

“Transcendentalism”

Fichte’s Kantian Conception of First Philosophy in the *Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science* from 1804

Günter Zöllner

Abstract. *The article features a short text by J.G. Fichte (1762-1814) dating from 1804, entitled Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science and presented here for the first time in English translation. Fichte’s text is preceded by a section each on Kant’s and Fichte’s novel conception of first philosophy as transcendental philosophy and Wissenschaftslehre, respectively. The article argues for a depsychologized and logicist interpretation of the transcendental project in Kant and Fichte, which thus finds a suitable successor in the neo-Kantian development of epistemology as a foundational philosophical discipline.*

Keywords. Fichte, Kant, Philosophy, Transcendental, Subject-Object, Wissenschaftslehre.

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The article has a twofold purpose. It intends to introduce readers of English to a practically unknown, small but significant text by the German philosopher J.G. Fichte (1762-1814) dating from 1804. It is entitled *Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science* and is provided in the *Appendix* of this article¹ for the first time in English translation. In addition, the essay aims at relating Fichte's brief remarks, which bear on the main character of his philosophical life project, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, alternatively translated as *Science of Knowledge* or *Doctrine of Knowledge*, to similar efforts in his principal predecessor, I. Kant (1724-1804). Both Kant's and Fichte's core philosophical initiatives center around a novel mode of doing philosophy, for which Kant uses the term "transcendental philosophy" and Fichte employs the related designation "transcendentalism". The essay is organized in two sections. The first section is devoted to Kant's initial introduction of transcendental philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; second, revised edition 1787).² The second section is dedicated to Fichte's revisions of Kantian transcendental philosophy, as succinctly summarized in the *Aphorisms*. The joining of textual analysis and contextual considerations throughout the essay reflects the conviction that, not unlike Kantian intuitions in the absence of concepts, texts taken out of their contexts are blind, and, not unlike Kantian concepts in the absence of intuitions, contexts devoid of texts are empty.³

1. Kantian Foundations

When Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* first appears in 1781 (published in German in the Baltic port city of Riga in today's Latvia), the almost 600-page work is the result of years of sustained intellectual labor. Kant's project to demarcate the mutual boundaries of reason and the senses dates back to the late 1760s and becomes the object of almost all his efforts in the 1770s during which he publishes virtually nothing ("silent decade"). When the work is finally published, it mostly meets with incomprehension and hostility. Due to its rigor, discipline and focus, the *Critique of Pure Reason* stands apart from the fashionable productions of the German late Enlightenment marked by eclecticism, syncretism, and populism. For the metaphysically inclined late adherents of Leibnizian rationalism, chiefly among them Kant's contemporary Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an unintelligible attack on the very idea of metaphysics. For the empiristically and scepticistically oriented followers of English and Scottish Enlightenment thought, the very same book is a throwback to overcome forms of false metaphysics.

In Kant's design, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an altogether new beginning in philosophy, destined to break the history of philosophy in two – to adapt a phrase from Nietzsche's later similarly ambitious self-description. So radical is the reform, or rather revolution, envisioned, projected and executed by Kant that he feels the need to coin a novel terminology for Kantian-style future philosophy. In the first instance, Kant immense innovation concerns the very foundation of philosophy in all its forms and fields in a fundamental philosophy traditionally termed "first philosophy" (*protē philosophia*, *prima philosophia*) and historically identified with metaphysics. In an outright disturbing move, Kant questions the very possibility of metaphysics *qua* first philosophy on principal

¹ See *infra*, pp. 29-31.

² As is customary, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited with the pagination of the first and second original edition of the work ("A" and "B", respectively). Kant's other works are cited according to the Academy edition of *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (abbreviated "AA").

³ On the Kantian counterfactual twin scenario of blind intuitions and empty concepts, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 51/B 75. See also G. Zöllner (2010).

grounds, arguing that the self-extension of knowledge through rational reasoning alone, typically attributed to metaphysics, lacks proper warrants against skeptical doubts concerning isolated reason’s very ability for cognitive self-expansion. Couched in the terms of Kant’s novel classification of knowledge claims according to origin and modality, the metaphysics of objectively valid and purely rational cognitions («synthetic judgments a priori»: see *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 6-10/B 10-14; *Prolegomena*, AA, 4, 266 f.) is open for profound questioning and seriously in need of a specifically critical scrutiny regarding the extent and boundaries of any such alleged metaphysical cognition.

The critical move from outright cognitive claims of a metaphysical nature to the prior investigation of the very possibility of any metaphysical cognition introduces into Kant’s first philosophy a reflexive orientation – away from first-order claims about (metaphysical) objects to second-order claims about the possibility (or impossibility) of those first-order claims. In Kant’s favored locution, the novel first philosophy investigates the universal and necessary conditions under which philosophically pertinent knowledge of objects is possible («conditions of the possibility») in the first place or at all («in general»). In delineating, once and for all, the cognitive capabilities of reason as such and by itself, the *Critique of Pure Reason* first prepares as much as actually enacts reason’s cognitive self-critique – the first ever such rigorous self-examination on the part of pure reason, according to Kant. While Kant’s philosophical revolution concerns first and foremost philosophy’s old core of first philosophy under the guise of metaphysics, its results have repercussions throughout the branches, areas and disciplines of philosophy, as indicated in the extensive, critically revised system structure of philosophy provided at the very end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 832-851/B 860-879) in the Architectonic of Pure Reason.

In Kant’s long-range completist perspective on philosophy in its entirety, the foundational function of the *Critique of Pure Reason* extends to first philosophy itself, which is introduced and initiated but not yet fully executed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On Kant’s meta-critical self-interpretation, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 11/B 25), in addition to preparing the way for the complete system of philosophy, also lays the foundation for the «system of pure reason» comprising those and only those types and tokens of philosophical knowledge warranted on the basis of pristine reason, unadulterated by any and all experience. With regard to this future systematically complete and purely rational philosophy, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 10/B 24), extensive though and even complete with regard to the basic concepts and elementary principles it may be, is but the complete sketch or «idea» of the critically grounded future first philosophy.

To be sure, Kant never managed to publish the intended «system of pure reason», just as he never completed of the announced «system of philosophy», especially as regards the long promised but never provided “metaphysics of nature”. Instead he supplemented the *Critique of Pure Reason* by first one, then one more *Critique*, devoted to pure practical reason and the power of reflective judgment, respectively (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790) – a move that left him open to the public perception that his projected system in two guises, the *encyclopedic* system of philosophy and the *critical* system of pure reason, required execution and completion by other hands and in other forms. From Reinhold through Fichte and Schelling to Hegel, post-Kantian philosophy’s agenda rests on this perception, which might be termed a misperception, given the essential completeness of Kant’s foundational philosophy, which lacks not substance but filling out, not principles but applications, not grounding but execution.

Still Kant’s critical system of pure reason, as already contained in outline in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and intended to serve as the basis for all future philosophy, is not itself a universal form of philosophy holding forth about everything and all kinds of things. On the contrary, it is a highly specific foundational philosophical project that has implications for almost all other forms and fields of philosophy, without though imposing its own mode of

doing philosophy onto those other fields. Not surprisingly Kant resorts to a technical term to describe the foundational yet limited nature of his novel brand of first philosophy, as initially introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 12/B 25), viz., «transcendental philosophy».

To be sure, the “transcendentals” (*transcendentalia*) had been part of the occidental metaphysical tradition since medieval scholastic philosophy, in which they figured as the logico-ontological generic predicates that overreach categorial predication. They consisted in category-transcending or transcategorial (hence the term “transcendental”) determinations, such as oneness, being and truth. Kant himself recalls, in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 113-116), the established and enduring school-philosophical doctrine of the transcendentals, even calling it «the transcendental philosophy of the ancients». In addition, the adjective “transcendental” had been used in Kant’s time as an attribute to designate various higher-level philosophical projects, paradigmatically so in the coinage «transcendental cosmology» designating an overall account of the world in terms of its generic laws and structures (Hinske, 1970; Honnefelder, 1990).

Building on the term’s earlier and recent usage for identifying overreaching and encompassing cognitive matters, Kant avails himself of the technical expression “transcendental” to designate a *special* kind of cognition of a *generic* nature, viz., the cognition of all that and only that which can be ascertained entirely independent of experience (*a priori*). In addition, the cognition involved in transcendental knowledge is *theoretical* cognition, *objective* cognition or knowledge of *objects*. In combination with its *a priori* nature, the theoretical character of the knowledge marked by Kant as “transcendental” yields the purely theoretical, specifically *speculative* focus of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the latter understood as the programmatic manifesto of transcendental philosophy. Most importantly, the type of cognition involved in transcendental knowledge (synthetic judgments *a priori*) is subject to the semantic separation between object- and meta-knowledge. The knowledge termed “transcendental” consists in second-order cognitions about the necessary conditions that render possible first-order synthetic *a priori* theoretical cognition. Put in traditional terms: transcendental knowledge in Kant is about the meta-categorial principles of categorial knowledge.

Kant provides an elementary elucidation of the term “transcendental” in the Introduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 25), where it receives the following slightly revised, conceptually tightened rendition in the work’s second edition:

I call all cognition *transcendental* that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our manner of cognition of objects, insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy. (Kant, 1999, 133)

The nesting relation between higher-level transcendental cognition and its object, viz., lower-level synthetic cognition *a priori*, is confirmed by a passage, again to be found in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that concerns the specifically transcendental elucidation of space and time in the Transcendental Aesthetics (B 40): «I understand by a transcendental exposition the explanation of a concept as a principle from which insight into the possibility of other synthetic *a priori* cognitions can be gained» (Kant 1999, 176).

In addition to identifying the specific, second-order scope of the transcendental project, the *Critique of Pure Reason* – more precisely, its second edition, which includes methodological and doctrinal clarifications intended to remove previously manifest misunderstandings of the work – also addresses the extent and boundaries of Kant’s novel core conception. In particular, Kant limits the scope of transcendental philosophy to theoretical philosophy, at the exclusion of practical philosophy (moral philosophy). Kant’s argument against the extension of transcendental philosophy from the theoretical to the

practical sphere turns on the necessary involvement of feeling (pleasure, displeasure) in moral concepts and principles, even if that involvement takes the negative form of pointedly disregarding or even excluding the influence of feeling in moral matters:

The chief target in the division of such a science is that absolutely no concept must enter into it that contains anything empirical, or that the *a priori* cognition be entirely pure. Hence, although the supreme principles of morality and the fundamental concepts of it are *a priori* cognitions, they still do not belong in transcendental philosophy, for, while they do not, to be sure, take the concepts of pleasure and displeasure, of desires and inclinations, etc., which are all of empirical origin, as the ground of their precepts, they still must necessarily include them in the composition of the system of pure morality in the concept of duty, as the hindrance that must be overcome or the attraction that ought not to be made into a motive. Hence a transcendental philosophy is a philosophy of pure, merely speculative reason. (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 28 f.; Kant 1999, 151)

While Kant’s purity requirement keeps transcendental philosophy strictly separate from moral philosophy, moral philosophy as envisioned by Kant already in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 797-804/B 825-832), depends essentially on transcendental philosophy. Only because the transcendental inquiry into the origin, extent and boundary of synthetic *a priori* theoretical cognition results in the latter’s restriction to the domain of empirical objects (possible experience), more precisely, the latter’s universal formal features, is there a conceptual space left empty by the principal limitation of purely theoretical cognition and remaining open for a possible alternative occupation by moral laws under the idea of freedom. It takes the restriction of theoretical cognition, including *a priori* synthetic cognition, to objects in space and time (appearances) to extend practical cognition and the ensuing volition to non-empirical cognition-*cum*-volition in the moral realm.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the transcendental project, which combines narrow scope (focusing on theoretical cognition) and wider reach (involving practical cognition), is introduced at two levels, each marked by the adjective “transcendental” and pointing in two related but different directions which transcendental philosophy was to take in and after Kant. In the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, devoted to the *a priori* principles of (theoretical) sensibility, “transcendental” tags the critical reduction of all (humanly) cognizable objects and their properties to mere “appearances”, necessarily shaped by and tied to the spatial-temporal forms of sensory intuition. The correlated principal exclusion of all objects so sensorily conditioned from the status of things considered as not so conditioned (things in themselves) is covered by the correlated terms «transcendental idealism» and «transcendental ideality», matched by their complementary opposites, equally maintained by Kant, of «empirical realism» and «empirical reality», which designate the robust actual being of the sensory objects in space and time (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 27 f./B 43 f.; A 369-372; A 490-492/B 518-521).

By contrast to the reductionist-idealist use of “transcendental” in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the parts of the Transcendental Dialectic that build on it, the use of “transcendental” in the Transcendental Analytic is constructive and objectivist. In general, “transcendental” here marks that about pure concepts of the understanding, pure schemata of the productive power of the imagination and pure judgments of the determinative power of judgment which contributes to the objectivity of *a priori* theoretical cognitions, their ultimate warrant in sensory intuitions notwithstanding. The most fundamental and outmost formal of these transcendental conditions of objective cognition and its cognized objects is «transcendental», «pure» and «original apperception» (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 106; B 132. Divergent text in A and B) – a Leibniz-inspired concept that conveys the strict correlation between the *a priori* functions of subjectivity and the universal lawful constitution of objectivity. While the hallmark of aesthetic subjectivity is ideality, that

of logical objectivity is «objective validity» (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 89/B 122; A 97; B 137. Divergent text in A and B). Kant himself can be seen to waver between the more subjectivist-idealist focus of the transcendental project in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), subsequently favored by Schopenhauer and Heidegger, and the objectivist-logicist focus assumed in the work's second edition (1787) – and previously presented in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1785) – in an attempt to combat the psychologist reduction of transcendental-critical idealism to Berkeleyan material idealism.

2. Fichtean Revisions

Of all the philosophers, poets and poet-philosophers working in the wake of Kant's cultural revolution, none stayed closer to the “spirit”, if not the letter, of the critical philosophy in general and that of the transcendental project in particular than J.G. Fichte. Fichte's meteoric career started with his first publication, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792) being taken for a work by Kant himself. From the beginning Fichte understood his lifelong work on what he termed, with a neologism, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as emended continuation of Kant's transcendental philosophy. In addition, Fichte engaged throughout his twenty-year work on the *Wissenschaftslehre* in detailed critical, or rather meta-critical, discussion of the major tenets, salient features and finer details of Kant's critical philosophy.⁴

In taking up the Kantian project of transcendental philosophy, Fichte exhibited the same ambivalent, or rather two-pronged, approach already manifest in Kant himself. Where Kant had delegated the reductivist-idealist strand of transcendental philosophy primarily to the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and more generally to the work's first edition, Fichte highlights the transcendental-idealist side of the *Wissenschaftslehre* primarily in *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95) (GA, I/2, 251-451; Fichte, 2021, 195-378) and more generally in the writings from the first presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. By contrast, the objectivist-logicist aspect of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which matches Kant's specific focus in the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the general orientation of that work's second edition, comes to the fore in the (fragmentary) *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797/98) (GA, I/4, 183-281; Fichte 1994) and the (unpublished) Jena university lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796/97; 1798/99).⁵

In the early Jena years, Fichte had couched his version of transcendental philosophy in terms of a transcendental egology («absolute I», «theoretical I», «practical I») and thereby exposed the (post-)Kantian project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to charges of extreme subjectivism and excessive idealism. In part in reaction to the hostile, even if mistaken, reception of the first presentation of *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte issued the “new presentation” which deemphasized the subjectivist-idealist aspects of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in favor of a more balanced articulation of the subjective as well as objective aspects of the supreme principle of transcendental philosophy («pure I», «pure willing»). In particular,

⁴ When revising Kant's transcendental philosophy through the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte also redefines the relation of the former to moral philosophy, in general, and to moral freedom, in particular. This development, which does not play a role in the *Aphorisms* to be introduced below, will not be discussed here either. On the reconfiguration of transcendental philosophy as a system of freedom in Fichte, see Zöller (2014 and 2016).

⁵ GA, IV/2, 17-267 (“Halle”), and GA, IV/3, 321-535 (“Krause”). See also Fichte (1994b) and (1992).

Fichte introduced a neologism for the principal feature that was meant to convey the pre- as well as praeter-disjunctive, «absolute» unity of subjectivity and objectivity – a term building on the original unity of subjectivity and objectivity that had already figured in Kant under the neo-Leibnizian appellation «transcendental apperception».

The novel term in Fichte is «subject-object» (*Subjekt-Objekt*),⁶ along with the allied *abstractum* «subject-objectivity» (*Subjekt-Objektivität*: see the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*, section 9, in GA, I/4, 255). The composite locution «subject-object» conveys contraction as well as division and serves to render the I’s double function as principal unity and as principle of dualist differentiation. In the preserved lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* Fichte indicates the complex status of the subjective-objective I by means of the term «original duplicity» (*ursprüngliche Duplizität*), which oscillates between designating the unitary origin of duplicity and the duplex character of originality (Zöller 1998). Following Fichte’s introduction of the term “subject-object” in published work from 1797/98, Hegel was to adopt the neologism (along with the derivative *abstractum* «subject-objectivity») in his *Difference Essay* from 1801, in the process subjecting the concept to the further differentiation into the «subjective subject-object», characterizing the prime principle of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the «objective subject-object», designating the alternative supreme principle of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* (Hegel 1968, 34, 48, 52, 71).

Due to the outbreak of the so-called atheism dispute over Fichte’s alleged atheistic pronouncements in the 1798 essay *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World* (GA, I/5, 347-357) together with Fichte’s ensuing loss of his Jena professorship the following year, the publication of the *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* remained a brief fragment. In reaction to the widespread misperception of his published works, Fichte also refrained from publishing his continuous further work on the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which became known only posthumously through the two editorial projects of Fichte’s complete works in the mid-nineteenth century and in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to the successive and variative, so to speak serial versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte’s body of philosophical works from his later years (mostly spent in Berlin) also comprises several introductory texts, designed to familiarize the reader (or listener) with the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and its main methodological and doctrinal features. One such propaedeutical text, entitled *Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science*, dating from 1804 and preserved in two, somewhat different versions, is particularly interesting for the contrastive comparison it carries out between Kant’s transcendental philosophy and the latter’s revised continuation in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*.

While the “New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*” from the later Jena years, with its key conception of the «subject-object» as the transcendental principle, had moved already beyond the (mis-)perceived exaggerated idealism and subjectivism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’s first presentation from the beginning of Fichte’s Jena years, the *Aphorisms* from 1804 advance farther yet to a unitary conception of the supreme transcendental principle as preceding as well as preparing all subsequent division and differentiation. In doctrinal terms, the *Aphorisms* from 1804 belong into the orbit of the five narrowly spaced presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804/05, especially into

⁶ See Fichte, *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre*, first (and only) chapter, section II, in GA, I/4, 277. The term also figures in a note added to the second edition of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (dating from 1802); see GA, I/2, 261.

the context of the second lecture course on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804⁷ which stands out through its scope and size. In biographical terms, the *Aphorisms* belong to Fichte's attempts during his early Berlin years, when he was without an academic appointment and confined to offering privately arranged lecture courses, to aggressively publicize his ongoing work on the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

The somewhat more extensive of the two versions of *Aphorisms* is part of a letter written by Fichte to someone named Appia (GA, III/5, 244-248), whom the editors of the critical Fichte Edition identify as the Calvinist preacher Paul Joseph Appia (1783-1849), active in Frankfurt upon the Main (GA, III/5, 244 and 244, note 1). If the identification is correct, Appia would have been a student in Geneva in his early twenties when receiving the letter. The second version of the *Aphorisms* (GA, II/7, 246-248) was written for the Swiss-born Francophone writer and exiled anti-Napoleonic polemicist Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), who was touring the German lands at the time collecting first-hand material on the country's intellectual and artistic leaders in preparation for a book project on Germany past and present as a cultural alternative to Napoleonic France (see the editors' introduction in GA, II/7, 245). When de Staël's work finally appeared in three volumes under the title *De l'Allemagne* in 1813, its section on Fichte showed no trace of the *Aphorisms* and instead restated the *communis opinio* about the early Jena Fichte. The two versions of Fichte's 1804 introductory *opusculum* share the main text, entitled *Aphorisms* (version for de Staël) and *Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science* (version for Appia), respectively. In the earlier version (for de Staël) the *Aphorisms* are followed by a brief "Conclusion". In the later version (for Appia) the *Aphorisms* are preceded by a somewhat longer untitled introductory section and followed by a brief "Explanatory Supplement".

The identical core text of the *Aphorisms* is organized in five consecutively numbered paragraphs: §. 1.), §. 2.), etc. Paragraph 2 is followed by a corollary, and paragraph 3 is called "Supplement". The title *Aphorisms*, along with the aphorisms' division into consecutively numbered paragraphs, is indebted to a publication by one of Fichte's former teachers at the University of Leipzig, Ernst Platner (1744-1818), whose *Philosophical Aphorisms Together with Several Guidelines to Philosophical History* appeared in two parts in 1776 (revised editions 1784 and 1793) and 1782 (revised edition 1800), respectively, and served as the textbook for the lecture courses on logic and metaphysics that Fichte offered regularly at the universities of Jena and Berlin.⁸ The following presentation of the *Aphorisms* is based on the version in the letter to Appia, which is also the version rendered in the first English translation of the *Aphorisms* provided in the next section.⁹

While the *Aphorisms* constitute an important, unduly neglected document of Fichte's philosophical self-interpretation, they do not, strictly speaking, offer yet another presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, not even such a presentation *in nuce*. Instead, they offer preliminary and preparatory thoughts *about* the *Wissenschaftslehre* as such and in general, much like the other introductory works of shorter or longer extent which Fichte customarily connects with the actual presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In particular, the *Aphorisms* are explicitly assigned to exhibiting the "concept" of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and thus follow the precedent of Fichte's very first such introductory publication, *On the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre or on So-called Philosophy* (1794) (GA, I/2, 107-

⁷ GA, II/8, 2-421 (the two preserved, slightly different versions of the work are presented on the even and on the odd pages, respectively).

⁸ See the reprint of Platner's *Philosophical Aphorisms*, first half of the edition from 1793, in GA, II/4, S (supplementary volume), and the editors' introduction in GA, II/7, S, V f.

⁹ In what follows, references to the *Aphorisms* are by the five individually numbered paragraphs of the text, which each comprise only a few lines of text. Quotations from the *Aphorisms* omit the text's many emphases, which are included in the appended translation though.

172). But unlike the earlier writing, which builds on the post-Kantian debate about the «first principles» (*Grundsätze*) of transcendental philosophy, the *Aphorisms* engage the legacy of philosophy on a broader scale that reaches back to classical Greek concerns with being (*to einai*) in general and in its various categorial kinds as well as to key concerns in modern, post-Cartesian philosophy.

Paragraph 1 of the *Aphorisms* identifies «being» (*objectum, ens*) as the object of all philosophy through Kant. Fichte explicitly includes «consciousness» among the entities of traditional philosophy’s objectivist approach to being, citing its reification («something conscious») under such objectifying notions as «mind» or «soul». The overall task of generally objectivist, or rather objectifying, pre-Kantian philosophy is specified as that of comprehending «the connectedness of the manifold determinations of this being».

Paragraph 2 of the *Aphorisms* cites as the *prōton pseudos* of pre-Kantian philosophy to have overlooked that no being occurs without consciousness, and no consciousness without being. Accordingly, the object of philosophy is not being, as explicitly or implicitly assumed in all pre-Kantian philosophy, but the «absolute unity» of being and consciousness. Fichte credits Kant with that discovery and identifies «transcendental philosophy» as the unfolding of this insight in Kant. At this point the alternative version of the *Aphorisms* (for de Staël) brings in the designation «transcendentalism» for the main tenets of transcendental philosophy (GA, II/7, 246: *Transcendentalismus*). The term is not found in Kant and seems not to have been used by Fichte anywhere else.

In a corollary to paragraph 2 Fichte notes that with the advent of transcendental philosophy the various systems of modern philosophy designed to explain the bidirectional interaction between being and consciousness, such as the systems of physical influx in Descartes, of occasionalism in Malebranche and of prestabilized harmony in Leibniz, become obsolete after the Kantian discovery that “originally” being and consciousness are “one and the same”.

Paragraph 3 of the *Aphorisms* is presented as a supplementary reminder that even after Kant’s “total revision” with regard to philosophy’s object, the task of philosophy remains as before to comprehend the connectedness of the manifold determinations of the redefined basic object of philosophy.

Paragraph 4 presents the first half of a two-part disjunction introduced into philosophy’s “business of derivation” for yielding the main determinations of the absolute unity of consciousness and being. It consists in presupposing «certain basic differences» as grounded in «empirical self-observation» and not subject to further unification. The resulting philosophy, while still to be characterized as transcendental, involves a plurality of basic units which are not brought to absolute unity and which are, moreover, based on empirical data. On Fichte’s assessment, this pluralist and empiricist type of transcendental philosophy, which he identifies as Kant’s, does not satisfy the requirements of «strictly scientific philosophy».

Paragraph 5 features the second half of the previously introduced disjunction, which consists in inwardly grasping and rendering the absolute unity of being and conscious as it is “in itself”, independent of its division into being and consciousness. While not engaging in the actual rendering of the absolute unity as such, the *Aphorisms* introduce a series of equivalent terms for the referred-to unity: «reason», «*logos*», «knowledge», with *logos* explicitly derived from the prologue to the Gospel of John, and «knowledge» explicitly tagged as a cognitive concept overreaching the distinction between consciousness and being. The presented formally perfect and materially non-empirical type of transcendental philosophy is Fichte’s own, which in the *Aphorisms* he labels alternatively *Wissen-*

schaftslehre and «logology» (doctrine of *logos*).¹⁰ On Fichte's perfectionist conception of transcendental philosophy, the genuine inner «insight» into the absolutely originary unity of being and consciousness yields at once an equally immediate insight into that unity's necessary division into being and consciousness, along with further ensuing subdivisions – all of them presenting themselves with necessity and universality (a priori) and without recourse to experience.

In a separate section following the *Aphorisms* in the version for Appia, entitled *Elucidating Supplement* and amounting to three quarters of the extent of the *Aphorisms*, Fichte outlines the previously announced a priori division and subdivision of the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s absolute unity. In particular, Fichte has being, which, considered «in and for itself» and in abstraction from all consciousness, is but utter unity, divide itself according to its «immanent laws» when united with consciousness, which consciousness itself thereby divides itself analogously. As Fichte stresses, the manifold being, which in its connectedness constitutes the object of the *Wissenschaftslehre qua* transcendental philosophy, occurs only in and for consciousness. Anticipating, by way of example, the divisions featured in the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself, Fichte introduces the primary division of consciousness into «sensory» and «supersensory consciousness», with the latter further dividing itself into «religious» and «moral consciousness» and yielding as correlated types of being «a god» and «a moral law», respectively. By contrast, sensory consciousness undergoes further (self-)division into «a social» and «a nature consciousness», yielding «a law of right» and «a nature», respectively. A further division specified by Fichte, again by way of example and in an anticipatory manner, concerns the extension of «absolutely divided [sensory] being» throughout «an infinite space» and across «an infinite time».

Fichte closes the supplement to the *Aphorisms* with the reminder that all the mentioned disjunctions do not occur «in itself, i.e., in pure being», but only «in consciousness». He equally insists though that consciousness along with its immanent laws and their results is by no means an «illusion», since there is «no being» and «no reason» except in consciousness and because the latter cannot be given up «in life». For Fichte the correlativity of being in its manifold determinations to equally multiform consciousness pervades all ordinary awareness («life»), even though philosophical reflection («speculation») reveals those determinations to be «not valid in itself» – a fundamental insight on the part of transcendental philosophy that prevents the «immense confusions and contradictions» which, according to Fichte, plagued pre-Kantian philosophy throughout.

The *Aphorisms* are remarkable in Fichte's *œuvre* for their succinct portrayal of the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* at a highpoint of the latter's continuing development. As is the case with the other works from 1804/05 (above all, the second presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804), the *Aphorisms* have moved beyond the early Fichte's focus on the I in its foundational function and have replaced the egological conceptuality of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* with a decidedly logicist («logological») approach to the foundations of knowledge. In the *Aphorisms* the depsychologization of the project of *Wissenschaftslehre* goes together with a new emphasis on philosophy's traditional and continuing task of exhibiting being in its unity as well as its innerly connected manifold forms.

To be sure, Fichte, following Kant, does not locate the absolute unity in being as such («in itself») but in reason's or knowledge's absolute unity of being and consciousness. Moreover, unlike Kant, Fichte entrusts the systematically complete transcendental philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) with the a priori derivation of the main correlated determinations of conscious and being. In particular, the *Aphorisms* cite the four core forms of consciousness and of being that make up the standpoints of nature, right, morals and reli-

¹⁰ On the originally theological meaning of logology (*logologia*), see Burke (1970).

gion previously identified in the final lecture of the second presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804, where philosophy itself is added as a fifth, unifying standpoint («quintuplicity»: GA, II/8, 418-419). With their distinction of transcendental philosophy’s two successive tasks – to grasp the absolute unity of being and consciousness and to exhibit the connectedness of being’s (and consciousness’s) manifold determinations –, the *Aphorisms* also recall the dual division of the *Wissenschaftslehre* 1804 into a «doctrine of reason» and a «doctrine of appearance» (GA, II/8, 229-230).

When compared to Kant’s definition of the transcendental project in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Aphorisms* – in line with the contemporaneous presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – can be seen to follow the logical-objectivist, rather than psychological-subjectivist, strand of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Particularly noteworthy in the *Aphorisms* is the absence of any transcendental-idealist terminology and conceptuality («only appearances», «nothing») and the explicit rejection of the view that the manifold determinations of being are a mere illusion. In the *Aphorisms* the reductivist strand to be found in Kant’s transcendental idealism and also in the early *Wissenschaftslehre* is replaced by a correlationism that stresses the mutual requirement of being and consciousness, while grounding both in a predisjunctive, absolute unity that is identified neither in ontological nor in mentalistic terms but located in the logical dimension of (universal and necessary) validity.

Building on the identification of the principle of absolute unity with «reason», «*logos*» and «knowledge» in the *Aphorisms*, the nature of the transcendental project, as introduced by Kant and further developed by Fichte, might be described with a term not unlike the *terminus technicus* Fichte borrowed from theology, «logology» – a novel concept and its correlated term introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century in an attempt to identify the logicist and scientific heritage of Kantian (and Fichtean) transcendental philosophy: epistemology (*Erkenntnistheorie*, *Erkenntnislehre*).¹¹ While the latter concept does not capture the full extent of transcendental philosophy’s functional continuity with the ancient of project of first philosophy, the epistemological focusing of transcendental philosophy brings out its anti-psychological, anti-idealist and pro-axiological leanings – and this better so than the would-be continuation of transcendental philosophy under the guise of «transcendental phenomenology» (Ströker 1987), «transcendental pragmatics» (see Dorschel et al., 1993) or «transcendental psychology» (Kitcher 1990). For the latter attempts risk falling back (or prove eager to relapse) into the kind of pluralism and empiricism for which Fichte critiques Kant in the *Aphorisms*.

¹¹ On the neo-Kantian origins of modern epistemology, see Köhnke (1991).

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APPENDIX

Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy*

Johann Gottlieb Fichte

What follows is an English translation of the main part of a letter sent by Fichte in the summer of 1804 to an unidentified young friend – presumably the Geneva theology student and later Calvinist pastor in Frankfurt on the Main, Paul Joseph Appia (1783-1849). The letter consists of a number of prefatory remarks announcing and introducing the succeeding exposition of Fichte's concept of philosophy qua Wissenschaftslehre, followed by the text of that exposition, entitled *Aphorisms on the Essence of Philosophy as Science*, which details Fichte's conception of philosophy in the form of five brief, consecutively numbered paragraphs, in turn followed by an elucidating supplement. As becomes clear from the opening section of the letter (not included in the present translation), the letter was intended by Fichte to provide its recipient with a textual basis for propagating Fichte's philosophy among an interested audience outside Germany's philosophical circles. An alternative, slightly shorter version of the *Aphorisms* – preserved in Fichte's *Literary Remains* (GA, II/7, 242-248) – served the same intent and was meant to introduce the Swiss-French *femme de lettres*, Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), to Fichte's philosophy, with an eye to the latter's consideration in her projected book on German historical and contemporary culture to be written from a foreigner's perspective.

The translation follows the presentation of Fichte's letter in the *Academy Edition of Fichte's Collected Works* (GA, III/3, 244-248; letter n. 664), with kind permission by its long-time editor, Dr. Erich Fuchs. It preserves the German original's many emphases (rendered in italics), standardizes the original's excessive punctuation, completes the numerous abbreviated words and phrases in the original and supplies explanatory additions (placed in square brackets) to Fichte's highly condensed text. The numbers in square brackets indicate the page breaks and page numbers of the presentation of the *Aphorisms* (GA, III/3).

[246] *Aphorisms on the essence of philosophy as science.*

§. 1.) All philosophy up to Kant had for its object *being* (*objectum, ens*) – (in dualism, e.g., consciousness itself, as [something] *conscious* (*spirit, soul*, and so forth), became being.) The purpose of this philosophy was to comprehend *the connectedness of the manifold determinations of this being.*

§. 2.) All [philosophers up to Kant] overlooked, merely by lack of attention, *that there occurs no being except in a consciousness, and vice versa, no consciousness except with regard to a being*; that therefore the proper *in-itself*, as object of philosophy, would have to be neither *being*, as in all pre-Kantian philosophy, nor *consciousness*, which, to be sure, has not even been attempted yet; but being + consciousness, or consciousness + being = the absolute *unity* of the two, beyond their separateness. It was Kant who made this great discovery and thereby *became* the originator of *transcendental philosophy.*

Corollary. That therefore those miraculous questions, how being enters into consciousness, or consciousness arrives at being, which were supposed to be solved through

* Translation by Günter Zöllner (University of Munich).

[the system of] *physical influx*, the *system of occasional causes*, [the system of] *prestabli-
lized harmony*, here fall away entirely, in that being and consciousness are after all origi-
nally not separated, therefore cannot be unified either, but are in itself one and the same.

–

§. 3.) *Supplement*. It is understood that even after this total revision of its proper ob-
ject, philosophy still retains the old task to make comprehensible *the connectedness of
the manifold determinations of that basic object*.

§. 4.). Now in the latter business of derivation one can –

Either proceed in such a way that one presupposes certain *basic differences* that can
only be found in empirical self-observation as not to be united any further; and then trace
to each of these *particular* basic units that which [in turn] is to be derived from each;
which will yield in part an incomplete [philosophy] that has not come to its end, i.e., abso-
lute unity, in part a philosophy partially based on *empirical data*, hence not a strictly sci-
entific philosophy, which, yet (due to §. 2.) remains [a] transcendental [philosophy].

Such a philosophy is the *Kantian*.

§. 5.) *Or* on can proceed in such a way that one penetrates and presents that original
unity of being and consciousness (§. 2.) in what it is *in itself* and independent of its [247]
division into being and consciousness. – (I call this unity *reason, logos*, as in the gospel ac-
cording to John, *knowledge*, by no means to be confused with *consciousness*, [the latter
of] which is only a deeper lying member of a disjunction located in opposition to being;
whence [I call] the system *Wissenschaftslehre, logology*. To present and render compre-
hensible the latter to someone actually inwardly, requires a long preparation of that per-
son through the most abstract speculation.) –

If one has properly presented that unity, one will immediately comprehend the ground
why it divides itself into being and consciousness; one will further comprehend *why in this
dividedness* it will *further divide itself* in a determined manner; all this absolutely a priori,
without any aid of empirical perception, [merely] from that insight into the unity; and
thus [one will] truthfully comprehend the all in the one and the one in the all; which has
been the task of philosophy since ever. This just described philosophy is *the Wissen-
schaftslehre*.

Elucidating supplement.

As far as the latter further division of being and consciousness, which are already com-
prehended as one, is concerned, the *Wissenschaftslehre* finds that this occurs due to con-
sciousness and according to the latter's immanent laws; that therefore being, in and of it-
self and considered in separation from consciousness, is through and through one, just as
reason itself, and that it divides itself only in its unification with consciousness, because
the latter, due to its own essence, divides itself necessarily; hence that only in conscious-
ness is there a manifold being, e.g. (this is how things turn out in the *Wissenschaftslehre*)
[consciousness] divides itself first into a *sensory* and *supersensory* consciousness, which,
applied to being, must yield a *sensory* and *supersensory* being. The *supersensory* in turn
further divides itself, according to a law that is not to be adduced here, into *religious* and
moral consciousness, which, applied to being, yields a *God* and a *moral law*; the *sensory* in
turn divides itself into a *social* and a *nature* consciousness, which, applied to being, yields
a *law of right* and a *nature*. Finally, as a result of the absolute (i.e., infinite, never to be
removed) division in consciousness, absolutely divided being, i.e., [248] *nature*, becomes
extended through an infinite *space*, consciousness [becomes] extended through an infi-
nite *time*; which time, however, and space occur, just as little as the first mentioned dis-
junctions, *in itself*, i.e., in pure being, or again in pure reason, but only in consciousness.

Still consciousness, with these its laws and results, is by no means an illusion, for there is no being and there is no reason, except in consciousness. For the same reason, we can never forego consciousness and its necessary results in life; and this in spite of the fact that we can and ought to know that these results are not valid *in itself*, so that we may save us thereby from the egregious confusions and contradictions that have been brought about by that false presupposition ever since.

Berlin, 23 June 1804.

Fichte.