

Research on Some Criticisms of Fichte's Intellectualism Made by Schelling in Classical German Philosophy

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Keywords: Intellectualism; Absolute Self; Not-Self; Subject-Object; Absolute Identity

Abstract: With in the comprehensive framework of German Idealism, Fichte and Schelling emerge as two pivotal figures whose contributions cannot be overlooked. Fichte, inheriting and subsequently transforming the essence of Kant's thought, laid the groundwork for Schelling, who further advanced the philosophical discourse. Both are regarded as crucial links in the intellectual progression from Kant to Hegel. The inquiry into the organic connection between their philosophical ideas and Schelling's response to Fichte's thought is a subject of profound interest. Through a meticulous comparative study, utilizing primary texts and secondary literature, this essay endeavors to elucidate the nature of their philosophical relationship. It is established that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, or theory of knowledge, eschews Kantian dualism, positing the "absolute ego" as the supreme philosophical principle from which all else is derived. However, this system is not without its challenges, particularly those inherent to subjective idealism, such as the issues of reality and the contradiction between the self and the non-self. Schelling, while inheriting Fichte's methodological approach of deriving a system from a supreme principle, offers a more critical perspective. He contends that Fichte's "absolute ego" is not truly absolute but is instead limited; furthermore, Fichte's denial of the objective content of empirical knowledge renders his system incapable of providing an ultimate explanation of knowledge or fulfilling the dual tasks of the "absolute." Schelling proposes an alternative path, one that seeks to realize self-awareness and ascend to absolute identity through the distinct approaches of *Naturphilosophie* (philosophy of nature) and transcendental philosophy. In this schema, the subject and object are considered absolutely identical throughout the process. This is an achievement that Fichte's system is unable to accomplish. Finally, the essay delves into the inherent limitations present in Schelling's critique of Fichte, including the irrational chasm of "absolute identity" and the persistent challenges of reconciling contradictions.

1. Fichte's system of knowledge

Before delving into Fichte's Science of Knowledge, the author believes it is essential to first provide a brief review of Kant's philosophical ideas. Kant, through his critique of the earlier philosophical systems of Wolff and Hume, initiated a "Copernican revolution" in the construction of knowledge. He established a philosophical system that begins with the "transcendental apperception of self-consciousness." From this transcendental self, he derived a priori synthetic judgments from

the manifold given by intuition. In this context, it becomes evident that Fichte's system of Science of Knowledge closely follows Kant's, yet diverges in certain aspects. Fichte maintained that "the Science of Knowledge is in complete agreement with Kant's doctrine; it is nothing other than the thoroughly understood Kantian doctrine." This illustrates that Fichte's system is fundamentally built upon Kant's philosophical foundation. However, Fichte did not entirely replicate Kant; he was dissatisfied with Kant's distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves. Fichte argued that Kant's distinction represented an incomplete dualism, criticizing Kant for positing things-in-themselves and the transcendental self as the sources of our phenomena and knowledge. According to Fichte, this led Kant's epistemology into a contradiction, which Fichte described as a bizarre and grotesque combination of "the ugliest dogmatism" and "the most resolute idealism."

In his transformation of Kant's epistemological system, Fichte gradually constructed his own epistemological framework, steering towards a form of self-centered monism. Unlike Kant, who established indirect unity through phenomena, Fichte placed the self and the not-self in a direct relationship. He extended Descartes' principle of deducing the edifice of human knowledge from the highest principle, writing: "The self is the source of all reality, and it is only through the self, and in conjunction with the self, that the concept of reality can be derived." Fichte considered the self as an absolute entity, existing in and for itself, independent of all other factors. The "absolute self" thus became the highest principle of his entire epistemology, eliminating the need for the noumenon. It serves as the ultimate foundation for explaining any knowledge, the basis for the reality and transcendental source of all knowledge and experience. Through the postulation of the "absolute self," Fichte sought this highest first principle via reflection and abstraction, resulting in the three renowned principles of his epistemology: "The self posits itself" ($A=A$), "The self posits the not-self" ($\text{non-}A \neq A$), and "The self within itself posits a divisible not-self against a divisible self." Here, I shall refrain from elaborating on their specific meanings. Through these three principles, Fichte also posited the finite self and the not-self within the "absolute self" in a dialectical opposition. The self is the only true reality, self-determined and independent. Through its pure positing, the self establishes the finite self and the not-self. Fichte termed the self that limits the not-self as the "practical self" and the self that is limited by the not-self as the "theoretical self." The not-self, as the antithesis of the self, acts as the intrinsic motive force for the self's realization and development. On the basis of the absolute self, the "original act" establishes the unity of subject and object, affirming the unity of the self and the not-self in the process of unifying subject and object, thereby discarding Kant's dualism in favor of monism, and establishing the highest principle of epistemology.

2. Problems with Fichte's system of knowledge

In Fichte's philosophy, the entire content of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is constructed and deduced from an "absolute ego." He rejects any objective content derived from the empirical material of the external world, viewing everything as ultimately grounded in the "absolute ego." However, the question of the reality of the "absolute ego" remains unanswered by Fichte, who treats it as a necessary element within the subjective domain. Although this "ego" is not the self of any individual but rather a "pure ego," the concept of the self still carries a strong subjective hue, overly emphasizing the role of the "absolute ego" as a subject. As the philosopher Hegel, who succeeded Fichte, noted, "In Fichte's system, identity only establishes a subjective subject-object." Fichte was unable to address the issue of reality [2]. Another problem concerns how to overcome the inherent contradictions within cognition itself. According to Fichte, the "absolute ego" posits both the self and the non-self, but the

very positing of the self and the non-self constitutes a mutually antagonistic existence. Without the self, there can be no non-self, for the self posits the non-self; yet, the existence of the non-self impedes the self from fully realizing itself. Thus, there exists a direct and reciprocal relationship between the self and the non-self, which is fundamentally irreconcilable. The contradiction between the self and the non-self is an inherent flaw within Fichte's entire system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The author also contends that Fichte's epistemological framework, to some extent, embodies a form of dogmatism. A characteristic of dogmatism lies in asserting that one's theory possesses an ultimate quality. Fichte states: "We must ascertain the absolute first and unconditional principle of all human knowledge; if it is truly the absolute first principle, it is unprovable, or in other words, it is indefinable [3]." Although he consistently emphasizes that his system opposes dogmatism, it is evident that Fichte regards the "absolute self" as an ultimate foundation and thus an object beyond further critique, establishing a monism of the "absolute self." Therefore, in some respects, it indeed bears the hue of dogmatism.

The discussion in this section regarding certain issues within Fichte's epistemological system also sets the stage for Schelling's later reform of the epistemological framework, profoundly influencing the subsequent thoughts of Schelling, Hegel, and others.

3. Schelling's Critique of Fichte's Response to the System of knowledge

After Fichte's system of *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schelling did not wholly repudiate the structure Fichte had constructed. Rather, Schelling absorbed its spiritual essence, endorsing Fichte's assertion that philosophy, inherited from Descartes, should be a scientific system derived from the highest principle of unity according to logical necessity. However, Schelling was predominantly critical of Fichte's system, addressing its deficiencies and, in the process of critiquing Fichte, developing his own system of knowledge.

Primarily, Schelling targeted the subjective bias in Fichte's epistemology, arguing that it lacked a solid objective foundation. Since we cannot detach ourselves from the objective natural world beyond the "absolute self," Schelling advocated for the existence of objectivity, emphasizing the unity of subject and object. He asserted, "This higher entity can neither be solely the subject nor the object, nor can it be both simultaneously; it can only be absolute identity [4]." Thus, Schelling's system of knowledge negated Fichte's core principle of the "absolute self" as the highest principle, instead positing "absolute identity" as his foundational concept.

Secondly, Fichte encountered a formidable challenge in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, namely the problem of self-contradiction in knowledge. Schelling argued that Fichte's distinction between the self and the not-self was inherently contradictory and fundamentally flawed. He contended that the self, as such, could not exist in an unconscious state; if it were unconscious, it could not be the self. Moreover, without the self, there is no not-self, and without the not-self, there is no self. Thus, the "absolute self" is not absolute. While Fichte claimed that the self could provide the ultimate explanation of knowledge, Schelling criticized this view, asserting that knowledge should exist independently of our subjective perceptions and that its objects are objective. Consequently, the self cannot offer the ultimate explanation. Schelling elevated the not-self to a level of reality equal to the self, arguing that the highest principle of philosophy should not be the "absolute self," but rather an "absolute" that is neither self nor not-self. In this critique, Schelling vehemently opposed Fichte's elevation of the "absolute self" as the supreme principle of philosophy. Furthermore, within Fichte's epistemological framework, the self's establishment was an expression of identity without differentiation, which could only be proven through the self's positing of a not-self. Schelling, however, unified identity and differentiation within "self-consciousness," positing that the statement "I = I" represented the self viewing itself as an object, thus embodying identity. Simultaneously, the

act of uttering this statement introduced a differentiation between the "I" as the subject and the "I" as the object [5]. This unity of identity and differentiation under the "self" marked the point where Schelling and Fichte's epistemological paths diverged. Engels once remarked, "One thing is certain: it was Hegel who made Schelling aware of how far he had unconsciously diverged from Fichte." Schelling's ultimate principle of philosophy was the "absolute," referring to an absolute identity that transcends any finite, conditional opposition.

To further expound upon the philosophical principle of "absolute identity," Schelling continues his critique of Fichte, who denies the objective reality of experiential knowledge of the external world. Schelling presents his own viewpoint, asserting that "all knowledge is based on the concordance of objective and subjective elements." He argues that "there is neither a primary nor a secondary element; both exist simultaneously and are essentially one." Here, the subjective and objective are unified, and the relationship between the object of knowledge and its representation forms a system where it is impossible to distinguish which is primary or secondary. When elucidating this "absolute identity," Schelling divides it into two approaches: if objectivity is considered primary, one of philosophy's tasks is to "explain how representations can absolutely conform to objects that exist independently of them," thus deriving the subjective from the objective. Conversely, if subjectivity is deemed primary, another philosophical task is to explain "how an objective entity can become variable due to something merely conceived by thought, making the objective and the conceived fully correspond." This task generates the objective from the subjective. These two philosophical tasks form the foundation of Schelling's system of knowledge, which he believes Fichte's epistemology cannot address. Fichte's exploration remains within the subjective domain, denying the existence of experiential knowledge, and his "absolute ego" presupposes a non-ego, making it not entirely absolute, but limited and conditional. Schelling's dialectical movement of the "absolute" revolves around these two philosophical tasks [6]. The "absolute," as the origin of both nature and spirit, is undifferentiated and unconditional. Within the "absolute," there exists a primordial movement of spiritual substance that drives the ascent from an unconscious state to self-consciousness, and from self-consciousness to absolute identity. Schelling designates the former as the content of "philosophy of nature," which derives the subjective from the objective, and the latter as the content of "transcendental philosophy," which derives the objective from the subjective. Through Schelling's two tasks of the "absolute," namely natural philosophy and transcendental philosophy, one can discern the inherent unity of the subjective and objective. In transcendental philosophy, Schelling further distinguishes between theoretical philosophy, which addresses why representations align with objective things, and practical philosophy, which examines how ideas influence objects. The "absolute" manifests as self-consciousness in nature, and in transcendental philosophy, it continuously recognizes itself through self-consciousness, thus achieving the transition from subjective to objective and vice versa. These two tasks operate under a common principle and foundation, overcoming the flaw in Fichte's purely subjective identity [7].

Finally, let us briefly discuss the limitations inherent in Schelling's response and critique of Fichte. There are roughly two or three key issues regarding these limitations. Firstly, within Schelling's construction of the "absolute identity," there exists an insurmountable problem of irrational factors. This "absolute identity" cannot be comprehended either through sensory intuition or through intellect alone. Schelling attributes the understanding of this concept to the intellectual intuition of a select few, which marks a significant limitation in his critique of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, as it does not achieve a complete breakthrough. Secondly, another issue, as I see it, concerns the process of primal movement he proposes [8]. In this process, the "absolute identity" evolves from unconsciousness to self-consciousness and finally to absolute identity, propelled by a fundamental duality. This is essentially a creative activity of the "cosmic spirit." Within this primal opposition, the "absolute identity" transitions from a spiritual entity and eventually returns to this spiritual entity, serving as

both the starting and ending point. This process of primal opposition involves a reconciliatory transformation rather than a struggle between opposing forces [9].

4. Conclusion

In retrospect, this article reveals that through the study of the epistemological systems of Fichte and Schelling, it has been discovered that, in the first part, Fichte's epistemology discards Kant's dualism and constructs its epistemological framework from the standpoint of the "absolute self." In the second part, the article briefly enumerates the problems within Fichte's epistemological system, including the issue of the objective reality of the "absolute self" and the inherent contradictions within knowledge itself, and to a certain degree, the tendency towards dogmatism. The third part, which is the focal point of the article, discusses Schelling's response to the problems identified in Fichte's epistemology, which is primarily critical, and also elucidates the limitations of the critique. Schelling inherited Fichte's approach of probing the logical structure of knowledge from a supreme principle, transforming the "absolute self" into the "absolute identity." He criticized Fichte's principle of the "absolute self" as not being truly absolute, asserting that the self is still constrained. Additionally, Schelling reproached Fichte for neglecting the content of empirical knowledge, leading to a purely subjective perspective of the unity of subject and object. Schelling asserted that knowledge exists independently of our subjectivity and posits a dual philosophical route of unity: one through natural philosophy and the other through transcendental philosophy [10]. These two approaches represent distinct tasks, which Fichte could not resolve, as he was an unabashed subjective idealist. Schelling's approach circumvented the contradictions of subjective idealism encountered by Fichte. Moreover, the author acknowledges that the understanding of the philosophical thoughts of both Fichte and Schelling may not be exhaustive and may also be somewhat biased, which will constitute a significant direction for further refinement in subsequent research.

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