

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Fichte's Creuzer review and the transformation of the free will problem

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Abstract

Fichte's early review of C. A. L. Creuzer's neglected and idiosyncratic skeptical book on free will posed a serious challenge to what at the time was emerging as a consensus Kantian position on the role of free choice (*Willkür*) in the generation of imputable action. Fichte's review was directed as much against Reinhold's important (and only recently published) letter on freedom of the will as it was against Creuzer himself. In the course of his brief review, Fichte suggests an important recasting of the strategy of the Kantian postulates of rational faith; he poses a dilemma for the Reinholdian understanding of the relationship among an autonomous practical will, a free power of choice, and the actions of natural human organisms; and he hints at a radical reappropriation of the rationalist doctrine of pre-established harmony in re-orienting the search for a defensible reconstruction of a broadly Kantian position on the problem of free will.

Thirty-five years ago, Daniel Breazeale published a seminal article in *The Review of Metaphysics* with the title "Fichte's Aenesidemus Review and the Transformation of German Idealism" (Breazeale, 1981). Breazeale's focus was an early review published by Fichte in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* (I, 1–27).¹ The focus of the review was G.E. Schulze, an early skeptical critic of Kantian philosophy, particularly as it had been promulgated by one of the early enthusiasts for the Kantian program: K.L. Reinhold. Although Fichte's explicit target in the review was Schulze (1792/1911), Breazeale showed that the larger target was Reinhold himself and that the upshot was a radical transformation of the project of (post-) Kantian idealism. In what follows, I examine a second, even earlier review published by Fichte in the ALZ. Its target was also an early skeptical critic of Kantian philosophy, in this case C.A.L. Creuzer. I will argue that the main target of Fichte's critical review was not Creuzer himself but Reinhold and that the upshot was a radical transformation of the question to which a theory of free will would be an answer.

I begin with some philological and historical details. The book which Fichte reviewed bore the title: *Skeptical Observations Concerning Freedom of the Will, with Reference to the Most Recent Theories Thereof*.² It was published in 1793, but Creuzer (1793: unpaginated front matter) tells us in his introduction that "the greater part of this *Werkchen* [little book] was already

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worked out before Easter, 1792". Fichte's review appeared in the ALZ on 30 October, 1793—that is, a year and a half later. I emphasise these details of the timeline because they turn out to be consequential for our understanding of the rhetorical context and substantive content of the review. As Dieter Henrich has shown in great detail, the early 1790s was a period during which the development of philosophical ideas in Germany was highly compressed in time and space, with radical changes emerging in quick succession among thinkers who were in regular contact with one another and responding rapidly to new intellectual and political developments (Henrich, 2004). In this case, the full significance of Fichte's review comes into view only when we appreciate the extent to which its primary concerns are with philosophical developments that occurred only *after* Creuzer had written "the greater part of his *Werkchen*".

In orienting ourselves in the controversy, our first step must be to clarify the character of Creuzer's "skeptical observations" and to identify "the most recent theories" with which it is concerned. We will misunderstand Creuzer's position if we assimilate it to the familiar and long-established forms of skepticism which either doubt or deny freedom of the will. Indeed, Creuzer's skepticism is best understood not so much as skepticism *about free will* but rather as skepticism *about philosophy*. His allegation is that rational inquiry simply cannot solve the problem of free will, not so much because reason is weak, but because it is irredeemably conflicted on this topic and thus can never be satisfied. Creuzer:

[A]ll recent attempts to solve the great riddle of freedom of the will lead in the end to the same result; practical and speculative reason seem to be thoroughly irreconcilable [durchaus unvereinbar] with respect to freedom. (Creuzer, 1793: 160)

Tellingly, the book concludes with a few lines from Voltaire's rather free translation of Lord Rochester's *Satyr of Man and Reason*, in which both Rochester and Voltaire pillory the pretensions of man's supposedly noble rational powers.

Already with this framing of his position, we can see a first respect in which Creuzer's skepticism has a distinctively post-Kantian flavour, informed above all by the Kantian anxiety that reason may be at odds with itself and subject to antinomial "euthanasia".³ It is also distinctively post-Kantian in being explicitly informed by the idea of a "fact of reason" and by a version of the Kantian postulates argument. Creuzer's first substantive move in the book, following a bit of stage-setting, is to argue that we are inescapably aware of the undeniable demand of the moral law upon us and that we are rationally committed to freedom of the will as a condition on the intelligibility of that demand.⁴ But for Creuzer, this is not so much the end of the story as it is the beginning of the trouble. For when reason tries to make sense of this essential commitment (to render freedom "rationally thinkable" even if not knowable), it repeatedly falls into incoherence (Creuzer, 1793: 131). In substantiating this claim, Creuzer surveys a vast array of positions on the subject, including both Ancients and Moderns but ultimately focusing on "the most recent theories" provided by, inter alia, Kant, Schmid, Heydenreich, and Reinhold.

But Creuzer's skeptical conclusion is informed not simply by a survey of the options currently on offer. Instead, the whole book is organised around a remarkable table of what Creuzer argues are all the possible configurations of a theory of freedom. He relies on Kant's table of categories (Quantity, Quality, Modality, Relation) to map what purports to be every conceivable articulation (or form of "rational thinkability") of moral and metaphysical freedom. Creuzer's conclusion is summed up by Fichte in two claims that appear on the first page of his review: None of the theories of freedom resolve the struggle between the interests of practical and theoretical reason; hence, none achieve their praiseworthy goal of giving rise to a new, satisfactory theory of freedom (VIII, 411).

It took some time for Creuzer to publish his innovative and idiosyncratic work. C.C.E. Schmid, who seems to have helped Creuzer secure a publisher for the project, contributed a Preface which is signed 10 March, 1793—almost a year after "the greater part" of the manuscript had been completed; the book itself was probably published in time for the Easter Book Fair. As Creuzer's luck would have it, that intervening year (1792–93) saw a lot of movement around the free will problem. Even as Creuzer was finishing up his manuscript at Easter, 1792, readers of the April issue of the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* were shocked by Kant's disturbing essay on human freedom and radical evil. Two months later, Reinhold published the 6th instalment in his second series of *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* in the June issue of *Der neue Teutsche Merkur*. That 6th Letter consisted of 42 numbered propositions in which Reinhold

laid out what he took to be the fundamental principles (*Grundsätze*) of the Kantian approach to morality and natural right. The fourth principle was a new definition of the will; the seventh provided a definition of freedom of the will. In October, 1792, Reinhold published his second series of *Letters* in book form (Reinhold, 1792; hereafter *Briefe II*).⁵ The collection reprinted revised versions of the letters that had already appeared in the new *Merkur* but also included previously unpublished letters, one of which (the eighth) presented Reinhold's new "Explication of the Concept of Freedom of the Will" (*Briefe II*: 262–308; Reclam 495–529).⁶ By the time Creuzer's book appeared in 1793, Kant had worked around his impasse with the censor and was also publishing again; this time, it was *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

Creuzer scrambled to keep up with these developments. At least up through the Summer of 1792, he continued to make changes and additions to his manuscript, tracking what had become a rapidly moving target. He added a short paragraph, separated from the main text of his Introduction, in which he acknowledged the appearance of important new work from Reinhold and Kant. He included a long stretch of text in which he provided extensive excerpts from, and a running rebuttal to, Kant's recently published claims about radical evil (Creuzer, 1793: 145–169). And he added a long footnote stretching across several pages in which he responded to Reinhold's definitions in the June issue of the *Merkur* (1793: 124–129). But despite Creuzer's heroic efforts, there was at least one respect in which his book was already out of date when it was finally published. For while its aim was to provide a critical survey of "the most recent theories" of freedom, it failed to engage with what was arguably a major new statement on the topic: Reinhold's eighth letter. It is not clear whether Creuzer's silence reflected a conviction that the letter contained nothing substantially new, or whether perhaps his manuscript was already out of his hands by the time it came to his attention. But at least on Fichte's view, as we shall see, to miss the eighth letter was to miss something important: a signpost towards a fateful fork in the road for those who hope to develop a satisfactory (post-) Kantian approach to the theory of freedom.

Now it must be acknowledged that we are dealing here with what have become quite obscure sources, particularly in the English-speaking philosophical world. Creuzer's book only ever appeared in one edition and has never been translated. Fichte's review was not included in Breazeale's landmark edition of Fichte's *Early Philosophical Writings*. And when Cambridge University Press recently published an otherwise excellent edition of Reinhold's *Briefe*, it included only the first series of letters, without even providing a synopsis of the content of the second series.⁷ But in one respect at least, Reinhold's *Briefe II* can stake a claim to fame. For it is in that eighth letter that he most clearly advances and defends his controversial distinction between *Will* and *Willkür*.

So what exactly is Reinhold's distinction? Fichte explains it concisely in his review:

As many supporters of the Critical philosophy have maintained, and has been shown in an illuminating manner by Reinhold, one must carefully distinguish between those manifestations of absolute self-activity [Selbsttätigkeit] by means of which reason is practical and assigns a law to itself, and those [other] manifestations through which a person (in this function of his will) determines himself to obey or not to obey this law. (VIII, 412)

As we can see from Fichte's synopsis, the distinction is informed by a political analogy. In the exercise of free agency, we need to distinguish between a legislative and an executive function of the will. *Will*, on Reinhold's account, is a legislative authority. It adopts laws governing actions. It is free only and exactly in the sense that its legislative function is carried out *autonomously*: No outside or foreign power dictates which laws reason passes; it relies only on itself and answers only to its own authority. For Reinhold, as for Kant, the basic content of the moral law (the categorical imperative) is the product of autonomous practical reason, that is, of *Will*. *Willkür*, by contrast, is an executive power. Once the law has been adopted, and its demands have been made, the function of *Willkür* (a capacity for elective choice) is to determine whether or not to do what the law demands. In putting these pieces together in a unified doctrine of freedom, Reinhold insists on a further distinction between the *autonomy of the will* and the *freedom of the person*. An individual person can only be said to be free, on his view, in virtue of being endowed both with an autonomous *Will* and with a free power of executive choice [*Willkür*].

It is worth taking note of the history of the distinction alluded to in Fichte's pithy synopsis. The distinction, as Fichte sees it, had been recognised in one form or another by many "supporters" of Kant's moral philosophy.⁸ Reinhold's contribution was not to introduce the distinction but to bring it clearly out in the open and demonstrate its indispensability for the viability of the Kantian position in ethics. In retrospect, we can see it at work in Kant's earliest critical writings, and by 1792, it was playing a pivotal role in his account of radical evil.⁹ While a version of the distinction is adumbrated in some of Reinhold's earlier writings,¹⁰ the demonstration to which Fichte refers first appears in the eighth letter of *Briefe II*.

Reinhold's "demonstration" takes as established the basic Kantian claim about the autonomy of pure practical reason in issuing the categorical imperative. But it then proceeds along two separate strands of argument. The first begins from what we can perhaps anachronistically think of as Reinhold's phenomenology of moral life. On Reinhold's overtly moralistic account of deliberation, the critical moment comes when we find ourselves confronted with two demands [*Forderungen*], one "selfish" [*eigennützig*] and the other "unselfish" [*uneigennützig*]. The latter is the moral demand which, Reinhold claims, receives its ultimate warrant from the autonomous exercise of pure practical reason. The former has its roots in our sensuous nature. In the face of these two conflicting demands, Reinhold argues, we experience the manifestation in consciousness of our free power of choice [*Willkür*], which we exercise by satisfying either one demand or the other (*Briefe II*: 263; 283–4; Reclam 496, 511–12).

The second strand to Reinhold's "demonstration" takes the form of a challenge to those among Kant's early sympathisers who took freedom of the will to consist *entirely* in the autonomy of pure practical reason. If we adopt this interpretation, Reinhold famously argues, the result is "nothing less than the impossibility of freedom for all *unethical* actions". Reinhold:

As soon as it is assumed that the freedom of pure willing consists solely in the self-activity of practical reason, then one must immediately concede that impure willing, which is not produced by practical reason, is in no way free. (Briefe II: 267–68; Reclam: 499)

Although Reinhold does not here use the term, his argument turns on what has come to be known as the problem of imputation [*Zurechnung*].¹¹ How can unethical actions (and the consequences thereof) be put down to our moral account? Reinhold's answer is in effect a redeployment of Augustine's story about *Genesis*: Evil actions are imputable to us only insofar as they can be traced back to our elective freedom as a person—that is, to our free power of choice. Logically speaking, Reinhold's argument takes the form of a *reductio*. If we start from core Kantian premises about pure practical reason and omit the distinction between the autonomy of *Will* and the freedom of *Willkür*, then we end up with the seemingly absurd result that no one freely acts unethically.¹²

Reinhold's theoretical articulation of freedom was enthusiastically endorsed by many, so much so that by the Autumn of 1793, Fichte could describe it as the consensus position "agreed to by Reinhold, Heydenreich, and ultimately by Kant himself" (VIII, 412). In his review, Fichte condenses the position into the following pair of definitions:

Freedom of the will is: [Definition A] the power or faculty [Vermögen] to determine oneself, through absolute self-activity, to obey or not to obey the ethical law; that is [Definition B] the faculty to determine oneself to act in one of two diametrically opposed ways. (ibid.)

Straight away, of course, we encounter here a host of problems, both large and small, both as regards the philosophical adequacy of this definition and as regards its attribution to Reinhold, Heydenreich, and Kant. Kant himself would famously renounce the definition in 1797, and even its attribution to Reinhold in exactly this form might be thought to be misleadingly one-sided. For notice that Fichte's synopsis defines freedom of the will *narrowly* in terms of the freedom of *Willkür*. There are certainly passages in Reinhold that would support this, but I would argue that his considered view, and the philosophically preferable position treats freedom of the will as essentially two-sided, requiring both the autonomy of *Will* and the freedom of *willkürlich* elective-executive choice.¹³

I propose to leave further discussion of these matters of attribution to one side here, in part because they have been discussed by others,¹⁴ but mainly because I want to devote the balance of my analysis to the significance of Reinhold's position for Creuzer's skeptical observations and Fichte's response thereto. As we have seen, Creuzer's book does not engage directly with Reinhold's analysis in the eighth letter. But it is safe to say that Creuzer himself would not have been surprised by its content, nor would he have taken it as reason to modify his skeptical stance. This is in part because the building blocks of the Reinholdian position were already visible in the sixth letter of *Briefe II*, to which Creuzer had responded in his lengthy footnote. But more importantly, the position that Reinhold defends in the eighth letter is readily identifiable on Creuzer's table of possible positions. In Creuzer's map of the alternatives, Reinhold's position is an example of *transcendental indifferentism*. It is a form of indifferentism in the tradition of the scholastic doctrine of "liberty of indifference", finding freedom in a power to act in one of two contradictory ways. Indifferentism is *transcendental* insofar as it restricts the validity of the causal law to the sensible world, denying its applicability to intelligible entities.¹⁵

Creuzer was convinced that transcendental indifferentism is untenable. Indeed, unlike many positions on free will which at least have the advantage of satisfying either theoretical or practical reason, Creuzer holds that the Reinholdian position falls foul of both (Creuzer, 1793: 132). His first objection is that the position is committed to a form of "absolute contingency" that violates the conditions of "rational thinkability" (Creuzer, 1793: 131). For transcendental indifferentism requires that, at the critical moment of choice, everything that has already happened is compatible with two different outcomes. And this entails that, whatever *actually* happens, there is no sufficient reason for its having occurred.

[A] freedom which includes within itself the sufficient ground for taking up opposed and contradictory maxims ... stands in contradiction with the laws of speculative reason. (Creuzer, 1793: 151)

Creuzer insists that this concern cannot be allayed by restricting the law of causality to the sensible realm and then treating *Willkür* as some kind of "supersensible" reality. Such a move illicitly conflates a thing in itself and a noumenon. A thing in itself transcends the limits of our thought, and hence "for us = x" (Creuzer, 1793: 139). But supersensible freedom of choice is meant to be something thinkable, a noumenon, and hence must conform to the conditions under which it can be *thought*, even if it cannot be an object of knowledge.

Creuzer claims that transcendental indifferentism also violates the interests of practical reason, since "a will that is *indifferent* between good and evil plainly annuls all morality" (Creuzer, 1793: 133). On Reinhold's account of action, the moment of choice comes only *after* all the reasons are on the table. I know what morality demands and also what inclination demands. Only then does my *willkürlich* power of election play its role. It follows that this final determinant of my action is itself something that lies entirely beyond the reach of reason! So not only is there no sufficient *cause* of my choosing one way rather than the other; there is no *reason* upon which I can base my choice either! As Creuzer sees it, Reinhold's latest theory of freedom therefore falls before his master argument, failing to jointly satisfy theoretical and practical reason. It fails to satisfy theoretical reason because it violates the principle of sufficient reason, and it fails to satisfy practical reason because it ultimately renders all of our choices (whether moral or immoral) as groundless.¹⁶

So what was Fichte's assessment of Creuzer's skepticism, and specifically of Creuzer's objections to what by 1793, seemed to be the cutting edge Kantian position on freedom of the will? His review is in fact quite brief, occupying only five columns in the ALZ, with some of that space given over to Fichte's characteristic invective and ad hominem insults.¹⁷ Among the myriad theories of freedom that Creuzer had reviewed and criticised, Fichte seriously engages with only one objection to one theory: Creuzer's allegation that transcendental indifferentism violates the principle of sufficient reason.

Fichte's initial reply to this objection is brief and in many ways superficial, in large part because he thinks that Reinhold has already disposed of it. Quoting directly from Reinhold's eighth letter, Fichte distinguishes between two different understandings of the principle of sufficient reason:

The logical law of sufficient reason by no means demands that everything that exists must have a cause distinct from its own existence. ... Instead it demands only that nothing be thought without a ground.
(VIII, 312, quoting Briefe II, 283; Reclam: 510–11)

In distinguishing these two variants, we can think of the first as broadly objective (or metaphysical), being focused on the grounds for the *existence* of things or states of affairs. The second is broadly subjective (or epistemological), being focused instead on *our thought* about things. Reinhold dismisses the objective variant of the principle of sufficient reason on the rather doubtful grounds that it would be inconsistent with “the existence of God as an absolute and first cause, which every opponent of freedom can very well think on other occasions” (*ibid.*). He then insists (and Fichte robustly endorses this point) that the existence of free elective choice clearly satisfies the second, subjective version of the principle, since “reason has a very real ground for thinking freedom as an absolute cause” (VII, 417).¹⁸

Even as Fichte makes a show of signing on to Reinhold's reply; however, we can begin to see some important distance opening up between their respective positions and strategies. In tracking this divergence, the first point to recall is that Reinhold had advanced not one but two different grounds in his “demonstration” of the elective freedom of *Willkür*. When we look closely at Fichte's review, we can see that he is subtly recasting one ground while openly criticising Reinhold on the other. Let's consider the two points in turn.

Recall that one of Reinhold's two strands of argument for *Willkür* pertained to the imputation problematic: Unless we recognise a capacity for spontaneous freedom of choice, unethical actions will not be imputable to agents. Fichte accepts this argument but re-describes it as “a postulate of reason [*Vernunft-Postulat*] for the possibility of imputation” (VIII, 414). This bit of rebranding is subtle but significant. The postulates of practical reason are of course a central doctrine of Kant's critical philosophy, and from the beginning, they figure centrally in Reinhold's reconstruction of the Kantian position.¹⁹ In thinking about the logical form of the postulates, it is useful to distinguish between the “anchor” and the “terminus” of the argument. The anchor is an inescapable commitment of practical reason or morality; the terminus is some set of claims or commitments to which we must assent as a condition on the intelligible retention of the anchor. Kant himself offers several different presentations of the postulates, but the ultimate anchor is always the same: being subject unconditionally to the moral law. The terminus is rational assent [*Fürwahrhaltung*] to the existence of God, freedom, and immortality.²⁰ The effect of Fichte's rebranding of Reinhold's demonstration is in effect to propose a new anchor for the postulates: not the binding authority of the moral law but the imputation of actions to agents. In essence, Fichte is claiming that we are rationally committed to whatever is presupposed by the intelligibility of imputation.

This move is in fact anticipated by Creuzer in one of the final additions to his manuscript. Responding to Kant's essay on radical evil, Creuzer writes of the imputation problematic as follows:

Imputation is assumed [by Kant] as a fact that requires no proof, and one sees that Kant's real intention in all this is to burden man with guilt. The claim that there must be guilt, and consequently also imputation, stands in the end like a cherub with flaming sword, placed there in order to make all further progress impossible and to discourage all further investigation. It costs Kant no small effort to rescue his doctrine of freedom by appeal to this cherub. (Creuzer, 1793: 159)

The image of the cherub with flaming sword is taken from *Genesis*, where such a cherub is posted by God to prevent Adam and Eve from re-entering Eden after the fall. Neither Kant (in the essay on evil) nor Creuzer (in his rebuttal) make use of the language of postulates in describing this idea, but we can clearly detect the expansion of the postulates strategy through the introduction of this new anchor.

Creuzer's criticism of Kant on this point links that expansion specifically to the attribution of blame and guilt, but it is important to recognise the potential here for a transposition of the postulates outside a narrowly moral or moralistic context. The concept of imputation is at root a legal concept, pertaining to the allocation of liability (Reath, 2006). As Creuzer indicates, it has a very direct connection to theological matters pertaining to sin and punishment; indeed, the German term (*Zurechnung*) relates directly to old Germanic terms for the divine *Book of*

Judgment (or *Book of Reckoning*).²¹ But the underlying transcendental structure of imputation is really a form of recognition. To impute the consequences of my action to my moral account is *ipso facto* to recognise me as the genuine agent or author of my action. In Fichte's rebranding of Reinhold's demonstration in the eighth letter, we should therefore see the first stirrings of a philosophical strategy that is oriented from the start by the task of identifying the conditions under which recognition is possible. We might even go so far as to say that Fichte's mature concept of "self-positing" is itself a form of "self-imputation," insofar as it involves staking a claim to my own status as agent and judge.²²

But so far, we are only talking here about differences of emphasis; we have yet to arrive at the major point of divergence marked in Fichte's review. To bring it into view, we need to consider the second strand of Reinhold's demonstration, which takes its point of departure from the phenomenology of moral life. Reinhold:

But reason has a very real ground for thinking freedom as an absolute cause – namely, self-consciousness, through which the action of this faculty announces itself as a fact, and justifies sound common sense [gemeinen und gesunden Verstand] in inferring its possibility from its actuality. (Briefe II, 283; Reclam, 511)

Reinhold concedes that we can only know *that* we are free and can never know *how* we are free. But he claims that this limit is due to the fact that *Willkür* (like sensibility, understanding and reason) is a "fundamental faculty," [*Grundvermögen*] which cannot be reduced to any other and which manifests itself among the facts of consciousness only "through its effects" (*Briefe II*: 284; Reclam: 511).

It is precisely on this last point that Fichte blows the whistle. In order to assess what I have been describing as Reinhold's "phenomenological" strand of argument, Fichte insists first that we be clear, with respect to the two forms of "self-activity," as to what actually occurs among the facts of consciousness and what is a supersensible or intelligible posit. As regards the autonomy of the will, Fichte claims that the relevant fact of consciousness is simply our consciousness of the moral law and its demands upon us. There is no *choice* in this domain. As regards *Willkür*, Fichte claims that the "sensible" reality of which we have consciousness is *the choice itself*—either a determinate conscious intention to act or the act itself. The *power or faculty* of free choosing is something intelligible, something postulated, something which is an object of *rational faith*; it does not itself figure among the facts of consciousness.

With this analysis in hand, Fichte poses his fateful question. Let's focus on this "self-determining of oneself to a certain satisfaction or non-satisfaction" of the moral law, a self-determining that must be assumed as a postulate of reason for the possibility of imputation. Now ask,

Is this act of self-determining the cause of the appearance of being determined to the same satisfaction or non-satisfaction? (VIII, 414)

This question sets up a dilemma for Reinhold and for anyone tempted by his view. If we answer in the negative, that the self-determining is *not* the cause of the appearance (i.e., of the choice, the intention, and the action), then it would seem that *Willkür* is a kind of fifth wheel in agency. It doesn't actually play any role in the generation of action. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Reinhold answers affirmatively, describing *Willkür* as an "absolute cause" which is known "only through its effects". But in taking this horn of the dilemma, Fichte claims

one draws something intelligible down into the series of natural causes, and is thereby also misled into displacing it into the series of natural effects; that is, one is misled into assuming something intelligible that is not intelligible. (VIII, 414)

On this horn of the dilemma, *Willkür* is no longer a fifth wheel; but it seems to be reduced to one more piece of the natural machinery of the natural world, now treated as party to causal relations and hence governed by natural necessity.

One possibility that we need to mark here, although Fichte himself does not, is a certain kind of response that some Kantians might advance. On this position, one would try to accept the affirmative horn of the dilemma but disarm it. The key is to resist the assumption that all causality is natural causality. On this view, the free act of choosing does indeed cause the actions, but through a distinct form of non-temporal causality that does not reduce to natural-nomological determination. I shall not here undertake to assess the merits of this strategy, which raises many thorny issues. But we should note that Fichte himself was aware of it and tried in his later writing to close down this escape route.²³

Let's pause to take stock. Fichte at this point seems to have placed himself in an impossible position. He seems to have endorsed the Reinholdian definition of "freedom of the person", and with it Reinhold's characterisation of the freedom of elective choice. But that position itself generates the dilemma that he presses quite effectively against Reinhold. What alternative remains? The answer, remarkably, is that Fichte seems to endorse *the negative answer* to the question he posed to Reinhold. The free self-activity at work in *Willkür* does not figure as the cause of appearances, at least not as the efficient cause. So how does Fichte try to occupy this position and what would it look like? What positive role is left for this form of freedom to play? And what is the broader picture of agency in which it has a part?

The central concept in Fichte's answer to these questions is "harmony".²⁴ The key passage reads as follows:

For determinate being [as opposed to the act of determining], some actual real ground in a preceding appearance must be assumed, in accordance with the law of natural causality. However, insofar as the determinate being produced through the causality of nature is supposed to be in harmony with the act of free determination (a harmony that, for the sake of a moral world order, also must be assumed), the ground of such harmony can be assumed to lie neither in nature, which exercises no causality over freedom, nor in freedom, which has no causality within nature, but only in a higher law, which subsumes and unifies both freedom and nature - in, as it were, a predetermined harmony of determinations through freedom with determinations through the laws of nature. (VIII, 414-415)

Let's unpack the elements of the picture Fichte is offering us here. We can distinguish three main components: (a) actual appearances must have their ground in prior appearances, which themselves constitute their natural, causal, and nomological origin; (b) the act of free self-determining is neither an appearance nor the cause of appearances; and (c) for the sake of a moral world order,²⁵ we must assume a harmony between the free supersensible domain and the causally determined natural domain.

Remarkably, then Fichte here seems to be dusting off an old and extravagant piece of grand rationalist metaphysics, the doctrine of pre-established harmony, and using it to try to rescue the Kantian doctrine of freedom. Were you puzzled by the relation between the noumenal self and phenomenal action? Here's your answer: assume a pre-established harmony between the two! Fichte is aware that his proposal may be met with incredulity by those who will be sure, at any event, that this cannot be Kant's own solution. By way of reply, he points to an obscure passage from the Kant-Eberhard Controversy in which Kant himself speaks approvingly of Leibnizian metaphysics, insisting only that it cannot be known by *theoretical* reason.²⁶ Moreover, he invokes Kant's "general remark" at the end of the essay on evil, in which Kant claims that in becoming good, "we render ourselves susceptible to an *unfathomable higher assistance*" which, at least on Fichte's telling, so arranges things that "our appearing, empirical character harmonises with our intelligible character" (VIII, 416).²⁷

With this, we have in hand the main elements of Fichte's theory of freedom, circa 1793. To sum it up in its briefest form, it involves two forms of absolute self-activity: the autonomy of reason and the freedom of choice. It involves a sharp dualism of two domains: a supersensible domain of freedom and an empirical domain of nature that stand in splendid isolation from one another. And it involves an "unfathomable higher assistance" which arranges matters such that former harmonises with the latter.

I am keenly aware that some modern readers who have remained with me thus far may now be feeling duped into work that would seem to be of strictly antiquarian interest. But before concluding that Fichte's early theory of

freedom is one that can no longer seriously be entertained, I seek indulgence for one final turn of the tale, so that we can consider this idiosyncratic account of agency in light of Fichte's later development. The Creuzer review was written in Zurich, in the final months prior to Fichte's departure for Jena. So how does this theory of agency look from the perspective of the Jena corpus? I confine myself to two pieces of evidence.

The first comes from what is in many respects the most mature work of the Jena period and the one most directly relevant to the concerns of the Creuzer review: the *Sittenlehre* (System of Ethics) of 1798. *Sittenlehre* §10 addresses the topic of "Freedom and the Higher Faculty of Desire" (IV, 132–42), and many of the issues from the Creuzer review are reprised there. Once again, the problem of understanding the relationship between intelligible freedom and sensible nature seems to bring us to the point of incomprehensibility.²⁸ Fichte then enumerates several possible approaches to a solution, one of which is "the hypothesis of the pre-established harmony" (IV, 133). But this time, Fichte seems to reject the doctrine.

What should we make of this? Certainly, one possibility is that Fichte simply changed his mind on this point. The Creuzer review, on this reading, would represent a last dalliance with the old rationalist apparatus—an apparatus that he had come to renounce by the time he wrote the *Wissenschaftslehre*. But it is also worth considering an alternate possibility. To start with, we need to take careful note of Fichte's exact formulation in the passage from *Sittenlehre* §10. What Fichte there sets aside is "*die Hypothese der prästabilierten Harmonie, wie sie gewöhnlich genommen wird*". There are two observations worth making about this. First, that additional clause—"as it is commonly understood"—constitutes a potentially significant qualification. It seems to leave open the possibility of an alternate way of understanding the hypothesis. The second observation concerns the terminology that Fichte uses here in gesturing towards the Leibnizian doctrine. He refers to it as the doctrine of "*prästabilierten Harmonie*", which is language he uses elsewhere in referring specifically to the traditional doctrine.²⁹ But in the Creuzer review, Fichte avoids this language. The theory of agency he sketches there appeals instead to a "*vorherbestimmten Harmonie*". So there are certainly resources that we might exploit here to draw a distinction. Is there some form of harmony that might be *determined* in advance [*hervorbestimmt*], even if it is not actually *established* in advance [*prästabiliert*]?

In nurturing this seedling of a possibility, I turn to one final piece of textual evidence. Fast-forward from 30 October, 1793 to 23 May, 1794. It was just over 7 months from the time of the publication of the review of Creuzer to the day of Fichte's first public lecture in Jena. The title of the lecture was "*Die Bestimmung des Menschen überhaupt*"; it was the first lecture in Fichte's notorious course on *The Vocation of the Scholar*. That first Jena lecture is a remarkable tour de force in which he touches on many of the major themes of the *Wissenschaftslehre*—albeit in a popular form much like a sermon. At the end, Fichte explicitly turns his attention to ethics, in a short stretch of text that is saturated with talk about "harmony". Within a few paragraphs, Fichte invokes the harmony of man's powers; he invokes the harmony between things and the pure form of the I; he invokes the harmony between our representation of things and the form of the pure I; and he invokes a harmony between "the bent [*Biegungen*] of our empirically determinable I" and "the form of the pure I" (VI, 297–301).

It is the last of these harmonies that would seem to correspond most closely to the problematic of the Creuzer review. What we need, in order to secure our freedom, is a harmony between "the bent" of our empirical I—that is, our sensible, empirical, natural life as human beings—and "the form of the pure I" which expresses itself in absolute self-activity. But by now, we know that this cannot be the whole story. If we follow out the logic of the Creuzer review, then we should expect Fichte to invoke some "higher power" that can arrange for this harmony—a power that is beyond the scope of either nature or freedom considered separately. And that is indeed the next move that Fichte makes. But this time, he does not appeal to the *inscrutability* of this higher power; he sketches a *theory* of what it must consist in. "Mere will", he insists, is not sufficient to generate the requisite harmony. What is needed in addition is "a certain skill" [*Geschicklichkeit*]³⁰—a skill which we "acquire and sharpen through practice" (VI, 298). In fact, he goes on to appeal to two distinct sets of skills. One set is *manual* in the literal set of the word: the ability "to modify and alter external things in accordance with our concepts". The other is *moral*: "the skill to suppress and eradicate erroneous inclinations which originate in us prior to the awakening of our reason and the sense of our own spontaneity" (*ibid.*). For these two skills taken together, Fichte introduces a special term: *Kultur*—that is, "culture" or "civilisation".

At the outset, I made reference to Fichte's transformation of the problem of free will. By way of conclusion, let me offer two possible ways of thinking about the terms of his revolution. The two framings are not meant to be exclusive but cumulative. Fichte's first radical move consists in the renunciation of a causal approach to the problem of freedom. We have grown accustomed to the idea that the problem of free will pertains to the causal origin of actions and that the solution—if there is to be one—must therefore take the form of a specification of the appropriate form of causality at work in genuine agency.³⁰ Much of the logical space on Creuzer's extensive table of possible positions is taken up with specifying one or another possibility. Free actions are those caused by reason; free actions are those caused internally; free actions are those generated by noumenal causality, or by *Will*, or by *Willkür*, To reject the appeal to (efficient) causality in the theory of freedom would therefore be to sweep away not only these purported solutions to the problem but also the very framing of the question to which they were offered as answers.

The second framing of the revolution can be traced back to Fichte's appeal, in the review of Creuzer, to the idea of assistance from a “higher power”. This turns out to be the key to Fichte's positive alternative to the rejected causal framing. For it turns out, on Fichte's view, that freedom of the will *does* require a higher power. *But the higher power is us!*

This last formula is pithy and memorable. But it is not quite accurate, if it suggests that the higher power is simply a collection or community of human beings. “*Kultur*”, in Fichte's distinctive sense of the term, serves as a marker for a research programme and political agenda that encompasses more than simply human organisms. It includes human institutions and practices, the built environment and “cultivated” land, styles of gender relations and parenting and education, international relations, the economy In short, it encompasses everything that plays a role in shaping the character and bodies and behaviour of human beings. Fichte's research task is to find (or rather: to “determine in advance”) a configuration of culture that is conducive to freedom, such that naturally generated human behaviour conforms to, even if it is not caused by, the freely self-active choices of our intelligible selves. His political task is to contribute to the creation of such a culture and thereby of a world in which human beings can be free.

All this may still sound very abstract and extravagant, so as a final word, let me turn to a story that is both more contemporary and more concrete and which may help us bring Fichte's radical thought within reach. In a remarkable recent memoir, James Bowen tells the story of his recovery from a heroin addiction that had devastated his life and left him homeless (Bowen, 2012).³¹ Bowen's pathway to recovery involved an exercise of what we might call “elective choice” in which he decided to “go clean”. But as Bowen's memoir powerfully recounts, that resolution did not determine the outcome of his struggle. What made the difference is what Fichte would call *Kultur*: the structure of the environment in which Bowen found himself embedded and the skills (both manual and moral) that he developed with support from those around him. In Fichte's terms, these (natural) influences eventually attuned Bowen's body, impulses, and behaviour (the “bent of his empirically determinable I”) so that his actions harmonised with his choice.

Bowen's story is, in its way, a salvation narrative, replete with a vision of hell and a feline Christ-figure (with stigmata!) who helps facilitate Bowen's transformation. But the “salvation” here is essentially secular: the “*Kultur*” with which Bowen found himself graced plays the role of the “higher power”. In Bowen's case, we will be inclined to understand his original “elective choice” (i.e., the resolution to “go clean”) as playing a causal role in his recovery. It may not *suffice* to effect his recovery and does not *determine* his subsequent actions, but his recovery could not have happened without it. But to follow out Fichte's approach in its most radical form, we would have to think of that original act of choosing not so much as an efficient cause of action but as something more like a final cause: The standard of success by which the subsequent narrative is assessed. Bowen's freedom is realised when the natural determinants of his actions are so-configured that his behaviour satisfies and thereby “harmonises with” that original choosing.

We should not lose sight of the fact that Fichte's review of Creuzer occupied only a few column-inches of the ALZ. It would be absurd to look to it for a developed theory of freedom, and it undoubtedly raises far more questions than it answers. I also don't mean to suggest that this very early work established rigid parameters in the theory of agency to which Fichte himself remained committed in his mature writings. But once we understand the review in its context, we should recognise that it does point us in a radical new direction in taking up the Kantian legacy in

our approach to the problem of free will. One advantage of that new direction is that the crucial question of *how* the will is free is not left in an unknowable, cherub-guarded garden but as a researchable problem about the configuration of human culture.³²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Citations in this format refer to volume and page of I.H. Fichte, 1971.
- ² Creuzer (1793); for Fichte's review, see VIII, 411–17. Translations from Creuzer's book are my own; except where noted, I follow Breazeale's (2001) translation of Fichte's review.
- ³ For Kant's description of the antinomies as threatening "the euthanasia of pure reason", see A407/B434.
- ⁴ "The consciousness of freedom, like the consciousness of the moral law, is a fact of reason, whose actuality we acknowledge immediately without any inference from empirical data It is not a consequence of consciousness of the moral law but rather the necessary condition thereon, for only insofar as we consider ourselves as free ... can we ascribe to ourselves a mode of action that is unconditioned and universally valid". Creuzer, 1793: 8–9.
- ⁵ Translations from *Briefe II* are my own.
- ⁶ References to *Briefe II* are given to the pagination of the first edition, which is provided as marginal pagination in the outstanding new critical edition edited by Martin Bondeli as Volume 2, Part 2 of *Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel: Schwabe, 2008). Since this edition is not widely accessible, I also include the pagination of Raymond Schmidt's 1923 Reclam edition, which is easily available online (e.g., through archive.org) in photomechanical reproduction (Leipzig: Reclam, 1923).
- ⁷ Ameriks (2005).
- ⁸ See for example Heydenreich (1791: 63–64).
- ⁹ Kant's commitment to *Willkür* can be seen at work in his solution to the Third Antinomy (A534/B562), but his fully explicit articulation of the distinction between *Will* and *Willkür* seems to appear much later, in his introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, which was finally published only in 1797. See in particular Ak. 6: 226–7, where Kant also takes issue with Reinhold's characterisation of the distinction. For a discussion of Kant's critique of Reinhold's version of the distinction, see Baum (2012). For Kant's use of the concept of *Willkür* in his essay on radical evil, see Ak. 6: 20–22.
- ¹⁰ See in particular Reinhold (1789): Book I: 89–91; Book III: 571ff.
- ¹¹ For Kant's version of this argument, see Ak. 6: 21.
- ¹² The *absurdum* of Reinhold's *reductio* had in fact been defended by Schmid, who contributed the introduction to Creuzer's book and famously dubbed the position as "intelligible fatalism". See Schmid (1790).
- ¹³ In support of this interpretative contention, I rely on the pivotal passage at *Briefe II*: 271–2; Reclam 502–3. That passage begins with a definition of "freedom of the will" [*Freyheit des Willens*] that conforms to Fichte's summary. But Reinhold immediately goes on to insist that this freedom involves "three forms of independence". The first is freedom of the will from necessitation by instinct; the second is independence of practical reason from determination by anything other than itself; the third is the freedom of the person from necessitation by practical reason. Negatively, Reinhold holds, freedom of the will consists in *all three* forms of independence; positively, it is defined as the capacity for self-determination through elective choice [*Willkür*] either in accordance with or contrary to the practical law. The clear implication is that *Willkür* is necessary but not sufficient for freedom.
- ¹⁴ See for example: Fabbianelli (2000), Lazzari (2003), and Zöller (2005).
- ¹⁵ "The other party, which have been dubbed the *transcendental indifferentists*, grant the thoroughgoing validity of the causal law in the sensible world but deny its applicability to intelligible beings and believe in this way to be permitted to ascribe [*beylegen*] to such beings a wholly lawless capacity for action" (Creuzer, 1793: 124).
- ¹⁶ For a recent restatement of objections to Reinhold echoing some of Creuzer's arguments, see Kersting (2008). For a qualified reply see, Breazeale (2012).
- ¹⁷ Fichte's parting shot is characteristically backhanded and stinging: "As for the rest, the reviewer believes that philosophy can expect many good things from Mr. Creuzer, just as soon as his extensive and manifold book learning acquires a better order and he has acquired more maturity in his spiritual activity [*Geistestätigkeit*]" (VIII, 417).
- ¹⁸ "*Die Vernunft hat ... einen sehr reellen Grund, die Freyheit als eine absolute Ursache zu denken.*" (Note that I depart from Breazeale's translation of this clause).
- ¹⁹ On the role of the postulates in Reinhold's *Briefe*, see Ameriks' (2005) introduction to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Briefe I*.
- ²⁰ See for example Ak. 20: 296–300.
- ²¹ Old High German: *rehhanon*-; Old Dutch: *rekeningh*.

- ²² I explore some of the consequences of this conception of self-positing in Martin (2016).
- ²³ See in particular *Sittenlehre* §14, which concerns “The Will in Particular”: “Nor can this situation be altered simply by shifting the ground of our moral decisions into the intelligible world. In that case, the ground for determining our will is supposed to lie in something that is not sensible, though something that nevertheless determines us just like a physical power, the effect of which is a decision of our will. But how is something of this sort any different from the sensible world? According to Kant, the sensible world is that world to which the categories can be applied. In the case, we are here considering, however, the category of causality is applied to something intelligible; when this occurs, the latter ceases to be a member of the intelligible world and descends into the realm of sensibility”. (IV, 161) On practical reasoning and time, see Freyenhagen (2008).
- ²⁴ Fichte uses both the term *Uebereinstimmung* and the term *Harmonie*.
- ²⁵ *Moralischen Weltordnung*; this is the concept, although not quite the word, that would occasion the Atheism Controversy just 5 years later.
- ²⁶ See Ak. 8: 247–251.
- ²⁷ The relevant passage from Kant's essay is Ak. 6: 45.
- ²⁸ “This explanation leaves it incomprehensible how such an agreement between two things that are completely heterogeneous and independent of each other is even possible. It is comprehensible that nature, for its part, limits and determines something, as my nature should be determined; it can equally be understood that the intellect forms a representation and determines it in a particular way. What is incomprehensible is how the mutually independent modes of acting of these two can be in harmony with each other ..., since the intellect does not legislate for nature, and nature does not legislate from the intellect”. (IV, 132–3)
- ²⁹ See for example, I, 147: “Nimmt er etwa gar das Dasein der Dinge außer uns noch daneben an, wie es in der prästabilierten Harmonie wenigstens von einigen Leibnizischem geschieht” The passage is from the 1794–95 *Grundlage*; the explicit mention of Leibnizians was added in the second edition.
- ³⁰ For a controversial dissenting voice, see Pippin (2008).
- ³¹ Bowen's memoir was made into a film (*A Street Cat Named Bob*; Stage 6 Films: 2016), on which Bowen also collaborated. The film is in fact a richer source than the book for the purposes that concern me here.
- ³² Support for the research presented in this paper was provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK); Grant Number. AH/H001301/1: Deciding for Oneself: Autonomous Judgement in History, Theory and Practice. Earlier versions were presented at Leiden University, at the 2016 Tübingen International Summer School on Kant and German Idealism and at the 2017 meeting of the North American Fichte Society. I am grateful to the participants for constructive feedback and criticisms. Particular thanks are due to the members of the University of Essex German Idealism Reading Group, especially Emily Fitton, Cristóbal Garibay Petersen, Pavel Reichl, and Robert Seymour, with whom I participated in an enormously fertile and stimulating close reading of the primary texts, extending over a period of many months. Fabian Freyenhagen provided astute feedback on the penultimate draft; Rosie Worsdale helped with the final preparation of the manuscript.

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How to cite this article: Martin W. Fichte's Creuzer review and the transformation of the free will problem. *Eur J Philos*. 2018;1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12313>