C.Ü. Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi Mayıs 2005 Cilt : 29 No:1 13-21

ON FICHTE'S RECONSTRUCTION OF THE KANTIAN UNITY OF THE I

Aslı Yazıcı

Öz

Wissenschaftslehre adlı eserinde Fichte'nin nihai amacı Kant'ın çözülemez gördüğü nesne-özne, biçim-madde, özgürlük-zorunluluk temel ikiliklerinin kuramsal ve felsefi sorunlarını ortaya koymaktır. Fichte, bu tür ikiliklerin insanın bilişsel dünyasında var olduğunu kabul etmesine karşın söz konusu ikiliklerin ötesine geçebileceğimiz ve geçmemiz gerektiği konusunda ısrar eder. İnsan düşüncesinin birleştirici olduğunu ve felsefenin en önemli görevinin de bu birliğe ulaşmak olduğunu düşünür. Fichte'nin açıklamasının genel teorik temelleri içerisinde bu birliği sağlamanın mümkün görünmediğini iddia edeceğim. Daha özelde, dikkatli bir okuyuşta Fichte'nin yorumunun ben'in ideal birliğinin teorik temelde asla sağlanamayacağını ve buna erişilemeyeceğini, ancak pratik temelde kendisine sadece yaklaşabileceğimiz bir ideal birlik olabileceğini gösterdiğini ileri süreceğim.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Ben, Ben'in İdeal Birliği, İdealizm, Dogmatizm, Kant, Fichte

Fichte'nin Kantçı Ben'in Birliğini Yeniden İnşaası Üstüne

Abstract

Fichte's overarching aim in the Wissenschaftslehre is to introduce central theoretical and philosophical problems of Kant's fundamental dualism of form and matter, subject and object, necessity and freedom which Kant regards as insurmountable. Although Fichte admits such dualism in our cognition, he insists that we can and must rise above it. He thinks that human thought is essentially unitary and that the great task of philosophy is to achieve this unity. I will claim that within the limits of theoretical foundations of Fichte's account such a unity seems not to be possible. In particular, I will claim that a careful reading of Fichte's interpretation can only show that the Ideal unity of the I can never be realized and achieved on theoretical ground, but we can only approximate to it on practical basis.

Key Words

I, The Unity Of I, Idealism, Dogmatism, Kant, Fichte

1. Kant and Fichte

Having dedicated his whole life to clear up fundamental tenets of Kant's philosophy, Fichte claims that Kant's "radical revision of our current conception of philosophy" has been completely misunderstood (Fichte, 1970:3). He thinks that though Kant's Copernican hypothesis, the discovery of the constitutive activity of reason as "the law giver of nature," marks a turning point in modern philosophy, the question of binary oppositions between form and matter, subject and object, and freedom and nature remains unsolved. Fichte contends that his construction of 'the I being for itself' can successfully solve the problem of insurmountable oppositions, the issue which he tries to clarify throughout the whole *Wissenschaftslehre* (Science of Knowledge) (Sedwick 2000:Taber 1984; Pippin 1988:76).[1]

I will claim that within the limits of theoretical foundations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* the unity of form and matter (and that of subject and object, and even that of freedom and necessity) seems not to be possible. In particular, I will claim that Fichte's conclusion in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is amount to

[1] Pippin especially states that a proper understanding of "how the I is for itself" will accomplish the central goal of post-Kantian German Idealism, that is, the reconciliation in a higher systematic unity of Kant's fundamental dualism of nature and freedom.

nothing but to the well-known Kantian claim that the opposites in consciousness are insurmountable. Unlike some commentators who think that Fichte's contribution is "significant one" (Pippin, 1988: 74), this conclusion, I believe, adds nothing new to the solution of the problem of the insurmountable opposites. Fichte's analysis can only show that the Ideal unity of the I can never be realized and achieved on theoretical ground, but we can only approximate to it on practical basis.

Before presenting a detailed explanation of Fichte's grounding of the I as universal and certain foundation of all experience, let me introduce some points regarding the main basis of Fichte's ***Wissenschaftslehre*** –its Kantian background. In its broadest sense ***Wissenschaftslehre*** (Science of Knowledge) is Fichte's reconstruction of Kant's transcendental idealism. As such it includes a number of recognizable features of Kantian project: that "the object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object," (Fichte, 1970:4) and that "the object of every philosophy, as the ground of the explanation of experience, must lie outside experience" (Fichte, 1970:11). For Fichte, 'philosophy' is a science, the main task of which is to provide an answer to the fundamental question: "What is the source of the system of presentations which are accompanied by the feeling of necessity, and this feeling of necessity itself?" Since presentations accompanied by the feeling of necessity are also called ***experience***, in Fichte's terminology, we need to identify the rock-hard ground of all experience (Fichte, 1970:11). In this sense, his starting point is Kantian because he seeks to find out the necessary conditions making experience possible. Fichte can be seen as an "archfoundationalist," one who upholds that "the demand for an explanation of experience is surely founded in reason" (Fichte, 1970:27; Breazeale, 1988:99).

In the main parts of the ***Wissenschaftslehre*** Fichte deals with the "fundamental principles" of the Science of Knowledge, gives an account of the "foundation of theoretical knowledge," introduces the "foundation of the science of practical knowledge" respectively. The organization of the ***Wissenschaftslehre*** clearly signifies that his attempt to fashion a scientific philosophy is not taken into account as a mere attempt which is based upon theoretical interest. The scientific philosophy Fichte seeks consists of the systematic connection between theoretical and practical (moral) philosophy. Like Kant, Fichte gives the primacy to practical reason and regards philosophy, or ***Wissenschaftslehre,*** as a moral project, not finally, as a mere theoretical discipline alone (Breazeale, 1996:47-64; Ameriks, 1999:116-130). Fichte thinks that human thought is essentially unitary and that the great task of philosophy is to achieve this unity. Fichte's departure from Kant can be found in his insistence to reject that the nature-freedom dualism in human consciousness is insurmountable. By introducing the I as a fundamental ground of experience Fichte tries to reconcile the unity of the dualism(s) in question.

2. Idealism and Dogmatism

Now the problem for Fichte is to provide a scientific explanation of the possibility of experience on the ground of the unity of theoretical and practical philosophy (Breazeale, 1996:52). How can a rational being inquire into grounds of experience? Though our capacity is limited to experience, we can abstract from experience, because we are able to "separate what is conjoined in

experience through the freedom of thought" (Fichte, 1970:16). Thanks to philosophical reflections we can see the two aspects of experience, the objective and the subjective, the *thing* that is known and the *intelligence* that knows:

The philosopher can leave one of the two out of consideration, and he has then abstracted from experience and raised himself above it. If he leaves out the former, he retains an intelligence in itself, that is, abstracted from its relation to experience, as a basis for explaining experience; if he leaves out the latter, he retains a thing-in-itself, that is, abstracted from the fact that it occurs in experience, as a similar basis of explanation. The first method of procedure is called *idealism*, the second *dogmatism* (Fichte, 1970:8-9).

Given the way Fichte sets up the argument, there are only two possible ways of abstracting and thus two possible philosophical systems. A philosopher abstracts either from the thing-in-itself or from the intelligence-in-itself (the self-in-itself) (Fichte, 1970:10). The philosopher abstracting from the thing-in-itself is called *dogmatist*, while the philosopher abstracting from the self-in-itself is called *idealist*.

Every consistent philosophy, Fichte says, is either *idealism* or *dogmatism*. In either case the task of a consistent philosophy is the same: to show that the source of the system of presentations which are accompanied by the feeling of necessity can be deduced from a single, self-evident principle. That is to say, each of these philosophical systems deals with one of these two aspects of experience, the intelligence-in-itself and the thing-in-itself, and seeks to deduce life and consciousness from it. While *idealism* takes the intelligence-in- itself, or the I, as its single self evident principle, *dogmatism* takes the thing-in-itself as its supposed principle. Dogmatism, in Fichte's terminology, is a philosophical system that begins with the thing-in-itself and explains experience as the product or effect of the thing-in-itself (Fichte, 1970:12-13). Except Kant and himself Fichte calls most of the leading figures of modern philosophy from Descartes to Leibnez as dogmatist, who "construes the self merely as a product of things, an accident of the world" (Fichte, 1970:13). Different from dogmatism idealism begins with the intelligence-in-itself and explains experience as a consequence of the productive activity of the the-self-in-itself or 'I think.'

With respect to the explanatory ground of experience, the main object of philosophy, idealism has advantage over dogmatism because the latter takes the starting point the thing-in-itself, "a pure invention," according to Fichte, which "has no reality whatever. It does not occur in experience" (Fichte, 1970:10). By taking the thing-in-itself as its starting point dogmatism seeks to explain the existence and nature of consciousness. In so doing, dogmatism is attempting the impossible: it is trying to explain thought through something which by hypothesis has no relation to thought.

Dogmatism, Fichte says, explains experience as the product, or effect of the thing-in-itself (Fichte, 1970:13).[2] This dogmatic explanation of experience leads a consistent dogmatist to be "necessarily fatalist" because

[2] According to Fichte, the dogmatists think that everything that appears in our consciousness is the product of a thing-in-itself.

He [the consistent dogmatist] does not deny the fact of consciousness that we consider ourselves free, for that would be contrary to reason; but he completely denies the independence of the self upon which idealist relies, and construes the self merely as a product of things, an accident of the world; the consistent dogmatist is necessarily also materialist. He could refute only on the basis of the postulate of freedom and independence of the self; but it is precisely this that he denies **(**Fichte, 1970:13).

Briefly, since dogmatism explains experience as the product, or effect of the thing-in-itself, Fichte claims, a consistent dogmatist is both a fatalist and materialist because he denies the independent reality of consciousness and thus the reality of human freedom.

Fichte claims that dogmatism fails because it "is completely unable to explain what it must" explain (Fichte, 1970:16). What it must explain is experience, or the system of presentations accompanied by the feeling of necessity. That is to say, a dogmatist cannot show how presentations and our consciousness thereof can be produced by the causal interaction of things. The dogmatist, giving primacy to the thing-in-itself, has experience as the thing affects the passive intellect. But Fichte says that "intellect and thing are …exact opposites: they inhabit two worlds between which there is no bridge" (Fichte, 1970:17). In other words, Fichte claims that dogmatism is utterly unable to bridge the gulf between presentations and things. The dogmatist is required to call the principle of causality in order to explain how the things affect the passive intellect and lead to presentations. Fichte says that in dogmatism the thing and intellect are radically distinct, and that causality is unable to operate from thing to intellect (Fichte, 1970:19).

Keep in mind that Fichte's objection to dogmatism is not that it provides no account of how things cause presentations to the passive intellect. Rather, his objection to dogmatism is that the dogmatic account is unintelligible because, for the dogmatist, presentation comes through causation. The hallmark of Fichte's objection to the dogmatic account of presentation arising from causation is that, since causation is mechanical, presentation is mechanical and without freedom. But Fichte insists upon the existence upon freedom of the mind and the will (Fichte, 1970:20). Dogmatic account of presentation is unintelligible because dogmatists have no sense of independence or freedom of mind and that of will. Briefly stated, Fichte sees dogmatism as the real ground of the insurmountable dualisms of philosophy.

After arguing that the dogmatic account of experience is unintelligible, Fichte claims that dogmatism is not a philosophy, but only a feeble affirmation and assertion and thus that idealism remains as the only possible philosophy (Fichte, 1970:19). Unlike dogmatism, idealism begins with an active intellect or *intellectual intuition.*[3] "[O]ut of the activity of this intellect we must deduce ***specific*** presentations: of a world, of a material, spatially located world existing without our aid, etc., which notoriously occur in consciousness" (Fichte, 1970:21). Here the emphasis upon the "activity of the intellect" is of crucial value to understand on what ground Fichte claims that the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the first system of freedom.

[3] According to Fichte, "the intellect", for idealism, is only active and absolute, never passive.

Fichte defines the activity of the intellect and combines this definition with the fundamental presupposition of idealism, when he says

since the intellect is itself the highest ground of explanation, an action determined by the intellect and its nature, and not something outside it. The presupposition of idealism will, therefore, be as follows: the intellect acts, but owing to its nature, it can act only in a certain fashion. If we think of this necessary way of action itself, we shall call it, most appropriately, the law of action: hence there are necessary laws of the intellect (Fichte, 1970:21).

As opposed to the starting point of dogmatism, namely, the thing-in-itself, the starting point of idealism is not something outside of the intellect. Rather, it is the action of the intellect itself (Pippin, 1988:77). Through this action the active intellect posits freely its own laws: laws of action and laws of intellect (Snider, 1989:74). These laws, Fichte says, give "the feeling of necessity that accompanies specific presentations; for here the intellect does not register some external impression, but feels in this action the limits of its own being" (Fichte, 1970:21). By "idealism" Fichte means critical or transcendental idealism according to which the system of representations accompanied with feeling of necessity, or experience, is nothing but a consequence of the productive activity of the intellect.

The hallmark of Fichte's transcendental idealism is that experience arises by "free but law-governed thought" which is a natural consequence of the activity of the intellect-in-itself or the I (Fichte, 1970:27). Transcendental idealism starts with the I, not experience because the activity of the I, or the intellect, posits experience. Consciousness is nothing but this experience. The whole aim of the *Wissenschaftslehre* therefore is to identify the first principle of the Science of Knowledge with the unity of subject and object in consciousness (Pippin, 1988:79). The I, Fichte says, "is a necessary identity of subject and object: a subject-object; and is so absolutely, without further mediation" (Fichte, 1970:98). According to Fichte, the first principle, or the I is an Act (Fichte, 1970:93-94). It expresses what Fichte believes to be the supreme act of the mind in which the I is simultaneously subject and object. As we have seen, Fichte argues that every consciousness involves an awareness of the I. This awareness can be discovered by a philosophical analysis of consciousness. To show this Fichte considers the law of identity, A=A, as an item of knowledge "accepted by everyone," the general character of which is defined by Fichte as follows.

[I]f anyone were to demand a proof of this proposition [A is A], we should certainly not embark on anything of the kind, but we should insist that it is ***absolutely*** certain, that is, ***without any other ground:*** and in so saying – doubtless with general approval- we should be ascribing to ourselves the power of asserting something absolutely (Fichte, 1970:94).

The 'A is A' is a universally accepted affirmative judgment. The general character of it is its self-certainty; that is to say, the identity of A with itself is asserted, or "posited," absolutely without any other ground. With the analysis of this universally affirmative judgment Fichte aims at showing the fundamental principle of all consciousness: the I originally posit its own being (Taber, 1984:451). The I's own positing of itself, Fichte says, its own pure

activity (Fichte, 1970:97). By his discussion of the law of identity Fichte claims that all affirmative judgments imply the self-positing of the I.

The thought that every act of judgment involves the assertion of the I is not original to Fichte. In his deduction of the categories from the transcendental unity of apperception Kant stated the same thought. But Kant, as Fichte says, was not the first who stated the truth of this thought. Before Kant, Fichte says, Descartes stated the same thought with his proposition "cogito, ergo sum." According to Fichte, the "cogito, ergo sum" is not taken into account as a "merely the minor premise and conclusion of a syllogism", but as "an immediate datum of consciousness" (Fichte, 1970:100). Though there seems to be a continuity between Cartesian project and Fichte's project in the *Wissenschaftslehre* in basing philosophy on self-evidence of cogito, or that of self-consciousness, there is a crucial difference between them concerning the status of self-consciousness. While in the Cartesian project self-consciousness is taken as a fact and comprehended as an accident of some substance, in the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* self-consciousness is thought as an activity, in Fichte's own words, the self-positing of the I.

At this point it is helpful to clarify the essential meaning of Fichte's claim that all affirmative judgment implies the self-positing of the I. By this claim Fichte means that the category of reality is given by this self-affirmation of the I. Since reality of things is given in self-affirmation of the I, self-consciousness must be our starting point. But in consciousness judgment has not only an affirmative aspect but also a negative aspect. The negative aspect of consciousness is revealed by judgments such as '~A is not equal to A.' This leads us to introduce a new aspect of Fichte's first principle: in order to be the I there must be Non-I. [4]

In summarizing Fichte's consideration of the law of identity and that of its variations, we should point out two important implications: (1) when the I forms a concept of itself, the I originally posits its own being. This is primary act of the I. (2) The primary act of the I necessitates a second act: "To the I a Non-I is absolutely opposed" (Fichte, 1970:102-105).[5] By these two implications Fichte only has shown that consciousness involves both affirmation and negation. It is clear that (1) and (2) are in opposition to each other. Fichte claims, on the one hand, that in consciousness there is an identity because the I posits itself, 'I am I.' On the other hand, he says that in consciousness, there is Non-I which is absolutely opposed to.

3. The Doctrine of the Check

Now the problem for Fichte is to show how the I and the Non-I are to be harmonized in the unity of consciousness. In his attempt to reconcile the I

[4] Fichte's claim depends upon the view that in consciousness all judgments are at once inclusive and exclusive: to declare that a thing is X is to declare that it is not Y, Z, K,…T, R… . To say that the thing before me is not computer is exclude one possibility but it leaves many others open. The thing before me may be a book, or be a pencil, be a cup, or be a table etc. But to say that it is red and long thing is to destroy many possibilities. This effectiveness of affirmation judgments leads Fichte to assert that the fundamental characteristic of thought is affirmation, not negation.

[5] While (1) refers to the affirmative character of consciousness, (2) refers to negative character of consciousness.

and the Non-I, Fichte finds another opposition which he introduces by the following proposition:

The I posits itself as determined by the Non-I (Fichte, 1970:135).

This proposition is problematic because it seems to involve both activity and passivity of the I at the same time. When we say that the I ***posits itself*** we refer to activity of the I. But when we say that the I posits itself as ***determined by the Non-I*** we refer to passivity of the I. In his reconciling these two I(s) Fichte seems not only to fail but also to meet a new kind of opposition by representing both the I as active and the I as passive.

Fichte tries to solve this problem by his doctrine of ***check.*** To see how the term ***check*** is actually employed in the ***Wissenschaftslehre***, let me quote Fichte's treatment of ***check***. He says

[A]ll that is required, if I may so put it, is the presence of a check on the self, that is, for some reason that lies merely outside the self activity, the subjective must be extendable no further. Such an impossibility of further would then delimit…it would not set bounds to the activity of the self, but would give it the task of setting bounds to itself. But all delimitation occurs trough an opposite, hence the self simply to do justice to this task, would have to oppose something objective to the subjective that calls for limitation, and then synthetically them both…. It will at once be apparent that this mode of explanation is a realistic one…for it presupposes neither a not-self present apart from the self, nor even a determination present within the self, but merely the requirement for a determination to be undertaken within it by the self as such, or the ***mere determinability of the self*** (Fichte, 1970:190-191).

This passage gives us two roles of check in Fichte's philosophy –check as a limitation and check as a stimulus. We must take the ***check*** as a limitation because ***check*** refers to nothing but to the activity of the I which is unable to extend further. But this limitation is not an external limitation. Rather, it is a limitation which is posited by the I itself. The role of check as a limitation has a crucial implication concerning the meaning of freedom in the ***Wissenschaftslehre.*** This is because, when Fichte says that the I simply posits itself, he does not mean that the I's freedom is absolute and unlimited. The I can posit itself insofar as it posits itself as limited and divided against itself. So, in the ***Wissenschaftslehre***, only limited freedom of the I is possible when it posits itself.

The other role Fichte ascribes to ***check*** is the role of stimulus. We must take the ***check*** as a stimulus because it is the possibility of the further activity of the I. Fichte explains this role more clearly when he says,

The check …occurs to the self insofar as it is active, and is thus only a check insofar as there is activity in the self. Its possibility is conditional upon the self's activity; no activity of the self, no check. Conversely, the activity of the self's own self- determining would be conditioned by the check: no check, no self-determination. Moreover, no self-determination, no objective, etc. (Fichte, 1970:191).

The moral of the story is that the Non-I is recognized by the I as its own product. Thus Fichte overcomes the difficulty of reconciling the I and Non-I by stating the Non-I as a product of the self-determination of the I itself. To

state his doctrine of check in a sound way Fichte goes on with the identification of check with the activity of the I (Wood, 2000). According to him, there is two fold activity of the I –one centrifugal or outward-going and the other centripetal. Such a twofold activity can be stated as follows: the I's infinite outward-going activity receives a check and as a result of this check the self is driven back upon itself. In the theoretical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* however, Fichte's justification of his argument is unsatisfactory due to his failure to explain why the I strive to go outward and why it is driven back upon itself. In the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* the opposition between the I and the Non-I appears as an opposition between the I as intelligence (the finite I) and the I as absolute (the infinite I) (Fichte, 1970:220). Fichte's aim in this practical part is to show that these two are but one.

4. The Ideal Unity of the Finite and Infinite I

In order to show the unity of the finite I and the infinite I Fichte focuses upon the concept of 'the I as Idea' (Fichte, 1970:238).[6] He says that there are two kinds of the I which must be carefully distinguished from each other -the I as intellectual intuition, from which the *Wissenschaftslehre* starts, and the I as Idea which philosophy ends (Fichte, 1970:83). The I as intellectual intuition is only for the philosopher, while the I as Idea is present for the I itself, which the philosopher studies. The I as Idea (hereafter, the Ideal I) is

> the rational being, partly insofar as it has exhibited universal reason perfectly within itself, is indeed rational throughout, and nothing else but rational: and has thus also ceased to be an individual, which it was through sensory restriction alone; partly insofar as it has also fully realized reason outside it in the world, which thus equally continuous to be founded in this Idea. The world in this Idea remains a world in general, a substrate governed by these particular mechanical and organic laws: yet these laws are adapted throughout to present the ultimate aim of reason…it cannot be determinately conceived, and will never be actualized, for *we are merely to approximate ourselves to this Idea* ad infinitum (Fichte, 1970:83-84, italics added).

The Ideal I is rational and an infinite being. Now the problem for Fichte is to explain how to reconcile the infinite I and the finite I in the unity of the I. Since the Ideal I is an infinite being, Fichte says, it can never be realized by any finite being, or by any system of finite beings. "The highest unity" we shall find in the *Wissenschaftslehre* cannot be understood "as something that *exists,* but as something that we *ought* to, and cannot, achieve" (Fichte, 1970:102). Though Fichte believes that the Ideal I can never be realized, he insists on the possibility of progress; that is to say, we can approximate to the Ideal I, even though we can never reach it.

Conclusion

Reason, Fichte says, is practical. It is practical in the sense that it strives to the ideal unity of the I (Fichte, 1970:233). For him, the ideal unity of the I is the goal and this goal can be achieved on the practical ground. This throws some light upon why Fichte sees the *Wissenschaftslehre* a moral project. Regarding his discussion of the concept of Ideal it is important to remark that

[6] According to Fichte, the I is infinite in that it strives to be infinite, that it sets up for itself an infinite ideal.

the concept of Ideal exhibits the teleological aspect of his philosophy. In the teleological framework of the *Wissenschaftslehre,* the ought-to-be is taken as the basis of and explanation of all reality, that is to say that *Is* is explained on the ground of O*ught.* This leads us to conclude that, for Fichte, the world in which we inhabit *is* because the Idea of the I *is*. Thanks to the creative power of the Idea of the I, this world comes into being. Since the ideal unity of the I is the goal which can be achieved (though in the sense of approximation), the moral duty of any rational human being is forgetting of her/his personal interests and is focusing on the pursuit of the great Ideal, the ideal perfection of the I. But this leads such a person to annihilate her/his individuality for the sake of the Ideal, which can only be approximately achieved.

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