

**The First Principle in the Later Fichte: The (Not) “Surprising insight” in the Fifteenth
Lecture of the 1804 Wissenschaftslehre**

Michael Lewin

Abstract

How surprising is the insight, that *being* equals *I* in the 15th lecture of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II? It might have been indeed an unexpected turn for his contemporaries in Berlin listening to Fichte for the first time, but should it be surprising for us, having at least since 2012 (the year the last volume of [*Gesamtausgabe*] appeared) access to all his published and unpublished works?

I want to propose a way of reading Fichte, which bypasses two popular and contradictory interpretations of his philosophy in the post-Jena period: (a) the Absolute is the new first principle (hence the *I* is just a shadow of the much higher being) and (b) his system basically remains unchanged (hence the being is nothing more than the *I*). At first, I analyze the functions of later Fichte’s improved version of the Kantian and Reinholdian abstract subject-object-symbolism and assign specific content to it. This will shed light on the structure and the first principle of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II. In the second section I give reasons why Fichte calls both *God* and *I* “absolute” and “pure being” and explain their relation to each other referring to a thought experiment sometimes used by Kant—an analogy between the divine and human (pure) reason. The *analogical thinking* of this kind remains within the borders of transcendental philosophy as long as it is used only for certain didactic purposes.

Introduction

Several interpreters stress discontinuity in Fichte's development and believe that he abandons the critical path in his later works. Henrich and Gloy assume that the later Fichte transforms his "deficient" (circular) theory of self-consciousness by putting God as the primal unity and ground of self-consciousness on the top of his system.¹ God, the absolute being, is, as Rivera de Rosales writes, "the real condition or *ratio essendi*"² of knowledge in the *Doctrine of Science*. These and similar views bring Fichte's later project close to mysticism and (Neo-) Platonism: the absolute I and the world become merely a shadow of the highest principle. Numerous researchers try, however, "demystifying" his later works claiming, like Ivaldo, that—although some passages may purport it—Fichte's later philosophy does not represent any "objectivistic metaphysics" or an "onto-theo-logic."³ Ivaldo, Schmidt, Stolzenberg, Asmuth, Schlösser, Ivanenko, Traub and Loock, to name a few, either equate the absolute being with the first principle of the Jena Fichte, or recognize strong structural similarities to the absolute I and exclusively or prevalently transcendental forms of argumentation in Fichte's philosophy after 1800.⁴ The most promising demystification strategy is brought up by Schmidt, Stolzenberg,

¹ See Dieter Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse. Gedanken und Auslegungen zu den Grundlagen der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982), 75-82 and Karen Gloy, *Bewusstseinstheorien: Zur Problematik und Geschichte des Bewusstseins und Selbstbewusstseins* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1998), 226-237.

² My translation of a sentence found in Jacinto Rivera de Rosales, „Die Welt als Bild.“ In: *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1812. Vermächtnis und Herausforderung des transzendentalen Idealismus*, ed. Thomas Sören Hoffmann (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2016), 101.

³ My translation of expressions found in Marco Ivaldo, „Leben und Philosophie: Die *Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* als Antwort auf Jacobis Nihilismus-Vorwurf,“ *Fichte-Studien* 43 (2016): 182-83.

⁴ See Andreas Schmidt, *Der Grund des Wissens. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre in den Versionen von 1794/95, 1804/II und 1812* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004); (2006): Jürgen Stolzenberg, „Fichtes Deduktionen des Ich 1804 und 1794,“ *Fichte-Studien* 30 (2006), 1-13. Christoph Asmuth, „Transzendentalphilosophie oder absolute Metaphysik? Grundsätzliche Fragen an Fichtes Spätphilosophie,“ *Fichte-Studien* 31 (2007), 45-58; Ulrich Schlösser, *Das Erfassen des Einleuchtens. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1804 als Kritik an der Annahme entzogener Voraussetzungen unseres Wissens und als Philosophie des Gewissseins* (Berlin: Philo Fine Arts, 2001); Anton A. Ivanenko, *Философия как наукоучение: генезис научного метода в трудах И.Г. Фихте* (Санкт-Петербург: Владимир Даль, 2012); Hartmut Traub, „Transzendentes Ich und absolutes Sein. Überlegungen zu Fichtes ‚veränderter Lehre‘,“ *Fichte-Studien* 16 (1999), 39-56; Reinhard Loock, „Das Bild des absoluten Seins beim frühen und späten Fichte,“ *Fichte-Studien* 17 (2004), 83-102.

and—to some extent—by Hoeltzel,⁵ who draw on Kant’s concept of pure practical reason or reason in general to understand the highest principle in the Jena and Berlin Fichte. My alternative suggestion is Kant’s theory of ideas, the theory of pure reason in the narrower sense as the starting point. The last decades of Kant research, especially—but not only—related to the *Transcendental Dialectic*,⁶ re-discovered the “other side”, the non-destructive transcendental account of ideas and metaphysics. This helped to reveal the whole system of different kinds of ideas in Kant (postulates, transcendental, simple theoretical, practical (moral, religious, and political), aesthetical, architectonic ideas, and those ideas that represent the pure reason itself). According to Fichte’s programmatic demand of a complete deduction of all main acts of consciousness, the system of ideas must be derived just as the system of categories and other results of the Kantian philosophy. The project must start with the self-positing of pure reason as the first and highest act in the *Doctrine of Science*. This is the key to understand different principles and their order in Fichte’s works. I will not explain this view and Fichte’s deduction of ideas in detail in this paper, but this is the background I will draw on.⁷

Following the “demystification agenda”, I want to argue against the assumption that transcendental philosophy as a research program, which was introduced by Kant, is abandoned in the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II or in general by the later Fichte. The concept of God—the absolute of the religious standpoint—is insofar (besides the practical implications) theoretically interesting and relevant for the scientific endeavor of *Doctrine of Science*, as it is an important

⁵ See Steven Hoeltzel, “The Unity of Reason in Kant and Fichte.” In: *Kant, Fichte, and the Legacy of Transcendental Idealism*, ed. Halla Kim and Steven Hoeltzel (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 129-52.

⁶ See, e.g., Nikolai F. Klimmek, *Kants System der transzendentalen Ideen*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), Jannis Pissis, *Kants Transzendente Dialektik. Zu ihrer systematischen Bedeutung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), Martin Bunte, *Erkenntnis und Funktion. Zur Vollständigkeit der Urteilstafel und Einheit des kantischen Systems* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), Marcus Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics: The Dialectic of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), and Rudolf Meer, *Der transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft. Funktion und Struktur des Anhangs zur Transzendentalen Dialektik der Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

⁷ See Michael Lewin, *Das System der Ideen. Zur perspektivistisch-metaphilosophischen Begründung der Vernunft im Anschluss an Kant und Fichte* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2021) and Michael Lewin, „The Faculty of Ideas. Kant's Concept of Reason in the Narrower Sense,” *Open Philosophy* 5/1 (2022), 340-359.

example of an idea that can be used to indicate existence of our *pure reason* (in the narrow sense) and to examine the functionality of pure reason. Fichte invites his audience in Berlin to create a pure concept of God, to investigate theoretical and practical dimensions, possibilities, and borders of our pure thinking. In the research program of transcendental philosophy, reason (in the narrow sense) is a faculty that operates with ideas as the purest form of representation. The common title for all ideas is, as Kant states in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, the unconditioned, or the *absolute* (KrV A324/B380). To think the absolute means to use reason—a person who creates the idea of God proves herself to be capable of pure thinking, of freedom or of the highest form of spontaneity. As God can be seen as *absolute*, of itself, in itself, and through itself, the reason, or the I, which “lives” in the activity of pure thinking or pure (self-)positing can be regarded as absolute itself, it is as the *absolute I*. This is—in a very few words—the basic “insight” in the 15th lecture of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II, which contains the “doctrine of *reason* and truth” (1804², 115; GA, II/8: 228-29, italics added).

What we find in the period between 1804 and 1806 in Fichte’s works is not a mixture of purported transcendent cognitions and transcendental philosophy. Neither reason or self-consciousness nor the world are derived from God. But on the other side one also cannot simply equate the absolute with the absolute I. This would be unjustified considering the evolution of Fichte’s thinking after 1800. In the following, I want to show how I have come to my interpretation of the “insight” Fichte speaks of in the 15th lecture, which must not necessarily be “surprising” for those familiar with the earlier versions of the *Doctrine of Science*. In the first section of my paper (I), I want to argue that the thinking of different subject-object-relations, and the corresponding idealism-realism-dialectic, constitutes the structure of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II. This structure leaves no doubt that the absolute of the *Doctrine of Science* is the self-positing pure reason, and that God cannot be the highest principle in Fichte’s system. In the second section (II) I want to detect the duplicity of the *absolute* as God on the

one hand and as reason (or I / We) on the other hand in this text, and explain it in the sense of an analogy, which was—among other things—introduced for didactical purposes and productively used by the later Fichte.

I

(a) Subject-Object-Relations (S-O-R)

The abstract terminology of subjects, objects, and their relation to each other is a basic tool used in the transcendental philosophy. Kant differentiates between subjective and objective deduction of categories and ideas, speaks of relations of representations to an absolute subject (soul) or to an absolute object (world) (see KrV A333-34/ B390-91), describes self-consciousness in terms of a subject-object-relation and so on. Karl Leonhard Reinhold recognized that subject-object-relations underlie every epistemic act of consciousness, and that they are all mediated by different types of representation.⁸ Thus, he suggested the concept “representation” to be the central concept in transcendental philosophy and did it for a very good reason. Kant, namely, declared at the beginning of the *Transcendental Dialectic* “representation” as genus, under which stand all different types of representation analyzed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: sensation, intuition, empirical and pure concepts as well as ideas (see KrV A320/B376). Subject, object, and their relation to each other via representation are therefore basic elements of all epistemic acts—Reinhold formulated this insight, as we know,

⁸ Reinhold’s philosophy, a long time almost completely out of focus in the research on classical German philosophy, was rediscovered in the last decades. See especially *Krankheit des Zeitalters oder heilsame Provokation? Skeptizismus in der nachkantischen Philosophie*, eds. Martin Bondeli, Klaus Vieweg and Jiri Chotas (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); *Karl Leonhard Reinhold and the Enlightenment*, ed. George Giovanni (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010); *Am Rande des Idealismus. Studien zur Philosophie Karl Leonhard Reinholds*, eds. Wolfgang Kersting and Dirk Westerkamp (Paderborn: mentis, 2009), and *K. L. Reinhold. Am Vorhof des Idealismus*, ed. Pierluigi Valenza (Pisa-Roma: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2006).

as *principle of consciousness* [*Satz des Bewusstseins*], a fact, that everyone should be able to prove for herself as universally valid through personal introspection.

Fichte could not agree that the principle of consciousness is a solid ground for a system based on results of the Kantian philosophy. As he states in a letter to Reinhold: Had Reinhold waited until all three *Critiques* appeared before starting to work on his system, he could have found the right first principle, it is the absolute I (see the letter to Reinhold from July 2, 1795, GA, III/2: 346). So, there are two basic modifications Fichte makes to Reinhold's model of subject-object-thinking, which significantly change it. Firstly, subjects and objects are not only mediated by representation, but also by all other acts of consciousness [*Bewusstseinshandlungen*] including pure acts of positing as well as feelings and acts of will like needs and conation [*Begehren* and *Streben*]. Secondly, there is—in one single case: in the case of the absolute I—a unity of subject and object. This unity is established by means of a pure act of self-positing, a fact-act [*Tathandlung*] involving the *intellectual intuition*, which is not dependent on the subject-object-difference and therefore does not fall under the standard definition of a representation.

So, what happens here and where I want to point at is that Fichte creates a new transcendental apparatus and a new logic in working with abstract language of subjects, objects, and their interrelation, which goes beyond Kant's and Reinhold's usage of the same and which becomes fully differentiated especially in the year 1804. Subjects and objects play the role of abstract transcendental symbols used for difficult logical operations. One can also say they are *pictures* as well as, for instance, *light, life*, and other creative imaginations we encounter in the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II. As Fichte stated in his essay *On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origins of Language* (1795)⁹ (see GA, I/3: 103 (remark)), he does not believe in the indispensability of

⁹ For the English translation see Jerry Surber, "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language," in Jerry Surber, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 119–45.

written and spoken language for abstract thinking—one can also productively think in pictures created by our faculty of imagination. The advantage of thinking in abstract pictures like subject, object, the “through”, pure being, absolute, the point of oneness, light, life etc. lies in the possibility to eschew certain (empirical and non-empirical) content which could distract the philosopher from targeted logical operations. The problem is, however, that when it comes to a right interpretation of these imaginations, one can understand very different and even contrary concepts behind them, especially when some of the imaginations are used—depending on context—in many varying ways. In my opinion, the transcendental symbolism of subjects, objects, and their interrelations, has five main functions in Fichte’s philosophy. The abstract language of subjects and objects is used:

- (1) to indicate relations. Something can rely either to a subject or to an object, or something can be self-relating;
- (2) to articulate certain qualities and mental attitudes. “Subject” stands rather for activity, idealism and thinking, whereas “object” for passivity, realism and being;
- (3) to express standpoints. To do so, Fichte uses images of “enduring” (one can also say “standing” or “motionless” (S), (O)) as well as “moving” (“self-forming”, “living” (S’), (O’)) subjects and objects in the 28th lecture 1804/II;
- (4) to illustrate objects of knowledge. “Subject-object” (S=O) stands, for example, for the absolute I or reason and “object”, in the quality “enduring object” (O), for the world;
- (5) to express areas of science. Natural sciences, for example, primarily deal with nature, it is with “enduring object” (O). Jurisprudence deals with “enduring subject” (S).

(b) The Unity of Subject and Object (S=O)

If I try to determine the unity of subject and object using these five points, I come to the following results:

(1) A subject-object must be understood in terms of a *self-relation*, just like it was at the beginning of the first *Doctrine of Science* in Jena: I equals I, or, to put it in another way, I (respectively reason) is *for itself*, it posits its own being, and therein lies its essence (see GWL, GA I/2: 259 and WLn[K], GA IV/3: 328 and 341). Any other possible relation to a subject or object is omitted in the act of self-positing: the I, with the predicate “absolute”, is self-enclosed in a sphere in which it is only being for itself and not for the other.

(2) As for the qualitative determination of a subject-object, it must be seen as *ideal-real* (respectively *real-ideal*) or, which is the same, as *unity of thinking and being*. The Jena Fichte stated clearly that the *Doctrine of Science* is neither a mere idealism nor realism, but a combination of both. Its first principle expresses the unity of real and ideal elements: fact-act means that I act (real activity) and that I have immediate consciousness of that act (ideal activity) (see WLn[K], GA IV/3: 361). In other words, the self-positing is an expression of *being* of the absolute I, whereby “being” is to be understood in a higher sense, as pure real activity, which is inseparably accompanied by *thinking*, it is by intellectual intuition of the same.

(3) “Subject-object” is a transcendental symbol that represents the standpoint of the *Doctrine of Science*. While every standpoint or world view has its own absolute, the absolute of the *Doctrine of Science* is not an object or subject. Enduring or living and self-forming subjects and objects are—as Fichte demonstrates in the last lectures in 1804—just sides or appearances of the subject-object-unity.

(4) This unity stands for what Fichte synonymously calls “absolute I”, “reason” and “pure knowledge”, which is the genuine object of knowledge of the *Doctrine of Science*.

(5) The corresponding area of knowledge is *Doctrine of Science* respectively *critical metaphysics*.

(c) The Structure of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II

The core thesis in the first section of my paper is that subject-object-symbols are used by Fichte to structuralize the *Doctrine of Science*. If we find out that he assigned concrete and indisputable content to certain abstract operations with subjects and objects which constitute the structure of *Doctrine of Science*, it will shed light on what the first principle is or is not. There are at least four basic questions which are discussed in relation to the structure of Fichte's lectures 1804/II: (1) At what point do the prolegomena end? (2) Where do we find the first principle?¹⁰ (3) What is the concrete succession of bottom-up and top-down-movements of deduction?¹¹ And (4) whether Fichte's lectures in this period consist of a synthesis of 25 argumentation steps—a line of interpretation begun by Martial Gueroult, pursued by Joachim Widman and recently revisited by Alexander Schnell.¹² What I am interested in and what has not been yet (as far as I know) discussed is a parallel between what I call the idealism-realism-dialectic,¹³ which starts at the 11th and ends at the 15th lecture, and the deduction of 5 standpoints or areas, in which reason

¹⁰ Do we really encounter it first in the 15th lecture—or even before? Or only and actually in the 23rd lecture (see: Ulrich Schlösser, *Das Erfassen des Einleuchtens. Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre von 1804 als Kritik an der Annahme entzogener Voraussetzungen unseres Wissens und als Philosophie des Gewissseins* (Berlin: Philo Fine Arts, 2001)).

¹¹ See Jens Lemanski, *Summa und System. Historie und Systematik vollendeter bottom-up- und top-down-Theorien* (Paderborn: mentis, 2013), 189-248.

¹² See Martial Guérout, *L'Évolution et la structure de la Doctrine de la science chez Fichte* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930); Joachim Widman, *Die Grundstruktur des transzendentalen Wissens. Nach Johann Gottlieb Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre 1804 (2)* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1977); Joachim Widman, „Zum Strukturverhältnis der W. L. 1804 (1) und 1804 (2).“ In: Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Erste Wissenschaftslehre von 1804*, ed. Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart/Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1969), and Alexander Schnell, *Réflexion et Spéculation. L'idéalisme transcendantal chez Fichte et Schelling* (Grenoble: Millon, 2009), 31-42.

¹³ On the idealism-realism-relation in Fichte see especially Valentin Pluder, *Die Vermittlung von Idealismus und Realismus in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie: eine Studie zu Jacobi, Kant, Fichte, Schelling und Hegel* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: frommann-holzboog, 2013).

(pure knowledge) is active, in the 28th lecture.¹⁴ I will illustrate this parallel with the help of the following intuitions and reflections:

(a) The exceptional status of *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II is well known. It does not start with the first principle right away, but with a bottom-up-movement we also encounter in *The Vocation of Man* (1800) and in Fichte's late lectures on the *Facts of Consciousness* (1810-1813). This movement of ascent has the function to negate all constrained mental operations and points of view that are deficient and inappropriate to articulate the absolute principle. Perhaps one can also use the Hegelian term "sublate" [*aufheben*] in this context, as the abandoned standpoints are not discarded entirely, but rather transformed into a higher unity, of which they are all just certain sides. This higher unity or the absolute of the *Doctrine of Science* is an act of pure genesis, which differentiates itself inwardly into the same moments that were rejected and criticized as merely *factual*. In my reading of Fichte's lectures 1804/II, these moments are two different kinds of realism and idealism, which re-appear as four standpoints below the self-positing of reason.

(b) This statement can be supported by the thought that it is a not a mere coincidence that the reader of Fichte's *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II encounters exactly two realisms, a lower and a higher one, and two objects, an enduring (O) and living (O'), as well as two idealisms, a lower and a higher, and two subjects, an enduring (S) and living (S').

(c) Furthermore, "realism" and "idealism" are, as Fichte states in the 14th lecture, just other words for *objectivism* and *subjectivism*.¹⁵ So, if one considers the different functions of subject-object-symbols I have distinguished above, following persistent meanings can be assigned to

¹⁴ Fichte calls these five standpoints also spheres [*Wirkungssphären*], in which we operate with ideas (the spheres of pure reason's activity, if we keep in mind that this is the faculty that deals foremost with ideas in Kant and Fichte), in *On the Nature of the Scholar and its Manifestations* (see GA, I/8: 79). See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Über Das Wesen Des Gelehrten*, eds. Alfred Denker, Jeffery Kinlaw, and Holger Zaborowski (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2020) for recent research on this text.

¹⁵ Fichte puts it very clearly: "realism, or more accurately *objectivism*" and "idealism which, because of language's ambiguity, we might better call *subjectivism*" (1804², 109; GA, II/8: 214-15).

the moments of the idealism-realism-dialectic in correspondence to the five standpoints (I present first the realisms and then the idealisms, and assign numbers from the hierarchical order in the doctrine of five standpoints to them):¹⁶

(1) Realism, or objectivism, is a mental attitude “of the thinking subject” (1804², 92; GA, II/8: 172-73) which is characterized by passivity. The subject gives itself up to an object and loses itself in the content without reflecting upon its own actions. This attitude appertains to sensuality and produces the enduring object (O), nature, the object of natural sciences.

(4) Higher realism, or objectivism, is characterized by the self-destruction of the subject. The object it relates to is seen as being self-constructing and therefore not, by any means, produced by it. “Hence, nothing at all remains here of a pre-given *us*” (1804², 98; GA, II/8: 186-87). The subject becomes engrossed in object in a higher sense, as a self-forming or living one (O’), it is God, the absolute of the religious standpoint and of theology.¹⁷

(2) Idealism, or subjectivism, is a mental attitude which relies heavily on the fact of reflection. This attitude leads to the standpoint of enduring subject (S) which determines the object and manifests itself in the standpoint of legality and morality.

(3) Higher idealism, or subjectivism, represents energy of thinking and creativity. Object is formed by the “living” subject (S’). This results in the standpoint of art and higher morality.

(5) Unity of realism and idealism, or of objectivism and subjectivism (O=S), is therefore reason or absolute I, the standpoint of the *Doctrine of Science* (see I (b)).¹⁸

Idealism-Realism- Dialectic	Doctrine of <u>reason</u> / truth	5 areas of knowledge / science / 5 spheres of reason’s acting / appearance
--	--	---

¹⁶ I will do it in no particular order, as my aim is not an interpretation of the dialectic, but simply the assignment of the S-O symbols to specific content from the lectures 11-14 and the summary in the second part of the 15th lecture.

¹⁷ This object in a higher sense was not yet present in the *Foundations of the Entire Doctrine of Science* 1794/95.

¹⁸ This deduction of the sciences approximately corresponds to the deduction in the end of the *Doctrine of Science nova methodo* (WLn[K], GA, IV/3: 520-23).

<i>Lectures 11-14</i>	<i>15th lecture</i>	<i>Lecture 28</i>
(2) S (<i>idealism</i>)	O=S	(1) O (nature sensuality natural sciences)
(1) O (<i>realism</i>)	real=ideal	(2) S (person right jurisprudence)
(4) O' (<i>higher realism</i>)	being=thinking	(3) S' (person art ethics & aesthetics)
(3) S' (<i>higher idealism</i>)		(4) O' (God religion theology)
(5) →		(5) S=O (reason science DoS)

If I am right and this construction constitutes the structure of Fichte's lectures, there can be no doubt that the first principle of the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II is not God, as it would be the position of *higher realism*, but pure reason. Reason or the I is the only subject-object we have, which is real and ideal at the same time: which posits itself (being) and knows of it (thinking).¹⁹

II

There are, nonetheless, at least two points which may confuse a reader of Fichte's lectures 1804/II. Firstly, Fichte sometimes speaks of a preference for realism (objectivism). This can lead to the belief that God is the real absolute of the *Doctrine of Science*. The relevant passages furnish, however, no proof for this assumption. In the 11th lecture Fichte gives his listeners the main reason for the predilection for the realistic perspective: "idealism renders impossible even the being of its opposite, and thus it is decidedly *one-sided*. On the other hand, realism at least leaves the being of its opposite undisputed" (1804², 92; GA, II/8: 172-73).²⁰ In other words: radical idealism is more harmful to the *Doctrine of Science* than radical realism, which does not

¹⁹ While in the case of God, there is a gap between the thinking reason and its object.

²⁰ In the 17th and 21st lectures we encounter a preference for idealism. For the movement of descent, the idealistic aspects "of" and "through" are more relevant. Speaking of preferences, Fichte utters rather methodological remarks to explain and reflect on the procedure of bottom-up- (preference for realism) and top-down-deductions (preference for idealism).

annihilate the thinking, but just does not make use of it. This statement must be seen in the context of Jacobi's charge of nihilism against Fichte that pure systematic scientific knowledge leads to abandonment of reality.²¹ Fichte countered this objection already in the end of the first lecture:

Namely, as soon as one has heard that the science of knowing presents itself as idealism, one immediately infers that it locates the absolute in what I have been calling *thinking* or *consciousness* which stands over against being as its other half and which therefore can no more be the absolute than can its opposite (1804², 26; GA, II/8: 16-17).

Pure knowledge is thus not merely an ideal, but also a real acting. Self-positing is not only knowing of, but a real self-positing of reason. We perform this act and "live" in it; the knowledge has therefore reality for us. This reality does not come from the self-forming object, it is God, as this is the standpoint of higher realism, which, as Fichte said in the cited passage, "can no more be the absolute than can its opposite".

The second point, which can confuse the reader of Fichte's lectures even more, is his energetical and uncompromising appreciation of the absolute of the religious standpoint and of theology. It can even provoke the opinion, that God is the actual absolute of the *Doctrine of Science*. The thesis of the second part of my paper is that Fichte, being in conversation with his contemporaries, uses productively an analogy between the thinking of God on the one and the thinking of human pure reason on the other hand.

(a) The Duplicity of the Absolute

²¹ See for a broader context also Marco Ivaldo, „Leben und Philosophie: Die *Anweisung zum seeligen Leben* als Antwort auf Jacobis Nihilismus-Vorwurf,“ *Fichte-Studien* 43 (2016): 172-85.

If one consults relevant passages in the lectures 1804/II one can notice a rivalry between two absolute principles, which may both claim for themselves to be the first principle of the *Doctrine of Science*. In the *first* lecture it is stated clearly that the absolute of the *Doctrine of Science* is the pure unity of being and thinking, which can be called “pure knowledge” or “I” (1804², 25-26; GA, II/8: 12-17). In the *fifth* lecture, however, comes for the first time the idea of God on the scene, which Fichte, completely nonchalantly, proclaims as the real absolute in opposition to science as its mere expression:

Love of the absolute (or God) is the rational spirit’s true element, in which alone it finds peace and blessedness; but science is the absolute’s sweet expression; and, like the absolute, this can be loved only for its own sake (1804², 50-51; GA, II/8: 74-75).

It must be nonetheless remarked that Fichte calls God “absolute” in general, he does not declare it to be the absolute of the *Doctrine of Science*, which must be loved for its own sake. In the *eighth* lecture Fichte says: “If, as is customary, you want to call the absolutely independent One, the self consuming being, *God*, then [you could say that] all genuine existence is the intuition of God” (1804², 68; GA, II/8: 114-15). This is clearly a definition of the standpoint of religion which deals with the self-forming object in a higher sense (O’), and not with the subject-object.²² In the following lectures, the idealism-realism-dialectic, we lose track of what the absolute really is. It is the absolute incognito, the real one, we are in search of, similarly to the method of dialectical movement in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* or *Encyclopedia*. In the doctrine of *reason* and truth, Fichte returns to the original statement of the first lecture that reason, or “We”, or “I”, is the actual “one undivided being itself, in itself, of itself, through

²² One of the main tasks of the *Doctrine of Science* since its very beginning is to deduct from the only true first principle the principles of different areas of science. This includes their correction in the light of the enlightenment. Thus, Fichte wants us to understand the principle of theology in a right way. And this is something we learn from the first principle (of self-positing of reason)—God appears as a pure thought (idea of reason) as pure reason appears in a pure insight.

itself, which can never go outside itself to duality” (1804², 116; GA, II/8: 230-31)—what he calls a “surprising insight” that he wanted to bring his audience to. The object is here the same as the subject, which “lives” in the act of pure being—the I is for the I, is completely enclosed in the act of self-making. In the 28th lecture Fichte finally rectifies the order and hierarchy of absolute principles of sciences, leaving no doubt that God is the absolute of theology. The task of the *Doctrine of Science* to derive principles for other sciences by means of the reflection on the unity of being and thinking, it is on the act of self-positing of reason as object and subject at the same time, is herewith completed.

(b) Why this Duplicity?

There are, however, good historical and systematic-philosophical reasons for what can cause the above-mentioned confusion. I want to name a few concentrating myself on the latter. Firstly, what Fichte aims at with the esteem of the absolute of the religious standpoint is that it can be— together with the concept of self-positing pure reason—opposed to a mere realistic epistemology and empirical as well as non-critical metaphysical concept of world. God and reason are both examples for what Fichte calls the *higher* or *living being* contrary to the being in the sense of a *dead thing* (1804², 25-26; GA, II/8: 12-17) as well as an objectivized thing-in-itself as in traditional metaphysics.²³ Secondly, this similarity can lead to fruitful parallels between God and pure reason. As I stated at the beginning, both principles can be designated by the term “absolute”, not only in the sense of being the hard core of a standpoint, but also as the purest form of representation, it is idea. This has *theoretical* (i) and *practical* (ii) implications that I want to discuss briefly in the last part of my paper.

²³ The “pure” and “living being” is a conceptual abstraction that developed together with language, as Fichte explains in *On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language* GA, I/3: 111-13.

(c) God and Pure Human Reason: Parallels

(i) In the research program of transcendental philosophy, to create ideas of God and of the absolute I means to use the faculty of reason in the narrow sense. Whether Fichte's audience thinks of God or of the unity of being and thinking—in both cases they are using the purest form of spontaneity possible to us. These mental operations can be also described as acts of positing, of pure (self-)activity and pure thinking, which lead to pure knowledge. In the program of transcendental philosophy these operations do not result in the cognition of things-in-themselves. Instead, everyone who creates the idea of God or of the absolute I (of the pure reason itself) and reflects on it can notice the following: Firstly, both can be mentally represented as single, self-enclosed, and absolute entities in themselves, out themselves and through themselves. Secondly, we can neither grasp God nor the pure reason without objectifying them in the form of a concept. As Fichte states in the lectures 1804/II, in *The Way Towards a Blessed Life* (1806), and, for instance, in the *Doctrine of Science* 1812—God is a pure concept, and this is the way he appears in us, there is no emanation or becoming from God.²⁴ While the world follows from God in Spinoza, in the *Doctrine of Science* “God” appears merely as an “empty concept”—and the love to God, which is the primal affect [*Seinsaffekt*] of the religious world view, gives him reality.²⁵ Correspondingly, the self-positing reason is not a mere being, but a thinking of this being, which has not only to be intuited intellectually, but also to be fixated as a concept. These are the epistemological reasons why Fichte can begin his

²⁴ „[W]eg mit jenem Phantasma, eines Werdens aus Gott, [...] einer Emanation“ (AzsL GA, I/9: 119, cf. WL-1812-H GA, IV/4: 269). I abbreviate *The Way Towards a Blessed Life* (1806) with AzsL and the *Doctrine of Science* 1812 (Halle-Nachschrift) with WL-1812-H.

²⁵ In the *Doctrine of Science* „<finden> wir es nicht als das Seyn selbst, sondern als einen Gedanken“ (WL-1812 GA, II/13: 52). God is a „leere[r] Begriff[] eines reinen Seyns“ (AzsL GA, I/9: 167); „leere[r], über Gottes inneres Wesen schlechthin keinen Aufschluß gebende[r], Begriff“ (AzsL GA, I/9: 110)—„die Liebe, ist die Quelle aller Gewißheit, und aller Wahrheit, und aller Realität“ (AzsL GA, I/9: 167).

late versions of the *Doctrine of Science* with an analysis of the idea of God. What one learns from the creation of the idea of God can be also applied to the thinking of the idea of pure reason and vice versa. For Fichte after 1800, in his vivid way of doing philosophy, it becomes a possible strategy to introduce the visitors of his lectures to the theory of self-positing pure reason.²⁶

(ii) It is certainly also the religious thought of the *Image of God (Imago Dei)*, in philosophical guise, which influences Fichte and makes parallels between divine and human reason—a merely “*symbolic anthropomorphism*” (Kant 2004, 108; Prol AA, IV: 357)²⁷—possible. As Kant stated in many passages in his work (see, e.g., Kant 2004, 108-11; Prol AA, IV: 357-60, KU AA, V: 456, 460 etc. as well as KrV A672-73/B700-01 and A678/B706), it is allowed and is not a transcendent chain of reasoning to compare God and human reason: under the condition of awareness that it is merely an *analogical thinking*—“*cognition according to analogy*” (Kant 2004, 108; Prol AA, IV: 357). For Kant it is very clear that we cannot think anything without categories. If we use categories to construct merely logically or formally a concept of God or of pure reason—for instance for the sake of critique—it does not mean that we automatically believe that we cognize real things-in-themselves.²⁸ This would be a mistake of the power of judgement, not of reason (see KrV A642-43/B670-71). For the analogical thinking of divine and human reason, which, as Kant states, can be used for didactical reasons, for instance, in religious practice and education, he uses the category of causality:

²⁶ A motive for this strategy could have been given by Friedrich Karl Forberg, „Briefe über die neueste Philosophie,“ *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten* 6 (1) (1797), 44-88, who noticed that both ideas, the absolute I and God, seem ungraspable.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁸ For Kant’s formal construction and determination of transcendental ideas with 12 categories see the above-mentioned works on the *Transcendental Dialectic*, especially Bunte’s (2016), Pissis’ (2012), and Klimmek’s (2005) monographies.

I will say: *the causality of the highest cause* is that, with respect to the world, which *human reason* is with respect to its works of art. Thereby the nature of the highest cause itself remains unknown to me: I *compare* only its effect (*the order of the world*), which is known to me, and the conformity with reason of this effect, *with the effects of human reason that are known to me*, and in consequence I call the highest cause a reason, without thereby ascribing to it as its property the same thing I understand by this expression in humans, or in anything else known to me (Kant 2004, 110; Prol AA, IV: 360, markations by M.L.).

The same way of thinking of pure reason as of a faculty that has causality over (a) *the will* and (b) *the understanding*, and its picture and modification of the world, compared to God's reason, is something we encounter already in the early Fichte:

Ad (a):

[T]he categorical, the quality of the [moral, M.L.] law as simply unconditioned and incapable of being conditioned—this points to our higher origin, to our spiritual descent. It is a divine spark in us, and a pledge that We are of His race (Fichte 2010, 20; VCO GA, I/1: 145).²⁹

Ad (b):

Dogmatists who {consider the world to be something that exists by itself and who} nevertheless retain their moral and religious sentiments have to say that God created the world. {They cannot, however, explain this any further; for no understanding is produced, no matter how the dogmatist construes this claim.} The dogmatists consider God to be a pure intellect, the determinations of which can surely consist in nothing but concepts. This is also how the I has been considered here: it is a {pure} intellect, and its determinations are nothing but pure concepts. A material world is also present for the I, and therefore these pure concepts must transform themselves into a material world—though only into one that exists purely for the intellect. In the case of God, in contrast, these pure concepts must be transformed into a self-sufficient material world, one that also exists for another intellect {- which is quite unintelligible}. The transcendental idealist has to explain only the former process; i.e., he has to show how the pure concepts {of a finite intellect}, considered in a certain way, transform themselves into material substances,

²⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, ed. Allan Wood, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

{[that is,] into a material world for this intellect—which is something that can and should be shown by the philosopher} (FTP, 418-19; WLn[K] GA, IV/3: 496, see also GWL GA, I/2: 390-92).

Before falling prey to later Fichte's vivid terminology and imaginary, the proponents of mystical interpretation of his works should give thought to this function of cognitions according to analogy that Fichte used from the early works on. The (i) parallels encountered in thinking of God and reason, and (ii) the analogies between the "highest reason", and theoretical and practical sides of the human pure reason are perfect transcendental means—especially in the context of the past Atheism dispute—to give Fichte's audience a ladder to the standpoint of the *Doctrine of Science*.

Conclusion

So, is the insight in the 15th lecture surprising? It might feel so the first time one reads the *Doctrine of Science* 1804/II and it certainly felt so for Fichte's audience in Berlin. But it should not be surprising after (I) the systematic reconstruction of the structure of these lectures with the help of the five standpoints and the subject-object-symbolism. The *higher realism*, the giving herself or himself up to a self-forming, living object (O'), is something common to the fourth standpoint in the hierarchy of the five "absolutes", spheres of reason and knowledge, and world views. And it should also not be surprising after (II) considering (i) the epistemic thought experiments that lead to cognition of parallels in thinking of God and pure reason, and (ii) the symbolic-anthropomorphic analogies between God's and human's pure reason. There is no better way for Fichte's audience to get into the *Doctrine of Science* and experience pure reason's activity than in thinking the absolute being (understanding it first as God and then as the absolute I, it is reason, that creates the idea of God and of itself). There is, despite of any

technical, introductory, or other differences, a consistence in central determinations between the earlier and the later versions of the *Doctrine of Science*. The key concepts to notice and understand it—and which I have worked with—are *subject-object*, *idealism-realism*, and *pure reason*, which essence lies in the self-positing, and which is an alternative name for the absolute I, both in the earlier and later versions of the *Doctrine of Science*: “reason is simply the I, and cannot be anything else than I” (1804², 192; GA, II/8: 400). Reason was, after all, since the beginning of Kant’s transcendental project (as the faculty of pure reason in the narrow sense) responsible for ideas and absoluteness. Kant occasionally called it “pure activity” [*reine Tätigkeit*], “pure self-activity” [*reine Selbsttätigkeit*], “spontaneity”, “causality”, “freedom” and “the true I” [*das eigentliche Ich*] throughout his works. This, as Fichte would say, should be grasped *energetically* and examined systematically.