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Kant, Fichte and «The Interests of Reason»

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Resumen: Kant distingue entre el interés de la razón teórica y el interés de la razón práctica y los refiere al interés de la razón como tal, que entiende finalmente de naturaleza práctica. Fichte vincula más estrechamente que Kant ambos intereses y conecta su explicación del interés fundamental de la razón a su teoría general del «yo escindido» que se esfuerza siempre por conseguir una unidad (inalcanzable). Para Fichte no hay conficto real entre el interés teórico y práctico de la razón ni puede haber un genuino conflicto entre razón e interés. Por el contrario, la razón es siempre «interesada» y la «vida de la razón» es una implicación activa en el mundo a través de un proceso de infinito esfuerzo.

Abstract: Kant distinguishes the interest of theoretical reason from the interest of practical reason and tries both to the interest of reason as such, which he conceives of as ultimately «practical». Fichte links the interests of practical and of theoretical reason more closely than does Kant and connects his account of the fundamental interest of reason to his general theory of the «divided self» always struggling for an (inobtainable) unity. For Fichte, there is no real conflict between the interests of theoretical and of practical reason, nor can there be any genuine conflict between reason and interest. On the contrary, rason is always «interested», and the «life of reason» is one of active engagement with the world in a process of endless striving.

At first glance there may appear to be something vaguely oxymoronic about the phrase «the interests of reason.» Interests are particular and conditioned; they signal the presence of needs and point to objects beyond themselves, whereas reason is universal, unconditioned, and self-contained: hence, *disinterested*. To evaluate any claim in terms of «interest» is, as Kant put it, to evaluate it not in terms of its truth or the force of the argument through which it is established, but rather, in terms of its consequences and how well it satisfies some pre-existing requirement or demand (KRV: A475/B503).[2] Indeed, it might seem that Kant's own distinction between «selfless» or «rational»

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2 The following abbreviations are employed in this essay:
AA = *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Reimer/de Gruyter, 1902–). Cited by volume and page number; e.g. V: 21.
BG = *Fichte, Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*. Cited accord to the text in GA, I,3.
GA = *J.G. Fichte: Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1964–). Cited by section, volume, and page number; e.g. V,1: 23.
GMS = Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Cited according to the text in AA, IV.
GN = Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts*. Cited according to the text in GA, I,3 and GA, I,4.
IW = Fichte, *Über Belebung und Erhöhung des reinen Interesse für Wahrheit*. Cited according to the text in GA, I,3.
KPV = Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Cited according to the text in AA, V.
KRV = Kant. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Cited according to pagination of first [A] and second [B] editions.

actions, performed for their own sake or out of respect for the moral law, and «self-interested» or «irrational» actions, «pathologically» conditioned by sensual needs and ends, would eliminate the possibility of any «interest of reason.»

Upon further reflection, however, it becomes obvious that if we had no interest in morality we could have no motive for acting morally, and thus our actions would be dictated entirely by the inclinations of our sensual nature. Hence, if either practical moral action or the sort of «disinterested» theoretical endeavor associated with the pursuit of scientific knowledge is to be possible at all, then reason must surely possess certain «interests» of its own, by virtue of which it is able to exercise some influence upon human life. Consistent with the distinction, just alluded to, between the activities of pure practical and pure theoretical reason, Kant posited separate «interests» of theoretical and practical reason, though he also posited an underlying unity of reason's interests, all of which, he maintained, are ultimately «practical.»

Kant's concern with this issue was shared by Fichte, who also followed Kant in distinguishing between the interests of theoretical and of practical reason. What distinguishes Fichte's account of the «interest of reason» from Kant's, however, is the «constitutive» role he assigns to practical reason and the much greater emphasis he is therefore able to place upon the essential *unity* of reason and of reason's interests –an emphasis, however, which by no means prevented him from recognizing the essential *lack of unity* within human experience, a lack that is a condition for the very possibility of reason's highest, teleological interest.

The following essay explores some of the similarities and differences between Fichte's account (as presented in his Jena writings) of «the interests of reason» and the Kantian account that originally inspired it. It is my hope that such a comparison will serve to illuminate the distinctive character of Fichte's project and to call attention to the still-unappreciated audacity of the same.

1. Kant

In the *Kritik der praktische Vernunft*, in the context of a discussion of respect for the moral law as an «incentive» *[Triebfeder]* for moral action, Kant notes the intimate connection between the concept of an «incentive» for action and that of a particular «interest», which «eine *Triebfeder* des Willens bedeutet, so fern sie *durch Vernunft vorgestellt* wird.»[3] Further analysis of the concept of «interest» reveals that only a *finite*, rational being can possess «interests», since the very concept of an «interest» suggests a certain lack and limitation on the part of the being who possesses it. A divine would necessarily be «disinterested.»

The interests of a finite rational being, moreover, can be either «empirical» or «pure.» When reason determines the will to pursue a certain pleasant or useful object, an object with which it can be acquainted only through the senses, it can then be said to have an empirical or «pathological»

SS = Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre*. Cited according to the text in GA, I,5.
VWL = Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*. Cited according to the text in GA, I,4.
WLnm = Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Cited as K or H: K = the «Krause Nachschrift» of WLnm, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, Kollegnachschrift K. Chr. Fr. Krause, ed. Erich Fuchs (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982). H = the «Hallesche Nachschrift» of WLnm, in GA, IV,2.

3 KPV: 89. See too GMS: 459n.: «Interesse is das, wodurch Vernunft praktische, d.i. eine den Willen bestimmende Ursache, wird. Daher sage man nur von einem vernünftigen Wesen, das woran ein Interesse nehme, vernunftlose Geschöpte fühlen nur sinnliche Antriebe.» Accordingly, even the interests of theoretical or speculative reason are, in this sense, «practical.»

interest in the object of its action (GMS: 414n.). In contrast, the pleasure we take in the mere idea of doing our duty and in the idea of the good that is supposed to result therefrom is a «pure» (practical) pleasure, which is understandable only by reference to a pure practical interest of reason. Unlike empirical interests, pure interests focus upon an action and not upon any (sensible) object thereof.

If an interest, whether empirical or pure, is actually to serve as a motive or incentive for human action, it must be capable of stimulating one's power of desire *[Begehrungsvermögen]*. In the case of empirical interests, the power of desire is stimulated by a real or imagined object of the senses; whereas in the case of pure interests the power of desire is stimulated by the mere idea of the moral law, i.e., by a pure principle of reason. Thus, in the case of all «interests of reason», the usual empirical relationship between inclination and interest is *reversed*: the inclination follows from the (pure) interest, furnishing us with what Kant, in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, calls «die sinnenfreie Neigung (*propensio intellectualis*)» (AA, VI: 213). To be sure, we are incapable of providing a transcendental explanation of the possibility of such rational causality; instead, as in the case of freedom itself, we can only appeal to the *fact* of such rational causality by the will.[4]

To each power or capacity *[Vermögen]* of the mind, moreover, whether pure or empirical, Kant ascribes a distinct interest, «d.i., ein Prinzip, welches die Bedingung enthält, unter welcher allein die Ausübung desselben befördert wird» (KPV: 119). And what applies to each of these lower powers applies equally to the highest power of all –that is, to reason itself, which not only recognizes and judges the worth of the various interests of these lower powers, but also has the task of ascertaining the interest of reason itself (KPV: 119-20). This, to be sure, is not to say that reason freely determines or selects its own aims or interests, but rather, that nothing *outside of* reason determines such interests. The interests of reason must spring from and express the nature of reason itself.

Though reason itself is a single power (KPV: 89 and 121), it is nevertheless capable of two very different modes of employment –a speculative or theoretical employment, where it is concerned with principles alleged to determine objects of knowledge, and a practical or moral employment, where it is concerned with principles guiding the free self–determination of the will.[5] As its very name indicates, the primary interest of *theoretical* reason is cognition itself, the acquisition of knowledge. If, however, we go on to distinguish between the power of cognition, narrowly conceived, that is the power of «understanding» *[Verstand]*, and those theoretical claims of reason which extend (or strive to extend) *beyond* the limits of the understanding, then we can describe reason itself as striving for a theoretical or (as Kant generally prefers to say) «speculative» grasp of the unconditioned ground of all merely conditioned cognitions. So understood, reason takes itself to be a «Vermögen der Prinzipien» in contrast with the mere «Vermögen der Regeln» represented by the understanding (KRV: A299/B356), and, as such a «power of principles», theoretical reason strives to unify (that is, to grasp from a single principle) not only all empirical knowledge, but all of the rules of the understanding and all of the principles of reason itself. Since such a unity can be

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4 *Metaphysik der Sitten*, AA, VI: 213. See the concluding portion of GMS, «Von der äußersten Grenze aller praktischen Philosophie,» where Kant maintains that «die subjective Unmöglichkeit, die Freiheit des Willens zu *erklären* ist mit der Unmöglichkeit, eine *Interesse* ausfindig und begreifliche zu machen, welches der Mensch an moralischen Gesetzen nehmen könne, einerlei» (459-60).

5 «Das Interesse ihres speculativen Gebrauchs besteht in der Erkenntniß des Objects bis zu den höchsten Principien *a priori*, das des praktischen Gebrauchs in der Bestimmung des Willens in Ansehung des letzten und vollständigen Zwecks» (KPV: 120)

guaranteed only by tracing all knowledge back to a single principle, which itself can be derived from nothing higher, reason's striving for unity is simply another name for its striving for what is unconditioned – a striving described by Kant as «eine Forderung der Vernunft» (A305/B362).

The interest of reason in its theoretical employment may therefore be described more narrowly as knowledge of the unconditioned. According to the well-known argument of the Transcendental Dialectic, human reason conceives «the unconditioned», which is the ultimate object of its theoretical striving, under three conceptual rubrics, or in the form of three «transcendental ideas»: as the simple unity of the soul, as the absolute and unconditioned beginning of the empirical series, and as the absolutely unconditioned being. Following Kant's own method of characterizing any «interest» in terms of the particular «objects» thereof,[6] we may therefore conclude that the *interest of theoretical reason* is knowledge of the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will, and the existence of God.

Of course, just because theoretical reason has an interest in knowledge of the unconditioned is no guarantee that such knowledge is obtainable; and indeed, one of Kant's chief aims was precisely to demonstrate that and why reason's striving for theoretical cognition of the soul, freedom, and God must fail to produce any knowledge at all – a failure dramatically illustrated by the antithetic and self-conflict into which reason apparently falls whenever it tries to thematize and to defend its epistemic claims concerning the «unconditioned» without first engaging in a critique of its own power to obtain such knowledge.

But if the principles of speculative reason have no constitutive role to play in human knowledge, they may still play an important regulative role with respect to the same. Though the principles and concepts of reason cannot provide us with any objective knowledge of what is absolute or unconditioned, they do have an important subjective use as regulative «Maximen der spekulativen Vernunft, die lediglich auf dem spekulativen Interesse derselben beruhen» (A666/B694). Such purely subjective principles contribute nothing whatsoever to the constitution of objects; instead, they assist us in bringing harmony into the empirical, determinate employment of reason. They help us to *unify* and to *extend* our empirical knowledge, but they cannot guarantee the completeness of the same. (To be sure, reason's speculative interest in unity is at least partially satisfied, inasmuch as we are compelled by the «subjective maxims» of theoretical reason –maxims which are the direct expression of this very interest– to view the empirical world «as if» it were a complete and unconditioned, i.e., purposive, whole.[7])

In the end, therefore, there is no real conflict between theoretical reason's larger interest in objective cognition (which is always of what is conditioned) and its «narrower», purely speculative interest in the unconditioned, for the latter turns out to me simply a means to the former.[8] «In der

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6 See § 2 of *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA, V: 204.

7 See KRV: A676/B704, as well as A686/B714: «Diese höchste formale Einheit, welche allein auf Vernunftbegriffen beruht, ist die *zweckmäßige* Einheit der Dinge, und die *spekulative* Interesse der Venunft macht es notwendig, alle Anordnung in der Welt so anzusehen, als ob sie aus der Absicht einer allerhöchsten Venunft entsprossen wäre.»

8 It was in his reflections on «the interest of reason» on both sides of the antinomies that Kant first identified reason's apparently conflicting *theoretical* interests: on the one hand, it has a theoretical, «architectonic» interest in the theses and, on the other, it has an equally strong theoretical interest in the «pure empiricism» represented by the antitheses, since the latter alone provides it with a sphere for the pursuit and expansion of genuine, objective cognition (see A475/B503).

There is, however, no real conflict between these two «subjective maxims» of reason, one of which directs us to seek an ultimate condition for all that is conditioned, while the other forbids us to hope that we will ever discover such an ultimate, unconditioned condition. These two principles, as Kant explains, though they may appear to express two

Tat hat die Vernunft nur ein einiges [theoretischen] Interesse und der Streit ihrer Maximen ist nur eine Verschiedenheit und wechselseitige Einschränkung der Methoden, disem Interesse ein Genüge zu tun» (A666/B694). Thus the ideas of reason have a real and important theoretical employment after all, even if it is not the exalted one so long cherished and pursued by rationalist metaphysicians.[9]

The sphere of reason, however, is not limited to the theoretical domain of *knowing*, but comprises as well the practical domain of *free action*.[10] In its strictly practical employment, reason is not concerned with principles alleged to determine any sort of objective knowledge, but rather with the determination of willing and acting and with the a priori principles regulating the same. Within this domain, according to Kant, reason «ist im Besitze, dessen Rechtmäßigkeit sie nicht beweisen darf, und wovon sie in der Tat den Beweis auch nicht führen könnte» (A776/B804). Since the domain of practical reason is the domain of freedom, reason's «rights of possession» within this domain are determined by reason itself and thus directly reflect the pure practical interests of reason.

What are the *practical interests* of reason? In answering this question we may distinguish the immediate from the mediate objects of reason's practical interest. Practical interest is immediately concerned only with the free determination of the will in accordance with the moral law. We are aware of this highest practical interest, which Kant sometimes calls «das *Interesse der Menschen*», *directly*, through moral consciousness or conscience. Such an interest is by no means dependent upon any sort of prior knowledge (Bxxxii); it is simply a *fact*, albeit of a rather curious kind, namely: a fact of (practical) reason.[11] When we act morally the sole incentive for our action is supposed to be our sheer respect for the moral law. But only a rational being can be expected to have any *interest* in such action, since it is only through reason (and not through sensibility) that one can become aware of such a pure incentive for willing. Thus, «da das Gesetz selbst in einem moralisch guten Willen die Triebfeder sein muß, so ist das *moralische Interesse* ein reines sinnenfreies Interesse der bloßen praktischen Vernunft.» (KPV: 79). Nor is there, according to Kant, any interest of pure practical reason beyond its interest in morality.

This, however, is not to say that the interest of practical reason is confined to dutiful willing, though obedience to the moral law always remains the primary concern of practical reason; on the contrary, Kant maintains that practical reason possesses for itself «ursprüngliche Principien a priori, mit denen gewisse theoretische Positionen unzertrennlich verbunden [sind]» (KPV: 120). The «positions» in question are, of course, those that affirm the very things that purely speculative reason struggled in vain to establish on its own: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God. Though unable to establish the objective reality of these transcendent objects, theoretical reason is able to demonstrate the impossibility of any *disproof* of their reality and hence to «make room» for rational faith *[Glaube]* in this area. According to Kant's argument, belief in freedom, immortality, and God is not only consistent with our awareness of our moral duties and pursuit of the highest good, but is *necessarily connected* therewith. Indeed, Kant main-

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separate «theoretical interests of reason,» one in contingency and content and the other in necessity and form, are only heuristic and regulative and simply express two different, equally valuable, sides of one and the same «formale Interesse der Venunft» (KRV: A616/B644).

9 «Die Vernunft führt uns in ihrem spekulativen Gebrauch durch das Feld der Erfahrungen, und, weil daselbst für sie niemals völlige Befriedigung anzutreffen ist, von da zu spekulativen Ideen, die uns aber am Ende widerum auf Erfahrung zurückführten, als also ihre Absicht auf eine zwar nützliche, aber unserer Erwartung gar nich gemäße Art erfüllten» (KRV: A804/B832).

10 «Praktisch ist alles, was durch Freiheit möglich ist» (KRV: A800/B828).

11 Indeed, it is this «fact» alone which proves the very possibility of pure practical reason (see KPV: 121).

tains that to deny the postulates is in some –«practical,» if not «theoretical»[12]– way to reject the moral law itself. Once it has been shown that such postulates are inseparable from the practical interests of reason, and hence practically necessary, then theoretical reason, spurred on by its own, purely speculative interest, is only too willing to welcome and to endorse them.[13]

In the Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Kritik* Kant emphasized the apparent *conflict* between what he characterized as the interests of theoretical reason and those of practical reason. Thus, for example, he associates the four «theses» discussed in the Antinomy of Pure Reason with dogmatic rationalism and asserts that these claims are more in harmony with the practical interests of reason than are those on the side of the «antitheses,» which he associates with pure empiricism. The arguments of the theses are said to possess «ein gewisses *praktisches Interesse*, woran jeder *Wohlgesinnter*, wenn er sich auf seinen wahren Vorteil versteht, herzlich teilnimmt,» since ideas such as that of the immortal soul, of human freedom, and of God «sind so viel Grundsteine der Moral und Religion» (A466/B494). The interests of theoretical reason, in contrast, are less clearly identified with either side in this conflict, since certain theoretical interests of reason (such as its interest in completeness and in the unconditioned) are better satisfied by the theses and others (such as theoretical reason's interest in concrete cognition and continuing scientific inquiry) are better satisfied by the antitheses. In any case, the important point to note is how Kant, in the section of the first *Kritik* titled «Von dem Interesse der Vernunft bei diesem ihrem Widerstreite,»[14] stresses the apparent *divergence* between the interests of practical and of theoretical reason.

In contrast, the theory of the so-called «postulates of practical reason» stresses the underlying *unity* of the interests of theoretical and practical reason, which are here seen to merge, allowing us to recognize for the first time within the context of the Critical philosophy that «so ist es doch immer nur eine und dieselbe Vernunft, die, es sei in theoretischer oder praktischer Absicht, nach Principien *a priori* urtheilt» (KPV: 121). Thus the apparent conflict between the interests of theoretical and of practical reason – a conflict that, in the theoretical context of the first *Kritik*, could be resolved only *negatively*, that is, by sharply delimiting the legitimate sphere of theoretical cognition and by distinguishing the *constitutive* employment of the a priori principles of theoretical reason from the *regulative* employment of the principles of practical reason – can now be resolved in a more *positive* fashion and in a manner that re-asserts the fundamental unity of reason.

This conclusion concerning the «unity of reason» is perhaps stated most explicitly in the familiar section of the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* titled «Vom dem Primat der reinen praktischen Vernunft in ihrer Verbindung mit der speculativen.» Even here, however, it is clear that it is only because of the evident *conflict* and *disunity* between the perceived interests of practical and of theoretical reason that there is any need to insist upon the underlying *unity* of reason itself or to investigate the character of such unity. Indeed, Kant's oft-quoted reference to the «primacy of practical reason» is, in fact, a claim concerning the primacy of one of reason's original *interests*

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12 The clearest statement of this point is found not in any of Kant's published works, but in the posthumously compiled and published lectures on *Philosophische Religionslehre*, where Kant explicitly advances the so-called *absurdum practicum* argument for the postulates (see AA, XXVIII/2/2: 1082-84).

13 See KRV: A804/B832-A811/B839, where Kant explains how the interests of theoretical and of practical reason work in tandem to answer the question «what can I hope?» It must be admitted that Kant frequently seems to equivocate concerning the precise epistemic status of the postulates. Whereas his «official» position is that they are only instances of rationally necessary belief or faith [Glaube], he nevertheless sometimes speaks of these same postulates as *ein Erkenntnis* or «kind of knowledge» (see e.g., KRV: A818/B846).

14 KRV: A462/B490 - A476/B504.

over the other,[15] and the only reason the question of «primacy» even arises at this point is because practical reason, in pursuit of its own interests, advances certain claims that seem to violate or at least to conflict with the interests of theoretical reason, insofar as the latter reserves for itself the right to determine the truth and falsity of such claims. Hence the question, «which is the superior interest?» cannot be avoided. Kant answers this question in an appropriately «Critical» manner by denying that there is any real conflict between the interests of theoretical and practical reason in this case –or indeed in any other. So long as practical reason confines its postulates to the transcendent realm over which theoretical reason has previously abandoned its own claims, then no direct conflict can arise, and the only question is whether or not theoretical reason should continue to remain neutral concerning such questions or should acknowledge the «primacy of practical reason» in this area, not by violating the principles of theoretical reason, but rather by attempting to integrate into its own theoretical world-picture the postulates of the latter. Why should not theoretical reason simply withhold judgment at this point?

It is revealing that Kant's rejection of such a skeptical strategy is grounded upon an appeal to what he calls «das unvermeidliche Bedürfnis der menschlichen Vernunft,» namely, the need of human reason to raise itself to an «Einsicht der Einheit des ganzen reinen Vernunftvermögens (des theoretischen sowohl als praktischen)» (KPV: 91). But what permits theoretical reason to take this step and to satisfy its own need at this point is not any newly discovered item of theoretical knowledge, but rather, the undeniable *fact* that pure reason has a practical as well as a theoretical employment (i.e., that it can freely determine its own willing by a priori principles) and that, in the former employment, it finds itself compelled to believe certain propositions to be true:

> «Allein wenn reine Vernunft für sich praktisch sein kann und es wirklich ist, wie das Bewußtsein des moralischen Gesetzes es ausweiset, so ist es doch immer nur eine und dieselbe Vernunft, die, es sei in theoretischer oder praktischer Absicht, nach Principien *a priori* urtheilt, und da ist es klar, daß, wenn ihr Vermögen in der ersteren nicht zulangt, gewisse Sätze behauptend festzusetzen, indessen daß sie ihr auch eben nicht widersprechen, eben diese Sätzen, so bald sie *unabtrennlich zum praktischen Interesse* der reinen Vernunft gehöhren, zwar als ein ihr fremdes Angebot, das nicht auf ihrem Boden erwachsen, aber doch hinreichend beglaubigt ist, annehmen und sie mit allem, was sie als spekulative Vernunft in ihrer Macht hat, zu vergleichen und zu verknüpfen suchen müsse; doch sich bescheidend, daß dieses nicht ihre Einsichten, aber doch Erweiterungen ihres Gebrauchs in irgend einer anderen, nämlich praktischen, Absicht sind, welches ihrem Interesse, das in der Einschränkung des speculativen Frevels besteht, ganz und gar nicht zuwider ist.»(KPV: 121).

But if it is «one and the same reason» that judges in this case, then it is clear from this «primacy of practical interests» within pure reason itself that the only thing that guarantees the unity of reason in this case or any other is the fact that *all* of reason's interests are ultimately *practical* ones. And indeed, this is precisely the conclusion of Kant's own reflections upon the primacy of practical reason: «Der speculativen Vernunft aber untergeordnet zu sein und also die Ordnung umzukehren,

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15 «Unter dem Primate zwischen zwei oder mehreren durch Vernunft verbundenen Dingen verstehe ich den Vorzug des einen, der erste Bestimmungsgrund der Verbindung mit allen übrigen zu sein. In engerer praktischer Bedeutung bedeutet es den Vorzug des Interessse des einen, so fern ihm (welches keinem andern nachgesetzt werden kann) das Interesse der andern untergeordnet ist» (KPV: 119).

kann man der reinen praktischen gar nich zumuthen, wiel alle Interesse zuletzt praktische ist, und selbst das der speculativen Vernunft nur bedingt und im praktischen Gebrauch allein vollständig ist.»[16] Incipit Wissenschaftslehre!

2. Fichte

Like Kant, Fichte was prepared to distinguish between the narrow interests of theoretical reason (i.e., cognition of objects, or, in Fichte's vocabulary, consciousness «der vom Gefühle der Nothwendigkeit begleiten Vorstellungen» [VWL: 186]) –and the equally specific interests of practical reason (i.e., limiting and directing free willing, acting to construct the world as it ought to be). Indeed, he often employed the distinction between the interests of practical and of theoretical reason in order to characterize the difference, so crucial to the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, between the «standpoint of life» and the «standpoint of speculation.»[17] Yet even as he sought to *distinguish* the interests of practical reason from those of theoretical reason, he was equally intent upon positing the *unity* of theoretical and practical reason and relating the interests of both theoretical and practical reason to the *fundamental interest of reason as such.*

Kant, as we have seen, had already speculated on the ultimate unity of the interests of practical and theoretical reason, and had even gone so far as to suggest that all of reason's interests are ultimately «practical.» Fichte, however, was dissatisfied with Kant's halfhearted efforts to establish or to display the transcendental ground of the unity in question, and he first made his reservations on this score public in 1793, in his review of Leonhard Creuzer's *Skeptische Betrachungen über die Freyheit des Willens,* where he remarked: «Hn. Creuzers freylich nur uneigentlich sogenannter Skepticismus [. . .] hat die Theorien über Freyheit zum Gegenstande; das Resultat seiner Untersuchungen ist, daß keine der bisherigen den Streit zwischen dem Interesse der praktischen Vernunft und dem der theoretischen befriedigend löse; und ihr lobenswürdiger Zweck, zu Erfindung einer neuen und genugthuendern die Veranlassung zu geben» (GA, I,2: 7).

Had Fichte thought that Kant's theory of freedom was fully capable of resolving the prevailing conflict between the interests of practical and theoretical reason, he surely would not have praised Creuzer for seeking such a theory, nor would he have devoted his own life to the very task of constructing what he described variously as a «das erste System der Freiheit» or «eine Strebungs-Philosophie»[18] –a new philosophy that would establish once and for all the precise relationship between the interests of practical and of theoretical reason, as well as the problematic unity of the two. Before examining Fichte's account of the interests of reason, however, let us first consider his general view of the nature of reason and of interest.

The fundamental character of reason as such is described as follows on the first page of Fichte's *Grundlage des Naturrechts*: «Der Charakter der Vernünftigkeit besteht darin, daß das Handelnde, und das Behandelte Eins sey, und eben dasselbe; und durch diese Beschreibung ist der Umkreis der Vernunft, als solcher erschöpft» (GA, I,3: 313). This description bears, of course, a striking

16 KPV: 121. See too the important footnote to the final section of GMS (460n.), where Kant suggests that the only *pure* interest of reason is its *immediate* practical (i.e. moral) interest. The (interests of theoretical reason, in contrast, are never immediate and hence never pure, but always presuppose *practical purposes* for which they might be useful.

17 For a critical examination of this distinction see Daniel Breazeale, «The "Standpoint of Life" and "The Standpoint of Philosophy" in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre.*» In *Transcendentalphilosophie als System: Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen 1794 und 1806,* ed. Albert Mues, pp. 81-104. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1989. pp. 81-104.

18 See the draft of Fichte's letter to Baggesen, April/May 1795 (GA, III, 2: 298) and «Eigne Meditationen» (GA, II,3: 265).

resemblance to Fichte's well-known description of the character of the «Ich,» or of «Ichheit»: «Das Ich setzt sich selbst schlechthin.» Like the absolute I with which the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* begins, pure reason is described not as one mental power or *Vermögen* among others, but as «dem schlechthin setzenden Vermögen im Ich»[19]; and since the I in question is at this point identical with its own self-positing, it follows that rationality and I-hood, *Ich* and *Vernunft*, are here simply two different names for one and the same thing: namely, what is absolute, self-contained, self-sufficient, and self-positing.[20] The fundamental and characteristic feature of reason (or I-hood) is *self-conscious freedom*. «Die Vernunft wirkt immer mit Freiheit» (BG: 29).

Expressed in the more popular language of *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, just as certainly as man is rational he is his own end. He does not exist because something else should exist, but simply because *he* should exist: he is *because* he is. «Dieser Character des absoluten Seyns, des Seyns um sein selbst willen, ist sein Character oder seine Bestimmung, insofern er bloß und lediglich als vernünftiges Wesen betrachtet wird» (BG: 29). So understood, as being for its own sake, pure reason combines within itself elements of both theoretical and of practical reason, in the Kantian sense of these terms: reason or the I always involves a type of knowledge, namely self-consciousness, and, as such, is bound by the same rules of intuition and reflection that condition the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever. Unlike mere «understanding» (or purely theoretical reason), however, this self-positing reason, even in its knowing, is not a passive, epistemic subject. On the contrary, it freely produces itself in the very moment of its self-knowing. Its self-consciousness is its self-determination and vice-versa; its «knowing» is a kind of «doing» –a difficult notion, which Fichte tried to communicate through the terminology of *Tathandlung* and *intellectuelle Anschauung*. In short, reason is not some strange sort of *thing*, but is a kind of *doing*, a *Tun*: «Die Vernunft schaut sich selbst an: dies kann sie, und thut sie, eben weil sie Vernunft is; aber sie kann sich nicht anders finden, denn sie ist; als ein Thun» (SS: 68).

But if reason is something «self-sufficient» or «absolute,» then how can it have any «interests» of its own? Surely the presence of any such interest would seem to imply that reason is *not* sufficient unto itself? Even if, as Fichte himself does, one defines the primary interest of reason as «self-interest,» this still seems to to imply a certain *lack of completeness* on the part of reason, at least insofar as an interest always signals the presence of some underlying *need*. Fichte's reply is that, though reason must be posited by the transcendental philosopher as possessing a certain original unity, it is equally true that this same reason must be limited and divided against itself – since (and this is the central argument of the 1794/95 *Grundlage*[21]) only a finite I can actually succeed in positing itself as an I. Only finite reason can exist for itself as reason; and therefore, since reason is reason only insofar as it freely posits itself for itself as such, *finite reason alone exists*.

The only sort of rational being we can even conceive, therefore, is a being like ourselves: an

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19 GA, I, 2: 373-74. «Das Wesen der Vernunft [besteht] in dem Sichselbstsezen» (WLnm, K: 21).

20 «In der gedrukten WissenschaftsLehre ist das reine Ich zu verstehen als Vernunft überhaupt» (WLnm, H: 240). «In der WissenschaftsLehre [. . .] ist die Vernunft das einige an sich» (VWL: 257).
See too the continuation of the previously cited passage from GN: «Der Sprachgebrauch hat diesen erhabnen Begriff [der Vernünftigkeit] für diejenigen, die desselben fähig sind, d. h. für diejenigen, die der Abstraktion, von *ihrem eignen Ich* fähig sind, in dem Worte: *Ich*, niedergelegt; darum ist die Vernunft überhaupt durch die Ichheit charakterisirt worden. Was *für* ein vernünftiges Wesen da ist, ist in ihm da; aber es ist nichts in ihm, ausser zu Folge eines Handelns auf sich selbst: was es anschaut, schaut es in sich selbst an; aber es ist in ihm nichts anzuschauen als sein Handeln: und das Ich selbst ist nichts anders, als ein Handeln auf sich selbst (GA, I, 3, 313).

21 For the most convincing statement of this interpretation, see Alexis Philonenko, *La liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1980).

unstable combination of rationality and sensibility. The only sort of I that can actually exist is a limited, corporeal individual; the only kind of freedom that deserves the name is limited freedom. But if this is what it means to be a rational being, then it is easy to see how reason itself can have needs, and hence interests, of its own. Despite its finite, limited (in short, human) character, reason never abandons its *claim* to absoluteness; instead, it transforms its original claim into an *injunction* it addresses to itself: «*Der Mensch soll seyn, was er ist, schlechthin darum, weil er ist*, d.h. alles was er ist, soll auf sein reines Ich, auf seine bloße Ichheit bezogen werden; alles was er ist, soll er schlechthin darum seyn, weil er ein Ich ist» (BG: 29).

Note that only a being that, in fact, *is not* «what it is simply because it is» can place such a demand upon itself. Only a being whose original nature is a deeply *divided* one can posit as its ultimate goal «die vollkommene Uebereinstimmung [. . .] mit sich selbst» (BG: 31). This then is our revised conception of the nature of reason itself: not something that already exists as self-sufficent and «absolute,» but rather something that *ought to be and strives to become absolute* [22]; not a unified, freely self-determing subject-object, but a finite subject *striving* for *emancipation* from external influences and for *harmony* with itself.

A major aim of Fichte's early writings is to develop a general account of human action and consciousness, an account based upon a new appreciation of the constitutive role of «drives» *[Triebe]* with respect to all human experience, both theoretical and practical.[23] As part of this effort, he developed a rather elaborate theory of the various «interests» through which these drives express themselves within human consciousness. Though mentioned in many of his Jena writings,[24] Fichte's fullest discussion of this topic occurs in § 11 Das *System der Sittenlehre*, titled «Vorläufig Erörterung des Begriffs einer Interesse.»

Following standard transcendental procedure, Fichte begins his analysis with the straightforward statement of a «fact» –namely, that some appearances «interest» us, while we are quite «indifferent» to others– and then goes on to propose an explanation for the possibility thereof. Where do our interests originate? Though we can often produce a new interest in something or in some course of action by showing that it is associated with or will lead to something else in which one has a pre-existing interest, such indirect interests, argues Fichte, can always be traced back to certain *direct, immediately felt* interests. Interests of this latter type cannot be produced artifically but must spring from certain innate drives.[25] The presence of an immediate interest in something is always signaled

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22 Indeed, as Fichte explains in SS, the «Absolutheit» of reason resides entirely in its capacity freely to determine itself according to its concept of what it *ought* to be (SS: 68). I.e. what is «absolute» about reason is not its *being* but its *acting* –more specifically, its *striving*.

23 Fichte's earliest efforts to develop such a theory are to be found in the new section (§ 2) he added to the second edition of his *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, where he attempts to explain action and willing by reference to the «power of desire» (*das Begehrungsvermögen*) and the various drives associated therewith.

24 See, for example, BG, where Fichte maintains that all interests –including the interests of reason –must be rooted in particular *drives*. Thus we first became conscious of the laws of reason only within experience, where they «sich zum Bewußtseyn unter der Gestalt von Trieben ankündigen» (BG: 43). When our first dim consciousness of these innate drives has been developed and cultivated, the drives in question are transformed into *inclinations* and there satisfaction becomes a *need*. It is thus our awareness of such needs that first permits us to identify our own «interests.» (See too the note to Danish edition of these same lectures, where Fichte criticizes the eudaimonists for reversing the proper relationship between desire and knowledge and for trying to base the former on the latter. What actually comes first in man, according to Fichte, is not knowledge but *drive*, which demands its object in advance of any kind of knowledge and even in advance of the object's existence [BG: 73-74].)

25 «Was mich interessirt, muß im Gegentheil eine *unmittelbare* Beziehung auf meinen Trieb haben; denn das Interesse wird selbst unmittelbar empfunden, und läßt sich durch keine Vernunftgründe hervorbringen» (SS: 135).

by a distinctive feeling, which Fichte describes as a feeling not simply of the particular drive to which the interest in question is directly related, but rather, as a feeling of the harmony or disharmony between the object of ones interest and the particular drive in question. Moreover, since every *Gefühle* is, according to the one's *Wissenschaftslehre*, only a feeling of some limited state of the I itself, then it follows that what we are aware of when we are aware of any «interest» can only be a state of harmony or disharmony *within the I itself*.[26] And from this it follows in turn that one's original or immediate interest is necessarily one's *self-interest*, through which alone all other, indirect interests must be mediated.

Just as every particular interest must be directly connected with some drive, so must this original self-interest be connected with an original drive within the I –a *Grundtrieb* or *Urtrieb* to which all other drives, and hence all other interests, must be directly or indirectly linked. This «original drive» was, as we have already noted, first described by Fichte in *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmungen des Gelehrten* as an original drive for unity of the part of a finite, rational being, a drive that expresses itself in the injunction never to contradict oneself. In the context of the theory of interest developed in the *Sittenlehre*, this original drive is described as follows: «mein Grundtrieb, als reines und empirisches Wesen, durch welchem diese zwei sehr verschiedenen Bestandtheile meiner selbst zu Einem werden, ist der nach Uebereinstimmung des ursprünglichen, in der bloßen Idee bestimmten, mit dem wirklichen Ich. Nun ist der Urtrieb, d.h. der reine und der natürliche in ihrer Vereinigung ein bestimmter, er geht auf einiges unmittelbar; trifft mein wirklicher Zustand mit dieser Foderung zusammen, so ensteht Lust, widerspricht er ihm, so entsteht Unlust: und beide sind nichts anderes, als das unmittelbar Gefühl der Harmonie oder Disharmonie meines wirklichen Zustands mit dem durch den Urtrieb gefoderten» (SS: 136). Once again, therefore, man's fundamental drive is described as a drive toward unity or harmony with himself.

In addition to this original drive for unity, man also possesses a number of natural drives, which give rise to various sorts of «longing» *[Sehnen]* directed toward a certain material relationship between the material world and one's own body, as well as a «pure drive» directed not at any material object, but rather at action for its own sake. «Er ist ein Trieb zur Thätigkeit, um der Thätigkeit willen» (SS: 136). The real object or aim of this pure drive, therefore, is not to experience any pleasure in the experienced harmony between the human body and the material world, but to establish the independence and freedom of the I itself. Hence this pure drive expresses itself not in any *longing*, but in a *demand*, «ein absolutes *Fordern*» (SS: 137) –a demand that is experienced not as a passive «feeling,» but as an intuition of one's own true nature as a finite, rational (which is to say, free) being.

The interest we unavoidably take in the satisfaction of this pure drive toward activity is closely related to the above-mentioned self-interest associated with our original drive toward harmony with ourselves, since the only sort self-harmony compatible with our rational nature is one in which the latter determines our sensual nature. Thus Fichte concludes that «jene Forderung der absoluten Selbstthätigkeit und der Uebereinstimmung des empirischen Ich damit, is selbst der *Urtrieb*» (SS: 137).

The name for the *Vermögen* through which we become immediately aware of every satisfaction or lack of satisfaction of our original or pure drive is «conscience» *[Gewissen]*, defined as «das unmittelbare Bewußtseyn dessen, ohne welches überhaupt kein Bewußtseyn ist, das Bewußtseyns unserer höhern Natur und absoluten Freiheit» (SS: 138). Insofar, therefore, as reason can be said to have any overall or original interest of its own, this is something with which we become acquainted

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26 «Ich fühle nur *mich*; sonach müßte diese Harmonie oder Disharmonie in mir selbst liegen, oder sie müßte nichts anders seyn, als eine Harmonie oder Disharmonie meiner selbst mit mir selbst» (SS: 135)

not through sensible feelings nor through reflection and reasoning, but rather, through pure, immediate consciousness of the harmony or disharmony between our empirical selves and the pure demand for free self-determination. In short, the original interest of reason is revealed to us by conscience.

What does conscience tells us concerning our original or fundamental interest as finite rational beings? Fichte's answer will by now be familiar: «unsere Vernunft sowohl die *theoretische* und die *praktische* hat eigentlich nur Ein *Interesse*, und dieses ist *Einheit*. Wenn daher Kant von 2 spricht so ist es nur verschiedene *Modification* Eines u. eben desselben *Interesse* (WLnm, H: 23). There is a sense, however, in which even this original interest in unity is itself based upon reason's even more fundamental interest in positing for itself its own freedom, as Fichte himself goes on to explain in the Krause *Nachschrift* of the same portion of his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: «die Vernunft ist immer nur eine und hat nur ein Intereße. Ihr Intereße ist der Glaube an Selbständigkeit und Freiheit, und aus diesem folgt das Intereße für Einheit und Zusammenhang» (K: 17).

The original interest of reason can therefore be defined with equal accuracy as *self-interest in one's own freedom* or as an *interest in unifying the pure and empirical sides of one's own self.* Either way, it should be clear that such an interest is conceivable only only for a finite, limited being.[27] Only if reason's freedom is *not* absolute can reason take any *interest* in the unfettered exercise of the same; only if one finds oneself to be a *divided self* can one have an interest in *self-harmony*. Accordingly, it is but a short step from this first definition of the interest of reason to a second: namely, the actual interest of reason always lies in the *process* of self-liberation and self-unification, i.e., not in *being* free or *being* a united self, but in *striving* to be free, in striving to be a unified self. So understood, the concept of reason's interest presupposes that reason is always in pursuit of a goal it can –in principle– never attain. Were reason ever actually to achieve its original goal, then it would cease to be finite and thus would cease to be either rational or free. The true interest of reason –in other words, «die Bestimmung des Menschen»– is, therefore, to strive endlessly for ever-greater freedom and for ever-closer harmony with itself:

> «Alles vernunftlose sich zu unterwerfen, frei und nach seinem eignen Gesetze es zu beherrschen, ist lezter Endzweck des Menschen; welcher lezte Endzweck völlig unerreichbar ist und ewig unerreichbar bleieben muß [. . .]. Es liegt im Begriffe des Menschen, daß sein leztes Ziel unerreichbar, sein Weg zu demselben unendlich seyn muß. Mithin ist es nicht die Bestimmung des Menschen, dieses Ziel zu erreichen. Aber er kann und soll diesem Ziele immer näher kommen: und daher is die *Annäherung ins Unendliche zu diesem Ziele* seine wahre Bestimmung als *Mensch*, d.i. als vernünftiges aber endliches, als sinnliches aber freies Wesen. – Nennt man nun jene völlig Uebereinstimmung mit sich selbst *Vollkommenheit* [. . .]: so ist Vollkommenheit das höchste unerreichbare Ziel des Menschen; *Vervollkommung ins unendliche* aber ist seine Bestimmung.» (BG: 32).

Though reason itself, according to Fichte, is a unity, and though there is, strictly speaking, only one «interest of reason,» there is still an obvious sense in which reason can be said to have separate and distinguishable «theoretical» and «practical» interests: namely, insofar as it is employed to accomplish distinctly «theoretical» and «practical» tasks. To be sure, even in such cases, one can always point to a necessary (practical) moment of willing within even the most «theoretical»

27 This conclusion is already anticipated in the *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, where Fichte notes that only a finite, empirically determinable being can take an interest in the good (GA, I,1: 144n).

enterprise and to a necessary (theoretical) moment of knowledge within even the most «practical» one. Thus, in order to speak, as Fichte himself occasionally does, about separate interests of theoretical and practical reason, one first has to abstract from the underlying unity of theoretical and practical reason. Only then can one proceed to examine how the single interest of reason manifests itself empirically in the form of distinguishable interests of theoretical and of practical reason, as well as in the drive to unify these «distinct» interests –thereby re-establishing at the level of empirical consciousness the originally posited unity of the interest of reason.

One way to make a distinction between the overall interest of reason and the more narrow interest of practical reason is, as Fichte himself implies in the previously cited passage from § 11 of *Das System der Sittenlehre*, to link the former to the *Urtrieb* for unity and the latter to the *reiner Trieb* for free action and self-sufficiency (though, admittedly, Fichte himself does not consistently distinguish the «original» from the «pure» drive of the I). In this case, the interest of practical reason would be only another name for reason's interest in free activity for its own sake, an interest that, in Fichte's view, is identical with its ethical interest in acting morally. The interest of practical reason would thus comprise the entire realm of free activity, that is, the ethical realm of willing and acting, and «practical interest» would be equivalent to «ethical interest.»[28]

A more specific application of the term «the interest of practical reason» is encountered within the domain of reflection itself: e.g., when one persists in asserting one's own freedom *in the absence of theoretically adequate grounds* for such an assertion. In such cases, according to Fichte, the «practical interest of reason» intervenes in the (potentially endless) chain of philosophical reflections and prevents one from treating the «absoluteness» of one's own free will as a mere «appearance», derivable (at least in principle) from something higher. «Wenn man sich nun doch entschließt, diese Erscheinung nicht weiter zu erklären, und sie für absolute unerklärbar, d.i. für Wahrheit, und für unsre eineige Wahreit zu halten, nach der alle andere Wahrheit beurteilt, und gerichtet werden müsse, –wie denn eben auf diese Entschließung unsre ganze Philosophie aufgebaut ist– so geschieht dies nicht zufolge einer theoretische Einsicht, sondern zufolge eines praktischen Interesse; ich *will* selbständig seyn, darum halte ich mich da für.»[29] In such cases, where knowledge comes an end and practical interest prevails, what is produced is something more certain and unshakeable than any knowledge whatsoever: practical faith. Clearly, such an argument owes much to Kant's account of the postulates of practical reason. The difference, as we shall note below, is that Fichte greatly expands the legitimate sphere of such «practical postulating.» Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that, for Fichte, the entire realm of truth and certainty rests upon the practical postulate of freedom.

It is nevertheless possible to distinguish a narrowly *theoretical* interest of reason from the overall interest of reason as such. Just as every interest recognizable by a rational being must be directly related to one of its drives, so does the theoretical interest of reason rest upon what Fichte variously calls the «Trieb nach Wahrheit» (IW: 83), «Trieb zu wissen» (BG: 52) or «Trieb nach Erkenntniß» (SS: 156). Such a drive is not primarily a drive toward useful information; on the contrary, it is one of our «pure» drives, and hence our *Interesse für Wahrheit* is based upon the original nature of reason itself (IW: 83).

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28 Though Fichte's major discussion of the domain of «sittliche Interesse» occurs in SS, he had already identified such an «ethical interest» in his *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, where he had also gone on to distinguish between «pure» and «empirical» varieties of ethical interest (GA, I,1: 144). See too the distinction, explained in SS, between «technische praktische Vernunft» and «schlechthin praktische Vernunft» (SS: 68), which anticipates the more recent distinction between «instrumental» and «substantive» uses of reason.

29 SS: 43. See the similar passages in VWL: 219 and in *Über den Grund unseres Glaubens* (GA, I,5: 351-52).

Fichte devoted an early essay to the investigation of theoretical reason's «interest in truth,» and one of the chief purposes of this essay is to show how the pure theoretical drive really represents only a specific application of the *Urtrieb* for unity. Applied to our judgments, rather than to our actions, the original demand of reason becomes: «urtheile so, daß du die Art deines jetzigen Urtheilens als ewiges Gesetz für dein gesammtes Urtheilen denken könnst. Wie du vernünftiger Weise in allen Fällen kannst urtheilen wollen, so urtheile in diesem bestimmten Falle» (IW: 84). Hence, reason's pure interest in truth is not at all concerned with the content or the consequences of any particular proposition, but only with whether it can be united harmoniously with what Fichte calls «das gesammte System des menschlichen Geistes.»[30]

This interest of theoretical reason in pure truth also extends to what is arguably the most «theoretical» and abstract intellectual endeavor of all, that is to the task of constructing a transcendental account of the very possibility of experience itself, «da die Aufgabe, die Erfahrung aus ihrem Grunde zu erklären, einmal in der menschlichen Vernunft liegt.»[31] In other words, *philosophy itself* is both an expression and an object of reason's innate theoretical interest.

Though Fichte tried to demarcate a field for theoretical reason proper, his discussions of our interest in knowledge usually begin and end with an explicit admission that our drive for truth and hence our interest in knowledge and truth is not merely «subject to» our higher moral interest in unity, but is itself, when properly understood, only a particular expression and application of that same interest.[32] Despite his efforts to construct a complex, hierarchical theory of human drives, a theory that would allow him, in turn, to distinguish between the «original,» «practical,» and «theoretical» interests of reason, Fichte's primary emphasis was always upon the *unity* of reason itself and hence upon the underlying *unity* of all of reason's various «interests,» theoretical as well as practical.[33] To be sure, Fichte's account of the original unity of reason's interests was anticipated and no doubt inspired by Kant's claim that all of reason's interests are ultimately practical. It was left to Fichte, however, to work out in detail the sometimes surprising systematic implications of this insight for transcendental philosophy as a whole, as well as for a philosophical anthropology based upon such a philosophy.

Let us conclude this survey of Fichte's discussion of the interests of reason by calling attention to a feature of the same which has no parallel in Kant's writings: namely, Fichte's celebrated account of «the starting point of philosophy» and the essential role of *free decision* in the otherwise inconclusive debate between «idealists» anf «dogmatists» –an account that will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the discussion, in the First Introduction to *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung*

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30 IW: 87. One interesting corollary of this view is that the true explanation for «the unity of nature» and «the unity of the sciences» lies not in the object known but in the character of the knowing subject, and, more precisely, in «the interest of theoretical reason» in establishing systematic unity within its own thinking. Hence too, the unity of the sciences and of nature can never be more than a regulative idea, something toward which we must and can only infinitely strive: not a fact of nature, but an *ought*. Such unity is, in Kantian language, based not upon a constitutive or objective principle, but upon a subjective maxim of (theoretical) reason.

31 VWL: 206. Note the implications of this claim for for current debates between philosophical «foundationalists» and «antifoundationalists.» According to Fichte, the foundationalist project is, as it were, built into the nature of reason itself and is a direct expression of the latter's interest.

32 See the remark added to the Danish edition of BG, where Fichte states that the demand for truth is merely a specific expression of the moral drive (GA, I,3: 74), as well as the many remarks to the same effect in IW. E.g.: «Wahrheitsliebe bereitet vor zur moralischen Güte, und ist selbst schon an sich eine Art derselben» (90).

33 «Hier läßt sich auch klar, wie mir es scheint, einsehen, wie die Vernunft *praktisch* seyn könne, und wie diese praktische Vernunft gar nicht das so wunderbare, und unbegreifliche Ding sey, für welches sie zuweilen angesehen wird, gar nicht etwa eine zweite Vernunft sey, sondern dieselbe, die wir als theoretische Vernunft alle gar wohl anerkennen» (SS: 67).

der Wissenschaftslehre. Here and elsewhere, Fichte quite boldly *identifies the «interest of reason» itself with the interests of transcendental idealism* (that is, with the interests of genuine philosophy) –an identity that goes well beyond the above-mentioned function of philosophy as a possible *object* and *expression* of the pure interest in truth.

The most significant affinity between the interests of idealism and reason is that the former *begins with and presupposes* a lively awareness of the fundamental interest of reason itself: namely, freedom, which idealism takes as the explanatory ground of experience in its entirety. Philosophy, at least as understood by Fichte, cannot begin with any sort of objective knowledge of «what is the case» –since, after all, the proper task of philosophy is precisely to provide a transcendental account of «what is the case.» Instead, philosophy must begin with *self-knowledge*, and, more specifically, with a kind of self-knowledge that is inseparably connected with a sheer declaration or assertion of *self-interest* on the part of the philosopher.

To the discomfort of many, Fichte makes no secret at all of the fact that the difference between various approaches to philosophy, and, more specifically, between idealism and dogmatism, is based not upon any initial cognitive superiority of one starting point to the other, but rather upon a clear *difference of interest* on the part of the two parties involved. The «idealist» and the «dogmatist» have very different views of themselves and hence very different conceptions of their own «self-interest.» Whereas the dogmatist sees himself as a thing among things, and hence as a passive subject of experience, the idealist sees himself, first of all, as a freely acting agent. Hence, prior to any argument, each is already «interested in» and hence committed to a philosophy that starts with and subsequently confirms precisely his original view of himself and of his own interest.[34] But of course, only one of these two conceptions of one's self and of one's self-interest (namely, the idealist's) is actually compatible with what has been described in this essay as «the interest of reason.» As Fichte puts it, «das System des Idealisten beruht daher auf dem Glauben an sich selbst oder an seine Selbständigkeit, oder was Kant sonst Interesse der Vernunft nennt» (WLnm, H: 23).

Transcendental idealism is unterly unable to demonstrate the reality of the finite freedom that it freely adopts as its systematic starting point; instead, it *presupposes* a clear awareness of such freedom on the part of the philosopher. This point was clearly grasped by Jürgen Habermas, who remarked of Fichte's account of the dispute between idealism and dogmatism, that «in order to divest oneself rationally of the limitations of dogmatism, one must have made the interest of reason one's own.»[35].

If, moreover, one *begins*, like the idealist, with a philosophical first principle that acknowledges and proclaims reason's own interest in freedom and unity, and if, in the course of constructing one's transcendental system upon this starting point one proceeds correctly, that is, in such a way that nothing within the system is allowed to *contradict* this starting point, one can then be sure that the resulting system itself, and not just the starting point of the same, will also be in accord with the interest of reason.[36]

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34 See, above all, the well known passage from the «First Introduction» (VWL: 194-95), which begins: «Welches von beiden soll nun zum ersten gemacht werden? Es ist kein EntscheidungsGrund aus der Vernunft möglich; denn es ist nicht von Anknüpfung eines Gliedes in der Reihe, wohin allen VernunftGründe reichen, sondern von dem Anfangen des ganzen Reihe die Rede, welches, als ein absolut erster Act, lediglich von der Freiheit des Denkens abhängt. Er wird daher durch Willkühr, und da der Enschluß der Willkühr doch einen Grund haben soll, durch *Neigung* und *Interesse* bestimmt. Der letzte Grund der Verschiedenheit des Idealisten und Dogmatikers, ist sonach die Verschiedenheit ihres Interesse. «Der höchste Interesse und der Grund alles übrigen Interesse ist das für uns selbst. So bei dem Philosophen. Sein Selbst im Räsonnement nicht zu verlieren, sondern es zu erhalten und zu behaupten, dies ist das Interesse, welches unsichtbar alles sein Denken leitet.»

35 *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1971), p. 259.

36 This, presumably, is what Fichte had in mind when he wrote «und so zeigt sich der transscendentale Idealismus zugleich

In addition, a completed transcendental idealism will provide us, as its *result*, with a coherent portrait of the human condition as necessarily one of infinitely striving for a unity that does not and cannot exist –a portrait that harmonizes perfectly with reason's own original interest as described above. Thus it is not merely the starting point of such a philosophy which is in harmony with the fundamental interest of reason; a completed system of transcendental idealism –and only such a system– can claim to be an adequate presentation of «the entire system of reason,» for this is the only approach to philosophy which, from beginning to end, acknowledges the autonomy of reason itself. As Fichte states with appropriate drama in the *Sittenlehre*: «Entweder, alle Philosophie muß aufgegeben, oder die absolute Autonomie der Vernunft muß zugestanden werden. Nur under dieser Vorausssetzung is der Begriff einer Philosophie vernünftig»(SS: 69).

As we have now seen, reason can be said to have «an interest in unity» only insofar as the unity in question is a unity that *still remains to be established* and is thus an Idea (in the Kantian sense) or an object of striving. In other words, the condition for the possibility for the pursuit of unity is precisely the *lack* thereof. By offering a transcendental explanation of *why* limitation and finitude are necessary conditions for the very possibility of freedom, and hence for the possibility of striving for unity, the *Wissenschaftslehre* succeeds where no other system has succeeded: namely, in showing that the genuine «interest of reason» is not limited to the striving for unity, but also includes the experience of division. In establishing this result, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* manages to extricate the entire realm of the ideal from the otherwise well-founded Nietzschean analysis of the life-denying character of the same. Fichte provides us with a theory of the interest of reason that permits us to posit what *ought* to be without thereby succumbing to *ressentiment* toward what *is*.

If it is true that the primary demand of reason is that we strive to live morally, it is also true that the interest of reason extends beyond the interests of moral action itself. Kant recognized this when he incorporated an account of the necessary «postulates of practical reason» into his account of practical reason. Reason requires more than that we strive to will in accordance with the moral law; its demand for unity extends to the demand that we also strive to «make sense» of such moral striving by somehow connecting our view of ourselves as moral agents with our everyday view of ourselves as causally determined inhabitants of the empirical world. Though Kant admitted the existence of such a striving to make sense of our experience in its totality, he was far less sanguine than Fichte about the extent to which we might actually succeed in satisfying this particular interest of reason. Fichte believed that man's most adequate response to reason's demand for coherence is precisely philosophy itself, which offers us our best, indeed or only, hope of actually «making sense» of our lives and, more specifically, of the above-mentioned division at the heart of self-consciousness. Philosophy, therefore, not only presupposes a preliminary acknowledgement of the interest of reason, it can also be interpreted as way of responding to and satisfying this very interest.

3. Concluding Remarks

Fichte is a philosopher widely believed to have subordinated reason to interest, a view that assumes that there is a basic opposition or conflict between reason and interest. This assumption is called into question by the very phrase «the interest of reason,» and the primary goal of the preceding examination of Fichte's treatment of this topic has been to reveal the intimate connection

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als die einzige pflichtmäßige Denkart in der Philosophie, als diejenige Denkart, wo die Speculation und das SittenGestz sich innigst vereinigen» (VWL: 219).

between reason and interest. We have seen how Fichte, building upon certain insights of Kant, provides us with a picture of reason as *essentially interested.*

Though vestiges of earlier views are still apparent here and there in Fichte's vocabulary, the overall tenor of his philosophy is clear and unambiguous: reason is actual only in the form of finite, rational creatures endlessly striving to overcome their dependence upon anything outside of their own freedom, a striving that can equally well be described as a striving for personal integrity and unified self-understanding. Since a finite I is never, in fact, «unified,» the postulated unity of reason is always present in such cases only as goal, a *goal* of which one originally becomes aware only through a painful acknowledgement of one's own *lack* of *freedom and unity* and consequent *need* for the same.

The unity of reason and of reason's interests, like the postulated «absoluteness» of freedom, is not a *fact of experience* but a *condition for the possibility thereof.* But, as Fichte realized more clearly perhaps than anyone before or since, it is only as a *goal*, as an «Idea of reason» in the Kantian sense, that such unity can play any constitutive role in human experience. With this recognition, Fichte went a long way toward erasing the boundary, erected by Kant, between «constitutive» and «regulative» principles: for a free being, regulative goals *are* constitutive.

The major difference between Kant and Fichte on this point, therefore, is that, though Kant had gone so far as to posit a certain «primacy» of the interest of practical reason and even suggested at one point that all rational interests are at bottom «practical» ones, he failed to incorporate such insights into his actual account, especially in the first *Kritik*, of the character and interests of theoretical reason itself. In revealing the essential role played by practical reason (freedom, willing) in the constitution of knowledge –as well as the essential role played by theoretical cognition (e.g., of goals) in all practical action– Fichte went well beyond Kant.[37]. In doing so, he also succeeded in extending the realm of practical reason far beyond the strictly «moral» realm to which Kant had largely confined it. Reason can be moral because it is practical, but its practical character is not limited to morality. Fichte shows that reason can be theoretical if and only it is practical, from which it follows that the practical, self-determining character of reason –free deliberation, positing of goals, etc.– is an essential condition for experience in its entirety and not merely for morality..

To be sure, it is subsequently possible to pursue «disinterested knowledge» and to separate the theoretical from the practical interests of reason. Indeed, the very possibility of science, including the science of philosophy, depends upon just such a separation, and no philosopher has been more insistent than Fichte upon the narrowly «theoretical» character of philosophy per se and the strict irrelevance, *within philosophy*, of appeals to practical considerations.[38] Yet however essential such a separation between (narrowly) theoretical and practical interests may be for the very possibility of science and philosophy, there always remains something willfully and flagrantly artificial about any effort to «abstract» the theoretical from the practical. Though there may be no place for an appeal to practical

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37 Again, it is Habermas who has most clearly recognized Fichte's move beyond Kant on this point. «Only in Fichte's conception of interested self-reflection does the interest embedded in reason lose its secondary character *[Nachträglichkeit]* and become constitutive likewise for knowing and for acting» (*Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro [Boston: Beacon Press, 1971], p. 210). At the same time it must be acknowledged that Habermas is guilty of overemphasizing the importance of practical reason («interest») within Fichte's philosophy and neglecting the equally important role of theoretical reason («knowledge»). What Habermas overlooks is the fact, just as knowledge must always be «interested» for Fichte, so too must interest always be «knowledgeable.»

38 On this subject, see Fichte's many discussions of the all-important distinction between the transcendental (or theoretical) and the everyday (or practical) standpoints and of the importance of not confusing the two (e.g., in the «fragment» appended to his April 22, 1799 letters to Reinhold and Jacobi).

interests *within* philosophy, the pursuit of philosophy, viewed as one human activity among others, always stands in need of «practical» justification; nor has any philosopher ever tried harder than Fichte to justify philosophy by identifying its interests with the basic interest of reason itself.

Another unique feature of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the pivotal hermeneutic role it assigns to our actual consciousness of «the interests of reason.» Rather than beginning with a concept of reason and deriving therefrom a concept of «the interest of reason» (which is how we proceeded in our exposition of Fichte's views), actual human beings –including transcendental philosophers– begin with a direct awareness, that is, with a *feeling*, of their own interests; and it is only by reflecting upon these feelings that they subsequently come to distinguish their natural interests as sensual beings from their «rational interests» as free agents. Only then do they arrive at an understanding of reason itself. Understood in this Fichtean manner, the «life of reason» is not a life of disinterested contemplation, but of active engagement with the world. Practical action is thus not be understood as an alternative to the quest for self-knowledge, but rather as the only way that a free subject can actually obtain knowledge of itself and of the world within which it acts. Whereas, for Kant, it is the power of productive imagination that ultimately makes all knowledge possible, for Fichte, it is the practical, self-productive activity of the I itself (qua *Tathandlung*) that engenders and conditions the possibility of all cognition –though, to be sure, it is equally true that the possibility of such practical self-production is, in turn, dependent upon theoretical knowledge of objects, which, in turn, is dependent upon a direct feeling of one's practical limitations (*Anstoß*), etc.

Practical and theoretical reason are thus inextricably joined in every moment of consciousness, and so too are the «interests» of theoretical and of practical reason inextricably linked.[39] Recalling the project first alluded to by Fichte in his Creuzer review, namely, a theory of freedom that could resolve the apparent struggle between the interests of theoretical and of practical reason, of knowing and of doing, we can now see that Fichte's own subsequent strategy for resolving this conflict was not (as many people continue to believe) to *eliminate* it by subordinating one interest to the other, but rather, to demonstrate what might be called the symbiotic relationship between the two.

Though the appearance of a conflict between practical and theoretical interests can never be eliminated, the task of philosophy is to go beyond this appearance and discover the simultaneous and necessary presence of both «theoretical» and «practical» moments within the «unitary» nature of original reason itself. When reason is understood in this essentially dynamic, indeed dialectical, way, then there can no longer be any real question about the «primacy» of either practical or theoretical reason; instead, what is «primary» is the unquiet unity of the two, a unity that expresses itself not as some sort of indifferent «absolute,» but rather in a process of temporal striving in the material world. Hence the only real «interest of reason» is not in the (unobtainable) goal of such striving (i.e., in the accomplished unity of freedom and necessity, of practical and theoretical reason), but rather, in the endless process of informed action and interested knowing.

(Septiembre, 1994)

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39 It is precisely Fichte's growing awareness of this point which explains the most important change or development in his philosophy during the Jena period: namely, his decision to revise his presentation of the fundamental principles of his system (as presented in the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*) and to replace this earlier presentation with a completely new presentation of these same first principles (in his 1796/99 lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*). The chief difference between the earlier and the later presentation is that the latter completely abandons the misleading division between the «theoretical» and «practical» portions of the presentation –a change introduced primarily in order to avoid giving the impression that one could ever really separate theoretical from practical reason or hope to understand the one in the absence of the other.