

Certainty of Oneself. On Fichte's Conception of Faith as Non-epistemic Self-Consciousness.

Introduction

In 1521 Luther said the following:

"I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."¹

Through these famous words Luther brought subjectivity to the forefront of Christian thinking. The last sentence expresses the conviction that conscience and truth are the same, the consequence of which is that the concept of truth becomes internalized and has been addressed ever since as *certainty*. Since then modern thinking has been struggling with the *alienation* between the objective sense of truth and the expression that it finds within the subject's certainty. In the following paper I would like to address the issue of certainty and conscience in regard to one thinker, namely Fichte.²

The aim of my examination is the following: I would like to defend the broader thesis that practical self-consciousness and practical self-understanding is *prior to* any form of propositional or epistemic knowledge of ourselves. In *this* paper I shall present Fichte's conception as a *historical* example of this thesis. In this respect Fichte identifies conscience and faith as the very center of a non-epistemic

relation that the self has to itself. In order to do this, I shall [i] briefly introduce Kant's concept of conscience, since Fichte's main idea can better be grasped by taking into account Kant's concept of conscience, [ii] explain Fichte's conception of faith, taking especial care to [iii] reveal the existential dimension of this conception.

Conscience (Kant)

I shall begin with a Kantian reflection. According to Kant, morality is the very feature of human beings that gives us the possibility to transcend the being of mere objects. As Kant states in his *Groundwork*, while objects are defined by a price, that is to say, by both interchangeability and usage, human beings are, through their morality, pushed beyond any comparability and beyond the being of tools.³ We know, in other words, that through morality we are able to conceive ourselves as entities that have absolute – that is, incomparable – worth, and we know that we are not allowed to use either ourselves or other human beings as mere tools. Although our freedom makes it possible that we, through misrecognitions and misguided actions, *reduce* ourselves and other free beings to “something” that has only relative worth and is only a means to our ends, it is impossible to lose our ontological status. We know through the mere *fact of* practical reason about our absolute worth, especially since without morality we would not *be* what we *are*. In other words, practical reason *per definition* knows its intrinsic worth, whose worth

through the givenness of practical reason is *superior* to everything else.⁴ Practical reason *makes* us human beings.⁵ There is, as Kant puts it,

“no need of science and philosophy to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous. [...] Yet we cannot consider without admiration how great an advantage the practical faculty of appraising has over the theoretical in common human understanding.”⁶

What Kant has in mind here is quite simple: he tries to remind us that the *faculty* of morality is already presupposed when we begin to analyze moral concepts. Put differently, before we begin to talk and reflect about moral concepts, we must presuppose a natural *receptivity* through which we know about the moral law in particular and moral concepts in general. In contrast, in theoretical matters we need external help, that is to say, we lack a basic inborn receptivity of our own being. Put differently, we could grow up without any form of theoretical and empirical knowledge; we could be Kaspar Hausers⁷, but we would still *be* human beings with incomparable worth because of our moral “compass.”⁸ In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant lists four types of moral receptivity that are ingrained in our very nature, namely, [i] moral feelings, [ii] love, [iii] respect, and finally, [iv] conscience.⁹ These four conditions of moral reasoning can be revealed through a general philosophical anthropology or moral psychology, that is to say, according to Kant, we must just *have* these types of receptivity just as we must have a heart and liver.

But we should further examine the concept of conscience. Kant states that without the possession of conscience, one “would neither impute anything to him-

self as conforming with duty nor reproach himself with anything as contrary to duty.”¹⁰ We might reformulate this quote by saying that “conscience” is the concrete and common sense expression of our *ability and natural knowledge of being moral and – since morality makes us human beings – being what we are*. Usually, though, we are of the opinion that our conscience can be described as a judge who punishes or praises us *after* we did something right or wrong.¹¹ However, if we think about the temporal dimension of such an ability or faculty, then we must correct our common understanding of conscience as something that speaks to us and lets us feel good or bad *after an action*; rather, if we understand conscience – with Kant – as a basic *receptivity* of morality, then conscience becomes an expression for the *very possibility of being faced with our ability to be moral*, and not only either *before* an action through imagination or *after* an action through guilt and remembering. For “conscience” refers to the *confrontation* of humans with their own moral essence in a *present* situation of choice or decision.

Conscience and Faith (Fichte)

At this crucial point, Fichte comes into play, since he deals with this sense of conscience, taking it over from Kant and further developing it in his own way. Through a moral decision, according to Fichte, human beings get hold of their own vocation, that is to say, of what they are. Conscience, in more existentialistic words, throws one back to oneself. Only through our conscience we know [i] that

we must become what we are and [ii] that we are what we must become. Conscience is the self-aquaintance of the practical self:¹²

"Only," as Fichte puts it, "through [...] commandments of conscience do truth and reality come into my presentations. I cannot refuse them my attention and my obedience without giving up my vocation."¹³

Upon considering this quote, we see immediately that Fichte holds a position that might be considered as a "first existentialist" version of Kant. In short, conscience is the very relation of oneself as an *acting* entity through which one understands one's own *being* not only as mere theoretical reason, that is to say, as knowledge of reality and self-consciousness, but also and primarily as something that has to be *realized* in this world *through* my being. Put simply, we are only *certain* of our own *ability* and possibility to act through conscience and, according to Fichte, through our "conception of a moral world."¹⁴ Accordingly, conscience is a special kind of *self-understanding* through which we are *acquainted* with ourselves and our existence, especially since our knowledge of acting (conscience) is something about which we are, as Fichte explicitly states, "immediately certain."¹⁵ Whereas theoretical knowledge can be doubted, knowledge of our own ability to be moral and, therefore, of our own *being*, cannot be doubted: "We raise ourselves out of this nothingness and maintain ourselves above this nothingness only through our morality."¹⁶ Thus we are forced to change our conception of self-knowledge; for it can no longer be analyzed as (propositional) knowledge. Here another form of certainty comes into play for at this juncture Fichte introduces faith as a type of non-

theoretical knowledge within his search for an alternative conception of the self and the knowledge that it has of its own being.

We reach a better understanding of what Fichte is up to when we consider his understanding of the special relation between action and conscience. So far, I explained that through our conscience we “know” of ourselves and our being. But conscience only appears as a moment of decision and action. Thus we know through our conscience that we *must act* and that we *are able to act*. However, let’s put ourselves into a situation in which we have to make a moral decision: *how* do we know that we are *really* doing the correct thing, that which we feel forced to do through our conscience? Our conscience only tells us (receptivity) that we must act; it is the *impulse* of realizing what we are, namely moral beings.¹⁷ It gives us certainty about ourselves *as* human beings. However, *how* do we know that we are right? In other words: How do we know that conscience tells us the right thing to do; and, furthermore, how do we know *that* we have to act? The answer, according to Fichte, is quite simple: we must take into our consideration a special type of certainty, namely the certainty of faith, especially since faith – as *we* could put it – may be conceived as a *basic trust* in our conscience in a situation of decision. Put differently again, we may understand faith as trust in our knowledge that we have to act. If one then asks “How do we know that?” the answer, according to Fichte, is simply this: we do not *know* it, rather, we *believe* it. This belief has nothing to do

with a religious conception of faith; instead, it is a "firmness of my confidence," that is "reason's firm and unshakable adherence to a principle."¹⁸

I would like to further explain this idea. *While* we are in a situation in which we are forced to act, we cannot have doubt about the moral impulse that leads us to our decision; otherwise we would not act at all and the possibility of a world that must be realized through our action would cease. In other words, it is an *absolute* presupposition that – *in the moment* of an impulse to act – we *must believe* that our impulse is [i] *our* impulse (it is *me* who acts) and [ii] the *right* and thus, "true" impulse. "Truth," as Fichte puts it, "has its origin in conscience alone."¹⁹ Consequently, according to Fichte, faith is the necessary condition of a "truth" that is established beyond the distinction between right and wrong, for it constitutes our own consciousness in the moment of action and self-activity. This is to say, that it constitutes the *truth of ourselves*.²⁰ Put differently, faith creates a basic truth and *absolute* certainty of a decision *in* the very moment of the decision, which in this moment can no longer be "conceived" as wrong, that is, as something that does not belong to the agent. It might be the case that – *after* an action – we change our mind and realize that our decision, which was based on faith in our inner voice, was *not* the right decision and perhaps even immoral. But such a doubt can never occur *in* the moment of the decision, since the decision would immediately cancel itself. For, as Fichte puts it, in every moment conscience is "the bond by which that world unceasingly holds me and connects me with itself."²¹

In sum, we can see that Fichte (and not Kierkegaard) is the first thinker that shifts the problematic onto an existential level. The practical ego overthrows and *overpowers* theoretical uncertainty about one's own nature through an act of absolute self-determination of the will. "Faith," as Fichte finally puts it, "is no knowledge, but a decision of the will to reorganize the validity of knowledge."²² In other words, we "heal" our world of uncertainties within the knowledge of ourselves, through our certainty about our conscience and our practical essence. According to Fichte, we will not find a conceptual *explanation* of the *creation* of this self-certainty, especially since every explanation is tied back to theoretical reason, but – instead – we will find an element in our consciousness that allows us to *see* while we are acting.²³

But faith in the Fichtean sense has as well another aspect – the teleological aspect – to which I will now turn my attention.²⁴ As we have learned so far, "faith" refers to the certainty of the *actuality* of our own self. However, since faith into our conscience and faith into our morality establishes the possibility of actions and decisions, we must take into account that through faith the *temporal gap of present and future* is opened up, and a future (moral) world must come into being through our faith into our moral being.

Faith and Temporality

Usually we refer to the future dimension of our actions by either applying to it the term "result" or "consequences." Accordingly, if faith is intrinsically connected to

our present situations and to the certainty about our moral essence, that is to say, about our conscience, then it must include not only the *present* dimension of my conscience, but also the *future* dimension of my actions through the self-relation that faith establishes between conscience and itself. According to Fichte, I not only have to be absolutely certain about the inner morality of my call into action and of myself *in* the moment of decision, I also have to believe *that morality can be and will be realized* through my action. I must will that my *present* certainty becomes part of a *future* morality. In this vein, Fichte writes:

“Whatever it is in me that compels me to think that I ought so to act compels me to believe that something will result from this act. It opens the prospect of another world to my mind’s eye, a world which really is a *world*, a *situation*, and not an *action*, but a *different and better* world than the one that exists for my sense of sight.”²⁵

What Fichte has in mind here is the insight into the nature of a decision and an action. Actions presuppose the conception of purposes, the realization of which we call usually the consequence of an action. Accordingly, when we are pushed into a situation in which we are compelled to make a moral decision, we are not only certain about the rightness of our action; rather, we must be and are certain that our action will make something *better* than it was before. The belief in betterment is identical with the belief in the *realization* of our morality. Otherwise our faith in morality and conscience would be internally incoherent. It is impossible, according to Fichte, to follow the categorical imperative without being certain about the status of the categorical imperative itself, that is to say, that it is good *now and tomor-*

row, that it helps to bring about a better world. In other words, I cannot doubt that morality becomes some time in the future "immoral;" rather, I am compelled to have faith into the betterment of the world *through* my actions. Put differently, I must believe that morality is *always* morality and does not suddenly turn into its opposite.²⁶ Faith, we can conclude, not only opens the gap between present and future, it also ties both the past and future dimension together. By having faith in our own morality, i.e. in what we *are*, we disclose the *unity and wholeness* of our life, which finally includes the life of all *other* human beings, if we take into account that my actions include implicitly all future generations. In other words, through faith we do not only unite our own life; rather, we disclose the connection between our individual life and *every* future generation that is beyond our own (history). Fichte expresses this nicely:

"In respect of the nature of these consequences then, the present life, in relation to a future one, is a life *in faith*. In the future life we will possess these consequences, for we will proceed from them with our activity and build on them."²⁷

I would like to give a concrete illustration of this thought: Suppose that someone who lived in Germany between 1933 and 1945 feels forced and compelled to do something against the Nazis. This someone decides to engage in public, and to give a speech against the terror of the Nazis. Furthermore, let us assume that he or she knows that the Nazis certainly will kill him/her after or during the speech. Nevertheless, he or she feels compelled to act. From a Fichtean perspective we must pre-suppose three aspects of faith in the moment of this *lonely* decision: [i] one must

have faith in one's conscience, that is to say, into one's ability to act morally; [ii] one must have faith in the betterment of the world through the *realization* of one's morality (i.e. action); and, [iii] since one knows that one will die, one must necessarily have faith in the historical process that is *beyond* one's own personal life. Otherwise the agent would not feel *the drive and impulse to act* as the beginning moment of his/her action and decision.²⁸ The agent must certainly believe that his/her morality is still valid in a future life, even if his/her life is no longer part of it. In other words, he/she must believe that the inner correctness of his/her decision is still correct in a future life, that is to say, still correct within a future generation. Fichte would claim that without having this faith into our conscience and morality – which *is* the certainty of our own being – *we would not be compelled to act*.²⁹ To sum up, all three dimensions – present, future, and the mediation of both through history – are ultimately enclosed within the agent's self-consciousness. According to Fichte, this temporal unity and disclosedness of one's existence and life is a result of "faith, that is the confirmation through our own conscience".³⁰

Conclusion

We must conclude that Fichte claims that the nature of conscience is ambiguous: on the one hand our conscience – which is our self-consciousness – enables us to *act* and *be* what we are, and on the other hand it has an inner "*blind spot*," which cannot be expressed in theoretical terms but has to be addressed [i] as something that is beyond theoretical rationality and [ii] as faith. The nature of this "blind

"Certainty of Oneself. On Fichte's Conception of Conscience as Non-epistemic Self-Understanding," in *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 20/1, 2004, 25-36 ¹²

spot" within our consciousness and being is – most remarkably – what it is not. It makes us, at least if we want to follow Fichte, *see*. Therefore Fichte can finally be seen as modern successors of Luther, for – as Hegel states in his *History of Philosophy* – Luther first had the thought that “in the conscience he [man] can be said to be at home with himself.”³¹

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¹ The full quote reads as follows: Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves) I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." (*Luther at the Diet of Worms* (1521), in *Luther's Works* 32, 112). The Protestant tradition follows Luther's concept of conscience ("Here am I"), the reformatory movement of which Hegel later characterizes as the attempt to establish the unity of truth and conscience. Man discovered his "individual heart" (Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, Volume 3, 147) and Luther founded faith as man's "inmost certainty of himself" (Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, 3, 149).

² The full version of this paper includes an analysis of Heidegger's conception of conscience in *Being and Time*, which is not rooted, as a few Heidegger scholars, such as Gadamer, maintain, a Greek conception; rather it is rooted in a Lutheran/Fichtean conception.

³ See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 84/4:434.

⁴ See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 85/4:436: "Nothing can have worth other than that which the law determines all worth, must for that very reason have a dignity, that is, an unconditional, incomparable worth"

⁵ I cannot deal with the distinction between human beings and persons in this paper.

⁶ Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 59/4:404.

⁷ Kaspar Hauser was a young man who suddenly in 1828 appeared in the Nuremberg town square, virtually unable to communicate, barely able to walk. As the details of his story came clear, it was discovered that he was kept a prisoner in a dungeon from the moment he could remember, had no contact with any humans, and was physically immobilized. Hauser was slain in Ansbach in 1833. Soon, the Kaspar Hauser story became a legend within German cultural and intellectual history as well as for psychological research.

⁸ See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 58/4:404.

⁹ See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 528-531/6:399-403.

¹⁰ Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 529/6:400.

¹¹ This is, indeed, Kant's opinion. See Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 529-30/6:401.

¹² "[...] only through its relation to me does anything whatever exist for me. But everywhere only one relation to me is possible, and all others are only subspecies of this one: my vocation to act ethically." (Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 77).

¹³ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 76.

¹⁴ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 78.

¹⁵ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 79. The term "acquainted" is used especially within the Heidelberg-school of the theory of self-consciousness (Henrich, Frank), which uses this term in order to indicate its opposition to a propositional theory of self-consciousness.

¹⁶ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 79.

¹⁷ See Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 80: "I say that it is the commandment of action itself which through itself gives me a purpose"

¹⁸ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 104. Fichte's attempt to reduce religion to a special form of moral thinking led to the accusation of atheism and the atheism controversy in 1798. Fichte states in his brief essay *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World* that the "belief [in a moral world order; that is, in a divine governance of the world]" (Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 146) must be seen as the core element of a religion that is based in reason alone, especially since, as Fichte puts it, the "true faith" into the moral world order "is constituted by right action" (Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 150).

¹⁹ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 72.

²⁰ In other words, faith establishes what Fichte calls in *Lectures Concerning the Vocation of Scholars* the "harmony of all external things with his [man's] own necessary, practical concepts of them," (Fichte, *Some Lectures*, 8), which is the "total self-harmony or absolute identity" (Fichte, *Some Lectures*, 21). It can be realized through the will to realize the final end of man's perfection (Fichte, *Some Lectures*, 9).

²¹ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 95.

²² Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 71.

²³ We might say that, according to Fichte, we are Abrahams in *every second of our life*.

²⁴ This teleological approach to the problem of actuality leads Hegel – as is well known – to his famous critique of Fichte, in which he claims that the Fichtean system does not allow for a consideration of objects as what they are in themselves; rather, actuality is only considered as it is related back to the ego, its purposes and its morality (see Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume 3, 503). For Fichte, according to Hegel, every object

represents the struggle of the Ego to fulfill its "ought." Fichte conceives nature, according to Hegel, as a mere field *against* which the ego has to bring about its freedom (see Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, 121). In other words, freedom of consciousness involves the subjection and destruction of nature, the consequence of which is that Fichte has been conceived very often as the thinker who must be identified with the negative moments of modernity and its suppression of nature. Hegel remarks that Fichte conceives nature as "nothing," the sense of which is given through something that the ego brings about, namely the teleological sense of morality (see Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, 122). It might be of interest here to remark that Heidegger in *Being and Time* follows exactly the Fichtean model: every entity in our surrounding world, nature included, is dependent on the meaning and practical references that refer back to our authentic situation and the historical dimension. Heidegger writes: "The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 100).

²⁵ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 80.

²⁶ The thought that I have developed so far, can be found – in mere moral terms – in §15 of Fichte's *System der Sittenlehre* (1798), in which he calls the belief that someone must have into one's morality an "immediate feeling" (Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre*, 166), the doctrine of which Hegel attacks throughout his entire work. See for instance Hegel, *Hegel's Logic*, § 7; Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, 112, 118

²⁷ Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 97.

²⁸ I do not want to deal here with Fichte's theory about the connection between drive and the categorical imperative (Sittlichkeit), which he develops in his *System der Sittenlehre*. "Practical laws are," as Fichte puts it, "present to consciousness in the form of drives." (Fichte, *Some Lectures*, 21)

²⁹ Instead, as he states in his *System der Sittenlehre*, one's mentality and attitude would be "cowardly," which is in itself immoral (Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre*, 171).

³⁰ The whole quote reads as follows: "Something that does not have its source in faith, that is the confirmation through our own conscience, is an absolute sin" (Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre*, 174).

³¹ Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, Volume 3, 149.