

Does Fichte's Argument from the Summons Succeed?

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Abstract: Fichte's argument from the summons is typically considered a watershed moment in the history of social and political philosophy. In a single stroke, Fichte tries to (1) demonstrate that we can have certain *a priori* knowledge of the independent existence of other minds; (2) found the science of right as the terrain of intersubjective relationships; and (3) decisively refute his opponents' accusations of solipsism. The problem, however, is that Fichte's argument from the summons does not and cannot succeed. In his haste to produce a certain *a priori* argument for the existence of other minds, Fichte actually produces an argument that more closely resembles the ontological argument in that he infers the actual existence of other minds from the concept of the I. This paper offers a systematic reconstruction and diagnosis of Fichte's argument from the summons, spanning from Fichte's early reflections on the problem of other minds in the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation" to the *Foundations of Natural Right*. My argument in short is that Fichte proves too much: by showing that finite self-consciousness depends on the existence of a prior self-conscious agent, Fichte is forced to admit the existence of infinite rational agents (such as God) as the origin point of finite rational agency as such. This inference strongly undermines Fichte's claim to have decisively refuted solipsism and suggests deep methodological problems in Fichte's Jena philosophy.

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Introduction

In his letter of August 29, 1795 to Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Johann Gottlieb Fichte makes two stunning proclamations: first, that the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the doctrine expounding the foundational principles of Fichte's philosophy, was now complete; and second, that he would provide proof of the cogency and completeness of the *Wissenschaftslehre* through a determinate application of these principles to the domain of political right.¹ Fichte's letter to Reinhold therefore documents a critical transitional point in Fichte's philosophical development, where the first expression of the central principles of his philosophy had been substantially completed, but also where it was still necessary to defend these principles' determinate application to human action. Here we see Fichte's thinking between the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and the *Foundations of Natural Right*, and, thereby, also a way to understand the transition between these projects. Fichte was quite often a circular thinker, and so while he saw the foundational principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as obviously guiding their concrete application, he also thought that a system of political right would in turn strengthen the plausibility of his foundational principles and philosophical method as a whole.²

In his letter to Reinhold, Fichte reports that "I have been investigating natural rights this summer and have found that no deduction of the *reality* of the concept of right exists anywhere," including in Kant's moral and political philosophy.³ Fichte's thought seems to be this: other thinkers of political right, including Kant, have merely assumed the existence of other finite rational agents without ever demonstrating this fact, and so their analysis of the foundations of

¹ *EPW* 406-407.

² See for example, *FEW* 174-175. Also, in his letter to Reinhold, Fichte transitions from his declaration of the completeness of the foundational principles to the *Foundations of Natural Right* by stating that "Further application of my basic principles should make them clear and, I hope, more generally understandable than the basic principles of any other philosopher" *EPW* 407.

³ *EPW* 407.

political right are fundamentally suspect and incomplete because they are enthymematic. Fichte later on even says that “The most striking demonstration of the incompleteness of Kant’s critical philosophy is that Kant never provided an explanation of how I come to assume that there are rational beings outside of me.”⁴ So, if Fichte sought to correct and complete the critical system of philosophy, as the *Wissenschaftslehre* portends to do, he must provide a demonstration of the existence of other rational minds from first principles. This is what Fichte’s famous “argument from the summons” intends to do: fill the lacuna of all previous accounts of natural right by showing that we may know *a priori* that other minds exist. Fichte aims to provide an argument convincing to even the most ardent skeptic, so his strategy is to try to argue that the structure of self-consciousness *itself* depends on the existence of other finite rational agents: in short, I may know by virtue of my own freedom and agency that this agency must have been summoned into activity by another. In such a demonstration, Fichte would prove the independent existence of other minds, provide a renewed foundation of natural right rooted in fundamental intersubjectivity, and clarify misunderstandings of his foundational principles that led others to accuse *him* of solipsism.⁵

The only problem is that Fichte’s argument from the summons does not live up to these rather lofty goals and expectations. It is my contention that Fichte’s argument from the summons, first gestured at in his letter to Reinhold and later developed in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, cannot provide a proof for the independent existence of other minds, and therefore also does not provide a suitable foundation for natural right *or* successfully defend Fichte against accusations of

⁴ FTP 303. Certain readers of Kant (Saunders 2016: 177-9) concur with Fichte’s interpretation, according to which Kant’s transcendental idealism is inconsistent with genuine knowledge of other minds.

⁵ Many readers, including Schelling, Herder, and Jacobi interpreted Fichte as a ‘transcendental Spinozist,’ basing their argument primarily upon the theoretical section of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, where Fichte describes the I as substance and its ideas as modifications. It is easy to infer from this interpretation of the absolute I that other minds would also only be modifications of that one substance, which leads to a solipsistic interpretation of Fichte’s philosophy. The details of their interpretation will be discussed in more detail below.

solipsism. This is because, in Fichte's haste to secure an *a priori* argument to deduce the necessary existence of other finite minds, he inadvertently ventures into a metaphysical rather than genuinely transcendental argument, in that he tries to infer a necessary existence claim from mere concepts.⁶ Fichte's argument from the summons therefore more closely approximates the ontological argument for the existence of God than anything in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and this is shown from the fact that Fichte intends to conclude a necessary existence claim from merely conceptual inference.⁷ In the end, then, Fichte ends up proving too much or too little: too much when he claims that we are licensed to infer from the argument from the summons theoretical knowledge of the existence of an infinite, eternal, and disembodied rational agent (God) as the source for finite agency as such, or too little, as in most of his contemporary interpreters who only reconstruct his argument to say that the *concept* of other minds is necessary for us without showing that there *actually exist* such other minds.⁸

My argument is composed primarily of four sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I discuss Fichte's early thinking on the problem of other minds. I begin by denying that this topic receives any significant treatment in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and instead contend that Fichte begins to think about this problem in the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation" and in the aforementioned August 1795 letter to Reinhold. The second section then provides a reconstruction of Fichte's argument from the summons in the *Foundations of Natural Right*. As it will turn out, Fichte's argument is quite complex, but the bulk of my attention is centered on the parts of Fichte's argument most plausibly considered central to his *a priori* demonstration of the

⁶ This interpretation of metaphysical arguments will be defended below §3.

⁷ In essence, I argue that the permutations of different interpretations of the argument from the summons are best characterized as ways of construing the necessity (metaphysical, transcendental, phenomenological, or psychological) Fichte has in mind. This view is elaborated and defended in detail in §3.

⁸ I argue below (§3) that at least four contemporary interpreters of Fichte (Wood, Breazeale, Gottlieb, and Kosch) do reconstruct the argument from the summons in a manner that does not license Fichte's conclusion of the necessary existence of other minds.

existence of other minds. The third section will explain why, in my view, the argument from the summons must fail, even if one were to grant many eminently dubious aspects of Fichte's argument. My main point here is that Fichte proves too much. Since on Fichte's account finite agents *must* have been summoned into self-consciousness by another agent, this makes it seem impossible for there to have ever been a *first* finite rational agent, which in turn makes the notion of a series of finite rational agents paradoxical. Fichte's solution is to introduce the necessary existence of *infinite* rational agents, who do not need to be summoned but who can in turn summon finite rational agents in time. However, this solution significantly undermines his assertion that "if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one."⁹ The fourth section then compares my own interpretation of the argument from the summons with other contemporary Fichte interpreters. My central complaint with most of these perspectives is that in their attempt to make sense of Fichte's argument from the summons, they are forced to downplay the importance of the problem of other minds and Fichte's proposed solution. I conclude with some reflections on what the inadequacy of the letter of Fichte's argument means for a reconstruction of the spirit of his argument from the summons.

§1. Fichte's Early Thinking on the Problem of Other Minds

It is important to begin by clarifying that Fichte did not treat the problem of other minds in his 1794/1795 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. Some scholars have been confused by Fichte's invocation of intersubjective language at certain moments in this text. For example, Fichte concludes one of his demonstrations in the theoretical section of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with the proclamation: "No thou, no I; no I, no thou."¹⁰ This is naturally read as an anticipation of Fichte's

⁹ *FNR* 37

¹⁰ *FEW* 275.

argument from the summons as described in the introduction to this piece, since Fichte wants to demonstrate the existence of other minds from the nature of consciousness itself. However, here *du* rendered as ‘thou’ refers not to other consciousnesses but merely to objects of consciousness.¹¹ The point Fichte intends to make in this somewhat abstruse moment in the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that the I can exist only insofar as it has relatively independent objects as the contents of its intentional acts, and that these relatively independent objects only exist as posited by an I. Nothing in his argument requires one to believe in the relatively independent existence of other minds.

In fact, the theoretical portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* points decisively against this possibility, since here Fichte draws extended comparisons between the I and Spinozistic substance: “Insofar as the I is viewed as comprising the entire, purely and simply determined domain [*Umfang*] of all reality, it is *substance*.”¹² These comparisons between the I and Spinozistic substance actually motivated thinkers like Schelling, Jacobi, and Herder to conclude that Fichte’s idealism was a form of “transcendental Spinozism,” which they took to be a form of solipsism where all objects and events in the universe are mere modifications of the self-conscious I. Herder for example writes in the Preface to the Second Edition to *God, Some Conversations*: “Indeed, his [Spinoza’s] system was so misused that, forgetting all the limits of human knowledge which Spinoza recognized so well, some turned things upside down and made bold to spin out the contents of the entire universe from a confined and imaginary Ego. This senseless dream was called ‘Transcendental Spinozism’...”¹³ Similarly, Jacobi in his public letters to Fichte states “I

¹¹ Daniel Breazeale has made this point in his own work (2013a: 174) and in the editorial apparatus surrounding the passage (*FEW* 504).

¹² *FEW* 238.

¹³ Herder (1940: 69)

first found entry into the *Wissenschaftslehre* through the representation of an inverted Spinozism.”¹⁴

Fichte actually first addresses the problem of other minds in the May 1794 “Lectures on the Scholar’s Vocation.” These lectures were delivered very shortly after the publication of Fichte’s “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” which was Fichte’s first extended introduction of the tenets of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹⁵ Fichte here stumbles upon the problem of other minds much in the same way as he recounts to Reinhold: he intends to elaborate on the vocation of the scholar within society but is quickly driven back into deeper conceptual problems about the nature of our knowledge of other minds. For as Fichte notes, the “concept of society presupposes that there actually are rational beings apart from oneself.”¹⁶ This forces Fichte to raise two critically related questions asks: “How does a man come to assume that there are rational beings like himself apart from him? And how does he come to recognize them, since they are certainly not immediately present to his pure self-consciousness?”¹⁷ These questions are later reintroduced as the central problems for Fichte’s argument from the summons, as in the Danish edition a note remarks that “The author has since answered both of these questions in his previously mentioned book on natural right,” acknowledging the clear continuity between this lecture and the later argument from the summons provided in the *Foundations of Natural Right*.

Fichte begins to respond to these questions by outlining what he would consider inadequate responses to this question. There he says:

Persons still unaccustomed to strict philosophical inquiry might well answer my question as follows: ‘Our knowledge that rational beings like ourselves exist apart from us and our knowledge of the signs which distinguish rational beings from nonrational ones have both been derived from experience.’ But such an answer

¹⁴ Jacobi (translation slightly modified; 2016: 502).

¹⁵ *EPW* 137-139.

¹⁶ *EPW* 153.

¹⁷ *EPW* 153.

would be superficial and unsatisfying. It would be no answer at all to our question, but would pertain to an altogether different one. Egoists also have these experiences to which appeal is being made, and they have still not been thoroughly refuted on that account. All that experience teaches us is that our consciousness contains the representation of rational beings outside of ourselves. No one disputes this and no egoist has ever denied it. What is in question is whether there is anything beyond this representation which corresponds to it, that is, whether rational beings exist independently of our representations of them and would exist even if we had no such representations. And in this question we learn nothing from experience, just as certainly as experience is experience, that is, the system of our representations (*EPW* 154).

Fichte begins by considering the common-sense belief that we acquire knowledge of the existence of other minds by experiencing signs of their mindedness. When someone behaves in an intentional fashion, their action appears teleologically structured, and I may infer from this behavior that it is indeed the product of a rational agent. Fichte soon concludes however that this approach is philosophically useless, because the “Egoist” or solipsist may also experience these signs of mindedness but claim that the signs are nonetheless deceptive. In other words, our experiences only demonstrate that we experience bodies that appear minded, but this can by no means settle the question of whether they are in fact minded. Hence Fichte frames the problem of other minds in this passage to concern whether “there is anything beyond this representation which corresponds to it,” that is, “whether rational beings exist independently of our representations of them and would exist even if there were no such representations.” Fichte concludes with the very strong claim that experience can answer no fundamental questions with respect to the problem of other minds, because experiences may only compound appearances with one another.

Here I believe that it is uncontestable that Fichte is considering a metaphysical question, a question of whether there actually exists such rational creatures as we seem to see in our everyday life. The problem of other minds concerns decisively refuting the “Egoist,” or a solipsist who believes that only her own consciousness exists and that all appearances of other conscious

creatures are deceptive. For Fichte the vocation of philosophy is framed in terms of its explanatory adequacy and ability to persuade even the most ardent skeptics.¹⁸ To solve the problem of other minds is to demonstrate concretely that the position of the solipsist is untenable, that one cannot coherently believe that oneself exists while also doubting the existence of other minds. This is where Fichte turns to a transcendental argument: namely, that our consciousness is constituted in such a fashion that one may not coherently take themselves to be a real minded entity while entertaining serious doubt about the reality of other minds. In other words, there is some aspect of the essence of our mind that is *essentially* intersubjective, that is, that the very concept of our own mind (the I) depends on the actual existence of other rational agents. Through a transcendental argument the existence of one's own mind and the existence of other minds are inferentially linked. Since we may be certain of our own reality, and our belief in the reality of our own minds is tied necessarily to belief in the reality of the minds of others, we may be equally certain that other minds exist.

This is the sketch of the argument from the summons as Fichte will eventually present it in the *Foundations of Natural Right*. There is something distinctly satisfying about it: contrary to the impression that transcendental idealism ultimately amounts to a kind of solipsism, here Fichte tries to demonstrate concretely why transcendental idealism may *never* result in mere solipsism. Clearly he is reacting to the common perception that his own *Wissenschaftslehre* was merely an extension of the extreme idealist tendencies critics claimed were already present in Kant's effort to reduce

¹⁸ The opening sentence of "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" makes clear that Fichte's conception of genuine philosophical systematicity involves overcoming the most sophisticated forms of skepticism: "The author of this treatise has been convinced by his reading of the modern skeptics – especially Aenesidemus, but also Maimon's excellent writings – of something that even before this seemed to him to be very likely: namely, that philosophy has not yet been elevated to the rank of a self-evident science, despite the efforts of the most perspicacious men" (*FEW* 152).

the reality of all external objects to mere appearances.¹⁹ One could chart a short history of this problem. In many ways Fichte's struggle here strongly resembles Kant's own difficulties in the *Prolegomena* and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (especially the Refutation of Idealism) to separate his own transcendental idealism from skeptical or dogmatic variants of idealism. This is a persistent source of tension for Fichte, for he also goes out of his way in the later 1797 "Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*" to claim that Berkeleyan idealism constitutes a form of dogmatism rather than genuine idealism.²⁰ And later, in the Berlin variations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte claims that his earlier system was consistently misunderstood as a kind of subjective idealism.²¹ Clearly, this later shift is in response to criticisms from Schelling (and, less importantly to Fichte, Hegel).²² Outside of Fichte's contemporary context, the struggle against the perception of him as a 'mere' subjective idealism continues today.²³ The motivation underlying the argument from the summons persists as a red thread throughout Fichte's entire corpus.

This explains why such a proof was necessary for Fichte, but what was Fichte's strategy for developing this proof? Fichte provides a schematic version of the argument from the summons in his aforementioned 1795 letter to Reinhold. Here he writes:

Consequently, the proof can only proceed from the I itself and in the following way: I *myself* cannot think of myself without assuming that there are rational beings outside of myself. In outline, such a proof would go as follows: (1) I must

¹⁹ This reception to the critical project paradigmatically stems from a few sources: the Garve-Feder review, Jacobi's comments in the appendix to his Hume essay, Schulze's *Aenesidemus* review, and Salomon Maimon's *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*. Each of these figures argues with more or less sophistication that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and later versions of transcendental idealism (such as Reinhold's "Elementary Philosophy") could not strike the appropriate balance between empirical realism and transcendental idealism.

²⁰ Fichte claims that Berkeley's system is dogmatic rather than idealist because it still treats consciousness as if it operated by mechanistic relationships (*IWL* 23). This problem is mentioned in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, too, when addressing those Kantians who conceive of the self as more akin to a thing rather than an I (*FNR* 8).

²¹ Fichte complains about being misunderstood as a traditional idealist in the opening lecture: "as soon as one has heard that the science of knowing presents itself as idealism, one immediately infers that it locates the absolute in what I have been calling *thinking* or *consciousness* which stands over against being as its other half and which therefore can no more be the absolute than its opposite." See *1804*, 26.

²² Schelling poses this problem directly in letters to Fichte. He later gloats in 1806 that Fichte's later Berlin philosophy is a response to criticisms issued by himself and Hegel. See Schelling (2018: 25).

²³ See for example Pippin (2020: 148).

necessarily attribute to myself a certain predicate *C*. (In the course of the synthesis, *C* follows of itself from the I. *C* is in the I, but, as has already been demonstrated, the I contains nothing that it does not *attribute to itself*. Therefore, etc.) (2) I can assume this predicate [=C] to myself only on the condition that I assume there are rational beings outside of myself. (This is demonstrated by the full application of the category of interaction, which is the law according to which the I proceeds when it attributes to itself the predicate *C*.) Therefore, etc. It is assumed that the rational beings outside of me resemble me completely, therefore I must attribute the predicate *C* to them as well. *Summa summarum*: I cannot attribute *C* to myself without attributing it to beings outside of myself. Both acts are synthetically united; they are one and the same (EPW 407).

Fichte does not develop his later argument from the summons according to the exact outline he provides Reinhold, but this summary does show the general strategy of Fichte's approach and what an early, formulaic, and admittedly truncated version of the argument provides. Fichte begins with something presumed by the solipsist, that the I exists. He proceeds to try to argue that the I must have some predicate, *C*, but the attribution of predicate *C* to the I also requires a commitment to the independent existence of other minds. In other words, within self-consciousness, there is some permanent predicate, *C*, that is *fundamentally intersubjective*. Fichte attempts to refute the solipsist by demonstrating concretely that there is some predicate of the I which depends on the independent existence of other finite minds: as Fichte says, "I cannot attribute *C* to myself without attributing it to beings outside of myself. Both acts are synthetically united; they are one and the same."

This cursory examination of Fichte's early thinking on the problem of other minds demonstrates (1) that prior to the publication of the *Foundations of Natural Right* Fichte considered the problem of other minds to be a real philosophical problem undermining confidence in the possibility of a scientific treatment of intersubjective relationships. He also (2) clearly treated the problem of other minds using the basic framework developed in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, which is why he appeals to the basic structure and categories deduced there and the demonstrations in the *Foundations of Natural Right* assume the arguments provided in the

Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre. Characteristically, (3) he considered the resolution of the problem of other minds to consist in a decisive refutation of the most extreme version of skepticism. A consequence of (1), (2), and (3) is that Fichte does not consider experiential support for the existence of other minds to be sufficient. He then (4) envisioned developing a transcendental argument, one that would demonstrate concretely why it is inconsistent to maintain that one's own mind exists while denying the existence of other minds because (5) there is some predicate of self-consciousness that is fundamentally intersubjective. The later account in the *Foundation of Natural Right* assumes all these features.

§2. Fichte's Argument from the Summons

In this section I interpret Fichte's argument from the summons in the *Foundations of Natural Right* as the culmination of his previous efforts in the Jena period to provide an *a priori* argument for the necessary existence of other minds. The method Fichte adopts in the *Foundations* reflects exactly the argumentative structure he presented to Reinhold: he attempts to prove that skepticism about other minds is conceptually incoherent because there is some intersubjective permanent predicate of self-consciousness. The primary innovation in the *Foundations of Natural Right* is simply to unite the desideratum articulated in earlier works (especially the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation" and the letter to Reinhold) with the method and architectonic structure of the 1794-1795 *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. In other words, the *Foundations of Natural Right* is a natural extension of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, in the sense that Fichte imagines that the foundational framework developed in the main work could play a critical function in resolving disputes in the special domain. The opening problematic of the *Foundations of Natural Right* thus occurs in an intermediary domain between pure transcendental philosophy and its determinate application to the particular sphere of right. Hence the intricacy and importance

of the argument from the summons. On the one hand, it is essentially related to the problem of right, since a necessary presupposition of a system of right is that a relation of right between agents is transcendently possible.²⁴ On the other hand, the problem of other minds haunts the architectural framework of Fichte's transcendental idealism as the shadow of solipsism. A legitimate interpretation of the main work *requires*, in Fichte's view, a rejection of solipsism, so if it is true that the argument from the summons is a distinct application of his foundational principles, it also plays the role of legitimizing those foundational principles themselves, by showing their capability for resulting in a determinate framework of political right.²⁵ Fichte always thought of philosophy and politics as mutually informative this way.²⁶ Fichte thus felt a confluence of pressures and motivations in the development of his argument from the summons.

As Allen Wood has rightly observed, reconstruction of Fichte's argument from the summons requires close attention to his synthetic method.²⁷ In short, Fichte's synthetic method involves examining philosophical problems by showing the necessity of apparently incompatible features. This in turn is meant to motivate a more complex or dynamic approach to the problem which can recognize the one-sidedness of each independent point of view. The paradigm of this

²⁴ The formulation of Fichte's position is the strongest in §3, the second theorem of the Deduction of Natural Right: "The finite rational being cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy in the sensible world without also ascribing such efficacy to others, and thus without also presupposing the existence of other finite rational beings outside of itself." (*FNR* 29). Of note here are a couple of features: (1) Fichte insists on the *dependence* of judgments of relations of right on the judgment of the *independent existence* of other finite rational minds; (2) Fichte explicitly states that positing each of them occurs simultaneously, "in the same, undivided synthesis." Accordingly, it is not possible to analytically parse the question of right from the question of the independent existence of other minds.

²⁵ The *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* asserts the *circularity* of Fichte's arguments, where the truth of the original principles receives evidence from the cogency of what they can deduce. This explains why Fichte's arguments do not typically have a unidirectional inferential structure: "Before one can precisely determine any individual proposition [within this system], one must first explain its connection [to the other propositions in the system] and obtain an overview of the whole" See *FEW* 197.

²⁶ See "Concerning" for a characteristic statement of Fichte's view: "Philosophy, which, with respect to its concept, is valid for all reason, would therefore become something quite national with respect to its terminology – something extracted from the innermost character of the nation that speaks this language, and, in turn, something that perfects this national language by making it as specific as possible." See Fichte *FEW* 162.

²⁷ See Allen Wood (2016: 76).

method at work is the first section of the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, which concerns the *Grundsätze*, the fundamental principles of consciousness. These highlight three independent and apparently contradictory features of positing: self-positing [*Das ich setzt sich selbst*], positing in opposition [*Gegensetzen*], and the act of limiting [*ein Einschränken*]. Each feature taken on its own may make the very possibility of self-consciousness appear paradoxical, but when one considers them as necessary and relatively independent features of any intentional relation, consciousness as a whole and a system becomes possible. This is the method Fichte uses in the argument from the summons: an attempt to show that the very possibility of self-consciousness depends upon seeing that it must be fundamentally intersubjective.

In some respects, this is the high point of Fichte's social and political philosophy: his demonstration that there is some necessarily intersubjective dimension of self-consciousness as the foundation for a political theory. It is easy to see, given the polemical troubles Fichte involved himself in during the 1790s, why such a proof would be necessary for him. But as prescient as Fichte's foresight into the possibility of a transcendental investigation into intersubjective relations truly is, what follows to fill out such a picture is far less impressive. Fichte's actual argument from the summons is contrived and artificial: he generates a false philosophical problem, fails to solve it, and finishes by introducing a necessary instance of divine revelation. For the non-Fichtean, operating at the level of topics, the argument from the summons is a true highpoint of Fichte's system. But for the Fichtean, working instead at the order of reasons, it is hard not to look upon the argument from the summons with grave concern, as a concrete demonstration of how things can go wrong. To use the parlance of Daniel Breazeale, I think it is a confirmation that by 1796/7, at least in its application to particular domains, Fichte's method has already jumped the shark.²⁸

²⁸ Breazeale 2013b.

We can think of Fichte's argument from the summons as divided into the following steps:

1. We are self-conscious agents.
2. Therefore, all of the conditions of self-consciousness must be possible, since they are actual.
3. One essential condition of self-conscious agency is a reciprocal relationship between objects and actions.
4. Another essential condition of self-conscious agency is actualization in time.
5. Steps (3) and (4) generate an infinite regress, giving the appearance that self-consciousness is contradictory and impossible in principle.
6. The infinite regress is resolved through a given object that is synthetically united with that same agent's efficacy. This is the "summons to activity." This is the only way of resolving the contradiction between two of self-consciousness' essential features and so is itself a transcendental condition of self-consciousness. Here Fichte locates his "intersubjective permanent predicate."
7. We may know that we are summoned by another finite rational agent through the faculty of reflective judgment.
8. So, with the same certainty that we may know that *we* are self-conscious agents that exist, we may also be certain that there are other self-conscious agents who exist.

Each step is complex and admits of sub-arguments, but for our purposes we may highlight only the most essential components for an *a priori* proof. The key is refuting a solipsist, a skeptic about the existence of other minds, and therefore showing that a science of intersubjective relations is

possible. Fichte takes steps (1) and (2) to be absolutely undeniable and beyond the purview of demonstration. Fichte takes step (3) to have been demonstrated in the foundational principles of his whole system, although briefly reconstructs the outline of the argument in the *Foundations of Natural Right*. Steps (4)-(7) are original to Fichte's presentation here, while (8) details his conclusion. This presentation will provide a brief reconstruction of some of Fichte's central motivation for steps (3) and (4) but will focus specifically on steps (5) and (6), since these are the essential steps for decisively refuting a solipsist. Steps (5) and (6) demonstrate that there is *some* essential dimension of self-consciousness that involves being "summoned to activity" by another, and so these steps bear the most significant argumentative weight for Fichte's stated purpose. Step (7) demonstrates once we have accepted that one permanent predicate of self-consciousness is its "being summoned," that we are licensed to infer that this summoning stems from a rational agent. Because of the nature of reflective judgment, step (7) offers merely empirical arguments that would be unsatisfying for the solipsist for same reasons Fichte articulated in the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation."²⁹ Therefore, the onus is on the transcendental demonstration, which occurs chiefly in steps (5) and (6), and this will be my focus.³⁰

Fichte's argument already has the appearance of being contrived. It is easy to see how historical circumstances have led Fichte to formulate an argument of this kind, but it is harder to

²⁹ Commentators have pointed out to me that Fichte's argument here is likely not *entirely* empirical, since the structure of reflective judgments itself is transcendental, but what I mean is that Fichte infers from certain anthropological features of human beings such as uprightness, the prolonged period of pre-maturational helplessness, and expressivity of the eyes and the mouth, that one may reliably infer that other homo sapiens are indeed rational agents. Without this empirical component, Fichte will have only established the necessity of the existence of other minds, but not that we have good reason to believe that other human beings have minds.

³⁰ Fichte says after step six: "Up until now, our analysis of the synthesis that we established has been merely expository; our task was only to clarify what we comprehended in the mere concept of the synthesis. The analysis will proceed even further: but from now on, it will be one that draws inferences; that is, the subject - in consequence of the posited influence upon itself - may have to posit several other things as well: how does this happen, or what does it posit - in accordance with the laws of its own being - in consequence of its first positing?" (FNR 34). So while everything up to step 6 is completely "expository" or analytic, moving beyond step 6 to *characterize* what we are summoned by requires further inference that stems from the faculty of judgment.

see how the substantive argument that Fichte gives succeeds. In what follows I will provide an examination of the transcendental steps of Fichte's argument from the summons, especially steps (4)-(6). My intention is to demonstrate that the argument given here simply cannot succeed as a result of an underlying tension between Fichte's transcendental method and the metaphysical structure of the proof. Even if one were to grant an extraordinary idiosyncratic dimension of Fichte's argument that turns, ultimately, on his conception of self-consciousness (I have here in mind especially step (3)), the argument revolves around solving an infinite regress problem it does not and cannot solve. This is a dimension of Fichte's argument from the summons that is not frequently noted by commentators, who are more prone to detailing its historical significance, which in my view is a way of thinking *about* Fichte without thinking *with* Fichte. Thinking with Fichte in this case requires an immanent demonstration of why his argument from the summons cannot succeed and taking a diagnostic approach to discover what went wrong. The transcendental portion of the proof concerns a series of related claims: (3) there is a reciprocal dependence relationship between objects of consciousness and actions of consciousness; (4) this relationship takes the form of temporal precondition; (5) the synthesis of (3) and (4) results in an infinite regress that makes the very possibility of consciousness paradoxical; and (6) there must be an object which resolves the paradox, which is the summons to self-consciousness by another self-consciousness. It is the conjunction of these steps that allows Fichte to conclude that our certainty in the existence of other minds is issued by the very coherence of self-conscious reflection itself; Fichte's later reflections largely concern the *relative* empirical certainty of rationality we may have from certain anthropological features, such as uprightness, language competence, and so on.

The first step of Fichte's argument I will focus on is step (3). This is a vital moment for the argument. Here Fichte for the first time is tying the results of the *Foundation of the Entire*

Wissenschaftslehre with the argument that he develops in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, which essentially amounts to an interpretation of Fichte's transcendental idealism. Consequently, it can only receive cursory treatment here. Here Fichte claims that to posit an object is, at the same time, to posit an efficacy in the subject to posit such an object. This is a reflexive entailment of self-conscious judgments. Fichte also accepts that thinking about the capacity for a rational being to posit an object *also* requires that one think of the object as *given*. This will be the source of Fichte's "intersubjective permanent predicate," a way of receiving one's *own* activity as *given* by another. This is Fichte's understanding of the Kantian dictum that "Thoughts without content are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind."³¹ But one way that Fichte goes well beyond Kant is his temporal interpretation (4) of this phenomenon. It is not enough to interpret the argument from the summons as announcing transcendental conditions; it also announces *genetic* conditions, i.e. as taking place at a determinate point in time as the condition for the actualization of rational agency. Reinterpreted temporally: each *action* is temporally preceded by a given *object*, but every given object is constituted by a prior act. Here we encounter the infinite regress. At this stage, "We have not found any possible moment in which we might attach the thread of self-consciousness (through which alone consciousness becomes possible), and thus our task is not solved."³² If self-consciousness is possible, it must be because there is some special object which can halt the regress by which we can "thread self-consciousness to time."

This is Fichte's introduction of the summons to activity, in step (6), the solution to the paradox given up to this point and the central locus for Fichte's *a priori* argument for our certain knowledge of other minds. Here he claims that the object which halts the infinite regress, presenting a synthetic unification of the activity of the subject with the received character of the

³¹ Kant (2009: A51/B75).

³² *FNR* 30.

object, is the ‘summons to activity’ by another. The apparent paradox of the object Fichte is considering is that the *externally given* features of the object grate upon our belief that this could really be *our own* action. Fichte’s concept of the summons is meant to fulfill this lacuna. Fichte will call this synthetic unification of the subject’s efficacy and an object a “summons to activity,” an *Aufforderung*.³³ What is at stake here is a kind of normative injunction, or what he will also call a demand, an *Anforderung*.³⁴ What Fichte imagines is the situation in which another calls upon you to act, to use your freedom. The summons to act is paradigmatically exemplified in education and upbringing, *Erziehung*, where in the ideal case the teacher’s role is to make the student realize the freedom which already belonged to them.³⁵ More than an isolated attempt to respond to a specific philosophical problem, Fichte took his entire philosophical enterprise to be in effect a large ‘summoning.’³⁶ The goal of his philosophy is to help lead others to the realization of their *own* freedom. Fichte maintains that it is only by means of the summons to activity that self-consciousness can be “jump-started” and avoid the infinite regress detailed above. Here Fichte has discovered his intersubjective permanent predicate.

How is the paradox resolved? Fichte’s suggestion is that when another rational agent makes a demand upon us, our own activity is given to us as an object. Obviously, one’s own activity is not given *as actual* because this would fail to be *one’s own* action, but it is given as *demanded* by the other.³⁷ Here we have a given object which is synthetically united with one’s own activity, since one is called to action by another. On Fichte’s picture, we are only able to realize our own

³³ FNR 30.

³⁴ FNR 33.

³⁵ FNR 38. Fichte’s concern with the importance of education is shown in other texts as well, such as the “Lectures on the Scholar’s Vocation” and the *Addresses to the German Nation*.

³⁶ Daniel Breazeale extends Fichte’s concept of summoning in just such a way in his *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*. According to Breazeale, while the *argument from the summons* is limited to the *Foundations of Natural Right*, the *concept* of the summons is at work even in apparently more fundamental concepts such as the *Anstoß* or ‘check. See Breazeale (2013: 160).

³⁷ FNR 32.

freedom as incited by the *demand* of another rational being. The recognition of the demand of the other already implies the reciprocal recognition of one's own agency; in recognizing the demand of another one also thereby recognizes oneself as the sort of being potentially subject to the normative injunctions of the other. Whether I acquiesce to the injunction made upon me by the other and do my best to meet their demands *or* I reject their demands is irrelevant, as in each case I am led to the tacit recognition of my own status as an agent capable of consenting to or rejecting the normative demands made upon me by others.³⁸ Summoning by the other is thus a necessary condition of self-consciousness, and our common sense pre-philosophical understanding of this truth is revealed in the importance we place on education.³⁹ In this way, Fichte's argument from the summons utilizes the first *Grundsatz*, which claims that all positing of a particular object requires also the reflexive positing of the capacity of the subject appropriate to that object.

§3. The Problem with the Argument from the Summons

Does Fichte's argument from the summons really succeed? I believe that the answer must clearly be 'no.' Step (3) is an eminently dubious premise but derived as it is from Fichte's foundational principles of his whole philosophy, a much simpler argumentative path is available: Fichte's argument from the summons is structured around resolving an infinite regress problem (5), but Fichte's solution does not work. To the contrary, he generates an isomorphic infinite regress problem. The original regress problem addressed in the argument of the summons is an intrasubjective regress problem, where all objects of consciousness require a prior act, but reciprocally all actions of consciousness require a prior received object. Fichte resolves this regress

³⁸ *FNR* 33.

³⁹ Fichte also develops his argument further to show that the summoning must have stemmed from a rational agent. To make this argument, Fichte draws on Kant's account of reflective judgment in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. For our purposes, this dimension of Fichte's argument is irrelevant.

through the introduction of a special kind of object, the summons to activity by another, which is at once active because it is my own freedom and received because it is given to me by another. The problem is that this solution produces a second, distinct, intersubjective regress problem, where the existence of any finite consciousness presupposes as its condition another prior consciousness *ad infinitum*. It seems that in an important sense Fichte did not really resolve the regress described in step (5), since, in Fichte's language, there is still 'nowhere to tie the thread of self-consciousness' to any particular moment in time.⁴⁰ The intersubjective regress is vicious for the same reason that the intrasubjective regress was taken to be: it makes the existence of a first rational agent paradoxical and therefore the series of rational agency following therefrom inconceivable.

Fichte quickly realizes this is a problem but hypothesizes the existence of a Christian God who exhibits essential features of rational self-consciousness *except* the feature of needing to be summoned by another self-consciousness.⁴¹ God, as an infinite rather than finite rational agent, "jump-starts" the temporal sequence of self-consciousness at a determinate moment in time through the creation of Adam and Eve. But this story is inconsistent with the argument presented in step (6), which claims that the summons to self-consciousness by another self-consciousness is an *essential* feature of rational agency, rather than merely an accidental feature of our finitude.

⁴⁰ *FNR* 30.

⁴¹ See *FNR* 38:

The summons to engage in free self-activity is what we call upbringing [*Erziehung*]. All individuals must be brought up to be human beings, otherwise they would not be human beings. In connection with this, the question inevitably arises: if it is supposedly necessary to assume that there was an origin of the entire human race and therefore a first human couple — and this is surely a necessary assumption at a certain point in one's reflection — then who brought up the first human couple? They must have been brought up; for the proof given here is a general one. A human being could not have brought them up, for they are supposed to be the first human beings. Therefore, another rational being (one that was not human) must have brought them up - obviously, only to the point where humans could start bringing up each other. A spirit took them into its care, exactly [40] as is portrayed in an old, venerable document that generally contains the deepest and most sublime wisdom and presents results to which all philosophy must return in the end.

While the original intrasubjective regress and the new intersubjective regress are distinct, they are both fundamental problems motivating the structure of the argument of the summons, because they are both concerned with the coherence of the emergence of rational agency within time. Here a counter example is given (God) which exhibits all the features of rational agency except the need to be summoned at a particular moment in time. If God constitutes an exception to the argument from the summons, this deeply undermines the inference that the *source* of the summons is or must be another finite rational agent (why couldn't it be God, or any other supposedly purely incorporeal agent?). The solipsist derives from this argument no persuasive reason to believe in the independent existence of other minds and especially none that would succeed against serious skeptical doubt.

Any attempt at resuscitating the argument from the summons requires abandoning one or more of the central steps that make the argument function. If there are atemporal purely rational agents (as presumed by Fichte's solution to the return of the regress), then this strongly undermines step (4) and Fichte has made no advance on Kant.⁴² If the summons to activity by another self-consciousness at a determinate point in time is an essential feature of self-consciousness, then it is not clear how it is that God can exist as both as atemporal and as a rational agent acting at determinate moments in time. Either there is no essential regress problem, in which case being summoned to self-consciousness is *not* an essential predicate of rational agency and Fichte has no response to the solipsist, or there is a serious regress problem, but one that his own philosophical system is powerless to solve. Here too he is on equal grounds with the solipsist. In either case,

⁴² Perhaps there are arguments to be made about the conceivability of atemporal agents acting within time, but certainly if the argument from the summons *depends* on this supposition it is at least enthymematic in a way that ought to cast doubt on Fichte's argument as a whole. Why would a demonstration of the actual existence of other minds and relations of political right between them depend on the conceivability of infinite rational agents acting in time, of all things?

Fichte fails to maintain the argument from the summons as given and is simply not justified in his claim that the argument from the summons provides a decisive demonstration against the skeptic that there do actually exist other finite minds. Certainly, if human beings may be summoned by inhuman and incorporeal rational agents, then the mere fact that I must have been summoned offers no evidence at all that there really exist *other finite rational agents*. Fichte's solution always leaves open the possibility that there is me, God, and no one else: that is all the solipsist could ever want.⁴³

§4. Metaphysical, Transcendental, Phenomenological, and Psychological Interpretations of the Argument from the Summons

It seems to me that one's evaluation of Fichte's argument from the summons primarily stems from what *kind* of argument it is taken to be. In this respect, there are at least four available interpretations: one can read Fichte's argument from the summons from a metaphysical, transcendental, phenomenological, or psychological register. This section will explore different interpretations of the argument from the summons put forward by Allen Wood, Daniel Breazeale, Gabriel Gottlieb, and Michelle Kosch by way of comparison with the interpretation I have put forward thus far. This will require that I explain what I take the difference to be between these myriad approaches and try to explain how the idiosyncrasies of each interpretation stem largely from what they take Fichte's argument to aim to accomplish.

⁴³ Commentators have pointed out to me that there is a way to construe Fichte's thought here in a way that is more charitable, as referring to various evolutionary and phylogenetic conditions of the development of rational agency. As will be examined in more detail below, this is consistent with certain aspects of Fichte's philosophy, such as his emphasis on education and child-rearing in his doctrine of family right, the *Addresses to the German Nation*, and elsewhere. I take my point to be relevant even to this way of reading Fichte's philosophy, since what I am suggesting is that Fichte's way of *framing* and then subsequently *executing* the intended transcendental component of the argument from the summons is misguided in its presuppositions. I think this will inevitably result in contemporary interpreters either abandoning (Kosch) or significantly revising (Gottlieb) the transcendental aspect of Fichte's thinking on other minds.

Earlier in this essay I argued that Fichte's argument from the summons fails because he intends to provide a transcendental proof of the problem of other minds but ends up producing a metaphysical argument. Therefore, I believe it is fair to characterize my interpretation as a metaphysical interpretation of the argument from the summons, and I will defend the veracity of this interpretation, in spite of the obvious fact that Fichte himself would certainly not agree with me. I take Wood to be the primary representative for the transcendental interpretation, Breazeale to be the primary representative of the phenomenological interpretation, Kosch to be the primary representative of the psychological interpretation, and Gottlieb as providing an intermediary genetic account between phenomenology and psychology. Contrasting my own view with these alternative approaches will help me bring out the deep methodological problems that I locate in Fichte's argument from the summons that will inform my interpretation of Fichte's error provided in the conclusion.

One might think that a metaphysical interpretation of the argument from the summons is, in a certain way, doomed from the very beginning. For Fichte repeatedly and emphatically distanced his own argumentative approach from the tradition of classical metaphysics, and, at least in some sense, tried to offer the only true overcoming of the temptation towards dogmatic metaphysics.⁴⁴ It is also clear that Fichte regarded the argument from the *Foundations of Natural Right* as a transcendental argument. For example, in the "Annals of Philosophical Tone," Fichte discusses his argument from the summons in a clearly transcendental sense:

I did not [in the *Foundations of Natural Right*] simply presuppose, as is usually done, that every man recognizes other men outside of himself and assumes himself to stand in a relationship of mutual influence with other men, a relationship mediated by light, air, and crude matter. *Instead, I proved that it is necessary to*

⁴⁴ See for example a paradigmatic statement in *FEW*: "One further remark: if one oversteps the *I am* then one must necessarily arrive at Spinozism... there are only two fully consistent systems: the Critical system, which recognizes this limit, and the system of Spinoza, which oversteps it" (207).

assume all of these things as conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness
(EPW 346-347).⁴⁵

Here the important emphasis is on the conditions for the possibility of self-consciousness. Similarly, in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte has a distinct presentation of the concept of the summons that seems to abandon much of its metaphysical pretense.⁴⁶ To read Fichte's argument from the summons as a metaphysical argument is, in a certain sense, to read Fichte against the grain of his own thinking.

However, I think that Fichte's protestations can only provide *prima facie* arguments against a metaphysical interpretation, and that a close examination of its argumentative structure positively demands such a view. My central piece of evidence for this claim is that Fichte intends to infer an existence claim from concepts. Fichte's aim is to refute the solipsist by showing that from the very structure of self-consciousness, one can necessarily infer the existence of other finite self-consciousnesses. There is plainly no other way to make sense of Fichte's way of characterizing the argument from the summons or its conclusions if one denies this. If Fichte only intended to show how the mind *must* think, without any pretext to theoretical cognition, there is no way that he could meaningfully claim as he often did to have proven the *actual existence* of other finite minds.

It is important to recognize that both classical metaphysics and Kant's critical philosophy see the mark of a metaphysical argument as the attempt to infer an existence claim from merely conceptual knowledge. Moses Mendelssohn, for example, in his essay "On Evidence in the

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Matthew Delhey for drawing my attention to this passage. Delhey has furthermore suggested to me that Fichte has a strange conception of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* descriptions that may allow them to converge on the same class of objects. This might open the door to further non-metaphysical interpretations. However, on my view, it is not clear how it is that a non-metaphysical argument *could* license any form of the inferences to existence claims, as I take Fichte to infer, as I will discuss in further detail below.

⁴⁶ See for example SE 209-216.

Philosophical Sciences,” claimed that the cogito argument and the ontological argument are concrete demonstrations of the possibility of progress in metaphysics since they exemplified a means for inferring actuality from concepts.⁴⁷ Kant’s claim to have decisively broken with classical metaphysics hinges therefore precisely on his criticism of inferring existence claims from mere concepts, which is the essence of his commitment to the claim that existence is not a predicate.⁴⁸ The foundation of Kant’s critical system is in the recognition that classical metaphysical proofs recognized no limitation to conceptual knowledge and therefore amplified it to the unconditioned.⁴⁹ For Kant, conceptual knowledge is governed by the attribution of possible predicates, and denying that existence was a predicate was a way of acknowledging that existence claims found their source in a radically heterogenous cognitive faculty: intuition.⁵⁰ Kant was regarded by Mendelssohn as “the all-destroyer” precisely because Kant targeted exactly the locations where metaphysics claimed to transcend mere possibility and prove an existence claim.⁵¹ Mendelssohn recognized that targeting these claims on the behalf of metaphysics meant also targeting the capacity of metaphysics to arrive at real thinking.

Therefore, I take it to be a characteristic mark of metaphysical arguments that they attempt to infer the existence or actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] of some thing in virtue of one or more of its

⁴⁷ Mendelssohn says for example that much of metaphysics “has still discovered nothing but certain kinships among concepts. At that point, however, the important step into the realm of actuality must take place. He must show that the object of his basic concepts, from which he infers his truths, is actually to be encountered, so that he can infer from these truths the actual existence of the consequences” (1997: 274). And similarly: “We have Descartes to thank for these two transitions from the possible to the actual” (1997: 276).

⁴⁸ Kant first announces that “Existence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing” in his “The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God” (2007: 2:72).

⁴⁹ One paradigmatic formulation is in the A-Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason... The battlefield of these endless controversies is **metaphysics**” (2009: Avii-Aviii).

⁵⁰ So, Kant says after claiming that existence is not predicate that “For this reason, too, one does not examine the concept of the subject in order to demonstrate the correctness of the proposition about the existence of such a thing. The concept of the subject only contains predicates of possibility.” (2007: 2:73).

⁵¹ See Mendelssohn’s characterization of Kant (2012: 4).

predicates.⁵² The cogito argument is a metaphysical argument on this interpretation because it is claimed that one may infer the existence of a thinking substance from the predicate of thought. Similarly, the ontological argument is a metaphysical argument because it is claimed that one may infer the existence of God from the predicate of absolute perfection. If this is what it means for an argument to be metaphysical, then the argumentative strategy that Fichte develops in his letter to Reinhold and executes in the *Foundations of Natural Right* is plainly metaphysical. For here too we are meant to infer the actual existence of other minds from the need in our own mind to realize our freedom through the summoning act of another. The simple version of Fichte's thought is this: we are actual; we are possible only through another; therefore, others must also be actual. It seems to me therefore that either one *must* accept that Fichte produces a metaphysical argument *or* abandon the pretention to refute solipsism by proving the *existence* of other minds. And the latter option has cascading implications for Fichte's claim to have established a foundation for the science of right and the rest of his philosophical system.

The majority of Fichte interpretations opt for the latter route. Wood is an exception to this tendency. In many respects my interpretation developed here most closely resembles Wood's. Virtually all substantive characterizations of the argument from the summons in our arguments are the same: for Wood the argument from the summons uses the synthetic method developed in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* to tackle the problem of other minds using a transcendental argument.⁵³ We both maintain that the summons is intended to provide a

⁵² Interestingly, Fichte too seems to accept this characterization of metaphysical arguments later on in his emphatic denial that a metaphysical proof of a divine governance of the world is necessary or desirable: "Perhaps this is to be sought in some alleged necessity of inferring from the existence or structure of the sensible world to a rational creator of the same. Certainly not, for the philosopher knows very well that only a misguided philosophy, one that finds itself in the predicament of wishing to explain something whose existence it cannot dispute but whose true ground is hidden from it – is capable of such an inference – an inference that can never be drawn by the original understanding, which stands under the tutelage of reason and is guided by its operation" (*IWL* 144).

⁵³ See Wood (2016: 76-81).

transcendental proof of other minds by resolving an apparent paradox in the nature of self-conscious agency. Wood even considers the objection that Fichte's argument proves too much, which is in essence the claim I am making. However, Wood formulates this objection by saying that "It might seem to have the consequence that it is impossible for a rational being to act at all except in the *presence* of another rational being who summons it to act"⁵⁴ Wood claims that such an objection stems from interpreting the transcendental argument Fichte provides in a metaphysical register, which is quite close to how I interpret what has gone wrong for Fichte. But the problem remains even if it is not the case that each agential activity requires a summoner. It is enough if each actor requires a summoner to realize their freedom, to "jump-start" the process, because this produces the very same infinite regress that Fichte sought to avoid. It is odd that the problem of the returned regress is not treated by Wood, who otherwise attends to all the relevant features of Fichte's argument for transcendental proof.

Another strategy, perhaps one more directly responsive to the considerations I have presented, is to describe the argument from the summons as a phenomenological correlate of a more fundamental and internal transcendental procedure. To say that the argument from the summons is phenomenological is to say that its aim is to describe how others are given to me rather than prove that they exist independently of me. This typically involves identifying two distinct levels or stages of Fichte's argument from the summons: a genuinely transcendental and therefore timeless, singular, and complete act of self-positing, and its phenomenological correlate in the experience of developing self-consciousness by the summoning of another person. So, on Breazeale's account, for example, the description of the summons in the *Foundations of Natural Right* is the appearance of Fichte's concept of the check [*Anstoß*] from his *Foundation of the Entire*

⁵⁴ See Wood (2016: 87).

Wissenschaftslehre.⁵⁵ Similarly, Gottlieb has produced an interpretation of the argument from the summons that emphasizes its developmental dimension in childrearing. For him, the summons describes the process of *how* we come to develop rationality in an inextricably social process amenable to naturalistic explanation.⁵⁶ Breazeale and Gottlieb therefore encourage us to think of the process of emerging self-consciousness as requiring two complimentary but nevertheless relatively distinct levels of explanation: (i) a transcendental dimension, which is usually taken to be most fully elaborated in Fichte's *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, that is more fundamental, atemporal, and non-naturalistic in character; and (ii) a genetic phenomenological dimension, which is the actual process of the summons as described by Fichte in the *Foundations of Natural Right* and elsewhere, that is less fundamental but temporal and apparently naturalistic and therefore more concrete.

There is important evidence to motivate the phenomenological interpretation of the argument from the summons. To begin with, *some* of Fichte's ways of framing the problem he intends to address in the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation" seem amenable to phenomenological interpretation ('how do other minds appear to us and figure in our world?'), while others seem decisively metaphysical ('how do we *prove* the reality of other minds beyond our mere representations of them?'). Fichte plainly recognizes the *Foundations of Natural Right* as an extension and elaboration of the arguments presented in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte remarks that his arguments in the *Foundations of Natural Right* apply only to *finite* rational creatures, and not to the structure of the pure I as such, which presumably was treated in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*.⁵⁷ Moreover, at one point in his

⁵⁵ See Breazeale (2013: 188).

⁵⁶ See Gottlieb (2016: 134).

⁵⁷ "The rational being presented here is a *finite* rational being." (FNR 18).

presentation of the argument from the summons, Fichte clarifies that while the summons makes it *seem* as though our freedom is caused by another, this obviously cannot really be so, because otherwise we could not really call the action free.⁵⁸ This seems to indicate that there are multiple levels of description to the intersubjective relationship identified as the summons, and that the *Foundations of Natural Right* focuses almost exclusively on how one develops one's freedom from a finite first-personal phenomenological standpoint.

The problem with the phenomenological interpretation of the summons is that it is impossible to understand how it could license the conclusions that Fichte so clearly wanted to draw. Breazeale, for example, denies that Fichte was really interested in resolving the problem of other minds at all.⁵⁹ But how are we to make sense of Fichte's claim that where there are human beings, we may know that there is more than one? And how does the argument from the summons ground the science of political right if it is still unable to refute the Egoist, who denies that there are any genuine intersubjective relations at all? Gottlieb attempts to make sense of Fichte's strong remarks on the existence of other minds by saying that Fichte is trying to show "that the concept of the human being is a species-concept."⁶⁰ Clearly, though, this does not license one to infer on that basis that two or more human beings actually exist. I think that what Breazeale and Gottlieb want to focus our attention on is that our self-recognition involves recognizing oneself as an individual; and to recognize oneself as an individual in turn invokes the possibility of other individuals as well. Fichte, however, it seems to me, wants to go farther: not merely to invoke the *possibility* of other minds (which was never in question, even by the solipsist), but the *actuality* of

⁵⁸ "...the question here is not how the issue might be in itself from the transcendental point of view, but only how it must appear to the subject under investigation —, but rather as a determined to be self-active by means of an external check [*Anstoß*]" (FNR 32).

⁵⁹ So Breazeale has it that "Fichte treats intersubjectivity not primarily as an epistemological issue concerning 'our knowledge of other minds,' but rather as an immediate and essential modification of self-consciousness itself" (2013: 174).

⁶⁰ Gottlieb (2016: 124).

other minds, and for this no phenomenological account will suffice. If he did not intend to provide an argument of this sort, it is impossible to understand how he fills the lacuna of Kant's critical philosophy and proves the reality of other minds.

These results might lead one to wonder whether Fichte's intention to provide an *a priori* argument as a whole was entirely wrong-headed. This has led to the increasing dominance of a psychological interpretation of the argument from the summons, whose most unambiguous representative in the literature is Kosch, but it seems to me that Gottlieb comes close to this view as well. For Kosch what is essential about the argument from the summons is not anything *a priori* at all. Her understanding of the argument requires a more concrete articulation of "free reciprocal efficacy," which means a description of how precisely the activity of the summons produces reflective consciousness.⁶¹ This means explicitly abandoning Fichte's desire to provide a transcendental treatment of the problem of other minds in favor of an empirically informed approach.⁶² Gottlieb's interpretation, with its emphasis on Fichte's account of family-right and child-rearing seems to point in this direction as well, except that Gottlieb recognizes the necessity of a transcendental aspect of the argument from the summons. Kosch is far more willing to jettison this transcendental aspect and instead develop a more particular and empirically rich account of 'the summoning to activity.' For her, cooperative schemes encourage participants to develop an

⁶¹ In addition to the inconsistencies with Fichte's earlier remarks in the "Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation" and the letter to Reinhold, it also contradicts Fichte's characterization of philosophy in the *Foundations of Natural Right*. Prior to giving his argument for the summons, he states that "The philosopher's task is to show that this determinate action is a condition of self-consciousness, and showing this constitutes the deduction of that concept[...] By doing this, the philosopher simultaneously provides proof of the concept's necessity, determines the concept itself, and shows its application[...] The concept of right should be an original concept of pure reason; therefore, this concept is to be treated in the manner indicated" (*FNR* 9). Kosch's empirical-developmental interpretation of the summons is routinely rejected by Fichte as inadequate from a philosophical point of view.

⁶² She argues that she abandons a transcendental interpretation of the argument from the summons because such an argument would be susceptible to "empirical transcendentalia," a fundamental mistake (2021: 235). I agree with her diagnosis. But I disagree with her impulse to narrow the scope and ambition of Fichte's project because it runs into grievous errors. From my perspective, it is more important to think through the implications of Fichte's many successes as well as his mistakes.

explicit statement of their own interests and formulate how such interests might be negotiated with others, thus forming the basis for a specific class of duties. Here the paradigmatic text for Kosch's interpretation is the *System of Ethics*, not the *Foundations of Natural Right*.

On this interpretation Fichte's argument is reduced to a kind of psychological description: it is a merely contingent *a posteriori* fact about human beings that we realize our freedom socially. This reflects Kosch's methodological approach of finding what topics in Fichte remain relevant for contemporary philosophical inquiry rather than pursuing elaborate and apparently trivial connections to Fichte's own architectonic system. My approach to the argument from the summons proceeds in the opposite direction: if the transcendental dimensions of Fichte's argument from the summons are neutralized in the *System of Ethics*, since there the concern is locating the source of a certain class of duties, the formulation in the *Foundations of Natural Right* is more ambitious and important precisely because of the importance of its function for the totality of Fichte's philosophical system. Unlike Kosch, I do not think that this dimension of Fichte's analysis can be safely ignored. If Fichte sought an extremely ambitious formulation of the argument from the summons in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, presumably he was led to do so because he thought it was a necessary consequence of the application of his thinking to intersubjective relations.

I would like to close this section with one final piece of evidence in favor of the metaphysical interpretation of the argument from the summons. There is one fact that sits rather uncomfortably with all of the competing interpretations of Fichte's philosophy as something like the fly in the ointment: Fichte's invocation of the story of Genesis and his flat admission to the need to posit infinite rational agents to explain the existence of finite rational agents. I take it that all of the interpretations discussed here do not take this moment seriously, and in some sense, I cannot blame them, since Fichte's philosophizing here is archaic and opposes the entire ethos of

his philosophy. Wood remarks for example that “a disembodied or immaterial I would be transcendently inconceivable” and that it follows as a trivial consequence that God is an impossibility.⁶³ Similarly, the crux of Breazeale’s interpretation of Fichte is that “only a finite I can be an I at all,” which is clearly a flat denial of the existence of infinite atemporal agents.⁶⁴ These are compelling remarks and demonstrate the profundity of the spirit of Fichte’s philosophy.

The letter is, unfortunately, far more disappointing. However much I would like to, though, I don’t think that we can simply read this passage as an unserious concession to predominant religious authority. Fichte’s inference to the existence of an infinite rational agent to start the sequence of finite rational agency – humanity – is inescapable if it is a constitutive condition of finite rational agency that there be a prior rational agent.⁶⁵ And Fichte serenely but bafflingly accepted this implication, even if we think he should not have done so.

Conclusion

The fundamental problem with Fichte’s argument from the summons is its incompatibility with his transcendental idealism. This explains the main dynamic I have identified and explored with the argument from the summons in this paper: namely, that it portends to offer a transcendental argument, but actually oversteps the boundaries of what transcendental arguments can do through its postulation of a necessary existence claim. Fichte erred in his belief that any substantive account of transcendental subjectivity must go so far as to refute the most ardent solipsist who believes that other minds are conceptually possible, but not actually real. This positions Fichte to produce an

⁶³ See Wood (2018: 67, 81).

⁶⁴ See Breazeale (2013a: 188).

⁶⁵ I would like to thank Nils Seiler for raising the point that Fichte could consistently maintain that there was an infinite series of finite rational agents. While this is consistent with Fichte’s view, it seems to fare no better (but also no *worse*) in making Fichte’s view believable or coherent than invoking the existence of God.

argument that not only shows that other minds are a necessary concept for us, since we must posit ourselves as an individual, but moreover that we can be certain that other minds actually exist since they are conditions of our actually existing self-consciousness. My interpretation differs sharply from standard criticisms of the argument from the summons that generally maintain that Fichte's argument from the summons is laudable and important but ultimately too restricted by Fichte's transcendental idealism to provide a really suitable description of intersubjectivity.⁶⁶ In my view, it is just the opposite: the metaphysical ambitions of Fichte's decisive refutation of solipsism produce an argument that betrays Fichte's fundamental commitment to transcendental idealism and consequently offers a philosophically inadequate picture of other minds. In short, I am more optimistic regarding an adequate accounts of other minds within the confines of transcendental idealism, but I believe that Fichte unfortunately has fallen short of that lofty goal in the *Foundations of Natural Right*.⁶⁷

I have endeavored to show that there is something wrong with the *letter* of Fichte's account of other minds—the specific argumentative strategy that I have identified as ‘the argument from the summons’—but this is not itself fatal to the idea that there is something profoundly correct in the *spirit* of Fichte's argument from the summons. The redeemable aspect of Fichte's argument from the summons in my view is his effort to show that we must be able to think of genuine freedom and self-determination as necessarily cultivated and developed in the presence of others, particularly, in education and other political institutions. This is just what it means to think of

⁶⁶ This sentiment is expressed well by Angelica Nuzzo (2010: 104) when she claims that “intersubjectivity is indeed a transcendental function of subjectivity; yet, precisely in its transcendental function, intersubjectivity is also immediately absorbed into subjectivity.” A similar conclusion was reached by Robert Williams (2010: 166): “Precisely because unity of the *Ichheit* trumps synthesis, the I does not become a we, and the unity of the I remains subjective.” By contrast, from my perspective, Fichte's argument from the summons represents a substantial deviation from his transcendental idealism and this deviation contributes to the unworkability of the solution he proposes.

⁶⁷ For example, I am optimistic that Husserl's 5th *Cartesian Meditations* provides a transcendental idealist account of other minds that is far more satisfying than Fichte's argument from the summons, but to show this here would take us too far afield.

oneself *as* an individual. My caveat, however, is that the spirit of Fichte's argument is only truly available to us when we can recognize the inadequacy of the letter. There is a mistake in construing the dependence we have on others for our self-realization as a kind of metaphysical necessity, such that we may immediately infer from our own existence the real presence of others. This fails to respect a requirement for persuasive philosophical accounts of intersubjectivity described by Jean-Paul Sartre as "the contingency of the other."⁶⁸ Even if solipsism is not correct as a metaphysical thesis, it is always possible as an existential situation, as the unmistakable possibility that those others I have depended upon vanish into death. There is, therefore, not only a deep necessity to our relation to others, but also an existential precarity and contingency that must be incorporated into any satisfactory revision of Fichte's concept of the summons.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Sartre (2018: 402):

At this level of our investigation, once we have elucidated the essential structures of being-for-the-Other, we are tempted, evidently, to raise the metaphysical question: 'Why are there Others?' As we have seen, the existence of others is not in effect a consequence that flows from the for-itself's ontological structure. It is of course a primordial event, but of a metaphysical order, which is to say that it has to do with the contingency of being. It is essentially in relation to these metaphysical existences that the question of the why arises.

⁶⁹ In this respect, I agree with Paul Franks (1996: 187-9) when he writes:

What Fichte needs above all – and what Fichte does not possess in any adequate form – is an account not only of the development toward full humanity, but also of what *resists* that development. From the beginning of his career as an independent philosopher, Fichte insists on preserving the possibility of heteronomy as essential to human freedom. But the freedom to repudiate the moral law as expression of autonomous human nature is also the freedom to repudiate Fichte's philosophy as expression of fully self-conscious human nature. And Fichte never finds the right level at which to characterize this darkness of the spirit, which cannot (as I have already argued) be represented as a conscious choice of a course of action. Fichte's achievement remains incomplete, since it remains without an account of the ways in which human beings can become obscure to themselves, and without any sense of how we might be helped out of our darkness.

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