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## Giving Fichte a Chance: A Žižekian Defense of the I

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### Introduction

A recent essay by Slavoj Žižek fills a lack in his oeuvre concerning his Lacanian reading of the principal German Idealists, a lack discernable since the 1990s produced his foundational writings on Kant, Schelling and Hegel. Very little was said then or since on the obviously missing fourth Idealist. With the publication of “Fichte’s Laughter,” however, Žižek at last brings the chain Kant-Fichte-Schelling-Hegel to its completion with its philosophically rigorous and spirited defense of Kant’s most immediate successor: Johann Gottlieb Fichte. This essay constitutes his first extended analysis of the ‘philosopher of the pure I’ and should be regarded as a welcomed addition to Žižek’s body of work on late-modern German philosophy as well as a major contribution to Fichtean literature itself.

Since the Fichtean subject is often taken to be the overblown Ego at the absolute origin of all reality, in today’s climate of questioning all claims to universality this largely results in a dismissal of his work: either post-1799 Fichte is overshadowed by Hegel’s ‘problematic’ completion of the trans-subjective Absolute so that Fichte is to be accorded only precursory status with respect to the latter or else the self-positing absolute I

theorized during his Jena period is viewed as representing a thinking fatally caught up in the madness of solipsism. However, in contrast to both these tendencies Žižek regards Fichte as having made important contributions to our modern notion of subjectivity. To appreciate this, one must exert considerable effort and rigorously work through the logical structure of Fichte's subject in detailed fashion. But the prescribed length of this paper necessitates that any such demonstration be schematic in nature. So to aid in this effort, we propose to examine Fichte – via Žižek – by additionally utilizing a framework informed by Lacan's formulae of sexuation whose efficient and compressed logical form seems well suited to our purposes: it at once discloses itself as the most expedient way to achieve a general understanding of Fichte's difficult notion of subjectivity, while simultaneously accounting for many of its particular components and their relations when its logical form is unpacked.

We will proceed as follows. After briefly examining how Fichte himself conceives his I with respect to the Kantian transcendental subject, we will render into Fichtean terminology Lacan's 'feminine' and 'masculine' formulae. This formulation will not only at once distinguish Fichte's subject from Kant's, but will also underscore Fichte's overall efforts to clarify the intricate and tortuous logic of subjectivity he ultimately struggles against as attested to by the very split between his Jena and Berlin periods. But more importantly, this will also provide a solid foundation from which to systematically proceed through the propositional stages of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* which begin with absolute self-positing and end with the mutual limitation between the subject and the object. As our concern is primarily with this trajectory, the focus will largely be on the logic of his Jena period, though this will itself be suggestive of what later compelled Fichte to refocus his project. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows us to underscore an element Žižek deems central to these efforts: Fichte's doctrine of the *Anstoß*. We will argue along with Žižek that this ambiguous object primordially disturbs the self-identity of the I such that its immanent antagonism can only be resolved through the I's self-positing of the external mutual limitation between the finite I and the Not-I. By following this path, we will also define some closely related concepts to *Anstoß* such as *Aufforderung*, *Tathandlung* and intellectual intuition, as well as endeavor to clarify key conceptual oppositions such as immanence/ transcendence and finitude/ infinitude. There will also be opportunities to explain major differences between Fichte and Kant, including the necessity of the former to dispense with the Thing-in-itself, as well as opportunities to re-conceptualize some prevailing interpretations of Fichte. By proceeding in this manner, with an initial focus on

the uncanny contingency at the very core of subjectivity and proceeding 'outward' to account for Fichte's overall ontological attitude, we can begin to understand how the 'Fichtean self is a profoundly divided self' (Breazeale 1995: 100) and why Žižek thus considers Fichte's I relevant to our modern notion of subjectivity.

## Fichte's I and *Anstoß*

Most accounts have it that Fichte considered his own project as largely remaining faithful to Kant<sup>1</sup>, at least up until Kant's 1799 *Erklärung* denouncing Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, to which the latter responded by calling the former a '*Dreiviertelskopf*' in a letter to Reinhold. (Beiser 654n.23) Nevertheless, that Fichte views his work as the logical extension of Kantian philosophy can be seen in the very core of his *Wissenschaftslehre* and its concern with establishing the notion of an Absolute I, for he clearly tells us during his discussion of the Kantian I of pure apperception that we 'therefore find quite definitely in Kant the concept of the *pure* self, exactly as it is framed in the Science of knowledge.' (I, 476)<sup>2</sup> Fichte's I is thus the Kantian I, but with a crucial modification. While for Kant, 'all consciousness is merely conditioned by self-consciousness' so that 'its content can be founded upon something outside self-consciousness,' Fichte seeks to remove any possibility of a ground of determination *external* to self-consciousness. (I, 477) In a word, Fichte's urgent mission is to establish a system which does not (even surreptitiously) rely on a Thing-in-itself, a system which he is 'very well aware that *Kant* by no means *established*,' but nevertheless insists 'with equal certainty that *Kant envisaged* such a system.' (I, 478)

We can quite readily perceive this difference between Kant and Fichte at the topological level by utilizing Lacan's formulae of sexuation.<sup>3</sup> Recall that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant tells us: 'Through the I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever.' (A346/B404) This means that consciousness of self is possible only insofar as the I is out of reach to itself *qua* the real kernel of its being. Kantian subjectivity thus follows the two Lacanian masculine formulae, since for Kant 'All is I' and this implies the existence of an exception 'There is at least one X which is not I.' This means that we cannot acquire consciousness of ourselves in our capacity of the 'Thing

which thinks' and *for this very reason* this Thing acts as a constitutive exception for a purely logical I which must be capable of accompanying all other representations.<sup>4</sup> For Kant, the lack of full access to our self is what guarantees consciousness. This is precisely what Fichte denies and his own version of subjectivity follows the two Lacanian feminine formulae. For Fichte 'non-All is I' and this implies a lack of an exception 'There is nothing which is not I.' That is, there is no-thing which is exempted from the positing function of the I and this lack of exception establishes a universal I quite unlike the universal that Kant establishes with the inaccessible Thing-in-itself.<sup>5</sup> Already we can see how the 'still widespread'<sup>6</sup> charge of Fichtean absolute idealism (that because Fichte does away with the Thing-in-itself, he universalizes the subject such that 'All is I') misses the mark, since it is only the presupposed existence of the Thing-in-itself which guarantees the I's consciousness of it All. Rather, Fichte's elimination of this exceptional point is much more troubling as it cuts from within the I.

To see this, one must note how Fichte does not simply cease to consider the Thing-in-itself altogether, but rather understands how 'the finite spirit must necessarily posit something absolute outside itself (a thing-in-itself), and yet must recognize, from the other side, that the latter exists only *for it* (as a necessary noumenon).' Here 'is that circle which it is able to extend into infinity, but can never escape.' (I, 281) What is usually overlooked is the converse to the usual interpretation of this famous passage which reads it as yet another formulation of the triumphant conclusion that even the Thing-in-itself falls within the purview of the Fichtean I: the necessity of such positing by the I acts as an inherent obstacle to the I, cutting it from within, so that 'if ever a difference was to enter the self, there must already have been a difference originally in the self as such.' (I, 272)

The recognition of this primordial difference inherent to the I is what leads Žižek to claim that 'Fichte was the first philosopher to focus on the uncanny contingency in the very heart of subjectivity' and to further argue that this involves Fichte's *Anstoß*, an element 'formally homologous to the Lacanian *objet a*.' (Žižek 2009: 142, 146) Indeed, Fichte's presentation is strikingly similar to Lacan's infamous *object a* when he writes that it is not necessary to presuppose the actual presence in the self of this element, for 'all that is required – if I may so put it – is the presence of a check [*Anstoß*] in the self.' (I, 210) Consistent with our analysis above that Fichte's I lacks points exceptional to it, he further writes 'that this mode of explanation...presupposes neither a not-self [Not-I] present apart from the self, nor even a determination present within the self, but...the mere determinability of the self.' That is, the *Anstoß* is not an external obstacle to the I, nor a

determinate object within the I, but rather something that ‘would give it the task of setting bounds to itself.’ (I, 210-1) This latter point suggests that the *Anstoß* exceeds its function of obstacle in the sense of something that provokes further action of self-limitation. This is nicely captured in the very German term itself whose numerous overlapping meanings Fichte makes good use of in his text. On the one hand, it conveys ‘obstacle’ and ‘hindrance,’ but on the other, ‘impulse,’ ‘impetus’ or ‘stimulus,’ so the English translation of ‘check’ only captures at best half of this term’s ambiguous meaning. (Breazeale 1995: 88)

We shall return to the *Anstoß* below to discuss the role this primordial impulse plays in setting into motion the gradual self-limitation and self-determination of the I, but two other points should be addressed. First, as the foregoing has endeavored to make clear, in no way should the *Anstoß* be considered Fichte’s ‘covert reintroduction of the thing-in-itself’ as per Hegel’s criticism or modifications made thereof by some interpreters like Beiser. (Beiser 316) Second, although Fichte uses the term *Anstoß* much less frequently in his later Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, preferring there the term *Aufforderung* to index an ‘immediate awareness’ or ‘consciousness’ of being *externally summoned* to exercise one’s freedom – more specifically, to exercise it through voluntarily *limiting* it, we should not consider this a lapse on Fichte’s part to now think an element wholly external to the I. (Breazeale 1995: 97) Rather, ‘the doctrine of *Aufforderung* by no means mitigates but merely reinforces the most important result of...the doctrine of the *Anstoß* as presented in the *Grundlage*: viz., the necessary finitude of all subjectivity and the unavoidable element of contingency – “facticity,” if you will – at the heart of the Fichtean self.’ (*ibid* 98) As Žižek suggests, ‘perhaps this intersubjective *Aufforderung* is not merely the secondary specification of the *Anstoß*, but its exemplary original case.’ (Žižek 2009: 142)

## Fichte’s Propositional Stages

An overall understanding of Fichtean subjectivity could not be reached without attempting to work through the three propositions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In this section, we begin with the first proposition of pure self-positing, proceed through the second involving a posited absolute opposition and then discuss the key notions of immanence, transcendence, limitation, finitude and infinity to conclude with the third proposition resulting in a posited external mutual limitation between the finite I and the Not-I, in both its theoretical and practical forms.

We defined Fichte's Absolute I above as 'non-All' which implies how 'There is nothing which is not I.' This means that what the I is not is thus absolutely nothing to the I and accordingly Fichte opens his First Introduction of the *Wissenschaftslehre* urging the non-philosopher to turn his attention away from all surrounding things toward his inner life, for '[o]ur concern is not with anything that lies outside you, but only with yourself.' (I, 422) For the philosopher, his counsel is the same although it now comes by way of the First, Absolutely Unconditioned Principle: 'The I is posited absolutely.' (I, 96) This first proposition more famously and simply reads as 'I am I' or 'I = I.' (I, 94) Because this 'can be neither *proved* nor *defined*' (I, 91), this proposition must be rather dogmatically set forth as the absolute starting point of philosophy, much like how mathematics is founded by axiomatic prescription. This also means that it involves something quite unimaginable, as it 'is intended to express that Act [*Tathandlung*] which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.' (I, 91) With this *Tathandlung*, we do not have an act or deed that is considered done, but 'rather, it refers to the very *doing of* the "deed."' (Wilhelm 36) This *Tathandlung* is an act of undifferentiated or absolute self-positing through which the I is nothing more than a pure substanceless becoming, for 'the self-positing self and the existing self are perfectly identical, one and the same...Hence *I am absolutely what I am.*' (I, 98) Here, Fichte earns his title as *the* philosopher of positing reflection, for we have a full coincidence of the posited with the positing, where the 'I am' is identical to the pure processuality of this *Tathandlung*. This original unity of subject and object is Fichte's precise definition of intellectual intuition where being and doing completely coincide. This of course greatly conflicts with Kant's first *Critique* which restricts the notion of intellectual intuition to the divine mind. In Kant's own words, '[t]he consciousness of self (apperception) is the simple representation of the "I," and if all that is manifold in the subject were given by the *activity of the self*, the inner intuition would be intellectual' which is a mode of intuition that 'seems to belong solely to the primordial being, and can never be ascribed to a dependent being.' (B68, B72) But we need to be mindful how Fichte does not thereby assert the possibility of constituting it All as opposed to Kant's presumably more modest approach. Rather, for Fichte it is precisely because there are no exceptional points external to the I that the I thereby stumbles upon a limit inherent to itself.

Understanding this moves us immediately and imperceptibly onto Fichte's second propositional stage. That is, if the mystical flow of this *Tathandlung* cannot be empirically experienced, if intellectual intuition is forever inaccessible to consciousness, then pure

self-positing *as such* poses an inherent limit to the I's self-positing. We can readily see this by modifying Fichte's feminine formulae to account for the I's positing of its own presuppositions: 'Non-all presuppositions are posited by the I' implies 'Nothing is presupposed which is not posited by the I.' In other words, that which the I does not posit can obviously be no presupposition to it, yet this 'presupposed nothing' of the I can only refer to this *Tathandlung* itself. This means that what the positing reflection of the Absolute I overlooks is how the *positing activity itself* always lies outside its grasp. Wilhelm gets close to understanding this when he writes how the 'effort to grasp oneself as pure or undifferentiated "activity"...ends in failure, and in this failure the "I" encounters a limit. But this limit is not an "other," outside of the activity – it is simply the breakdown of activity. Where "I" was expected, there is suddenly a loss. But a loss is an encounter.' (Wilhelm 36) This is how the absolutely 'nothing' of what the I is not nevertheless takes on a certain 'material weight' and disturbs the I from within. But we must be careful not to move too fast to conclude that the I thereby encounters the Not-I *qua* active objective reality, as this occurs only in the third proposition.

Instead, what we have in this second stage is a purely formal conversion in which, here following Žižek's terminological convention,<sup>8</sup> 'the rise of non-I out of this pure flow is not (yet) a delimitation of the I...*Both I and non-I are unlimited, absolute.*' (Žižek 2009: 163) We will examine the passage of the non-I to the Not-I which subsequently opposes itself to the finite I below when we take up the third proposition. Here, we turn to Fichte's comparably brief discussion of his second principle which proposes that there 'is a not-self [non-I] opposed absolutely to the self.' (I, 104) This is Fichte's formal presentation of how the I must be inherently limited, the very result discussed above in various ways but now approached anew. Fichte begins by likening the second proposition to the first as no proof or derivation is possible in either case. Thus, we are compelled to 'proceed from a fact of empirical consciousness' (I, 101) to consider how 'there is thus an opposition included among the acts of the self' (I, 102) to conclude how '[o]pposition in general is posited absolutely by the self.' (I, 103) Fichte then distinguishes *Tathandlung* in its two aspects, form and matter (or content), in order to proceed to its outcome *qua* absolute opposition.

In order to understand these difficult latter steps, Žižek suggests we call to mind Kant's discussion in the first *Critique* of the infinite judgment<sup>9</sup> whereby a non-predicate is affirmed to the subject, in contrast to a negative judgment whereby a predicate is denied to the subject. Accordingly, the judgment 'he is inhuman' is not equivalent to claiming that 'he is not human.' The latter merely externalizes the subject with respect to humanity, judging

him either animal or divine. But with the former, Kant opens up a third domain where a monstrous 'inhuman' indexes an inherent and terrifying excess to 'being-human' and for Žižek, the Fichtean non-I should be conceived in the same way, for it

'is not a negation of the predicate, but an affirmation of a non-predicate: it is not "this is not a Self," but rather "this *is* a non-Self [non-I]," which is why one should translate it into English more often as "non-Self [non-I]" rather than "not-Self [Not-I]." (More precisely: the moment we pass to Fichte's third proposition – the mutual delimitation/determination of Self and non-Self, the non-Self effectively turns into a *not*-Self, something).' (Žižek 2009: 162)

The contention is that Fichte endeavors to affirm this non-predicate in his discussion of the second principle, conditioned as it is 'to content' as per the title of §2. Fichte begins by noting how '[o]pposition is possible only on the assumption of a unity of consciousness between the self that posits and the self that opposes' (I, 103), which allows him to regard the trajectory from the first to the second proposition as follows: 'Nothing is posited to begin with, except the self; and this alone is asserted absolutely (§1). Hence there can be an absolute opposition only to the self. But that which is opposed to the self = the *not-self* [non-I].' (I, 104) To understand this, we must read the first part of this trajectory in a *literal* sense, as beginning with that 'posited nothing' and proceeding to the affirmation of such a non-predicate which inherently comprises and stands absolutely opposed to the I. In other words, the non-I indexes the 'nothing' in our above feminine formulation 'There is nothing which is not I,' a formless content which remains after abstracting from the unity of consciousness 'the purely formal and logical proposition "A = A."' (I, 105) Thus, both I and non-I are unlimited and absolute so that I = non-I, just as sure as I = I. But the thing to note is how there must already be a minimal distinction between form and content, between the pure form of A = A and its symmetrically opposite non-I, to make the positing of non-I necessary for otherwise 'the absolute Self and the absolute non-Self [non-I] would simply and directly overlap.' (Žižek 2009: 163)

Fichte explains this positing of non-I in phenomenological terms in a key parenthetical passage regarding 'the shallowness' of treating the concept of the non-I as a general concept obtained by abstraction from everything represented, for 'within the object of [re]presentation there can and must be an X of some sort...[which] must lie initially in myself, the [re]presenter, in advance of any possible experience.' (I, 104-5) Žižek explains this passage as homologous to Kant's account of how the multitude of passive subjective impressions passes to the subject's perception of a consistent objective reality only by



‘way of supplementing this subjective multitude with, again, the subject’s act of transcendental synthesis.’ (Žižek 2009: 161-2) In both cases, it is precisely because the excess in the object over the subject’s representation of the object discloses itself as something to be represented (and not as that which represents) that this excess must lie within the representing subject. The thrust of Žižek’s argument is that Fichte successfully conceives the passage from the second to the third proposition –from this purely formal conversion whereby the non-I rises from the pure flow of the subject’s act of transcendental synthesis to the Not-I of objective reality – only because he is operating with the *Anstoß*, an element similar to Lacan’s *objet a*, an ex-timate object capable of accomplishing the miracle of *creatio ex nihilo* where ‘nothing’ is counted as something as to its form<sup>10</sup> and whose logic we saw already at work above with the minimal distinction between form and content. (Žižek 2009: 163) The doctrine of the *Anstoß* is thus an ‘appearance without anything that appears,’ the very possibility of which Kant dismissed as an ‘absurd conclusion.’ (Bxxvi-xxvii) So once again we see the difference between Fichte and Kant with respect to the Thing-in-itself: whereas the Kantian necessity of thinking the Thing-in-itself carries with it a (disavowed) presupposition of its substantiality, Fichte’s own thought of *Anstoß* similarly denies knowledge of it as a determinate object yet nevertheless eliminates that presupposition to reveal *Anstoß* as ‘a positivization of a lack, a stand-in for the void.’ (Žižek 2009: 164)

By considering the *Anstoß* the ‘secret’ of the Thing-in-itself, we again see how Fichte believes it possible to rid transcendental idealism of the latter as well as understand how Fichte re-conceptualizes our standard notions of limitation and the oppositions of immanence/ transcendence and finitude/ infinitude. As Žižek points out, if Fichte can show how the absolute I is capable of temporal auto-affection, there is no longer a need to posit behind the subject’s transcendental act of synthesis a ‘thing which thinks’ as the primary source of the subject’s sensual affections. This would amount to showing ‘the ultimate synthesis of the subject and the object,’ or else how ‘there is no subject without *Anstoß*, without the collision with an element of irreducible facticity and contingency.’ (*ibid* 164, 143) In Fichte’s own words, the ‘self is to encounter in itself something heterogeneous, alien, and to be distinguished from itself...[yet for] all that, this alien element is to [be]<sup>11</sup> encountered *in the self*, and can only be encountered therein. If it lay outside the self, it would be nothing for the self.’ (I, 272) He continues by saying that while *Anstoß* in general is of the self’s activity which extends into infinity, it simultaneously ‘is foreign and contrary to the self.’ (*ibid*) This confusing passage raises the question as to the exact status of

*Anstoß*. There appears to be only two options. On the one hand, *Anstoß* may be strictly immanent and posited directly by the I itself, but this leaves Fichte vulnerable to the criticism which holds that the I's activity amounts to nothing but an empty game of positing obstacles only to vainly assert its absolute ego after it triumphantly overcomes them. On the other hand, if *Anstoß* is considered an impenetrable transcendence irreducible to an ordinary represented object, then we either revert back to the Thing-in-itself or to something equally unacceptable: today's discourse on intersubjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Žižek's solution is to consider how Fichte must have in mind the full coincidence of its transcendence with its absolute immanence, which amounts to an 'overlapping of self-positing and obstacle, i.e., the obstacle is the excremental "reject" of the process of self-positing,...the obverse of the activity of self-positing. In this sense, *Anstoß* is the transcendental *a priori* of positing, that which incites the I to endless positing, the only non-positing element... *Anstoß* is that which makes [the absolute I] non-All.' (Žižek 2009: 146-7)

So while it appears Kant imposes the greater limitation on subjectivity because 'There is at least one X which is not I,' Fichte dispenses with the Thing-in-itself *because* of the transcendental subject's finitude, *because* 'There is nothing which is not I.' In contemporary terms, Fichte's insight is how 'there is no metaposition,' no Archimedean point for the subject to occupy which would allow him to momentarily escape its finitude and arrogantly objectivize a limitation between itself and the universe. The subject's *direct* assertion of its finitude is thus pure conceit; rather, 'the only way to truly assert my finitude is to accept that my world is infinite,<sup>13</sup> since I cannot locate its limit *within* it. (This is also what makes Fichte's notion of *Anstoß* so difficult: *Anstoß* is not an object *within* the represented reality, but the stand-in, within reality, of what is outside reality).' (*ibid* 148) Here we see how every limitation must be self-imposed not because the Fichtean I is the absolute origin of all reality, but precisely because it cannot objectively locate itself within reality. With Fichte, 'finitude and infinity are no longer opposed: it is our very encounter of the obstacle (and thus brutal awareness of our finitude) that, simultaneously, makes us aware of the infinity within ourselves, of the infinite duty that haunts us in the very core of our being.' (*ibid* 157)

There are two important results to be taken here. The first, which we will address in more detail below, is that we thus arrive at Fichte's basic ontological attitude as 'an engaged-practical one' where this synthesis of the finite and the infinite 'can only be given as practical effort, as endless striving...[of] the "thetic" practical-finite subject' set against the 'hypo-thesis' of the absolute I. (*ibid* 159) The second concerns how the immanent

antagonism of the self-identity of the I, whereby the I encounters an inherent obstacle, must be resolved by positing the external limitation of the finite I and the Not-I as mutually limiting opposites. (*ibid* 149) This is as Fichte tells us: ‘*In the self I oppose a divisible not-self [Not-I] to the divisible self [finite I].*’ (I, 110) We thereby arrive at the third proposition, for if indeed ‘There is nothing which is not I,’ the non-I which passes to Not-I through *Anstoß*<sup>14</sup> can be nothing but the absolute I’s non-positing. So when the I encounters the objective reality of the Not-I which exerts pressure on and actively resists the I, this can never be a direct determination and limitation by objective circumstances of which the I plays no part. Rather, ‘I am determined by external causes only insofar as I let myself be determined by them.’ (*ibid* 150) So in no way does Fichte’s repeated emphasis on the subject’s practical struggle with objects of reality conflict with his equal insistence of the I’s capacity for intellectual intuition. As Žižek explains, Fichte uses the logic prefigured in Kant’s ‘incorporation thesis’<sup>15</sup> to explain how the infinite striving of its ethical engagement with reality is an aspect of the I’s finitude, for if the I finds itself passively affected by the active object world, this can only be because the I (actively) posited itself as a passive recipient.<sup>16</sup> (*ibid* 165) In the Second Introduction Fichte tells us the same thing: ‘As surely as I posit myself, I posit myself as something restricted, in consequence of the intuition of my self-positing’ (I, 489), but in his later discussion of the third proposition it is much more rigorously stated in its theoretical form: ‘The self posits itself as limited by the not-self [Not-I].’ (I, 126) We must be careful to note here how the I does *not* directly posit the Not-I as limiting the I. There is likewise a fine distinction to be drawn with the third proposition considered in its practical form where the I does *not* directly posit itself as limiting the Not-I, but rather: ‘The self posits the not-self [Not-I] as limited by the self.’ (I, 125)

The finesse and resulting ambiguity of this reflexive formulation which Žižek underscores is lost on much of Fichte’s critical reception. Quite possibly Fichte’s critics overlook how the absolute I is not substantial but rather that which ‘remains thoroughly transcendental-ideal...the transcendental condition of the finite I’s practical engagement, its hypo-thesis, never a positively-given *ens realissimum*.’ (Žižek 2009: 159) This means we cannot simply conclude that because this mutual limitation is always posited within the absolute I that this I is All there is; rather we must conceive how such positing always splits from within the subject so that the absolute I is best conceived as a *medium* in which the finite I and the Not-I are mutually delimited. (*ibid* 152) But this also opens up the possibility that the vector which proceeds from the first to the third proposition has, in its turn, a reverse trajectory. As already cited above, when Fichte says ‘the finite spirit must

necessarily posit something absolute outside itself (a thing-in-itself), and yet must recognize, from the other side, that the latter exists only *for it* (as a necessary noumenon)' (I, 281), we should keep in mind Fichte's insistence on the primacy of practical reason. That is, it is only because the I posits an unattainable practical goal or project for itself that finite reality becomes a series of obstacles frustrating that project, a project now experienced by the positing subject as a fundamental presupposition of its practical activity. In a word, if there is no project, then there are no obstacles. As Žižek often notes of German Idealism in general, the abstract speculations of Fichte become 'substantial insight the moment we relate it to our most concrete experience.' (Žižek 2009: 155) But far more troubling is how this implies a vicious circle: Fichte begins with the absolute I positing the absolute opposition of the non-I which, because of *Anstoß*, subsequently finitizes itself by its delimitation with the Not-I; however, the trajectory has its reverse, for the starting point of *Tathandlung* returns as presupposed by and thus dependent on the posited finite I. So is there a fatal inconsistency in Fichte? Yes, but only from the standpoints of metaphysics and transcendental philosophy, as 'this is the crucial, properly speculative, moment in Fichte: the presupposition itself is (retroactively) posited by the process it generates.' (*ibid* 167)

## Conclusion

Žižek cautions us to consider how Fichte's overall achievement is but a *moment* of proper speculative philosophy. Certainly Fichte's post-1799 shift signals an acknowledgment on his part of the fundamental deadlock of self-reflection whereby the pure self-positing of the I forever remains a presupposition and thus can never be posited *as such*. More specifically, when this inherent limitation to the I's activity is acknowledged, reflection reverts to immediacy. That is, Fichte's feminine logic of positing reflection necessarily (mis)perceives its own act as the in-itself of an external presupposition and we thus move imperceptively to the (Kantian) masculine logic of external reflection which implies the existence of an exceptional 'There is at least one X which is not I' – a claim we saw rigorously rejected by Fichte. To get out of this bind, Fichte makes recourse after 1799 to a ground that 'is now no longer identified with the I *qua* absolute I but with something absolute prior to and originally independent of the I (*Seyn*, "Being;" or *Gott*, "God").' (Zöller 55) So whereas in the Jena period Fichte's project was to demonstrate the subjective

genesis of a reified notion of the objective reality of things, inclusive of the Thing-in-itself, in post-1799 'it is no longer the absoluteness of the things that is unveiled as an unavoidable illusion, but the absoluteness of the I itself.' (Brachtendo Žižek, Slavoj rf 157) Yet as Žižek convincingly argues, Fichte was nevertheless not able to clearly formulate this insight, of how 'the notion of the I as the absolute ground of all being secretly but unavoidable "substantivizes" the subject, [of how] it reduces subject to substance;' nor could he assert how 'the subjective reflection of the Absolute is the Absolute's self-reflection.' (Žižek 2009: 124) In the end, Fichte's shift 'towards the asubjective Absolute is not a reaction to his earlier excessive subjectivism, but a reaction to his inability to formulate the core of subjectivity.' (*ibid* 127)

However, we have seen how this ultimate failure to fully articulate subjectivity in no way permits us to overlook Fichte's achievement. Žižek's insight into how the doctrine of the *Anstoß* is formally homologous to Lacan's *objet a* marks Fichte as the first philosopher to focus on the uncanny contingency which lies at the very core of the modern subject, providing for an entirely new way to approach his work. This focus alone justifies viewing Fichte's philosophy of the I as superior to most contemporary thinking on subjectivity for which – as Žižek repeats across all his writings – this excessive element continues to remain largely unacknowledged.

Notes:

1 See, for example, La Volpa's *Fichte* which traces the first thirty-seven years of Fichte's life up to his resignation from his university position at Jena in 1799. Especially valuable is La Volpa's biographical account of the early conversion to Kantian philosophy of which Fichte himself noted how he there 'found [in Kant] the antidote to the true source of my ill, and joy enough beyond that' to effectively define his own life's mission as a Kantian preacher to make philosophy 'popular' and 'effective in the human heart through eloquence.' (La Volpa 46, 79)

2 Citations to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* are made in customary fashion as per the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A and B pagination. For translations used, see Bibliography. All citations in this paper with *italic* script represent the author's original emphasis.

3 The formal presentation of the formulae occurs in *Seminar XX*. (Lacan 78) Let us also note that the logic surrounding Lacanian sexuation cannot be dismissed as foreign to German Idealism, indebted as we are to Joan Copjec's discovery that the two pairs of sexuated formulae are structurally homologous to the Kantian opposition of mathematical and dynamical antinomies. (Copjec 212-36)

4 This is why for Žižek, 'the philosopher of "external reflection" *par excellence* is Kant – for example, his theory of how the Thing-in-itself eludes subjective reflection.' (Žižek 2002: 168)

5 This is why for Žižek we should 'refer to Fichte as a philosopher of positing reflection *par excellence*.' (Žižek 1989: 224) The third term of the triad of reflection (positing-external-determinate) is of course completed with Hegel.

6 (Beiser 217, 640n.1). This common view only becomes more prevalent with respect to Fichte's post-1799 work. For instance, his 1806 *Anweisung* lectures are alternatively praised or dismissed for their 'alleged mystical extravagances' depending on one's religious predisposition. (Zanelotti 131)

7 Elsewhere Breazeale notes how the difference between the terms falls along Kantian faculties: whereas *Anstoß* is a limitation via a sensible 'feeling,' *Aufforderung* is an intelligible limitation. (Breazeale 2002: 190)

8 Žižek's use of translated terms from Fichte is not consistent across his own (2009) text. For instance, he often temporarily adopts different translations of terms from secondary texts appropriated for his own argument, thus making things quite difficult to follow. But it nevertheless serves to remind the reader that the responsibility of working through Fichte's logic – indeed for the very interpretation of Fichte – rests squarely on his own shoulders. To that end we have endeavored to be clear regarding our own decisions on terminology and indicate these within citations when needed to make for a consistent reading with this paper's overall interpretation of Fichte's I.

9 A71/B97.

10 As in set theory where the entire derivation of mathematical presentation *as such* depends on how a One emerges by merely taking the set of the initial empty set. The 'axiom of the void' which asserts the existence of the empty set thereby most directly inscribes subjectivity at the very foundation of mathematics.

11 This term added to overcome an apparent problem with the translated text.

12 See, for instance, Beiser (334-45) for an argument on how Fichte's 'problem of other minds' remains of interest and importance today.

13 As with the 'axiom of infinity' in set theory which asserts the existence of infinity.

14 Žižek 2009:163.

15 Allison coined this term which neatly references the logic Kant uses to explain how, in the final analysis, it is the finite rational agent himself (due to his capacity for spontaneity) who imbues a certain incentive with sufficient motivational force to cause him to act accordingly by incorporating that incentive into the maxim that will guide his actions. (Allison 130)

16 'We can now see perfectly, how the self should be able to determine its passivity through and by means of its activity, and how it can be at once both active and passive.' (I, 141)

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