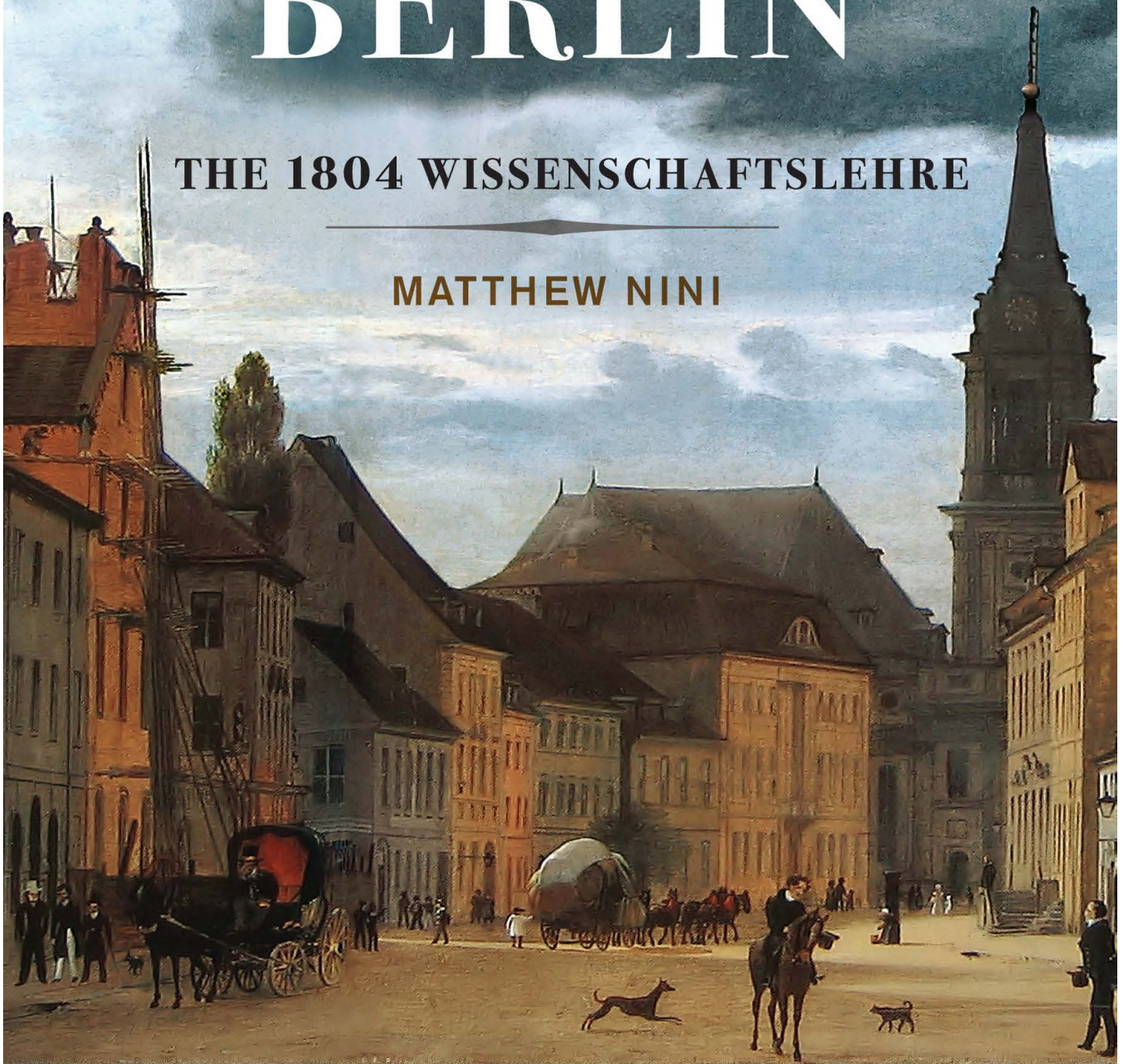


FICHTE IN BERLIN

THE 1804 WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE

MATTHEW NINI



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IN
BERLIN

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1 Fichte in Berlin

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MATTHEW NINI

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PREFACE

This book is a study of a particular period in the life and work of the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). It attempts a close reading of the major texts that Fichte produced in Berlin between 1804 and 1806 and argues that these texts constitute a whole. The centrepiece of this period is the second set of lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1804, a difficult text whose argument I have attempted to reconstruct in detail. “*Wissenschaftslehre*” is not just the name that Fichte gives to the theoretical part of his philosophy. The word also designates an intellectual exercise aimed at achieving an insight, one that grounds a certain manner of living in the world as a knowing subject. Fichte’s goal as a philosopher was to have his students achieve this insight, allowing them to think for themselves and become philosophers in their own right. If Fichte produced some seventeen versions of his *Wissenschaftslehre* over the course of twenty years, it was because different audiences with different concerns required different conditions in order for the foundational insight to be achieved. This does not mean that Fichte did not struggle with the articulation of individual versions, or that their clarity and effectiveness remain consistent. What is essential is the insight, and this remains. *Reconstruction* is an essential part of achieving insight. One does what Fichte does until one starts to perform the exercise for oneself. In this spirit, I do not consider this book to be just a historical account. Its self-aware reconstruction of Fichte’s argument is, like every serious book on Fichte, an original and personal rendition of the exercise that is *Wissenschaftslehre*. I have chosen to do this with a lesser-known (though no less robust) version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that emphasizes the role of performing the *Wissenschaftslehre* as an integral part of the completion of the content of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself. This book is therefore my attempt to facilitate the reader’s own philosophical insight. The book’s success can only be measured by whether or not it has helped

the reader perform the philosophical exercise that is herein presented in its historical context.

My work would not have been possible were it not for my teachers at McGill, Garth Green, George di Giovanni, and Torrance Kirby, as well as my host in Freiburg, Philipp Schwab. I wrote this book during my *Wanderjahre*. My guides and hosts all deserve genuine thanks: Josefine Wickenbrock in Freiburg; Maren Coors in Hildesheim; Mirna Marić in Zagreb; Veronika Zikmundová and Robert Kanócz in Prague; Vesna Topić in Belgrade and then Sarajevo; Christophe Guillet and Duncan McDonald in Montreal; Hadi Fakhoury and Sean McGrath, whose friendship transcends geography. Finally, I would like to thank Isabelle Lindsay, who made the index and whose help was indispensable during the editorial process.

This book reworks material that has previously appeared elsewhere. Chapter 1 borrows from “The System Must Construct Itself. Manifestation and Autopoiesis in Fichte’s 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *Perspectives on the Self – Reflexivity in the Humanities*, eds. Vojtěch Kolman and Tereza Matějčková (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 61–79. Chapter 5 relies in part on “Bildung as Standpoint: Philosophy of Religion as Philosophy of Culture in Fichte’s Middle Period,” in *Annali online della Didattica e della Formazione Docente*, 12 (2020), 327–41. I thank the editors for allowing me to do so.

Freiburg-im-Breisgau,
Summer 2023

ABBREVIATIONS

- 1804/2 *The Science of Knowing: J.G. Fichte's 1804 Lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre*. Translated by Walter E. Wright. Albany: SUNY, 2005.
- AA *Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften (Akademieausgabe)*. 22 vols to date. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–.
- CPJ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- CPR Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- DM Ivaldo, Marco. “The Doctrine of Manifestation in Fichte’s Principien (1805).” Translated by Garth Green. *Laval Philosophique et Théologique* 72 (2016): 35–64.
- EPW Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Early Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Daniel Breazeale. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- ES Gueroult, Martial. *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science chez Fichte*. 2 vols. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1930.
- FEW Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794–95)*. Edited and translated by Daniel Breazeale. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- FIG *J.G. Fichte im Gespräch. Berichte der Zeitgenossen*. Edited by Erich Fuchs, in cooperation with Reinhard Lauth and Walter Schieche. 8 vols. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1978–2012.
- FNR Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Foundations of Natural Right*. Edited by Frederick Neuhouser. Translated by Michael Baur. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- FTP Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) Nova Methodo*. Edited and translated Daniel Breazeale. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- GA *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Edited by Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth, and Hans Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964–.
- IWL Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*. Edited and translated by Daniel Breazeale. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
- MPW Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich. *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*. Edited and translated by George di Giovanni. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.
- PR *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800–1802)*. Edited and translated by Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood. Albany: SUNY, 2012.
- SE Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *System of Ethics*. Edited and translated by Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- SW *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*. Edited by I.H. Fichte. 8 vols. Berlin: Viet & Co., 1845–46; and *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes nachgelassene Werke*. 3 vols. Bonn: Adolphus-Marcus, 1834–35.
- SWN Schiller, Friedrich. *Schillers Werke, Nationalausgabe*. Edited by Julius Petersen et al. 43 vols to date. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1943–.

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INTRODUCTION

On Fichte's Development up to 1804

J.G. Fichte's thought is inextricably linked to the word *Wissenschaftslehre*. This expression, which has entered the English language as a term of art ("Science of Knowing" and "Doctrine of Science" are older, inadequate attempts at translation), is the name given to Fichte's theoretical philosophy and the title of some seventeen works, either books or series of lectures, of which he is the author.¹ Superficially, these works, written over the course of twenty years, seem radically different from one another, addressing different issues, using different terms, and making different arguments. Fichte, however, maintained that his most important insights remained unchanged throughout his career, each work attempting to unfold the single idea that is *Wissenschaftslehre* (WL).

While at least outwardly problematic in regard to each new version of the WL, this assertion becomes particularly difficult to accept in regard to the evolution that Fichte's thought underwent at the turn of the century. The first versions of the WL, written in Jena – the 1794 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, the 1796–99 lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, and their companion texts – present a cohesive philosophical vision: the attempt at reconciling freedom and necessity in view of giving an account of human subjectivity. But from 1800 onwards, the WL changes radically in its presentation. In the interval, Fichte lost his professorship at Jena and moved to Berlin, where he had become a private lecturer and tutor. An accusation of atheism made in Jena and the ensuing controversy still haunted him. Moreover,

major philosophical disputes with his contemporaries meant that he was forced to mount a defence of the perceived weaknesses in his thought. The new versions of the WL produced in Berlin change nearly all the terms with which Fichte's students were familiar: gone are the *I* and *not-I* [*Ich, nicht Ich*], the check [*Anstoß*], fact/act [*Tathandlung*] and summons [*Aufforderung*]. They are replaced by new series of terms that would not remain consistent. Moreover, what was once a rigorously transcendental philosophy now used terms like *light*, *life*, and *the absolute* to convey a religious philosophy modeled on the Gospel of John. Fichte, however, remained adamant: the WL was what it had always been.

This problem, that of the passage [Übergang] from Jena to Berlin, cannot be addressed merely by comparing different versions of Fichte's work. Rather, the answer is to be found in the nature of WL itself. The WL is an exercise, one born of an insight that would have occurred to Fichte some time in 1793² and that he subsequently would have tried to capture in writing. The first written version of the WL, the 1794 *Foundation*, was meant to be a manual for the use of Fichte's students, a recipe book to which they could refer as they tried to reproduce for themselves what they had seen the master perform in front of them. Fichte himself was less their teacher than their guide, whose task it was to create the conditions for students to have an insight of their own. Once this insight occurred, the students would be able to reproduce the transcendental form of Fichte's philosophy in their own terms, with each individual arriving at the truth by means of their own work and after their own fashion. As Fichte famously said, "the kind of philosophy one chooses depends on the kind of person one is."³

There is, then, a sense in which Fichte's own articulations of the WL are incommensurable. Each was produced under different circumstances and for different audiences. Fichte's task was to elevate the novice to a standpoint from which rigorous systematic thinking was possible, not adjudicate its content.⁴ At the same time, the insight always leads to the unfolding of a series of thoughts that, in their relations to one another, achieve certainty. To use the terms Fichte adopted in 1804, the journeyman philosopher does not *construct* a radically new system; rather one *reconstructs* for oneself what is true. Put even more simply, one comes to feel at home in the truth. In the progression of Fichte's own work, there is a tension between the ephemerality of philosophy as thought performed,

and philosophy as science of science, a rigorous foundation for inquiry into what is true. This tension exists in regard to the relationship between different versions of the WL, as well as the relationship that WL has with particular philosophical sciences Fichte sees as being derived from his “science of science.” Thinking with Fichte means conferring primacy to the practical over the theoretical. Hence, if Fichte’s body of work does not achieve systematic coherence, it does at least constitute a series of complementary viewpoints. Each version of the WL is what each other might have been; the relationship of WL with each particular subject matter derived from it is always one that knowledge that is *certain* manifests itself as *a certain kind* of knowing. Even Fichte’s claims of systematicity (that his WL never changed and that only five particular sciences are necessarily derived from WL as science of science) are rehearsed in different ways at different moments. Hence, the strengths of one version cannot simply be transplanted to fill the lacunae of another; each WL is a whole unto itself. Seeing WL as an exercise whose performance is itself an integral element of its content means radically re-evaluating the question of its continuity or discontinuity after Jena. The WL is always the same; the WL is also something new each time it is performed. Having performed the WL for oneself in the past means that one can compare the articulated record to the ineffable insight from which it arose – a kind of progress is possible, as the history of the elaboration of WL will bear out. And it is precisely in addressing the question of the relationship between insight and articulation that the second version of the WL from 1804 proves to be one of the most robust versions.

When Fichte announced the publication of the first version of the WL, the *Foundation*, in October 1794, he wrote that what was about to appear was, as the title suggests, only the groundwork for a larger project. It was to be followed the next year by a full system, divided into theoretical and practical parts.⁵ On Fichte’s definition, philosophy is always radical philosophy – that is, it must provide for its own foundation. The foundational principles are not to be situated beyond the particular philosophical reflection to which it gives rise but always as a part of it, at its root, its *radix*. In 1794, concerned with human subjectivity and the relationship that it, as free, has to all the forms of necessity that exercise constraint over it, Fichte offers a disciplined account of the idea of a foundation. In this context, the foundation at which he arrives is that

facts of consciousness are always accompanied by an awareness of the subject's act of knowing and that the relationship between these two elements is necessary: put simply, consciousness and self-consciousness are inseparable. As Fichte himself was aware, this approach is conditioned by human finitude – hence the particularization of the first principle through the term “*I*.” But intellectual spontaneity (the idea that nothing external causes our thoughts but that we ourselves are responsible for them) is not exhausted by the mere concept of individual consciousness, and Fichte would change tack in the *Nova Methodo* lectures to address the problem of intersubjectivity. It is also possible to begin from the other end entirely, still using the main insight of WL – that is, that thinking and thinking-of-thinking are inseparable. This approach would imply presuming the unity of knowledge and then seek to trace back all of knowing's discernable forms in consciousness to their original unity. Such a style would be more theoretical and certainly less malleable than the foundationalist approach; but it provides a considerable advantage as well: that of offering a systematic logic from which one can deduce other forms of knowing. Instead of being a “foundation,” this articulation of the WL would be a *philosophia prima*⁶ or “first philosophy” in Aristotle's terms, a thinking-about-thinking that subsequently grounds thinking particular subject matters.

Historically, this change of tack occurs at the critical junction that is the Jena-Berlin transition, though not all at once. Fichte will require several attempts over the course of several years before he is able to produce a coherent, articulate, and complete version of a first philosophy, namely, the second set of lectures on the WL in 1804. At least in part, the revision that produced the 1804 lectures was the product of an internal requirement of the WL itself – the need to integrate the discursive expression of the WL into its own theoretical standpoint. Put otherwise, Fichte was trying to create conditions for his listeners that would lead each of them to arrive at an insight that occurs all at once. There is no way to facilitate this insight other than to use language. Yet the discursive process that is language necessarily moves one further away from the immediacy of the desired insight. The solution is to integrate discourse into the very exercise that is WL. The listener must be aware that the insight sought cannot be captured by language but that for the sake of the exercise required, one must treat it *as if* it could be

attained in this way, ultimately integrating one's presuppositions into the insight as the latter's product, not its source. In sum, to ask "what is *Wissenschaftslehre*?" is to already be doing it. This approach offers the most robust form of exercise Fichte had yet put forward. The 1804/2 lectures are in this regard perhaps his most successful attempt at outlining a philosophical exercise, one whose conclusions will ultimately coincide with its execution in the pure spontaneity that unites being (what is experienced immediately) and knowing (discourse), called *esse in mero actu*, "being in mere act."

The 1804 lectures treat the absolute principle that is *esse in mero actu* in two parts. The first is a theory of truth that seeks to arrive at it – in other words, to produce the insight into it (in Fichte's German, to see into it, *einsehen*). There are any number of ways one can achieve this, and the lecturer gives a sketch that encompasses all the fundamentals of this in the first four lectures. Their difficulty, however, leads to another, more specific discursive approach: a dialectic between two philosophical positions, realism and idealism. These generalized positions, the product of historical controversy about the WL, each presume that some lesser form of agency actually exhausts spontaneity. Realism considers it to be being, while for idealism it is knowing. Neither is aware of its own presuppositions, and both will therefore reason toward a logical end that creates an aporia that only WL can solve.

The second part of the 1804/2 lectures is a theory of appearance. If the insight is ultimately that thinking and thinking-of-thinking constitute a necessary relationship, then the pure activity or spontaneity found at the end of the first part must be confronted with the possibility of real content. The second part therefore juxtaposes the absolute with the possibility of any object of thought at all. In Fichte's day, one would call this placeholder content "facts of consciousness." In contemporary parlance, a philosophy of the facts of consciousness is enveloped by phenomenology, and it is precisely this term that Fichte uses to describe the theory of appearances. The phenomenology will have to demonstrate that the pure spontaneity that is the absolute, *esse in mero actu*, is not derived from particular acts of knowing – if anything, it is the other way around. Particular acts of knowing are themselves the image of the absolute. That is to say, within a particular, contingent act of knowing, one finds a necessary relationship that is spontaneity itself.

The 1804/2 ends with the assertion that all forms of scientific enquiry – that is, wherever an a priori functions as a regulative principle for treating particular content – can be structurally derived from the WL. The four broadest sciences derived from the science of science that is WL are religion, ethics, right, and natural philosophy.⁷ Yet Fichte will not consecrate individual treatises to each of these disciplines. Rather, in the period that succeeds the presentation of the 1804/2 WL, he will produce other work, often popular lectures directed towards a general public. In what follows, it will be argued that even if these works occasionally have a problematic relationship to Fichte's WL, from them one can derive a further refinement of the phenomenology begun in the second part of 1804/2. Fichte's theory of appearance suggests that subjectivity is itself the appearance of the absolute. Subsequent texts on the philosophy of history (in *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, 1804–05), the *Principles of the Doctrines of God, Morals, and Right* (1805), and the philosophy of religion (in *The Way Towards the Blessed Life*, 1806) will build on this. They will establish that subjective experience is free but follows a priori principles and exists in time; that the absolute structure that is spontaneity manifests itself freely in time – said otherwise, that individual moral progress is indeed possible and is the trajectory of free reason; and that the realization of this progress is a vocation cultivated through interiority. The progression is one of carving out a space of interiority for the subject whose free activity is reason and simultaneously understands itself to be acting in such a manner.

In addition to the WL's own internal development, external factors, both historical and conceptual, play a role in this evolution. The major shift in approach that occurs from 1799 to 1804 is occasioned first by a historical event, the atheism controversy.⁸ While the accusations of atheism that led to Fichte losing his professorship in Jena and fleeing to Berlin constitute a political event, he saw things otherwise. Retrospectively, he framed the event as a philosophical one, involving the role of religion in his system. In his defence, the *Divine Governance* essay that represents Fichte's philosophical stance during the controversy is in fact his first attempt at articulating a philosophy of religion on the principles of the WL.⁹ The accusations that would continue to haunt Fichte years after the controversy subsided would impact not only the religious rhetoric that found its way into his work but also cultivate a desire to establish

a “doctrine of religion” separate from but closely allied to the WL and further still, allow for the term “God” to be used as a synonym for the ineffable absolute at the heart of the 1804/2 WL.

Philosophical debates played an even greater role in the evolution of Fichte’s thought. In the wake of the atheism controversy, Fichte’s contemporaries seized the opportunity to voice criticisms of the perceived shortcomings of the WL. Partly because of the language of *I* and *not-I* but also because of a number of still-implicit aspects of the WL as a whole, Fichte’s readers often conflated intellectual spontaneity with individual subjectivity. Yet as Fichte would work out in the period between the atheism controversy and the 1804 WL, this criticism made the same mistake of which it accused the WL. Schelling will criticize Fichte’s *I* in the name of an absolute principle, claiming that the WL can serve as a legitimate beginning to philosophy but cannot arrive at the absolute principle that relates indifferently to both being and knowing. Jacobi, on the other hand, asserts that God, the unity of being and knowing, is absolutely in-itself and cannot be expressed, meaning that the WL cannot speak of God, and can only achieve systematicity by positing as absolute an idol of its own fabrication. In both instances, Fichte’s interlocutor has been thinking according to a maxim of which he is not aware. For Schelling, this maxim is realism, the idea that we have immediate access to an absolute, such that being takes precedence over consciousness. For Jacobi, the maxim is idealism, the idea that what is in-itself is inaccessible. Consciousness is not consciousness-*of* being but merely consciousness in-and-for-itself, giving precedence to thought. But Fichte does not mean to caricature Jacobi as an idealist, nor Schelling as a realist. If anything, they were the opposite: Jacobi, the champion of lived faith as opposed to abstract philosophy, was an anti-idealist; for his part, Schelling had goals that, far from naïve realism, were close to those of the WL. The point is that both find themselves caught in a struggle that dissolves when one achieves a higher standpoint.

Yet Fichte will also learn something from both Jacobi and Schelling, incorporating elements of their thought into the new articulation of the WL. Indeed, the strengths and weaknesses of both are intimately related, and in reworking the WL, Fichte would not resort to simple refutation: both Schelling’s and Jacobi’s positions could be corrected using the WL itself, allowing for their insights to be incorporated into its new expression.

It is WL that propels the realism-idealism dialectic forward, and WL will itself be the highest point and resolution of the conflict.

Fichte admired Jacobi, and the use of feeling in the WL had always been closely allied to Jacobi's use of the term. Now, Fichte's new expression of the WL as first philosophy will accept Jacobi's stance but turn it on its head: Jacobi accepts a truth in-itself, but one that remains inaccessible by means of philosophy. Fichte will reply that the problem at hand is not arriving at what is true in-itself by means of philosophical construction but rather realizing that if we can do philosophy at all, it is because we proceed from this truth – we do not do philosophy; rather, we are ourselves the philosophical expression of reason. It is the truth that speaks us. This is a direct consequence of the cooperation of consciousness and self-consciousness, which do not exist outside each other but rather arise together in a single act: their relationship, in Fichte's terms, is genetic, sharing a common internal root, rather than an external cause.¹⁰

It is precisely this last point that will become clear to Fichte in the protracted debate with Schelling between 1800 and 1802. Through the bitter dispute with his former disciple, Fichte becomes aware that the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, of knowing and knowing-of-knowing, cannot lie in one or the other. Discourse (thinking) and the truth it expresses (being) come apart when examined in judgment but are aboriginally united. This is the more abstract, logical expression of what we earlier called Fichte's integration of language into the WL. Schelling had already expressed something similar with the idea of indifference. Yet according to Fichte, Schelling's expression of the indifferent absolute does not live up to its own standards, still positing this absolute as external to being and thought. Yet this would mean that either it is a self-enclosed external being, validating Jacobi's criticisms, or is *prima facie* consciousness's own ground, its own activity, meaning that it is ultimately thinking. Again, Fichte's solution will be to claim that to be truly indifferent, the absolute must be found in the internal relationship between being and thinking. Another point learned from Schelling is what Fichte will come to call *attention*, a way of attending to our own inner activity that lets us see the relationship between thinking and awareness-of-thinking. What Schelling had called intellectual intuition, the subjective side of the Schellingian system, does not produce objects but rather incites one to realize that one is engaged in a certain kind

of thinking about being. Fichte brings this a step further by insisting on its reversal: I do not “think” the absolute; rather, through becoming aware of a mental state of affairs, I realize that I dwell within it, and my thoughts are the product of this unity in activity.¹¹

From 1800 onward, Fichte’s conceptual challenge is to show that the corrective to both Jacobi’s and Schelling’s philosophies arises naturally from the WL itself. After a number of false starts, Fichte would offer a coherent account of this in 1804. The key lies in the evolution of one of the central concepts of the Jena WL, the *Tathandlung*. The insight at the heart of all versions of the WL is that thought is an activity that always belongs to an I, to self-consciousness, and that in the activity of thinking, recognition of the I will emerge. The *Ich* is therefore the foundational principle, but only when properly understood. As Fichte will write at the beginning of the 1794 *Foundation*, the foundational principle or *Grundsatz* is an activity to be performed rather than the object of a proof, emerging in its activity. It must therefore always have some objective content: when one engages in the activity that is objective knowing “out there,” something else arises, concomitant with the object.¹² Yet this foundational principle cannot lead us to some fact apart from the consciousness in which it is present: the I does not posit some (objectified) principle outside of itself. Rather, it “posits itself through its own activity.”¹³ Crucial to the proper understanding of this foundational principle is that its constructive activity – the discursive side of it that generates objects in consciousness via judgment – is in fact the same activity that manifests itself as oblique self-recognition. Fichte reconciles these two aspects by means of the neologism *Tathandlung*, or fact/act.

Leading up to 1804, as he thought through the dilemma of the real and the ideal suggested by Schelling and Jacobi, it occurred to Fichte that the solution was to think his old concept of *Tathandlung* in terms of a unified, ineffable, and dynamic absolute. If the fact/act that is *Tathandlung* expresses a self-positing by dynamically linking statement and performance, the same could be done for the real and ideal: the absolute, above real and ideal, relates to the particular as an original to an image [*Bild*]. They have a shared origin, a genetic root, in the activity of image-making, otherwise called phenomenology [*Phänomenologie*]. Writes Fichte in 1804:

Now, from the time it first arose, the WL has taught that the primary error of all previous systems has been that they began with something factual [*von Tatsachen auszugehen*] and posited the absolute therein. The WL, on the other hand, attests to another foundation, a fact that is *act* [*Tathandlung*], which in these lectures I have called *Genesis*, using a Greek term that is more readily understood than the German. Hence from the time it first arose, the WL ... has never admitted that the “I” as *found* and *perceived* is its principle. As something found, it is never a pure I, but always the individual person of each of us[.] Thus the WL has always testified that it recognizes the I as pure only as *produced*, and that, as a science, it never places the I at the pinnacle of its deductions, because the productive process will always stand higher than what is produced. This production of the I, and with it the whole of consciousness, is now our task.¹⁴

Tathandlung has now morphed into genesis. Moreover, Fichte has clarified that the first principle of WL has never been the I, or merely subjective spontaneity, but rather the process that produces this knowing I, *Tathandlung*/genesis.¹⁵ Ultimately, genesis will imply that nothing really exists outside the absolute. The images that it “generates” are in fact constitutive of the absolute: particular subjects, free agents in the world, are themselves the necessary appearing of the absolute.

How can that which is entirely contained within itself produce an external world?¹⁶ The answer is that the absolute’s activity of imaging is contained within itself, a twofold movement of leaving in appearance and returning in knowing that constitutes a single outward movement that fashions an image [*Abbilden*]. To use the most frequent metaphor of 1804, it is *in* the ineffable light that is the absolute that what *is* appears.¹⁷ In the end, consciousness, that for which the world *is*, is itself what is made manifest. Consciousness is the absolute’s appearance.

This theory of appearing is the product of the transcendental argument structure found in the 1804/2 WL, emerging from the fullest form of the constant foundation of the WL, the fivefold synthesis. Explaining the fivefold synthesis and exploring how Fichte puts it to use is the chief theoretical task of this book. More activity than theory, the only way

to give an account of it is to perform it. For now, a brief overview of what the fivefold synthesis is will have to suffice. Its initial version is the product of the first half of the 1804/2 text, its “theory of truth” (lectures 1–15) and prompts a phenomenological investigation into the absolute as one life. Near the end of this investigation, in 1804/2’s twenty-sixth lecture, Fichte offers the definitive version of his fivefold synthesis:

1. Seeing sees into another, life.
2. But in so doing, it negates itself. Life is in fact the ground of seeing (reversal).
3. Seeing is part of life, life’s own inwardness (life through seeing, seeing through life).
4. The terms therefore constitute a single movement, an externalization generated by the “throughness” of both terms (genetic version of seeing into life).
5. The genetic seeing into life is itself reversible; this externalization is internal to life; facticity belongs to genesis (reconstruction).¹⁸

Here, seeing stands in for knowing as a single activity that unifies two otherwise heterogeneous aspects: my knowledge of particulars, and my awareness, when knowing them, that I am in fact the knower engaged in this activity. That of which the knower is aware [*Einsehen; ich sehe ein*] is the very dynamism of intellectual activity itself. This is the heart of the exercise that is WL, my insight into knowing’s self-positing. Through this awareness, I see that my spontaneous knowing is not the ground of the pure activity but rather the other way around: seeing is the form of life. Yet instead of describing it as a check [*Anstoß*], as he would have in the earlier WL, Fichte here considers it to be the activity that is life, always made incarnate in a particular living being. To live is to do so in the realm of the particular and finite, yet as image of an ineffable pure activity. The particular I is not the image of some universal I but rather the face of the hidden absolute, its features coming to light in the actions of particular consciousness. Life’s dynamism and the activity of living things is therefore one single movement that is internal to the absolute.

These arguments can only be made lucid through a close reading of the text of the 1804/2 WL. Fichte intended for its hearers (and later,

its readers as well) to engage in a transformative exercise that would first facilitate an insight and then serve as a guide to the elaboration of a personal philosophical position. It is only after we have been through the exercise that the fivefold synthesis and its consequent *Bildlehre/* phenomenology can become clear. Part 1 of this book is therefore dedicated to closely examining the 1804/2. Its two chapters treat the two parts of the text: chapter 1 examines the theory of truth contained in lectures 1–15; chapter 2 examines the theory of appearance contained in lectures 16–28.

Herein, I have tried to suggest that construing WL as a *philosophia prima* necessarily evokes a phenomenology: thinking-of-thinking must move downward to accommodate the possibility of thinking about something in particular. This is necessitated by the very structure of the WL, which sees experience as a constitutive element. Yet the series of popular lectures that follow the exposition of the WL in the years 1804 to 1806 do not offer a catalogue of the ways in which one can think about experience. Indeed, Fichte does not offer four treatises on the four ways of analyzing one's own experience of the world that, together with WL, constitute the fivefold expression of "science" [*Wissenschaft*]. Instead, Fichte seeks to secure the link between thinking-of-thinking and the possibility of thinking about what is external. The reasons for this approach can only be found in the WL itself. If the external appearance of images belongs to the absolute's appearing to itself, then what is external – objects of experience – are in some sense internal to the pure activity that is the absolute, *esse in mero actu*. The question, then, is how particular sciences can be the science-of some particular delimitation of experience *and* ultimately an expression of science-of-science. Since experience is always particular, one can build on this question by asking: how does *my* particular experience of the world belong to the absolute's appearance? Or better still: how is my subjective activity an expression of WL?

Fichte believes he can answer both questions through the development of a phenomenology as extension of the WL. The passage from science-of-science to particular sciences is also the passage from intellectual spontaneity in its broadest sense to *my agency*, the subjective experience of an individual. The world that Fichte wishes to describe is our world, the one in which my experiences really occur. Fichte not only seeks to elaborate a WL which allows me to describe the logical

structures of my action in the world, but a philosophy that allows me to feel at home in that world. To that end, the passage to particular sciences and those sciences themselves will describe standpoints that allow one to grasp the world in a fully human manner: they are forms of discourse subjectively adapted to one's experiences. Completing his phenomenology, Fichte seeks to provide insight into what it means to be a knowing subject in the world; reintroducing the notion of feeling, Fichte will account for fundamental aspects of subjective existence such as the experience of time, the practical concept of freedom, our sense of having a vocation, and our capacity for interiority.

It is precisely this cultivation of subjectivity necessitated by a phenomenology that the three chapters of the second part of this book will address. The *Characteristics of the Present Age* (1804–05) establishes that time is the field in which subjectivity engages in free action. The *Principles of the Doctrines of God, Morals, and Right* (1805) analyzes the concept of appearance, arguing that free subjectivity active in time is always determined but also called to a higher form of self-realization – that is, the free use of Reason in view of the betterment of humanity. The *Way towards the Blessed Life* is at once a doctrine [*Lehre*] of religion and the lynchpin moment in a phenomenology according to the WL – if WL is genetic, finding its sources within and not in some external thing, so too with a phenomenology; self-realization is to be found through an inward journey. As highest particular science, religion is a type of discourse about a specific object. But this object, which the *Blessed Life* calls God, is the same as the WL – the absolute truth internal to all other forms of discourse. Religion embodies its own kind of discourse, one that arrives at the same goals as the WL but by means of feeling rather than dialectic; religion is discourse about the subjectively felt sense of truth contained in any kind of discourse, the science of the personal dimension of discourse – said otherwise, of how one can speak with conviction.

Taken together, the first philosophy that is WL and the extended phenomenology constituted by explorations of time, appearance, and religion provide a portrait of Fichte's thought during this, his middle period. This is not to say that it provides a complete philosophical system; rather, the works both scientific and popular that were given in Berlin are dependent on and elaborated out of the version of the WL that was intended for the same audience, the 1804/2. One of the main goals of

this book, then, is to demonstrate that this context, Berlin from 1804 to 1806, sees Fichte thinking in a certain register, one defined by the concerns of the 1804/2 WL.

More important, this book is meant to help readers perform the exercise that is WL for themselves. Like any commentary on Fichte's work, this text can only convey the author's unique way of thinking through the exercise. The measure of success of such works is whether or not they allow readers to arrive at their own insight. As Fichte says, "our living thinking and insight ... can't be shown on a blackboard[.]"¹⁹

PART ONE

The 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*

PREFATORY REMARKS: “BRINGING THE WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE TO UTTER CLARITY”

In the summer of 1803, Fichte wrote to Schiller that he was “still completely occupied with the *Wissenschaftslehre*; not in order to find it, or to improve it, but rather, to bring it to utter clarity.”¹ Since arriving in Berlin four summers earlier, in July 1799, Fichte had not ceased to work on the *wL*, preparing a far more novel iteration of it than its Jena incarnations could have foretold. While the foundational insight at the heart of his philosophy remained the same, its embodiment in *wL*, and indeed the very notion *that* it could be embodied, was evolving. From the beginning, *wL* was an activity, not a text, an objective and scientific intuition into the structure of thought but also one that is highly personal, coming to life for an individual at a certain moment in time. Every written articulation of the *wL* – a task that Fichte was always loath to undertake – could only be a sort of exercise book, a series of thought experiments, remarks, and maxims that allow the reader to undertake what is always a unique journey.² Just as students must reconstruct their own *Wissenschaftslehren* in hearing or reading Fichte’s account, so too does each formal articulation of the *wL* arrive at its goal from a certain angle. No one version of Fichte’s text can be considered definitive, since each approaches the task of *wL* in a different manner according to different concerns.³ Fichte saw his role in these expositions not as teacher – still less as master or expert – but as guide, an individual who had himself achieved the insight that