Schelling (III/4, 405) and in *Bestimmung der Menschen*, in which Fichte likens the “moral world order” to a force of attraction that holds the “kingdom of rational beings” together (I/6, 293–96).

in order for Fichte's deduction to succeed in explaining experience as a whole (I/2, 141; *EPW* 126). In another well-known remark from "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*," Fichte tells us that philosophers are not "journalists," but rather "writers of pragmatic history" (I/2, 147; *EPW* 130–31). Journalists (at least when they are honest) relate *actual events, observable occurrences* that any sufficiently attentive onlooker could pick out and describe. Fichte, however, says that this is precisely *not* what philosophers are doing.³² Instead, philosophers construct explanations of *actual events*, explanations that are "produced by pure thought for the purpose of providing a necessary foundation for experience" (*WLn* 91). In his *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte maintains that the ground of experience described by transcendental philosophy "appears to exist only by means of and only for the philosophy that proposes it" (I/4, 189; *IW* 12).

The philosophical project is to *explain* or *deduce* experience as a totality, and so, as Fichte makes clear in 1797, "philosophy's object must necessarily lie *outside of all experience*" (I/4, 187; *IW* 9). The terms of a philosophical theory, then, are not "objective truths," in the sense that philosophical theories do not make claims about things that actually exist. Instead, philosophy provides an explanatory, but entirely *fictive*, account of the experience. Indeed, in the *Sun-Clear Report* of 1800–01, Fichte explicitly calls his genetic deduction of experience "fictional" (I/7, 249). This is an element of Fichte's conception of his own project that has been articulated by Daniel Breazeale. Breazeale builds his reading not only on the *Sun-Clear Report*, but also on a number of other passages spanning Fichte's career during the 1790s. He is also careful to point out Fichte's hitherto neglected debt to Salomon Maimon with regard to this notion of "fictions."³³ In his recent monograph on Fichte, Günter Zöllner offers a parallel reading that also places great emphasis on the importance of the *Sun-Clear Report*. Paraphrasing Fichte's project, Zöllner observes that "the philosophical reinvention of experience involves the construction of a system that as such exists only in and through contingent philosophical reflection."³⁴ Zöllner goes on to argue that the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole is best read as a "model" of experience. Among other things, this felicitous choice of phrase opens the door to an instructive analogy between Fichte's conception of his project and some contemporary views about models and idealizations in the philosophy of science.³⁵ In *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (1796), Fichte himself suggests as much by comparing transcendental philosophy and mechanistic physics. Fichte contends that, given the rational project of understanding nature as an ordered unity, and given the laws of logic and the principles of mathematics, the concept of universal causation necessarily follows. This is not to say, accord-

³²For an examination of this passage, see Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte's Conception of Philosophy as a 'Pragmatic History of the Human Mind' and the Contributions of Kant, Platner, and Maimon," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2002): 685–703.

³³See Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte's Philosophical Fictions," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 175–208. I have examined Breazeale's case for this reading in detail, and defended a modified version of it, in my "Fichte's Fictions Revisited," *Inquiry* 51 (2008): 268–87.

³⁴Zöllner, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy*, 22.

³⁵In particular, Fichte's views seem to anticipate Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

ing to Fichte, that universal causation, and the laws of mechanistic physics that express it, actually exist; still, one would hardly call these arbitrary fabrications (I/6, 336–37; *GNR* 25–26).

Considerations like these are presumably behind Fichte's claim that "Transcendental philosophy has no desire to become a way of thinking that could be employed within life; instead, it observes an [actual] I, which embodies within life this system of thinking described by transcendental philosophy" (*WLnm* 472). A transcendental explanation locates a "fact of consciousness" within an ideal explanatory framework. This framework is not supposed to *depict* the inner workings of the mind, but rather to *model* them in an ideal system. It is, says Fichte, *as if* this system really represented the contents of human mental life. In actuality, of course, it is an idealization, in much the same way that Newtonian mechanics can be taken as an idealization of the messy real-world interactions of physical objects. To say that an "actual I" embodies this system is just to say that experience is organized around implicitly or explicitly recognized norms. What the *Wissenschaftslehre* does is to treat these norms *as if* they were part of a unified system of conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness.

It is worth noting here that at least one recent commentator dissents from the fictionalist reading offered here. Peter Thielke maintains that the "acts" of the mind uncovered during the course of Fichte's deductions are "subconscious," which seems to imply that they actually occur, albeit unbeknownst to the non-philosopher.³⁶ On this reading, it looks as though transcendental philosophy is a sort of arm-chair psychoanalysis. However, the *Sun-Clear Report* contravenes this reading. With a tone of incredulity, Fichte seems to reject this interpretation of his project when he asks his imaginary interlocutor, "Do you actually believe that we want to produce, with the construction of fundamental consciousness in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, a history of the acts of consciousness that existed prior to consciousness, the life-story of a man before his birth?" (I/7, 249) Elsewhere, Fichte insists that the principles that he uses to construct his model of experience are "not given through empirical intuition" (I/2, 48; *EPW* 65), and so are best understood as "Ideas" in the Kantian sense. Fichte's model is not meant to be a recounting of the actual subconscious workings of the human mind, but rather a model, rooted in a series of ascending abstractions, of how experience *might* be viewed as a systematic totality embodying *a priori* norms.

With respect to the philosophy of religion, this means that the "deduction" presented, for example, in the "Divine Governance" essay, does not represent some actual series of mental events. Fichte tries to make this clear, first of all, in some works composed in response to the "Atheism Controversy." For example, in *From a Private Letter*, his last public attempt to deal directly with the charge of atheism, Fichte writes, "The *locus* of religious belief [within the necessary system of human thinking] not only can but well nigh must remain hidden from the ordinary religious person" (I/6, 378; *IW* 167). The "locus of religious belief" is the position occupied by the norms that it expresses within the ideal framework constructed by the transcendental philosopher. This framework is pictured as a sort of web of

³⁶Thielke, "Getting Maimon's Goad," 118.

principles linked by inferential connections on the model of Euclidean geometry. The “locus of religious belief” is just the “place” that the relevant norms occupy in an ideal logical order. It must be “hidden” from the fabled “ordinary religious person” because it is an artifact of a philosophical theory, one that rests upon an act of abstraction from the standpoint of ordinary life. The ideal framework derived by the transcendental philosopher is, in fact, several removes from any “actual I.” It rests upon a series of abstractions as well as upon some assumptions that can hardly be attributed to ordinary people, not least the assumption that experience can be modeled as a system of normative principles. Further on in the same piece, Fichte writes:

Regarding this point, which concerns only the *deduction* [of religious belief], I am dealing only with philosophers, and indeed, only with those who I myself consider to be “transcendental” philosophers. . . . An adherent of the popular religion *possesses* belief, without particularly inquiring into the deduction of the same. Nor is the concept of an *intelligible moral order*, in its philosophical purity, simplicity, and precision, by any means to be attributed to such a person—though one can expect that everything he believes *can be* traced back to this concept (perhaps by his religious instructor or by some other philosopher). (I/6, 388; *IW* 175)

Fichte expresses here his typical confidence in the cogency of his deduction. Whatever one’s judgment regarding the warrant for this confidence, what is important for the present discussion is that Fichte explicitly maintains that no one actually has the thoughts, or makes the inferences, regarding a “moral world order,” which Fichte had presented in his attempts to deduce religious belief *a priori*. The concept of “an intelligible moral order” is just Fichte’s designation for the normative content of religion as a “fact of consciousness.” That is, religion, at whatever level of intellectual sophistication it happens to be located, is the expression of the recognition of a norm that operates in the “intelligible world” in much the same way as the law of causation operates in the physical world.

Notice, too, the similarity between the passage quoted immediately above, and the following remarks that Fichte gives at the end of his “deduction of the principle of morality” in the *System of Ethics*:

Certain misunderstandings and objections make it necessary to add the following remark:—We are not claiming that we are, from the ordinary viewpoint, conscious of the connection between the thought we have derived and the grounds of the same. It is well known that insight into the grounds of the facts of consciousness is something that pertains solely to philosophy and is possible only from the transcendental viewpoint.—Nor are we claiming that the thought in question ever occurs among the facts of consciousness with the universality and at the level of abstraction with which we have derived it. (I/5, 70–71; *SE* 62)

Fichte’s understanding of the status of transcendental explanations is robust across the different subsidiary sections of his system. The context of the above remark is Fichte’s deduction of the Kantian “fact of reason,” that is, of the fact that “the human mind finds itself to be absolutely compelled to do certain things” (I/5, 33; *SE* 19). Through a series of complicated steps, Fichte claims to “derive from the system of reason as such the necessity of thinking that we ought to act in a certain manner” by showing that “if any rational being whatsoever is assumed then such a being must think such a thought” (I/5, 61–62; *SE* 52). Similarly, in the

“Divine Governance” essay, Fichte purports to show that if one thinks of oneself as obligated to fulfill the “end of reason” (a thought that Fichte has shown to be “necessary” in the *System of Ethics*), then one must also have the thought of the actual fulfillment of this end. But, the fulfillment of any end requires a mechanism—a causal principle of some sort—in order to occur. Hence, Fichte maintains, rational beings necessarily have the belief in a “moral world order.” In both cases (i.e., that of moral feeling and of religious belief), however, Fichte does not maintain that anyone ever makes the deduction that he has presented. Instead, people simply find themselves with moral and religious beliefs, much as they find themselves referring their representations of material objects to an external reality.

Fichte explicitly maintains that his *theory* of religion, like all philosophical theories, is *fictive*. What looks like an inference, from moral obligation to the possibility of the realization of the end of moral action, is in fact a philosophical model of the “acts” of the mind that give rise to religious belief. Such acts are, by definition, never objects of experience properly so called; instead, such acts are postulated by the transcendental philosopher. Belief in God, on the other hand, is a “fact of consciousness.” It is as essential to the coherence of human experience as is belief in other minds or in an external world. Fichte’s project, during his time at Jena, is to construct a transcendental theory that explains and grounds such facts in acts of the mind that are themselves products of an entirely “artificial” (*künstliche*) way of thinking. Thus, rather than being a sort of Feuerbach *avant la lettre*, Fichte actually reverses atheistic fictionalism. For Fichte, the goal of philosophical analysis of “facts of consciousness” cannot, on pain of futility, be to eliminate them or to replace them with the concocted theory of some philosopher. Instead, the goal of his *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole is to achieve a “reconciliation” (*Ausöhnung*) between “head” and “heart.”³⁷

³⁷Thanks are due to Daniel Breazeale, Paul Franks, and two anonymous reviewers at the *Journal* for many helpful criticisms and suggestions regarding earlier drafts of this essay.