

My Duties and the Morality of Others: Lying, Truth and the Good Example in Fichte's Normative Perfectionism

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1. Introduction

The final part of Fichte's *System of Ethics* shares with most eighteenth-century treatments of normative ethics a general misfortune in later philosophical discussion and scholarship. Even Kant's ethics in the *Doctrine of Virtue* has long been neglected until rather recently, after all. According to a widespread, mostly implicit, assumption, those discussions are not as significant as the corresponding foundational accounts. Now, this underlying thought makes it impossible to fully appreciate the overall project of a work like Fichte's *System of Ethics*. One of the remarkable traits of Fichte's *System of Ethics* is that it encompasses not only a detailed investigation of the foundations of morality and the reality of its demands, but also an extended survey of the main substantive contents of those demands. The *System of Ethics* has the ambitious aim of delivering both an explanation of moral normativity in general and the justification of specific demands. This is not in contrast with the general systematic task. Quite the opposite, in fact. The title of the work has to be taken literally: As a system, it must include both theoretical and practical issues, that is, general and applied aspects of ethics. The project of a systematic treatment of moral theory, that is, a genuine *Sittenlehre*, in fact, had to include an examination of

the main ethical obligations, that is, a doctrine of duties. The normative development is a confirmation, a last step of the complex justification of the principle.¹ The *System* is, as the title says, not just a groundlaying, but a full development of a theory encompassing the investigation of a principle, a deduction of its reality, and the final confirmation in an account of specific obligations, which provides answers to the main normative questions. In this spirit, thus, the final part of the work, beginning in § 19, is presented as “the proper doctrine of duties”, which is ‘proper’, or genuine, both because it discusses some of the main substantive issues of morality in their specific terms, after the general obligations to the body and the intellectual faculties elucidated in § 18, but also because it is supported by a scientific justification, unlike the previous, unsatisfying attempts. Fichte’s foundational claims are thus to be appreciated by taking the *System of Ethics* seriously also as a work of normative ethics, by giving careful consideration to the last part and its task.

A possible obstacle to a careful consideration is that Fichte’s treatment of ethical obligations might appear less original than what the previous section had suggested. After § 18 has stressed the collective dimension of ethical demands, with notable resemblances to Hegel’s later views,² Fichte’s doctrine of duties devotes much more space to the discussion of moral demands that do *not* depend on the role of a rational agent in his community. Unlike Hegel, thus, Fichte does *not* hold that the only proper content for the doctrine of duties can be provided by the normative indications of social roles. In Fichte’s view, the proper doctrine of duties is not merely “the development of the relationships which [...] are [...] actual in their entirety, to wit in the state”.³ For this reason Fichte distinguishes between universal and particular duties (GA I/5: 232f.; SL 4: 259), where the former are obligations that regard the

¹ See also Angelica Nuzzo’s chapter in this volume.

² Similarities and differences between Fichte’s and Hegel’s views of morality are discussed in this volume by Angelica Nuzzo and Luca Fonnesu.

³ Hegel (1970b, § 148A).

relationships of rational agents without further qualification, whereas only the latter are determined by the agent's social role.⁴

Besides an insufficient attention to the overall project of the *System of Ethics* and the original traits of its doctrine of duties, however, a further obstacle to the understanding of Fichte's discussion of ethical obligations lies in that its proper aim is not unambiguous. Fichte maintains in § 17 that conscience "would suffice for actual acting [...]. This, however, is not sufficient for the purposes of science" (GA I/5: 190; SL 4: 208).⁵ Such a statement would seem to suggest that what Fichte presents is a theory of morality for scientific purposes only, for the sake of the system. This would entail that the genuine theoretical work is done by the first two parts of the work, whereas the last one has the mere task to present the main normative implications of the foundational claims, like significant corollaries that exemplify the meaning and display the reach of the truths gained through the theorems from which they are derived. The resulting doctrine of duties would then have no profound practical significance, since the criteria already available to conscience are sufficient for moral guidance. Even if we grant that the *System of Ethics* aims at contributing to morality, and not only to a theoretical reconstruction, that aim would not seem to be pursued through the doctrine of duties.

In the following, I thus shall examine some of the most distinctive elements in the doctrine of duties of the *System of Ethics*, which allow both to give prominence to incisive aspects of Fichte's analysis and to shed light on his general approach to

⁴ This general taxonomy is original to Fichte in several respects and provides the frame in which he revises and, ultimately, discards traditional classification of duties, as we shall see (§ 4 below). When commentators address the question of possible sources of this classification at all, they often mention Baumgarten (see Wood 2016, 236f., and Wood's chapter in the present volume). I do not see any true indication for assuming that Baumgarten's views may have been significant for Fichte, who never mentions them. If the recent Kant scholarship has acknowledged that they played a major role for Kant (see e.g. Bacin 2015a; Fugate & Myers 2019), this does not entail that the same holds true for Fichte as well.

⁵ See Dean Moyar's chapter in this volume.

matters of normative ethics. In his original account of key moral demands, namely the demand of veracity and the duty of setting a good example, the almost paradoxical connection between one's obligation and the morality of other people emerges as the central point of Fichte's conception. Consequently, I shall suggest a general characterisation of his normative ethics and suggest that Fichte's view of morality amounts to a special version of normative perfectionism. In turn, Fichte's perfectionism is qualified by the underlying claim of the agent-neutral character of morality, which entails a rejection of any self-other asymmetry.⁶ In this light, Fichte's view combines elements that would take centre stage in the debate on moral philosophy in the following century.

2. Obligations of Accuracy: Lying and Communication

A first distinctive feature of Fichte's conception of morality emerges in his treatment of the obligations concerning the communication with others. Fichte's classification of the duties to others distinguishes between (a) the duties concerning the formal freedom of the others, (b) those that have to do with the (apparent) contrast of freedom in rational agents, and (c) those that demand to promote morality. Fichte puts the duties regarding communication into the first class, since he construes them as obligations that aim to secure and augment the exercise of formal freedom in other agents. In Part One of the *System of Ethics*, Fichte has argued that "a free being [...] acts in accordance with a concept of an effect" (GA I/5: 75; SL 4: 66; cf. e.g. GA I/5: 166; SL 4: 179). More specifically, formal freedom is causality of rational agents that is determined in light of cognition.⁷ The correctness of that cognition, thus, is integral to

⁶ I do agree with Wood (2016) and Ware (2018) that Fichte's view resists easy classification, as is often the case with original and complex historical views. Nevertheless, suggesting a classification allows to emphasise its distinctive features, which in turn helps to re-consider its place in the history of ethics in broader terms.

⁷ On Fichte's conception of formal freedom, see Dan Breazeale's chapter in this volume.

the full development of the freedom of the others and “must therefore be my goal [*Zweck*] as well, just as much as and for the same reason that the correctness of my own practical cognition is my end [*Zweck*]” (GA I/5: 252; SL 4: 283). This gives to the obligations regarding other agents’ knowledge a distinctive prominence in Fichte’s theory.⁸

Fichte’s originality in considering the obligations concerning communication is twofold. First, his justification of those obligations takes a quite different path than most previous discussions of the morality of lying. Second, and relatedly, along with the traditionally recognised prohibition of lying, Fichte also isolates a corresponding positive obligation, which he presents as “the command to promote correct insight on the part of others and actually to communicate to them any truth we ourselves might know” (GA I/5: 258; SL 4: 290). I shall clarify these two points in turn.

The first original feature of Fichte’s view is that his justification of the unconditional prohibition of lying centres on the effects of lying on the formal freedom of other rational agents or, more exactly, the role that the *content* of the communication should play in the determination of the formal freedom of others. Fichte mainly emphasises his opposition to conceptions that admit only conditional prohibitions of lying, although an unconditional condemnation that leaves no space for exceptions in fact was not entirely new, even leaving Kant’s view aside.⁹ The most distinctive feature of Fichte’s view of lying, however, is the moral significance attributed to communication and its epistemic content. In his view, lying is immoral because it hinders freedom. While previous accounts had already pointed out that lying is an interference with the freedom of others as long as it is harmful, Fichte maintains that, independently from any harm, its hindrance to the freedom of others is construed in

⁸ See also Kosch (2018, 73).

⁹ See Annen (1997). Oddly enough, Annen’s otherwise helpful survey of the discussion on lying in eighteenth-century German philosophy does not even mention Fichte’s *System of Ethics*, although he considers also later works of less prominent writers.

terms of *cognition*. If I give another person “an incorrect cognition”, i.e. if I lie to him, “he has been made into a means for my end” (GA I/5: 253; SL 4: 283). Even if lying leads another person to act in conformity with moral demands, i.e. to act legally, it nevertheless prevents his morality, as “[t]he other person is not supposed to do what is right on the basis of some error, but ought to do it out of love for the good.” (GA I/5: 253; SL 4: 284)

Fichte’s content-centred construal of lying is original with respect to the previous debate and takes a path that has rarely been suggested in the discussions on the morality of lying overall. He characterises the content of the declarations, insofar as it can be matter of lying, as “practical cognition” (GA I/5: 252f.; SL 4: 283ff.), as opposed to a purely speculative cognition.¹⁰ This would appear to leave open the possibility that a purely speculative cognition, that is, one that cannot possibly have implications for the deliberations of a rational agent, could not be content of a morally relevant declaration. Fichte holds, however, that there is no purely speculative cognition, there cannot be such a thing. In a remarkable passage he explains:

“We therefore would have to distinguish between immediately practical items of knowledge [*Kenntnisse*] and purely theoretical ones. But according to a thoroughgoing transcendental philosophy, all theory is related to practice, and no theory is possible without such a relationship to practice. The distinction in question is therefore a merely relative one. The very same thing that is purely theoretical for one individual or for one era can be practical for another individual or era.” (GA I/5: 259; SL 4: 291)

‘Practical cognition’, thus, is any piece of knowledge, insofar as it is, or can be, regarded as a potential basis for rational action. Because of this emphasis on the

¹⁰ Note that Fichte thereby vacates one of the two distinctive features of practical cognition in Kant’s understanding. Kant had defined practical cognition through a twofold distinction, according to which ‘practical’ can be opposed either to ‘theoretical’ or to ‘speculative’. Speculative is, on Kant’s account, a cognition that cannot possibly have implications for our actions. (See Bacin 2015b.)

pragmatic function of belief, Fichte's view also strongly differs from those that appeal to a purported intrinsic value of truth as such.

The contrast with Kant's account of the ethical duty not to lie might be phrased by opposing two moral ideals. While Kant regards lying primarily as a violation of sincerity, Fichte suggests that what is blameworthy in lying is primarily an intentional failure of *accuracy*.¹¹ Fichte does write that "absolute sincerity and truthfulness is something I simply owe everyone" (GA I/5: 252; SL 4: 283), in the terms in which the issue was traditionally framed. However, Fichte equates owing sincerity with: "I am not permitted to say *anything that contradicts the truth*" (GA I/5: 252; SL 4: 283). In other terms, in Fichte's view the traditional distinction between truth (*Wahrheit*) and veracity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) fades away.¹² Fichte thus takes a different path than Kant's already by departing from the definitions taken from the natural law vocabulary that Kant had drawn on (see AA VI 428). While truthfulness is a quality of the mind that lies in the consciously determined correspondence of declarations with the subject's beliefs, Fichte's construal of veracity is about the truth of the communication, not the truthfulness of the subject. On Fichte's account, a liar deserves blame not because he intentionally hides his beliefs, but because he intentionally hides what is the *truth*, as far as he knows, thereby depriving the others of a possibly significant ("practical") piece of knowledge and thus impairing their formal freedom. What matters, is primarily the epistemic value of the declaration, that is, its providing *true* belief. In this light, lying is unconditionally wrong because

¹¹ On the contrast between sincerity vs accuracy see Williams (2002, 149, and *passim*). On Kant's account of ethical duty not to lie, see Bacin (2013).

¹² Fichte already vacated the distinction in his 1791 sermon "On the Love of Truth", by using 'truth' as corresponding to veracity (GA II,1: 147). Thereby Fichte regards as lies also what previous writers called 'logical untruths', that is, accidentally false statements.

it contrasts with the fundamental presupposition, demanded by the moral law, to assume that the others can morally improve themselves in free action.¹³

The importance of true knowledge for the determination of freedom makes the prohibition of lying unconditional. Fichte stresses accordingly his rejection of the permissibility of any supposedly necessary lie (*Notlüge*: GA I/5: 254ff.; SL 4: 286ff.),¹⁴ also by discussing the same “customary school example” (GA I/5: 256, SL 4: 288; translation modified) of the would-be murderer at the door that is famously considered in Kant’s essay on the *Supposed Right to Lie*.¹⁵ Unaware of Kant’s different take on the same case, Fichte’s more elaborate discussion is an exercise in considering all possible alternatives to lying. As the duty not to lie demands, one should tell the truth to the assailant in the first place, on the necessary assumption of the possibility of his improvement (GA I/5: 253, SL 4: 284).¹⁶ Alternately, the same presupposition would suggest to protect the would-be victim by talking the assailant out of his murderous intentions. In any case, not even the risk for one’s own life gives a reason to lie, directly contributing to the immorality of the other. Giving false information to the assailant, Fichte argues, is to be avoided at all costs.

This way of framing the issue follows from the account of agency given in the first part of the work. As to its normative implications, however, it does not account for the case of a declaration that, meant as a lie, in fact unwillingly delivers an *exact*

¹³ On the requirement of assuming the perfectibility of others, see GA I/5: 217, SL 4: 240; GA I/5: 248f., SL 4: 278f.; GA I/5: 253, SL 4: 284; cf. GA I/5: 280ff., SL 4: 318. See also De Pascale (2015, 186).

¹⁴ While the English translation of the *System of Ethics* by Breazeale and Zöller renders *Notlüge* with ‘white lie’, it would probably be more appropriate to use the directly corresponding term ‘necessary lie’, since the distinctive feature of a *Notlüge* is not its being trivial, as the phrase ‘white lie might suggest’, but exactly that it is borne out of necessity. See also Wood (2016, 243).

¹⁵ Everything suggests that Fichte’s observations are independent from Kant’s essay, which was published only a few months before the *System of Ethics*, in September 1797. I cannot examine thoroughly the contrast between Kant’s and Fichte’s view on lying here. For a brief comparison between their ways to discuss the murderer at the door case, see Timmermann (forthcoming, § 18).

¹⁶ This eases the supposed tension pointed at by Wood (2016, 243).

cognition, on the basis of which another rational agent can act both from a good disposition and according to a perfectly suitable representation of the object of the action. In Fichte's account, such an unwillingly correct lie could not be regarded as immediately blameworthy. It could be blamed only if a further consideration is brought in, namely that, although the cognition is correct, the *interaction* between the subjects would still be distorted. However, this further condition makes an unwillingly correct lie a violation of a *different* demand than the prohibition of lying. This is in fact the point of another, positive duty regarding the same matter, which I shall now consider.

The second original aspect of Fichte's view on the morality of communication lies in that his content-centred construal of lying and veracity leads him to go beyond traditional accounts and envisage a corresponding positive obligation to "promote correct insight on the part of others". As lying is prohibited insofar as it limits the formal freedom of others through false information, the same care for the epistemic basis of the practice of that freedom demands from every moral agent "to communicate [...] any truth" he might know (GA I/5: 258; SL 4: 290). Since every rational agent ought to promote what Fichte calls the efficacy of others as rational agents, that is, a causal realisation of their formal freedom as adequate as possible, sharing with them the knowledge we can count on is a specific duty. As Fichte writes, "even without being summoned by him [sc.: the other] to do this, I owe it to him to communicate correct cognition to him. This is a necessary end to me already through myself [*es ist mir schon durch mich selbst nothwendiger Zweck*]." (GA I/5: 258; SL 4: 290; translation modified)

Unlike the prohibition of lying, the specific duty to communicate the truth is an original addition of Fichte's examination of moral obligations, which thereby displays a not merely reconstructive character with regard to the traditional, pre-philosophical view of morality. Compared to the discussion of lying, which could draw on a long history of previous accounts, however, the positive duty of sharing our knowledge is ultimately less clear as to its applications. One issue with the

application follows from the extension to any possibly relevant piece of knowledge, since the only relevant criterion is which information can be helpful to a more secure, informed and efficacious action of the other (that is, “which truth is practical to this individual”: GA I/5: 258; SL 4: 290). On the other hand, although Fichte declares that particular obligations enjoy priority, i.e., *deliberative* priority, on universal duties (cf. GA I/5: 269; SL 4: 304), the specific obligations of the scholar that he presents later on (§ 29) can be reduced to, or follow from, the general duties regarding sharing of true knowledge.

3. Behaving Morally and the Morality of Others: The Duty to Set a Good Example

If Fichte’s view of the duties regarding communication points out how correct cognition is a necessary condition for the successful exercise of formal freedom, another aspect of his doctrine of duties stresses the direct contribution that every rational agent should give to the morality of others. The duty to set a good example plays, accordingly, an important role in Fichte’s account.¹⁷ Whereas the duties regarding communication address the epistemic basis of the deliberations of other people, the duty to set a good example should address the moral disposition of the others, that is, specifically their morality. This demand is, according to Fichte, entailed in the general rule: “show your fellow human beings things worthy of respect” (GA I/5: 279; SL 4: 317). If this rule is applied to one’s own actions, it yields the duty of setting a good example:

“And we can hardly show them anything better suited to this purpose than our own moral way of thinking and our own moral conduct” (GA I/5: 279; SL 4: 317).

¹⁷ The significance of that duty in Fichte’s conception had already been noticed very early by C.F. Stäudlin (1798, 453f.).

A praiseworthy conduct would not only be morally good *per se*, but would also contribute to the morality of others through a stimulation of the feeling of respect. The point of the duty of setting the good example, as Fichte presents it, follows from the thought expressed in Kant's remark that "respect is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit" (AA 5: 77). Fichte gives almost a paraphrase of that passage: "as soon as this affect finds its object it expresses itself unavoidably; everything worthy of respect is most certainly respected." (GA I/5: 279; SL 4: 317) Examples of good behaviour would strengthen this feeling in the other, thereby contributing to the goal that his actions would not only be legal, but genuinely moral (see GA I/5: 279ff.; SL 4: 318ff.). Fichte accordingly sees the point of this duty in "moral cultivation [*moralische Bildung*]" (GA I/5: 279; SL 4: 317). The purpose of the demand is, again, to strengthen the causal interplay of rational agents, insofar as it is built on the proper motivation. The efficacy of actions matters as long as they can count as a causal expression of reason.

The combination of a general maxim of moral education with a qualification that entails an exhortation to the other agent through one's own conduct has intuitive appeal. Fichte's suggestion to consider a specific obligation to set a good example grasps the plausible thought that one's own conduct does not matter exclusively as a feature of the moral worth or character of the individual agent, but can have an impact on others as well, even if they are not the addressee of the actions at issue. However, from the standpoint of a normative theory, Fichte's thought is peculiar in two regards at least.

First, the content of such an obligation sounds puzzling. As Fichte puts it in § 18, since "[w]hat I will is morality as such" and "it does not matter in the least whether this is *in me* or is *outside me*", "my end is achieved if the other person acts *morally*" (GA I/5: 210; SL 4: 232). This claim not only expresses the fundamental interdependence of moral agents, but generates here a definite obligation. The duty of setting a good example is thus put forward as a crucial part of one's striving

towards that end. That construal of the obligation, however, has a significantly paradoxical overtone. Is it even possible to promote the moral perfection of others? In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant has famously denied it, arguing that

“it is a contradiction for me to make another’s *perfection* my end and consider myself under obligation to promote this. For the *perfection* of another human being, as a person, consists just in this: that *he himself* is able to set his end in accordance with his own concepts of duty; and it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do.” (AA 6: 386).¹⁸

Unaware of Kant’s position on the matter, Fichte stresses that the duty requires *contributing* to the perfection of others, while leaving the actual deliberation to the other. Most of Fichte’s examination of the demand of giving a good example, in fact, is devoted to clarify the boundaries of that contribution. Still, this does not cancel that, in these terms, the duty at issue aims at a goal which, if not impossible to achieve, is impossible to assess, also from the individual agent’s standpoint.¹⁹ The genuine difference between Kant’s and Fichte’s views, however, concerns not the possibility to contribute to the agency of another subject, but the end at issue. For Fichte this obligation is not about the moral improvement of others, but one’s contribution to the realisation of morality, both in oneself and in others.

Second, the distinctiveness of this duty is unclear. Can setting a good example be the content of a *specific* duty? Or is it just a pervasive aspect of the moral significance of complying with the demands of morality in general?²⁰ Now, Fichte can clarify this

¹⁸ For a critical discussion of Kant’s view see Denis (1999).

¹⁹ Probably to make sense of this peculiar character, Kosch calls the duty of the good example an “indirect duty” (Kosch 2018, 71). The label does not fully correspond to Fichte’s thought, though, and might lead to misunderstandings. The bindingness of the duty of the good example does not depend on prior (‘direct’) obligations. (Kant uses the phrase ‘indirect duty’ in this sense with regard to securing one’s own happiness in order to remove obstacles to the practice of morality: see AA 4: 399.) The content of the duty of the good example cannot be reduced to a specific conduct, as I shall clarify soon, but this does not entail that its obligatoriness is to be construed differently than that of other duties.

²⁰ This issue has already been hinted at by Schleiermacher (1803, 304).

doubt and make sense of a requirement of that sort in two ways. He can argue that it is a specific duty insofar as it determines the task of a social role. Also, he can construe it as a sort of second-order duty, which is complied with by complying with other demands. Characteristically, Fichte's view ultimately includes *both* solutions.

In the more straightforward solution, corresponding to the latter option, the universal duty of setting a good example develops in the *particular* duty of the "moral teacher":

"The proper and characteristic duty of the teacher of the people is to set a good example. He does not provide such an example simply for his own sake, but for the sake of the entire community that he represents." (GA I/5: 307; SL 4: 352; cf. GA I/5: 307; SL 4: 204f.)

The universal obligation to set a good example evolves in a specific duty regarding the promotion of the morality of others, through his restriction to a particular social role.²¹ Fichte cannot be content with this solution, mainly because it would make the contribution to the morality of others not a universal task for every subject, but only for a restricted class of subjects. The underlying claim that "my end is achieved if the other person acts *morally*" (GA I/5: 210; SL 4: 232) does not concern only a social role, but each and every rational agent. More interestingly, then, the duty of setting a good example, as a *universal* duty, cannot be restricted to a specific conduct. Rather, it describes a general task in the moral life of every individual who has to be aware of the normative meaning of his conduct. The only specific aspect of the requirement is that of 'publicity', as Fichte puts it (see GA I/5: 284; SL 4: 323f.). Transparency allows one's actions, in principle, to have a larger impact on other subjects. The duty of setting a good example, thus, demands that the agent be open as to the grounds of his resolutions. In Fichte's view, thus, the specificity of this obligation is determined not by its object, but by a further constraint on actions, even if this concerns the entire

²¹ Compare the "exemplary conduct [*exemplarische Führung*]" (AA 6: 479) of the teacher in Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue*.

scope of the conduct of an agent.²² Unlike imperfect duties, the duty of setting a good example does not really leave open how the obligation is most appropriately complied with, in the given circumstances, because the duty applies to each and every aspect of the actions of a subject.

The duty of setting a good example thus gives an argument against a simple consequentialist reading of Fichte's view. The goal is here contributing to the *morality* of others, not to the mere instrumental adequacy or the conformity to law of their actions. Moreover, the duty of setting a good example is about contributing to morality in a way that cannot be assessed in terms of outcomes, if only because they must be left to the free determination of others. Here again, the obligation is about contributing to the full development of rational nature, even in others. Fichte talks therefore of "education [*Bildung*] to morality".

The most important part of the significance of the duty to set a good example, thus, lies in the demand to go, in one's own conduct, beyond the efficacy of the acts of an individual. The demand to contribute to the morality of others, as far as it is in one's power, pushes individual agency beyond its limits. What matters here, is namely not the full development of the capacities of others, but a more efficacious and pervasive advancement towards self-sufficiency. Education to morality, thus, is about strengthening *all* rational agents and their moral disposition through a robust, clear, transparent embodiment of morality. In this sense, the duty of setting a good example is about a conscious striving towards an embodiment of the moral law that goes beyond one's own individual self.

²² Thus, also this consideration confirms that Fichte's normative ethics does not leave conceptual space to the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. (See below, § 4.)

4. Impersonal Morality

The specific obligations that I have considered show that Fichte's view of morality in the doctrine of duties focuses on the efficacy and the grounds of the causal interplay of rational agents towards their common overarching end of self-sufficiency. Fichte's treatment of duties regarding communication points out that the correctness of practical cognition of others "must [...] be my end [...] just as much as and for the same reason that the correctness of my own practical cognition is my end" (GA I/5: 252; SL 4: 283). Analogously, "my end is achieved if the other person acts *morally*" (GA I/5: 210; SL 4: 232), since it is utterly irrelevant whether morality is realised by the one or the other subject. This double focus is in fact only a part of a comprehensive conception, which revolves around the thought that an agent's duty is, in its most substantial part, about the morality of others. Fichte's account of moral demands shows that the differences among individuals are of no importance from a normative point of view.

A reassessment of supposedly agent-centred aspects of morality is already apparent in Fichte's remarks concerning the purported duties to oneself. Fichte maintains that, if such duties *regard* one's own individual person, are in fact not *owed* to one's self as such. What is traditionally called a duty to oneself, is

"not, properly speaking, a duty with respect to [*gegen*] myself and for the sake of myself, which is how one customarily puts it; for in this situation as well I am and remain a means for a final end outside of myself." (GA I/5: 231; SL 4: 257).

Such duties are in fact merely *self-regarding* obligations. The argument on the purported duties to the self parallels a similar reduction that earlier writers had suggested in arguing that the so-called duties to the self are in fact owed to God.²³ Fichte's point is now, analogously, that the moral significance of self-regarding actions does not lie in their self-regarding features, but exclusively in the way they

²³ See e.g. Clarke 1706, 97.

make me able to contribute to the final end of reason. When he calls self-regarding duties “conditioned duties” (GA I/5: 232; SL 4: 257), he does not merely propose a new label, but emphasises this perspective change. Any qualitative difference from other-regarding actions is thus irrelevant, in this respect. An important agent-centred aspect of common-sense morality thereby undergoes a significant revision.

A further step in the same direction is taken in § 24 of the *System of Ethics*, where Fichte discusses, under a rather opaque label, the “duties with respect to conflict between the formal freedom of rational beings” (GA I/5: 266; SL 4: 300). Some early readers of the *System of Ethics* referred to this section for Fichte’s treatment of possible conflicts of duties.²⁴ More exactly, the section argues for the impossibility of such conflicts, in light of the general claim that the formal freedom of different individual rational agents cannot possibly be in contrast. Should the conditions for the exercise of formal freedom by different individuals — that is, their life, body, and property — conflict, Fichte argues that there is no general criterion to address the issue and solve the resulting perplexity. While previous writers had suggested that a criterion was provided by the necessary prioritisation of one’s own person to others’,²⁵ Fichte holds the opposite view. He goes so far as maintaining that on the matter

“[t]he law remains completely silent, and since my actions are supposed to be animated by nothing but the moral law, I ought not to do anything at all, but should calmly await the outcome.” (GA I/5: 268; SL 4: 303)

When he considers the possibility of moral contrast between the destinies of different persons, his underlying view emerges most clearly: There is no qualitative, morally relevant difference between rational agents. There is no normative priority or asymmetry between the self and others, as “we are both tools of the moral law in *the*

²⁴ See Reinhard (1801, § 201), Stäudlin (1798, 453f.). (These remarkable examples of the otherwise scarce early reception of the *System of Ethics* have never been considered, to the best of my knowledge. See Zöllner 2015, who only mentions a few early reviews of the *System*.)

²⁵ See e.g. Wolff (1750, § 64).

same way” (GA I/5: 268; SL 4: 303). Fichte maintains that the person of the other matters to me just as much as my own, by virtue of one same final end (see GA I/5: 250; SL 4: 280). At one point, he observes that obligations regarding relatives have priority insofar as they are “particular duties” (GA I/5: 269; SL 4: 304), that is, non-transferrable duties that are determined according to the social role of the individual agent. Thus, only the specific order of a society can establish overriding relations between demands, while the general interpersonal morality of “universal duties” is not able to discern any standard of prioritisation.²⁶ Provided that no particular duties apply, no asymmetry between persons has any normative bearing.

As is the case with self-regarding duties, also the duties to others are not properly owed to the individual persons of the others, in Fichte’s view. Both traditional classes of obligations are in fact “duties to the whole [*gegen das Ganze*]” (GA I/5: 232; SL 4: 258; translation modified). In Fichte’s distinction between conditioned and universal duties (see GA I/5: 232; SL 4: 257), the very difference between duties to oneself and to others is thus not merely re-phrased, but profoundly revised, and ultimately taken back. Obligations are not due to anyone in particular, but they merely demand actions regarding someone, be it one’s own self or others. This marks an important difference to previous views, Kant’s included, which follows from the normative irrelevance of individual distinctions.

Fichte’s dismissal of agent-centred differences, in fact, is introduced in general terms at the outset of the doctrine of duties through a re-formulation of Kant’s Formula of the End in Itself.²⁷ Fichte puts forward as the principle that underlies all moral demands the claim that “I am *for myself* – i.e., before my own consciousness – only an instrument, a mere tool of the moral law, and by no means the end of the same” (GA

²⁶ Fichte already vacated the distinction in his 1791 sermon “On the Love of Truth”, by using ‘truth’ as corresponding to veracity (GA II,1: 147). Thereby Fichte regards as lies also what previous writers called ‘logical untruths’, that is, accidentally false statements.

²⁷ On this see also Guyer (2019, 273-275).

I/5: 230; SL 4: 255). To the individual rational agent, who faces practical issues, the moral law is thus primarily a general demand of contributing to the efficacy of rational action. In this perspective, the other moral subjects are seen as ends: "Before my own consciousness, these others are not means but the final end" (GA I/5: 230; SL 4: 255). These remarks already imply a notable difference from Kant's emphasis on humanity both in one's person and the others'. Yet, as so often in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte maintains the convergence of their views:

"This Kantian proposition is compatible with mine, when the latter has been further elaborated. For every rational being outside me, to whom the moral law certainly addresses itself in the same way that it addresses itself to me, namely, as the tool of the moral law, I am a member of the community of rational beings; hence I am, from his viewpoint, an end *for him*, just as *he* is, from my viewpoint, an end *for me*." (GA I/5: 230; SL 4: 255f.)

However, this reassurance is soon followed by a further important clarification:

"Everyone is an end, in the sense that everyone is a *means* for realizing reason. This is the ultimate and final end of each person's existence; this alone is why one is here, and if this were not the case, if this were not what ought to happen, then one would not need to exist at all." (GA I/5: 230; SL 4: 256)

The consideration of all agents as ends is, in the deliberative perspective, a first glimpse of the teleological structure of morality. The notion of end, in fact, does not properly apply to persons *per se*, but to the realisation of reason, which is only possible through rational agents. The difference from Kant's view lies already in the meaning of 'end', which changes from denoting an object of volition to denoting (part of) a goal to be achieved. Whereas Kant had observed in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that every rational agent should be regarded "not as an end to be effected but as an independently existing end" (AA 4: 437), Fichte argues that other persons are to be regarded as ends not as a limiting condition to subjective

ends, but as a part of the general end to be pursued.²⁸ Correspondingly, all ethical demands presuppose the perfectibility of all rational agents as such.²⁹

While Kant's terms were functional to an anti-teleological view of morality, Fichte deploys them to stress the teleological outlook of his own conception from the outset. Also, while Kant's view acknowledges agent-centred distinctions and gives them a central position in his normative ethics, Fichte's account reaches a very different conclusion. His construal of the terms of the Formula of the End in Itself amounts to a dismissal of any self-other asymmetry. As Fichte puts it, "every virtuous person [...] ought to forget himself in his end" (GA I/5: 303; SL 4: 347; cf. e.g. GA I/5: 230; SL 4: 255f.).³⁰ The end of morality is not related to the perspective of the first or the second person, but is just the same for every rational agent. In *this* sense, his view is to be characterised as agent-neutral, namely as a theory that determines for every moral agent exactly the same ultimate aim.³¹ As he reportedly puts it in his lectures, "the object of the moral law was reason in general, the entire community of rational beings [...] is reason, as we have seen. Reason itself, as end, is posited outside of me, although it can only be realised through myself as individual" (GA IV/1: 123; cf. GA I/5: 229, SL 4: 254f.).

Fichte's view thus counters assumptions that are deeply rooted both in moral philosophy and in ordinary moral thinking. Some decades later, Sidgwick observed that:

²⁸ Notably, the corresponding passage in Fichte's lectures on morals (GA IV/1: 124) clarifies that he referred not to the *Groundwork*, but to the second *Critique* (AA 5: 87), where the notion of 'independently existing end' is not present.

²⁹ GA I/5: 217, SL 4: 240; GA I/5: 248f., SL 4: 278f.; GA I/5: 253, SL 4: 284; cf. GA I/5: 280ff., SL 4: 318f.

³⁰ Regarding Fichte's conception as an *Ethik der Person* (Maesschalk 2015), thus, is misleading as it precludes the possibility to appreciate this distinctive trait.

³¹ See e.g. Dreier 1993, 22.

“It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between anyone individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently ‘I’ am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual.” (Sidgwick 1874, 498).

That the ultimate end is not determined in relation to the distinction between different individuals is exactly what Fichte maintains as the first and foremost normative claim of his examination of ethical duties. The idea of the agent-neutrality of moral demands is thus a fundamental trait of his normative ethics. Fichte makes precisely this point by arguing that “all free beings necessarily share the same end”, clarifying it as follows:

“the purposive [*zweckmäßige*] conduct of one person would at the same time be purposive for all others and [...] the liberation of one would at the same time be the liberation of all the others. – Is this the case? [...] [E]verything and everything for us in particular, i.e., the *distinctive character of our presentation of ethics* – depends upon the answer to this question.” (GA I/5: 209; SL 4: 230f.; my emphasis)

The doctrine of duties makes it clear that Fichte answers his question in the affirmative: The “purposive conduct of one person” is indeed, crucially, “at the same time [...] purposive for all others”. This important claim in fact determines the distinctive character of his view. As Fichte observes in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, “[e]thics does not deal with any particular individual; instead, it deals with reason as such or in general” (GA IV/3: 521; WLnm, 242). Now, if ethics is “the theory of our consciousness of our moral nature in general and of our specific duties in particular” (GA I/5: 35; SL 4: 15), then the primary contribution of Part Three to the general project is to clarify that the demands yielded by that moral nature are not cast in individual, but in impersonal terms.

5. Normative Perfectionism beyond Asymmetry

Once we appreciate the agent-neutral character of Fichte's view of morality, we might suggest to interpret it as consequentialist. Michelle Kosch has argued that "the rejection of agent-centred restrictions" is one of the main reasons for thinking that Fichte's view is "consequentialist in structure".³² Now, an important weakness of a consequentialist reading of his normative ethics is that it leads to overlook Fichte's insistence on the requirement for morality even in what he presents as a "doctrine of legality".³³ Fichte stresses that even the *content* of main specific ethical obligations requires not mere conformity to the letter of moral demands, but proper causality from concepts. Fichte emphasises this requirement no less than three times.³⁴ As he puts it, "[o]ne cannot will legality at all, except for the sake of morality." (GA I/5: 261; SL 4: 294) Thus, the mere (either actual or intended) consequences do neither determine the moral worth of actions nor the deliberative standard. Unlike standard forms of consequentialism, Fichte's view does not regard any state of affairs as the aim with regard to which the worth of actions is determined.³⁵ On the other hand, however, morality consists in a fuller form of causal determination of reason than mere legality. As Fichte's analysis of specific duties display, all their requirements aim at the development of the efficacy of reason towards full self-sufficiency. In his account, the teleological structure of morality is also embedded in the perspective of

³² Kosch (2018, 89). Kosch assumes that the Agent-Neutrality claim necessarily distinguishes between consequentialist and deontological theories, which is disputable (see e.g. Dreier 1993, 22f.). Furthermore, departing from Wood (2014, 2016), Kosch (2018) and Ware (2018), I rather avoid the ultimately unclear term 'deontology' and prefer to use 'non-consequentialism' instead. For a detailed consideration of the limits of 'deontology', and the suggestion to drop the term altogether, see Timmermann (2015).

³³ On Fichte's slightly misleading understanding of 'legality' in the *System of Ethics*, see Luca Fonnesu's chapter in this volume.

³⁴ See GA I/5: 254, 261; SL 4: 284, 285, 294.

³⁵ See also Wood (2014, 151f).

the individual agent, who regards other agents as ends. Morality is thus construed in terms of relations to ends, with the crucial clause that these are not ends external to free agency.

To accommodate its non-consequentialist, yet teleological character, Fichte's conception of morality should be regarded as a version of perfectionism.³⁶ More specifically, Fichte develops a form of normative perfectionism, as opposed to a biological perfectionism. While the latter is based on the features of agents as a biological species, normative perfectionists like Fichte put forward a theory of morality that justifies moral obligations on the basis of the general end of the development of the rational nature of agents.³⁷ As we have seen in previous sections, Fichte's doctrine of duties accordingly justifies specific moral obligations insofar as they converge towards a larger development of rational nature. In contrast to most other forms of normative perfectionism, however, Fichte's perfectionism is significantly qualified by the central idea of agent-neutrality.³⁸ The ultimate end towards which morality strives is not, as we have seen, the full development of any individual self, but the full realisation of reason.

A striking, but indicative consequence of the agent-neutral qualification of perfectionism is that 'virtue' as a specific notion plays virtually no role in Fichte's normative theory. The *System of Ethics* is arguably unique, among eighteenth-century works on moral philosophy, in the extremely limited importance of the notion of

³⁶ I find myself in agreement with Ware (2018) and Moggach (2018) on regarding Fichte as a perfectionist.

³⁷ See Brink (2019), who mentions Aristotle, Mill and Green as examples of normative perfectionism.

³⁸ On the general profile of an agent-neutral perfectionism see Hurka (1993, 63f.)

virtue.³⁹ Not only the word is used in rather non-specific terms, synonymously for the moral worth of an agent. More importantly, there is no space for virtue as an agent's character.⁴⁰ When Fichte comes closest to a precise statement of his notion of virtue, he characteristically maintains: "True virtue consists in acting, in acting for the community, by means of which one may forget oneself completely" (GA I/5: 231; SL 4: 256), which amounts to rejecting a traditional, agent-centred notion of virtue. Virtue has thus no bearing for normative ethics, in Fichte's view, because the normative issues are not about the development of the individual agent.

More importantly, Fichte's agent-neutral conception of morality distinguishes his form of normative perfectionism from most others by dismissing any genuine self-other asymmetry. As his analysis of specific duties shows, it has no normative bearing to the realisation of morality whether an action affects one's own self or other persons. Every subject has the duty to further morality in others "as much as" in oneself "and for the same reason" (cf. GA I/5: 252; SL 4: 283). Ethical obligations do not address the individual person's perspective, but demand to go beyond it: "The sole duty of everyone is to further the end of reason; the latter comprehends within itself all other ends" (GA I/5: 285, SL 4: 325). The distinctive 'good' of individual rational agents fades that other normative perfectionists, such as Green, acknowledge fades away as such. In a radical construal of the impartiality of moral demands, Fichte holds that all individual agents equally matter as means to the development of reason in general.

³⁹ David James' emphasis given to virtue in his reconstruction of Fichte's social philosophy (James 2011) goes admittedly beyond Fichte's own vocabulary in the Jena practical philosophy, referring forward to the larger role of the notion of virtue in the *Addresses to the German Nation* (see James 2011, 17ff., 139). While talking of virtue is helpful to clarify the relationship between right and morality in Fichte's conception, it does not waive the marginality of that notion in ethics and the contrast to previous ways of deploying it.

⁴⁰ Similarities and differences between Fichte's and Hegel's views of morality are discussed in this volume by Angelica Nuzzo and Luca Fonnesu.

In spite of some counterintuitive elements, i.e. chiefly its agent-neutral character, Fichte's normative perfectionism presents rational agents with a moral theory that intends to provide the necessary normative orientation fitting the boundaries of the deliberative boundaries of finite reason. In a remarkable passage, where Fichte considers how one should decide when confronted with the necessity of sacrificing either the life of an older person or that of a younger person, he argues as follows:

"[I]t is simply impossible to judge from whose preservation more or less good will follow, for the finite understanding has no voice when it comes to determining what will and what will not prove to be more advantageous in a certain situation, and every argument of this sort is impertinent and presumptuous. This is a decision that must be left to the rational governance of the world – which is something that one believes in from this [moral] point of view. *Finite understanding knows only that at each moment of one's life one ought to do what duty calls upon one to do at that moment, without worrying about how much good will follow from doing this and how this might happen*" (GA I/5: 268; SL 4: 303; my emphasis).⁴¹

The philosophical investigation uncovers the teleological structure of morality, showing that it is oriented to the promotion of a final, all-encompassing end. On a larger scale, morality is organised towards the ultimate end of the full realisation of reason's power, to which all moral actions contribute. As Fichte writes, "[r]eason is thoroughly determined; therefore, everything that lies within the sphere of reason [...] must also be determined." (GA I/5: 191; SL 4: 208). This cannot be the standard of judgment in the given circumstances, but it is this structure that ultimately justifies specific ethical demands.

6. Practical Cognition: The Purpose of Fichte's Moral Theory

Its general characterisation notwithstanding, the overall purpose of Fichte's normative view still remains unclear. As I mentioned at the outset, Fichte's claim that

⁴¹ See also Ware (2018, 575).

the underlying purpose of the *System of Ethics* is “scientific” could easily be understood to the effect that the work merely provides a philosophical explanation of morality as part of the system of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. But how would the extensive doctrine of duties of the last part of the work sit in such a project, then? If a directly prescriptive theory would obviously not be compatible with the most fundamental tenets of Fichte’s thought and his view of freedom in particular, the aim of the normative theory cannot be a mere reconstruction of ordinary moral thinking either. In dismissing the relevance of any self-other asymmetry, the scientific investigation of morality leads to a revision of moral common-sense.

In contrast to a mere descriptive or reconstructive endeavour, the task of the doctrine of duties in the *System of Ethics* is rather to provide the epistemic grounds for a full development of the moral nature of rational agents. In the lectures on moral philosophy that prepared the *System of Ethics*, Fichte reportedly observed that “the human being with a moral disposition [*moralisch gesinnt*]” will “have to design a certain plan for himself, since the entire whole of reason [*das ganze All der Vernunft*] cannot be presented”. Thus “he will have to speculate, for the sake of moral action. If he meets doubt in his acts, he will have to speculate further”. Now, the distinctive task of the ‘scholar’ is exactly to entertain this theoretical activity for the sake of morality in general: “The scholar, who occupies himself with speculation, acts too, for exactly his speculation is his end and his action” (GA IV/1: 132). While this remark is phrased in terms that do not find direct correspondence in the *System of Ethics*, the thought aptly conveys the task of the theory presented in the published work, too. A normative theory as outlined in its final part follows the purpose to contribute to the morality of others by clarifying the coherent plan of the “whole of reason”.

Fichte thus understands the task of moral philosophy in strongly moral terms. What Fichte attributes to the “duty of a scholar”, namely “to seek and to disseminate truth that is purely theoretical” but “ought to become practical” (GA I/5: 259; SL 4: 291),

serves here also as a metaphilosophical maxim that requires to present the results of the philosophical investigation as practical cognition. In violation of that duty, the bad moral philosopher has a share in the responsibility for the viciousness of his community. For this reason, the defense of necessary lies is so seriously blameworthy.⁴² In contrast, an accurate, scientific, “proper” doctrine of duties should be regarded not only as integral to the overall project, but in fact as its main purpose. The scientific account developed in the first two parts of the work requires to be brought to completion in the third part, through which it can contribute to the advancement of morality.

Although it departs from deeply rooted assumptions in ordinary moral thinking, the philosophical reconstruction of the series of actions leading to self-sufficiency thus provides better epistemic grounds for rational deliberation. This gives to Fichte’s theory a practical significance without imposing on it a prescriptive character. In Fichte’s terms, the *System of Ethics*, especially its ‘proper doctrine of duties’ should be understood as providing an articulate body of practical cognition. If conscience “would suffice for actual acting” (GA I/5: 190; SL 4: 208), conscience supported by science, i.e. a systematic overview of the contents of morality, draws on true practical cognition. Moral philosophy thus represents an all-important contribution to the advancement of morality. The final observation that “the common man will become ever more capable of advancing with the culture of the age” (GA I/5: 317; SL 4: 365) is a fitting conclusion for the *System of Ethics*, as Fichte remarks, not merely because it underscores the thought of the cooperation between the different components of society, but also because it articulates the proper task of his own normative theory in promoting morality.

⁴² See GA I/5: 256; SL 4: 288: “Defense of necessary lies is also the most perverted thing possible among human beings.”

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