

# Fichte's First First Principles

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Penultimate draft of “Fichte’s First First Principles, in the *Aphorisms on Religion and Deism* (1790) and Prior” for *Fichte-Studien* 49 ([link](#)), ed. David W. Wood (KU Leuven), 2021, pgs. 3-31

Please cite published version

Word count: ~10.5k article, ~2.5k translation

**ABSTRACT:** The idea of a first principle looms large in Fichte’s thought, and its first notable appearance is in his “Aphorisms on Religion and Deism” (1790), which has received little attention. I begin this paper by providing some context on that piece, and then developing a reconstruction of the position presented within it. Next, I establish that Fichte’s views at the time of writing, and for some years prior, are those of the “deist,” and clarify why he felt he had to leave this stance represented in the “Aphorisms” behind. I conclude that understanding Fichte’s transformation away from “deism,” a species of what he would eventually call “dogmatism,” can also help us understand Fichte’s critique of the latter kind of thinking and so shed light on Fichte’s better-known views; and I emphasize that Fichte’s transition from a strict rationalism to a form of Kantianism may be of interest not only to scholarship on Fichte and the period, but likewise to work on rationalism in contemporary metaphysics. Finally, in an appendix I supplement the paper with a first English translation of the entire text of the “Aphorisms,” including annotations.

“One arrives to idealism through an inclination to dogmatism, if not through dogmatism itself.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

**I**T’S OBVIOUS ENOUGH that Fichte had a tenuous relationship with many of his readers and rivals. Fichte was particularly hard on that sort of opponent he labeled “the dogmatist” who, on his understanding, begins by affirming the priority of a world of necessitated things, and so denying of us a will that is free. The mature Fichte usually associates representatives of *dogmatism* with moral if not also intellectual inferiority. He frequently decries their resistance to convert from dogmatism to *idealism*, which in contrast begins by asserting the

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1. GA I,4: 195 | *Science of Knowledge* 16, trans. mod. I cite Fichte by volume and page number on the basis of the *Complete Works* [*Gesamtausgabe* or GA]. I have also utilized the *Collected Works* [*Sämtliche Werke* or SW]. Translations are mine unless noted, and I have modified a published translation in cases where the citation ends with “trans. mod.”

priority of self-consciousness, securing our freedom of will. In a characteristic passage of the “First Introduction” to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1797, Fichte aligns this pair of philosophical stances and their respective notions of the self with “two tiers of humanity” (GA I,4: 194 | *Science of Knowledge* 15, trans. mod.). The dogmatist’s self is dispersed and has not yet raised itself to autonomy; it’s a thing among the many other things of which they rigidly assert necessary existence. The more engaged idealist, meanwhile, believes first and foremost in themselves. As Fichte sees it, the idealist grasps—even chooses—their true independence, which is allegedly so opaque to the dogmatist. The idealist Fichte thus makes fun of his dogmatist opponents in a notable remark within the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, writing that “it would be easier to convince most people to regard themselves to be a piece of lava on the moon than an *I*” (GA I,2: 326n). But in all seriousness, throughout the most important period of his philosophical career, Fichte is sincerely concerned that the dogmatist is in grave ethical error insofar as they accept that we are embedded in a causal nexus which extends throughout the rest of a world that proceeds in a strongly deterministic manner.

Again, this much is rather clear.<sup>2</sup> It’s only rarely noted, however, that Fichte was himself once vulnerable to such criticism, should it hold. That is, Fichte was, at the earliest stage of his philosophical career, a “dogmatist.” Indeed, philosophers are often hardest on those views that they have previously held, and this is particularly true of Fichte. My aim in this paper is to properly demonstrate and clarify that fact in some detail. Additionally, I want to sketch a renewed account of Fichte’s transition away from his initial stance on this basis. To these ends, I will especially discuss Fichte’s first major engagement with “first principles.”

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2. Although Fichte’s opposition to what he calls dogmatism is consistent from 1790 forward, important questions do remain. It has, for instance, been debated in what respect Fichte really considers idealism to win out over dogmatism. In a pair of confounding passages from the first 1797 “Introduction,” Fichte writes: “these two are the only philosophical systems possible” (GA I,4: 188 | *Science of Knowledge* 9), referencing dogmatism and idealism, and then affirms: “idealism is left as the only possible philosophy” (GA I,4: 198), despite the fact that the dogmatist can’t be refuted in some respects. Breazeale, Daniel: *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte’s Early Philosophy*. Oxford 2013, Ch. 11 considers a number of relevant issues, some of which I shall return to below.

Now, these “first principles” I will point to have no direct relation of *content* to those to which the mature Fichte turns, perhaps most notably in his first major systematic work just referenced above—the *Foundation*—where Fichte frames the basis of the system that he’s best known for variously: “I am I” (GA I,2: 257); “the I is posited absolutely” (GA I,2: 259); etc.<sup>3</sup> However, what I call Fichte’s *first* first principles still have a clear *formal* relation to the principles of the *Foundation* and beyond, both insofar as these earlier principles may be expressed in propositional form, or already are expressed as such by Fichte, and insofar as they have a similarly systematic role to play in singularly functioning as a basis for the development of a view. That is to say, the principles I will identify as the first Fichte took seriously each meet the conditions of what he will later define to be a first principle.<sup>4</sup>

My discussion is centered on one text in particular: Fichte’s “Aphorisms on Religion and Deism [*Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus*],” written in 1790, but published only later by Fichte’s son I.H. Fichte.<sup>5</sup> (See this paper’s Appendix for a first complete and annotated English translation of the text.) The “Aphorisms” discusses the principles of primarily Christian *religion*, on the one hand, and those of a rationalist *deism*, on the other. I emphasize in this paper that the fundamental first principle in the former case is the proposition that *sin obtains and has obtained*; and I will argue that the foundational first principle in the latter case is the Principle of Sufficient Reason or PSR: that *nothing happens without a reason*.<sup>6</sup>

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3. For clarification concerning these diverse formulations, see the introduction to the present volume as well as a number of its chapters.
  4. Regarding Fichte’s notion of a first principle, his *Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 is key. It precedes the *Foundation* of 1794/95 and features particularly methodological discussions. See especially GA I,2: 115 | *Early Philosophical Writings* 104, “A proposition [...] which is certain prior to and independently of the association with others, is termed a *first principle* [*Grundsatz*].”
  5. I can only discuss the beginnings of Fichte’s philosophy of religion in this paper, but on his views over time, see Verweyen, Jürgen: “Fichte’s Philosophy of Religion.” In: *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, ed. James, David & Zöllner, Günther. Cambridge 2016.
  6. It might seem like ‘fundamental’ or ‘foundational’ first principle, locutions just used, are twice or even thrice repetitive. But here I only follow Fichte, e.g. in GA I,2: 282. When

There is much to learn in getting a clearer picture of where Fichte is at prior to developing the positions he is most known for, and arguably we are in the best position to understand where he ends up only if we have a clear idea of where he is coming from. Additionally, though I won't be able to go into any detail here, given that rationalism is justifiably receiving fresh attention in metaphysics today,<sup>7</sup> it's particularly worthwhile to consider what may be the most notable case of a philosopher affirming a robust version of this philosophical tendency and then turning elsewhere for detailed reasons—not to mention with some drama.

In Section 1 of this paper, I provide a bit more background regarding the text of the “Aphorisms” and its context. This information is important not only because the “Aphorisms” has been neglected,<sup>8</sup> but also because illustrating its context will allow me to more effectively develop the thrust of the paper and position its results. In Sections 2 and 3, then, I reconstruct Fichte's earliest stance and so discuss in greater detail what I take to be the first first principles of interest to him. This is the central portion of the paper in which I sketch Fichte's development, arguing that his earliest commitments line up with those of the

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Fichte sometimes confusingly speaks of several first principles or [*erste*] *Grundsätze* pertaining to a single system, I take him to be referring to the commitments that immediately follow from the deepest, i.e. most fundamental, first principle. For the sake of clarity I will identify as ‘fundamental’ or ‘foundational’ any principle which is absolutely prior to any other such principles that come to constitute a broader stance. Such first principles are not to be confused with ‘first first principles,’ where I am using the initial ‘first’ just in the sense of temporal priority, in order to play on the term ‘first principle.’ (One could similarly use the rhetorical form epizeuxis to specify the period of Fichte's work that I am most concerned with here as ‘Fichte's early early work,’ since Fichte's ‘early work’ is normally considered to begin with his Jena writings in the 1790s, and older texts that I deal with in this paper are rarely considered.)

7. For an overview of recent work, see Lin, Martin & Melamed, Yitzhak Y.: “The Principle of Sufficient Reason.” In: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), §6.
8. Notably, in the English-language context, Breazeale's excellent edition of *Fichte's Early Philosophical Writings* begins only with writings that postdate the “Aphorisms” and several other texts I discuss in what follows. Until now, Stine, Russell Warren: *The Doctrine of God in the Philosophy of Fichte*. Philadelphia 1945 offered the most in-depth treatment of the “Aphorisms” in English.

so-called deist in the “Aphorisms,” and clarifying why. Finally, in Section 4 and the Conclusion, I take advantage of these results of the previous sections in order to cast some additional light on Fichte’s views after 1790, for which he is most-known. Most importantly, I emphasize what led Fichte to become dissatisfied with his earliest system. This should help us understand the opposition Fichte eventually draws between idealism and dogmatism; but it may also give us pause as we consider the prospects of metaphysical rationalism today.

### 1. Some background

As mentioned, the text of the “Aphorisms” was published—apparently from a manuscript that was available to him—by Fichte’s son I.H. Fichte, first in 1831, and then in 1835 within a volume presenting Fichte’s posthumous works.<sup>9</sup> In turning to the philological and historical context of Fichte’s “Aphorisms” within this section, there are at least two important things to note about these publications of the piece:

*First*, the text of the “Aphorisms” was presented in both cases as a fragment; indeed, the text available today in the critical edition of Fichte’s works still carries within its title the parenthetical declaration “(Fragment).” But although the manuscript is no longer available, a number of commentators agree that this is in all likelihood an editorial intervention by Fichte’s son.<sup>10</sup> In truth, the “Aphorisms” ends with a perfectly reasonable tension such that there isn’t reason to assume the piece was to be worked out further in some significant way, or that it was marked by Fichte as unfinished, even abandoned. In the same way, the editors of

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9. Wood, Allen: *Fichte’s Ethical Thought*. Oxford 2016 offers the most recent and exciting discussion of Fichte’s “Aphorisms,” but I will point to a few inaccuracies in what follows. To begin, Wood: *Ethical Thought*, pg. 4 incorrectly states that the “Aphorisms” was first published in the edition of Fichte’s collected works edited by his son; the text was instead initially presented in the second volume of a project I.H. Fichte put together some years earlier, as mentioned. See Fichte, I.H. (ed.): *Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Leben und litterarischer Briefwechsel*, Vol. 2. Sulzbach 1831, pgs. 18-25.

10. See for instance Preul, Rainer: *Reflexion und Gefühl: die Theologie Fichtes in seiner vorkantischen Zeit*. Berlin 1969, pg. 108n51.

the relevant volume of the *Complete Works* (GA) note that another paratextual element, the subtitle “From the year 1790,” presumably stems from I.H. Fichte.<sup>11</sup> In any case, it should be clear that the “Aphorisms” admits of reconstruction, and a proper treatment of it—which I hope to offer in the next section—needs to account for it as the coherent unit that it is.

*Second*, when the “Aphorisms” was first published by Fichte’s son in 1831, it was accompanied by very little commentary. I.H. Fichte merely claims in this first volume of *Fichte’s Life and Literary Correspondence* that the text represents Fichte in transition, and that there’s some curious material in it which he thus wants to make available as an “appendix” in the second volume of this edition.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, though, Fichte’s son again publishes the “Aphorisms,” and with discussion that is then reprinted in the *Collected Works* (SW). He now explicitly associates Fichte’s earliest position with Spinoza.<sup>13</sup> Retrospectively, this isn’t absurd; the position Fichte takes in the “Aphorisms” has plenty to do with the position he would later criticize under the label of “Spinozism.” Additionally—and this isn’t guaranteed by the previous point—the position developed in the “Aphorisms” really *does* resemble Spinoza’s in many ways. It even has much in common with central doctrines of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, and not just his *Ethics*.<sup>14</sup> This is surely one reason why, on rare occasion, Fichte himself later associated his earliest thinking with a kind of “Spinozism.” But it’s not clear that Fichte initially understood his own position as Spinozistic in any real sense, because it’s not clear that he had the chance to read Spinoza at this

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11. To be clear, this is despite the fact that those same editors don’t mention the question concerning the classification as fragment; see GA II,1: 285f.

12. Fichte, I.H. (ed.): *Fichte’s Leben und litterarischer Briefwechsel*, Vol. 1, pg. 143.

13. “Spinoza, whose system [Fichte] also later characterized as the only consistent one prior to the invention of transcendental idealism, was the model for that philosophical perspective” (SW V: vi). Not only is the latter part of I.H. Fichte’s claim here too strong—as I will discuss next—but the former is as well: although Fichte does eventually consider Spinoza to be the most compelling dogmatist, Spinoza isn’t the only member of the set of properly consistent dogmatists.

14. Regarding theological-political correspondences, the Fichte of the “Aphorisms” and Spinoza both stress, for instance, that religion nicely fulfills the affective needs of the ‘intellectually inferior.’

time—and Fichte even seems to have held his relevant “deist” views prior to the controversy sparked by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, which inadvertently made Spinoza’s views far more widely known.<sup>15</sup> Given these data, calling Fichte’s earliest stance Spinozist is imprecise at best. We shouldn’t, on the basis of evidence currently available, say that Spinoza is a plausible influence for Fichte in the 1780s, even if Fichte’s views in the period can rightly be said to line up with Spinoza’s in several ways, and even if Fichte would at least have had some degree of second-hand knowledge regarding Spinoza by the late 1780s.

While a number of commentators have followed Fichte’s son in loosely associating Fichte’s earliest views with Spinoza,<sup>16</sup> and while the importance of Spinoza to modern German thought continues to be widely underestimated

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15. Fichte would eventually have been familiar with the Pantheism Controversy initiated by Jacobi, particularly given his admiration for Lessing as well as Goethe, whose poetry was initially included in Jacobi’s Spinoza volume. Medicus, Fritz: *J.G. Fichte: Dreizehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Universität Halle*. Berlin 1905, pg. 30 claims that while traveling through Weimar Fichte unsuccessfully tried to meet Goethe and Herder—indeed shortly before writing the “Aphorisms”—but I have not been able to confirm this. Wood: *Ethical Thought*, pg. 4 states that a meeting actually took place.
16. Most recently, Wood: *Ethical Thought*, pgs. 4f., 65 suggestively references Spinoza in his discussion of the “Aphorisms.” See also his “Fichte’s Absolute Freedom.” In: *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy*. Oxford 2014, pg. 164 in which he also goes a step further and speculates that “as far as we can tell, [Fichte’s earliest system] was largely influenced by Spinoza.” Several 19<sup>th</sup>-century commentators like Noack, Ludwig: *Fichte nach seinem Leben, Lehren und Wirken*. Leipzig 1862, pg. 32 also followed I.H. Fichte in associating Fichte’s earliest views with Spinoza, although it’s sometimes unclear whether they intend a historical connection to Spinoza, or are just speaking loosely. To my knowledge, only Breazeale, Daniel: “Fichte’s Spinoza: ‘Common Standpoint,’ ‘Essential Opposition,’ and ‘Hidden Treasure.’” In: *International Yearbook of German Idealism* 14 (2019) argues on the basis of GA II,10: 114 that the earliest Fichte can really be called a Spinozist. But Breazeale, “Fichte’s Spinoza,” pg. 113 reads the passage in question too strongly when he calls it an “explicit admission [on Fichte’s part] that before he was a Kantian he was a Spinozist.” Fichte doesn’t speak of Spinoza’s actual thought here, let alone of engagement with Spinoza’s writings, but instead only vaguely associates his earliest views with a kind of “Spinozism” of interest to young people around 1800.

in many cases,<sup>17</sup> a dissenting and more compelling account of the historical influences on Fichte's initial views emerged throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Rainer Preul has offered a particularly compelling and wide-ranging account of the multiple strands of thinking with which Fichte was engaged.<sup>18</sup> But more specifically, Hermann Nohl first proposed that the most decisive source for Fichte's early rationalism in particular is Karl Ferdinand Hommel and his *On Praise and Punishment according to Turkish Laws* (1770), published pseudonymously under the name Alexander von Joch.<sup>19</sup> Armin Wildfeuer then took up and defended Nohl's hypothesis in detail in the past decades.<sup>20</sup> I favor this account of things, despite a few reservations.<sup>21</sup> My aim is not to resolve any historical debate of

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17. The German philosophical engagement with Spinoza is extraordinarily extensive; regarding Nietzsche's relation to Spinoza, for instance, see Yonover, Jason Maurice: "Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Etiology (On the Example of Free Will)." *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming) as well as Yonover, Jason Maurice: "Nietzsche and Spinoza." *Blackwell Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Melamed, Yitzhak Y. Oxford (forthcoming).
18. Preul, Rainer: *Reflexion und Gefühl: die Theologie Fichtes in seiner vorkantischen Zeit*. Berlin 1969.
19. Nohl, Hermann: "Miscellen zu Fichtes Entwicklungsgeschichte und Biographie." In: *Kant-Studien* 16 (1911). Hommel, Karl Ferdinand: *Ueber Belohnung und Strafen nach türkischen Gesetzen*. Bayreuth & Leipzig 1772.
20. Wildfeuer, Armin: "Vernunft als Epiphänomen der Naturkausalität: Zu Herkunft und Bedeutung des unsprünglichen Determinismus Fichtes." In: *Fichte-Studien* 9 (1997). Wildfeuer, Armin: *Praktische Vernunft und System. Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur ursprünglichen Kant-rezeption Johann Gottlieb Fichtes*. Stuttgart 1999. See also La Vopa, Anthony: "Fichte's Road to Kant." In: *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Coleman, Lewis, & Kowalik. Cambridge 2000, pg. 218. "Fichte had probably first encountered the full-blown case for determinism in [...] Hommel."
21. My first reservation is that Fichte doesn't explicitly reference Hommel in the "Aphorisms," or in any other texts prior, and so this story concerning Fichte's influences still remains somewhat speculative. Wildfeuer: "Vernunft als Epiphänomen," pg. 67 emphasizes that Fichte had expressed interest in legal study over theology while at Leipzig (GA III,1: 18), which could have led him to Hommel or his work. My second reservation is that some theological-political aspects of Fichte's view in the "Aphorisms" don't seem traceable to Hommel. Wildfeuer is specifically interested in Fichte's early determinism, which lends plausibility to his thesis that Hommel is central, but there is more to the rationalist view in the "Aphorisms" than this theoretical stance. This second reservation leads to a third,

influence; but if Fichte's earliest views are to be traced back to a key figure, Hommel is the best candidate—and this tracing back is undoubtedly helpful in the present context. Thus, because Hommel is largely unknown today, a brief discussion of his relevant work is in order.

Karl Ferdinand Hommel lived from 1722 to 1781 and was a jurist in Leipzig most interested in penal law, which he aimed to reform on the basis of determinism, the view that everything that happens happens as a result of prior events, and even necessitarianism, the view that everything that happens happens necessarily.<sup>22</sup> In *On Praise and Punishment*, he starts off by trying to make these admittedly unintuitive positions more compelling in an informal way, noting the widely-held “first principles” that human beings are thoroughly influenced by time and space—their historical moment and context.<sup>23</sup> But Hommel soon clarifies that on a deeper level his views rest on an unconstrained endorsement of the PSR, which he sees as logically equivalent to the principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* [from nothing nothing comes].<sup>24</sup> His reasons for taking up this principle so

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which is that the aspiration to trace a complex set of views to a single influence is of course misguided; but Nohl and perhaps also Wildfeuer seem to defend such strong theses, which can never be proven. In reality, it's not convincing that any single author is—some might say—to blame for Fichte's earliest stance. Fichte's initial views presented in the “Aphorisms” must be a diverse synthesis of various strands of thought from the period, with plausible influences ranging from German Enlightenment thinkers (Spalding, Lessing, etc.) to also 18<sup>th</sup>-century rationalists, as shown by Preul. Fichte may have been familiar with the Leibnizian Platner's work from early on, as he taught in Leipzig, like Hommel had before dying in 1781. Later, Fichte would use Platner's *Aphorisms* as the basis for a lecture course in Jena. In any case, since Preul gives an inclusive account of Fichte's earliest intellectual context, I refer the reader to his work and restrict myself to Hommel, who can plausibly be considered a key reference, particularly in the context of the present discussion concerning Fichte's first first principles.

22. For some further background on Hommel in English and a short bibliography, see Hüning, Dieter: “Hommel, Karl Ferdinand.” In: *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. New York 2010. I distinguish determinism and the stronger view that is necessitarianism because the distinction already played a role in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as we shall see below.

23. Hommel: *Belohnung und Strafen*, pg. 1 (of unpagged Preface).

24. Hommel: *Belohnung und Strafen*, pg. 43f.

emphatically are rather weak, as they are grounded in experience.<sup>25</sup> But this doesn't preclude Hommel from developing throughout the text a fascinating account of free will as an illusion—an account which emphasizes both why we don't have freedom of will *and* why we think we do. Nor does he stop here. He additionally argues a fictionalist line, according to which it's best that we think we have free will even though we don't have it.<sup>26</sup> These ideas and others in *On Praise and Punishment* appear to have overwhelmingly impressed Fichte, and over a significant period of time.<sup>27</sup>

But why? Although this isn't the place to reconstruct Hommel's thinking, I do want to provide an account of the comparable deist view outlined in the "Aphorisms"—a view which, I'll then argue, can be ascribed to the earliest Fichte himself. Of the few discussions of the "Aphorisms" available, none do justice to the consistency and therefore attractiveness of the ideas developed there; thus, I turn to this pressing task and provide a reconstruction of the "Aphorisms" in the following section.

## 2. Fichte's "Aphorisms on Religion and Deism"

While the brief text of the "Aphorisms" begins with an account of Christianity qua religion, I start with the principles of "deism" in my reconstruction because it turns out that these are dominant. Fichte describes the "purely deistic system" as "oversee[ing]" religion (§16), which is clearly subordinate. Note that I speak of Fichte and 'the deist' interchangeably albeit loosely in this section; in the next section I back up this equivocation and reiterate that, although he's wavering by

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25. Hommel: *Belohnung und Strafen*, pg. 8. *A posteriori* arguments seem inadequate when it comes to motivating a fundamental rationalist principle like the PSR. Still, more compelling defenses of the PSR are surprisingly rare among those who endorse it. For a possible solution, see Yonover, Jason Maurice: "An Elenctic Defense of the PSR" (manuscript).

26. Hommel: *Belohnung und Strafen*, pg. 43, 159, etc.

27. Nohl and Wildfeuer each note implicit and explicit references to Hommel—or rather von Joch—throughout Fichte's works, notably including various versions of the *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* that was written as early as 1791 (GA I,1: 139; GA II,2: 64).

the time he writes the “Aphorisms,” Fichte is a deist in roughly the sense outlined below.<sup>28</sup>

On my reading, the fundamental first principle of Fichte’s ‘deism’ is—as with Hommel’s—the PSR,<sup>29</sup> according to which nothing happens without a reason. Fichte associates respect for this principle with the mind, proof, and rigorous thinking in “Aphorisms.” There, I submit, he lets the PSR hold with full force and criticizes anyone who tries to tame it in order to head in a different direction, namely in unjustified, and thus irrational, ways. He notes that “the philosophers that come to different [results] prove theirs just as cleverly”; but he accuses them of “sometimes *look[ing] inward* in the *ongoing series* of their inferences in order to start a *new series* with *new principles* [*Principien*] that they allow themselves to provide, from somewhere or other” (§15fn). In other words, non-deists, pseudo-rationalists, philosophers who want to constrain reason and the PSR, fall prey to partiality. They see where the PSR is taking them, and they look for a means of egress. ‘How can we step off this rationalist train?’ they ask.<sup>30</sup> Fichte thinks that they would never end up where they end up if they instead inquired systematically in “undisturbed, ongoing inferences from the first principles [*erste Grundsätze*] of human cognition” (§15fn).<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to these inferior thinkers, Fichte the true rationalist wants reason that doesn’t set its goal in advance, reason that won’t be susceptible to the otherwise-warranted “suspicion that one does not go about one’s work entirely sincerely” (§14). Fichte thinks that if we pursue systematic inquiry along these

28. Although “deism” can of course mean several things, I don’t have the space to explore alternative conceptions and we must take up Fichte’s notion of it, as developed in the “Aphorisms.”

29. Here I am in full agreement with Wildfeuer: “Vernunft als Epiphänomen,” pg. 62f.

30. Concerning this terminology and more, I benefit from Della Rocca, Michael: “A Rationalist Manifesto.” In: *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003, 1/2), as well as other recent work.

31. Crusius referred to the Principle of Contradiction and the PSR as the “grounds [*Gründe*] of human cognition” in a work we know Fichte was aware of (given the 1785 letter from Fiedler that I cite below). Crusius, Christian August: *Ausführliche Abhandlung von dem rechten Gebrauche und der Einschränkung des sogenannten Satzes vom zureichenden oder besser determinirenden Grunde*. Leipzig 1744, pg. 1.

lines—namely with the PSR as our guide, thinking “straight ahead, looking neither left nor right, and without caring about where one might arrive” (§15)—then we will come to a set of unshakeable “results” that he goes on to outline, and that we must now try to reconstruct in some detail.

Fichte begins here with the claim that “[t]here is an eternal being whose existence, and whose manner of existing, is necessary” before proceeding to the supplementary qualification that the world came to be “[i]n and through the eternal and necessary thoughts of this being” (§15a-b). How are we to understand these theses, their relation, and the manner in which they might follow from the PSR (which, I am arguing, is fundamental to the therefore rationalist view Fichte develops here)? Fichte doesn’t give us much to work with, but because the divine being is eternal, one might think, it cannot be limited; and because it cannot be limited, its existence is necessary. For what could stop it from existing? If it were to fail to exist, then according to the PSR, there would have to be a reason for this. But none can be given, for God is presumably infinite. And yet, again because the PSR holds without any caveats, everything that this divine being does, it does necessarily; there is a decisive reason why it does this and not that, which indicates that it couldn’t do otherwise, and so that its thoughts are also necessary. Perhaps this being creates from such thoughts because it has only an ideal existence—because it’s eternal—but in any case, it’s no surprise, given that the world emerges from such necessary thoughts, that Fichte’s next claim reads: “every alteration in this world is necessarily determined by a sufficient cause [*zureichende Ursache*] to be the way it is” (§15c). If the proposition that everything has its reason bears on God and its creative thinking, then it should certainly bear on other beings. What holds for any “alteration” in the world holds for us as, next, “even every thinking and sensing being must necessarily exist as it exists” (§15d). This key proposition clarifies that not only the physical (“sensing”) but also the mental (“thinking”) plays by the rules of the PSR, i.e. that *both* realms are subject to necessity and determination. And why wouldn’t they be? If there were some gulf between the physical and the mental, such that the physical would be governed by necessity in contrast to the mental, what would be the reason for this divergence? Fichte the dogmatist doesn’t think there can be one. This world, which was created by the necessary thoughts of God—not, it’s

important to note, through a free act of its ‘will’—has no room for arbitrariness. God has no freedom of will, nor, of course, does the human being. “Neither its activity nor its passivity can without contradiction exist in any way other than how it does” (§15d). One might formulate this penultimate “result” of the PSR as follows, keeping in mind that the “Aphorisms” presupposes a strong version of that rationalist principle:

A thing’s alteration to some activity or passivity is because of reason  $r$ . To imagine that a thing’s activity or passivity could be otherwise is to imagine that the thing’s activity or passivity *isn’t* because of reason  $r$ . But, given the PSR, even if the thing’s activity or passivity were for some reason other than reason  $r$ —let’s call this new reason reason  $n$ —then the source of this thing’s activity or passivity would just be reason  $n$ , and in this case equally necessary and determined by a particular reason. Really, for the thing to be otherwise than it has to be, it would have to both be so for some reason  $r$ ,  $n$ , etc. (as must be the case, given the PSR) and yet not be so for that decisive reason (in order for indeterminacy to enter the picture). Hence, any thing’s activity or passivity couldn’t, without contradiction, be different, as Fichte indeed proposes. In short, the thing would need to generate some spontaneity in order to be otherwise; but this is ruled out.

The last rationalist “result” in §15 concerns sin: “what the common human sentiment calls *sin* emerges from the necessary, greater or lesser limitation of finite beings. It has necessary consequences for the condition of these beings” (§15e). Notably, each of these two clauses stress the necessity of sin—and by now this should come as no surprise given the robust rationalist thinking at hand here. Regardless of whether or not some action can be categorized as sinful, that action was taken for a reason, necessarily, and without original input from the will. The qualification that highlights the limited human standpoint when it comes to sin (“*what human sentiment calls sin*”) also clearly calls into question the reality of the category. Such questioning is significant for the gap between religion and deism. It emphasizes again that religion resides below philosophical thinking, because the fundamental first principle of religion, which I turn to now, is that “there is sin,” which the sinner must atone for (§9).

Fichte rather pejoratively classifies this foundational principle of religion—that humans sin and thus must reconcile themselves with God—as a “proposition

of sentiment [*Empfindungssatz*]” (§10), and then glosses what follows from it, namely the other “first principles [*erste Grundsätze*] of the [Christian] religion,” as “grounded more in sentiments than convictions” (§12). Deism and its principles have a claim over all metaphysical matters, whereas religion and its principles trade in the passions and illusion. Yet, that being said, Fichte doesn’t recommend that we rid ourselves of religion on these grounds. In fact, it’s still quite important in some sense. Fichte the deist recognizes, indeed like Hommel, that the philosophical commitments he’s outlined won’t gain traction on most people. Fichte sees that even many so-called philosophers can’t handle the theses of §15. Thus, religion is there, and needs to be there, to comfort those who are pained by “needs of the heart” (§5). Here, even anthropomorphism—though false—is perfectly useful. Fichte helpfully summarizes the abyss between philosophy and religion with respect to their notions of God:

It seems to be a universal need of the human being that it seek certain properties in its God—properties which the first step to speculation must *deny* to the human being. Speculation will indicate to the human being that God is immutable and incapable of any passions; and the human heart craves a God that may be petitioned, that feels compassion and friendship. Speculation indicates that God is a being that has no point of contact with man or anything else finite; but the human being wants a God that it may confide in, alongside whom it could participate in reciprocal modification (§4).

Rationalist philosophical thinking or “speculation”—what happens when the PSR train is running at full speed—has results that may be difficult to digest. But for the young Fichte, that doesn’t make speculation any less reliable with respect to the truth. Likewise, the fact that the principles of religion aren’t at all true doesn’t make them any less useful. They’re clearly secondary, but some notions of God must be available for some people, and here Fichte can be understood to take up Hommel’s fictionalist line (according to which we don’t have free will but must imagine we do). Christianity does well on these terms, but ultimately this just means it’s “the best folk religion” (§16), and that’s a demotion by most measures.

Interestingly, the text of “Aphorisms” doesn’t end here. Although, according to §16, deism and religion are supposed to autonomously rule their spheres, this admittedly implausible arrangement turns out not to hold. Things take a turn in §17, and deism and religion seem to clash. Throughout the final two paragraphs, Fichte turns to consider the anonymous “human being” that somehow remains unfulfilled by the deist truth. Speculation leaves this figure feeling empty. Religion gets revenge and exercises its pull against the proper convictions of the deist. Fichte concludes what seems to be a set of autobiographically-inspired reflections by wondering with real urgency what to do with such a person (perhaps a friend, perhaps increasingly himself). From Fichte’s perspective, solutions for this figure will begin arriving later in 1790, as I will mention below.

Meanwhile, with this reconstructive account of the “Aphorisms,” we can step back from the text and pose several questions. *First*, especially given this conclusion to the piece, is it so clear that Fichte in fact identifies with the “deist,” such that he is at this moment indeed what he would later call a dogmatist, as I promised to clarify? Fichte obviously casts deism as having a monopoly on truth in the “Aphorisms,” but—the thought might go—perhaps he still wants to escape the view and take up the religious stance, as epistemically weak as it is. In the next section I reject this suggestion. Doing so is especially urgent given what I consider to be conflicting texts by Fichte from the period. *Second*, if Fichte identifies with the deist here, how does he become the Fichte we generally know him to be? How can it be that just a few years later he will accuse the kind of thinking developed in the “Aphorisms” of moral weakness and all the rest? I reach these questions starting in Section 4.

### 3. Fichte’s “deism”

In this section I clarify not only that Fichte was a deist, and so a dogmatist, when he wrote the “Aphorisms,” but that he had been grappling over the years prior to writing the “Aphorisms” with just the collision we encounter at the end of the piece, where it becomes clear that the religious majority may cause problems

for the deist.<sup>32</sup> To this end I provide evidence that Fichte held the relevant deist commitments well before 1790, and show that he had also dealt with the practical ramifications of holding such commitments that were in tension with erstwhile norms.

As early as January 1785, Fichte receives a letter from the pastor Karl Gottlob Fiedler, stating:

Your pleasant letter inspired numerous thoughts for me! So, you are *unus ex illis* [one of them]? I thought so, given a few different signals. [...] I thus proceed to your idol: Necessity.—Its form is precisely measured, its guise is magnificent, its countenance is beautifully painted—yet, it is dry, mute, and a block that is there where it is and cannot be otherwise than how it is. Certainly, one thing follows another in the world [...] but determination and necessity are reliably far from one another (GA III,1: 9).

Fiedler understood from Fichte's letter that Fichte was a rationalist along the lines we later see sketched in the "Aphorisms." Fiedler goes on to cite Crusius's *Thorough Treatise on the Proper Use and Restriction of the So-Called Principle of Sufficient, or Better, Determining Reason* (1744) to defend the view that PSR-oriented thinking can be constrained, such that one could have determination without necessity.<sup>33</sup> Although we are missing both Fichte's initial letter and his response to Fiedler, it's notable that Fichte will, about five years later, cite what he refers to in the "Aphorisms" as "a fearful Crusius" in order to criticize the philosophical move in question, which, according to the strict rationalist Fichte, reveals that one is fraudulently timid (§14). In any case, Fiedler is a kind friend and promises to remain Fichte's companion, hoping that necessity will bring him to visit in Elbersdorf before long.

Aside from this letter at the beginning of 1785—confirming that Fichte

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32. Preul: *Reflexion und Gefühl*, pgs. 119-121, in contrast, casts Fichte as first recognizing the relevant tensions between religion and deism only in the "Aphorisms."

33. Crusius, Christian August: *Ausführliche Abhandlung von dem rechten Gebrauche und der Einschränkung des sogenannten Satzes vom zureichenden oder besser determinirenden Grunde*. Leipzig 1744.

held his strict rationalist views prior to the Spinoza controversy sparked by Jacobi—there is then evidence both that Fichte held the deist view outlined in the “Aphorisms” well before writing the piece in 1790 *and* had to deal with this practically. For instance, in an interesting text written in 1787 addressed to the mother of the Ott estate he’s working at, whose children he’s tutoring,<sup>34</sup> Fichte defends himself from accusations that he was a “deist, naturalist, or at least a very heterodox” thinker. He asks the mother in the drafted note: “Have I ever, even in the most private discussions, expressed a principle that was in contradiction with, I don’t [just] mean reason or scripture, but the generally accepted doctrinal concepts in symbolics [...]?” Fichte doesn’t leave much room for her to answer this question, asserting in characteristically combative fashion: “I remember every word of mine very precisely” (GA II,1: 186). But knowing that Fiedler’s letter and the “Aphorisms” together bookend the note, we have strong reason to think that such accusations must have been accurate. Fichte was more than likely ‘corrupting the youth.’

Given now that Fichte in all likelihood held his rationalist “deism” over a significant period of time and was fully aware of its controversial nature, I propose that a reevaluation of his earliest texts is in order. Fichte certainly does write things in the second half of the 1780s that are in deep tension with his apparent rationalist deism. For instance, he defines religiosity in his draft for a work on “The Purposes of the Death of Jesus” (1786) as felt conviction (GA II,1: 79).<sup>35</sup> Fichte explicitly uses there the terminology of head and heart that likewise shows up in the “Aphorisms.” But these are notably *opposed* in the “Aphorisms”; that is, according to the “Aphorisms,” there can be no true conviction about religious matters, because they are strictly matters of the heart and thus feeling. In the “Aphorisms,” head and heart are miles apart, whereas in the text on Jesus they are to be intimately united. According to the letter of that latter, Fichte actually criticizes “merely outward, alleged Christians,” arguing that Christianity must be “a religion of the heart,” “of good hearts,” etc. (GA II,1: 90)—*not* just a

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34. Although Fichte was hired to tutor the children, materials from this period show he spent a great deal of time tutoring the parents—or trying to.

35. See also GA II,1: 176.

religion of “simple souls,” as in the “Aphorisms,” which are on balance disparaging of the religious standpoint (§12). Notably, if Fichte is still sympathetic to his strict rationalism here—as I propose, given that the letter from Fiedler of 1785 and the “Aphorisms” of 1790 bookend these religious writings—then Fichte is technically criticizing himself, for he is unavoidably the sort of “*Mundchrist*” that comes under fire in his own “Death of Jesus.”

But whereas Preul and other scholars take Fichte at his word, and so as highly conflicted,<sup>36</sup> I propose that throughout the latter half of the 1780s Fichte is simply writing in a tactical way in theological pieces like the one just mentioned. Fichte suffers from an acute lack of resources at this moment; he was hoping to publish something and to receive work. Extant theological texts aren’t giving voice to Fichte’s true views because Fichte *couldn’t* safely give voice to his true views. Fichte indicates very clearly to anyone actually close to him that he is a strict “deist”; at the same time, he puts together such public-facing sermons to try to make ends meet. In other words, texts from at least the second half of the 1780s have to be read with a large grain of salt, and I propose that we can draw a line between esoteric and exoteric views in this period—where on the esoteric side we have the stance developed in the “Aphorisms” and letters like those I have discussed (in addition to some that I cite below), and on the exoteric side we have what’s expressed in the draft on the “Death of Jesus,” the sermon on Luke, etc. Given what we know about Fichte’s “system” in this period and how he thinks it relates to orthodox religion, it’s fascinating to see him navigating religious matters. Things are not as simple as they seem.

#### 4. Fichte’s Kantianism

Throughout the previous sections, we have come to understand both why Fichte may have kept quiet about his rationalism in certain contexts (Section 3), and why he may have found it philosophically compelling (Section 2). To reiterate: as

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36. La Vopa: “Fichte’s Road to Kant,” pg. 209 likewise finds in Fichte an “internal argument” at this stage, and Breazeale: *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, pg. 312n41 speaks of Fichte’s “struggling.”

we saw in the section before last, the PSR—Fichte’s own very first first principle—allows for a kind of systematic unity that he will always aim for; and although religion doesn’t accept the results of what Fichte calls deism, even religious commitments following from the first principle of religion (that sin obtains) can be made sense of from within this dominant, properly philosophical system. But given the notable *consistency* of this strict rationalist stance that “dogmatically” posits a world of characterized by necessity and rules out free will, we must ask: why leave it behind? As I have noted, Fichte transitions away from his initial rationalist views soon after writing the “Aphorisms.” Discussing why he undergoes such a shift will help us to understand his earliest stance, and it will put us in a better position to grasp Fichte’s best-known views developed in Jena, including the opposition he will eventually draw there between dogmatism and idealism, which I mentioned at the start of this paper.

This stage of the story of Fichte’s philosophical development is more familiar to scholars.<sup>37</sup> As is known, around 1790, Fichte is sustaining himself by tutoring students. One in particular asks Fichte to instruct him on the exciting work of a prominent contemporary philosopher: Kant. Important in our context is that it appears Fichte begins such work already prior to his writing the “Aphorisms,” given dismissive references to Kant in §13 and §15n, the latter of which reveals exposure to the antinomies and more; but if not, then Fichte had clearly become familiar with Kant’s first critique by some other means.<sup>38</sup> According to the “Aphorisms,” Kant sits in the same category as Crusius. These are reticent thinkers and not bold rationalists who would affirm the true results of philosophical thinking. Fichte criticizes Kant in particular for hauling in the concept of freedom in an ad hoc manner: “for the sharpest defender of freedom that there ever has been, in *Kant’s* antinomies etc., the *concept of freedom generally* is given from somewhere else (from sentiment, no doubt)” (§15n). Kant’s second critique then makes all the difference for Fichte. In a letter to Friedrich August Weißhuhn

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37. Breazeale’s editorial introduction to the *Early Philosophical Writings* provides a thrilling discussion of Fichte’s development around this time and forward.

38. Wood: *Ethical Thought*, pg. 5 and “Fichte’s Absolute Freedom,” pg. 164 wrongly indicate that Fichte had been “entirely unacquainted” with Kant’s critical writings while writing the “Aphorisms,” which obscures the nature of Fichte’s conversion. See my discussion below.

later in 1790, just months after writing the “Aphorisms,” Fichte exclaims:

I have been living in an entirely new world since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought could never be proven—for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc.—and I feel all the happier for it (GA III,1: 167 | *Early Philosophical Writings* 357).

In the “Aphorisms,” even God’s will was subject to necessity, as we saw in Section 2. Now, Fichte is convinced of nothing less than *absolute* freedom, writing that he “was deceived by [his] previous system, and thus are thousands of persons perhaps still deceived” (ibid.). It turns out that Fichte’s “previous system” isn’t the only one available. It’s not even the most preferable one—and to a significant degree. In a letter to his fiancée Johanna Marie Rahn, Fichte similarly writes: “Tell your dear father, whom I love like my own: we were mistaken in our investigations into the necessity of all human acts, *no matter how correct our inferences may have been*, because we disputed on a false principle [*Princip*]” (GA III,1: 171).<sup>39</sup>

It’s clear enough what Fichte is enthusiastic about in Kant’s practical philosophy, as “absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc.” have been proven. But why should these be of interest? Or, to put the question otherwise, what is it that makes Fichte’s former principles false? Although many commentators have emphasized what Fichte found attractive in Kant,<sup>40</sup> none have yet posed

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39. Unpublished translation by Eckart Förster. Fichte goes on to indicate in the letter that he no longer thinks life is about “happiness [*Glück*]” but rather “worthiness to be happy [*Glückwürdigkeit*]”; yet this should not be taken to specify the principle shift Fichte has in mind. Instead, the shift is that he will no longer hold as a first principle the PSR, referred to in this letter as the “principle of necessity.” See also GA III,1: 195, where Fichte chides himself for having previously spread “false principles” and considers making up for this by popularizing Kant’s moral philosophy and its “first principles.”

40. This has been widely discussed in the literature, starting at least with Kabitze, Willy: *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Fichteschen Wissenschaftslehre aus der Kantischen Philosophie*. Berlin 1902.

this latter query as directly as one must. In the “Aphorisms,” Fichte characterizes his deism, which thoroughly denies freedom of will, as follows: it “has no damaging, but rather has, next to the system that it entirely oversees [i.e., the religious one], an exceedingly useful influence on morality” (§16). Here, deism is straightforwardly regarded to be morally beneficial. Furthermore, at least on Fichte’s initial formulation, it “does not hinder our honoring [Christianity] to be the best folk religion, and our recommending it with utter warmth to those that need it.” The only disadvantage of being a deist, for Fichte at this moment, is that one can’t participate in certain religious activities with sincerity, and one might miss out on some things here.

This doesn’t seem sufficient to justify a paradigm shift. Just some months later, however, Fichte is convinced that the deism he once praised is almost morally bankrupt.<sup>41</sup> Fichte writes to Heinrich Nikolaus Achelis, again in late 1790:

It has [...] become quite obvious to me that very harmful consequences for society follow from the accepted principle of necessity, and just as obvious that this is largely the source of the tremendous ethical corruption of the so-called better classes. If someone who accepts the principle of necessity still manages to avoid this corruption, the reason for this is by no means the harmlessness, let alone the utility, of this principle (GA III,1: 193f. | *Early Philosophical Writings* 361, trans. mod.).

In other words, Fichte’s concludes that his erstwhile rationalist stance turns out to be ideological in the Marxian sense, and it’s this shift that explains his more general shift in stance. Ever concerned with practical matters, Fichte had already bemoaned the “oppression of the lower [classes], particularly the agricultural one” in other early writings of the 1780s (GA II,1: 103). Now he connects such oppression to “deist,” “dogmatist,” strict rationalist thinking,<sup>42</sup> which serves the

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41. I qualify this statement with “almost” because Fichte will still regard a “dogmatist” like Spinoza with respect as an admirable human being, as Wood: *Ethical Thought*, 72n6 also notes. Spinoza is, however, an exception to the rule on Fichte’s eventual view.

42. Worries about the political ramifications of a metaphysics characterized by necessity appear in numerous practically-oriented, radical thinkers. Compare, for instance, Fanon, Frantz:

interests of the ruling class, and, to make explicit Fichte's reversal, can then be of *no* positive utility as concerns morality. According to the post-conversion Fichte, we must now consider deism to have a *damaging* influence, ethically speaking.<sup>43</sup> In short, Fichte's view concerning his earlier metaphysical rationalism's moral value flips.<sup>44</sup>

We have finally seen why Fichte is thrilled to affirm fundamental aspects of Kant's practical philosophy, and why he will go on to develop it, unifying the theoretical and the practical in a new way. Before moving on, two things must be noted:

*First*, although I have argued that Fichte's earliest and deepest philosophical commitment is to the PSR, there could appear to be a sense in which his dedication to the primacy of the practical is already present in the "Aphorisms," and so perhaps equally fundamental. In fact, maybe it's even *more* fundamental, given that Fichte holds on to it following his Kantian conversion. According to this line of thinking, Fichte merely changes his mind in a drastic way about what's preferable practically speaking, but his commitment to the practical persists. Thus, on a looser construal of a 'first principle,' one could nearly say that the primacy of the practical is Fichte's first first principle. However, I reject this move because it departs too much from Fichte's notion of a first principle.

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*The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Philcox. New York 2004, pg. 18. "The colonized subject also manages to lose sight of the colonist through religion. Fatalism relieves the oppressor of all responsibility since the cause of wrong-doing, poverty, and the inevitable can be attributed to God. The individual thus accepts the devastation decreed by God, grovels in front of the colonist, bows to the hand of fate, and mentally readjusts to acquire the serenity of stone."

43. Recent empirical research suggests that, at least today, the sort of worries Fichte has could be misplaced. See Crone & Levy's paper "Are Free Will Believers Nicer People? (Four Studies Suggest Not)." In: *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 10 (2018, 10). But more work is needed, and with a broader perspective.
44. For further background on Fichte's thoroughly moral stance around this time, see the "Haphazard Thoughts on a Sleepless Night [*Zufällige Gedanken in einer schlaflosen Nacht*]" (1788) in GA, II,1: 103-10. On Fichte's reception of the French Revolution, which may shed further light on his shift regarding the moral value of his earlier views, see La Vopa, Anthony J.: "The Revelatory Moment: Fichte and the French Revolution." In: *Central European History* 22 (1989).

For Fichte, a first principle must be propositional in nature and precede several other basic propositions that constitute a system, like the PSR.<sup>45</sup>

*Second*, I must point out that despite Fichte's harsh words about his previous commitments, he isn't actually so sure for some time what to do with the PSR, the first foundational principle he took up. In fact, the PSR explicitly sticks around even after the "Aphorisms" and Fichte's Kantian conversion just sketched. For instance, in the roughly-formulated "Meditations on Elementary Philosophy" (1793/4), Fichte has a brief metaphysical rationalist lapse, and considers the possibility that the PSR is preeminent before reminding himself of his conversion. "I must have an unconditioned, an absolute, a highest unity: that would perhaps be the Principle of Sufficient Reason [*Satz des Grundes*]*—ultimately the categorical imperative,*" he writes (GA II,3: 48). More work is needed to determine how Fichte might aim to preserve the PSR in his mature thought, though it's clear that the PSR is no longer *the* foundational first principle after 1790.

## Conclusion

The results of the previous sections cast light on Fichte's Kantian conversion.

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45. See my note 4 above. Additionally, Fichte does confusingly claim in the letter to Achelis I've just cited that he always knew deism was ethically lacking, and yet felt he had to affirm it anyway. This would indicate that Fichte once held the theoretical to have primacy, and did then undergo a shift here. Fichte writes: "I realized this truth [that duty, virtue, and morality are all possible only if freedom is presupposed] very well earlier—perhaps I said as much to you—but I felt that the entire sequence of my inferences forced me to reject morality" (GA III,1: 193 | *Early Philosophical Writings* 360f.). Were I to propose that Fichte consistently affirms the primacy of the practical, and that this rather than the PSR is *truly* the first first principle he subscribes to, then I would simply argue that Fichte is writing revisionist history here, because he is. Fichte explicitly affirms the positive moral benefits of deism in the "Aphorisms" at §16, as I have previously noted, and he's likewise careful not to dismiss Christianity's practical utility in developing his theological-political stance. In other words, although I don't propose that Fichte's first principle is the primacy of the practical since this doesn't seem in line with his use of the term "first principle," I do want to stress that Fichte is already a practically-minded thinker in the "Aphorisms," where—like other rationalists preceding him—he holds that determinism, necessitarianism, and the like are of great practical value.

Fichte portrays himself as a follower of Kant in central texts like “Introductions” to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1797, where he will argue “that [his] system is nothing other than the Kantian” (GA I,4: 184 | *Science of Knowledge* 4). Fichte makes reference to numerous aspects of Kant’s philosophy in these early works, for instance invoking what has been called Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ when writing of the “complete reversal of current modes of thought [*völlige Umkehrung der Denkart*]” his *Wissenschaftslehre* should effect (ibid.).<sup>46</sup> Fichte even tries to paint Kant as one of his own concerning the notion of intellectual intuition.<sup>47</sup> But these attempts to claim a Kantian lineage are inconsistently compelling. Fichte is most fundamentally a Kantian in central texts like the “Introductions” in that he thinks it important to affirm freedom of will, and in that he argues we easily can do so on the basis of practical reason. According to Kant’s defense of the Fact of Reason in the second *Critique* (AA V: 30), because we are conscious of the moral law, we must be free.

With this in mind, references to the moral law in Fichte’s “Second Introduction” of 1797 and elsewhere—references which might otherwise seem out of place—make perfect sense. The “Second Introduction” is specifically written “for readers that already have a philosophical system” (GA I,4: 209 | *Science of Knowledge* 29), primarily “dogmatists,” and we are now in the best position to see that, in many passages of this text, Fichte is essentially writing his autobiography. He is implicitly clarifying what made him leave his metaphysical rationalism behind, hoping that his account might have the same effect on others. In defending his new “mode [of philosophical thought] wherein speculation and the moral law are most intimately united” (GA I,4: 219 | *Science of Knowledge* 41), Fichte emphasizes that alternative views denying the self-sufficiency of the I also deny the moral law. Or he proposes that we can affirm the self-sufficiency of the I by noticing that we are conscious of the moral law and hence free. In a crucial passage, Fichte notes that it’s one thing to clarify the intellectual intuition that is central to his *Wissenschaftslehre*—that of the self-positing I—and distinguishes

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46. Compare Kant: “revolution of the way of thinking”; “alteration of the way of thinking” (AA III: 7-10).

47. See GA I,4: 225 | *Science of Knowledge* 46.

this from another pursuit, in which Kant succeeded, and which then enabled Fichte to develop his own system of thought.

It is a wholly different task to explain this intellectual intuition—here presupposed as a fact—in terms of its *possibility*, and, by this deduction from the system of reason as a whole, to defend it against the suspicion of fallacy and delusion which it incurs by conflicting with the dogmatic mode of thought that is no less grounded in reason; to confirm on yet higher grounds the *belief* in its reality, from which, by our own express admission, transcendental idealism assuredly sets out, and to vindicate in reason even the interest on which it is based. This comes about solely by exhibition of the moral law in us, wherein the self is presented as a thing sublime beyond all original modifications effected by that law; is credited with an absolute activity founded only in itself and in nothing whatever; and is thus characterized as an absolute agency [*Tätiges*] (GA I,4: 219 | *Science of Knowledge* 40f.).

Even what are normally considered Fichte's first principles depend on something else, namely our recognizing our freedom in a manner that closely parallels the thought experiments Kant references as he defends his Fact of Reason. One can proceed from the I that isn't a thing among things because one is obligated to do so. In short, "only through this medium of the moral law do I behold myself" (GA I,4: 219 | *Science of Knowledge* 41).

This is what makes Fichte a Kantian, and where he most convincingly presents himself as such. But it isn't what leads to his conversion. So long as he thinks deism is worthy in practical respects, it seems, he can hold onto that stance without much worry. Yet Fichte changes his mind on deism's practical value completely, as I emphasized in the previous section, and so he needs Kant in order to newly generate what he can take to be a newly coherent and systematic view. Additionally, I have proposed above not only that the Fichte of the second half of the 1780s has a rather steady set of views—what he'll later refer to in the letter to Weißhuhn as his "previous system"—but also that he knew good and well what trouble such views could get him in. What I have called Fichte's exoteric writings in the period deserve to be re-examined with this in mind. I

also argued that the most fundamental principles of the “Aphorisms,” where we’re presented with Fichte’s first discussion of first principles, were the metaphysical rationalist’s PSR (deism) and the *Empfindungssatz* that there is sin which the human being must atone for (religion). At his earliest stage, Fichte subscribes to the former principle—he clearly thinks the rationalist deism resulting from strict adherence to the PSR dominates where the truth is concerned, and that it has practical value as well—but Fichte maintains some room for religion and its practical, affective strengths when it comes to the broader public too.

Further work is needed to clarify the status of the PSR in Fichte’s mature thought. Fichte makes it seem like he left *everything* behind after digesting Kant’s second critique—he says he’s now in “an entirely new world”—but as I have already clarified, this is hyperbolic.<sup>48</sup> In fact, that may be what makes Fichte so interesting. He remains sympathetic to rationalism in many ways. He wants to beat the rationalist at their own game by developing a more rigorous version of Kantianism. Fichte does certainly change his mind when it comes to his views about the philosophical issues he initially considers to be central, particularly the question concerning freedom of will. But Fichte maintains his systematic, principled aspirations that emerge from his original commitment to the PSR. He always notes that dogmatism is significantly coherent, and compliments it by admitting that it’s the only real alternative to his own philosophical system, i.e. idealism. Fichte also continues to think in what might be called stance binaries, indeed with “first principles” on each side. In the 1790 “Aphorisms,” we have the two stances of deism and religion, with their fundamental commitments in each case; and in the 1797 “Introductions,” we similarly have idealism and dogmatism.<sup>49</sup> The mature Fichte certainly doesn’t find himself *torn* in any way, as one might think he is at the end of the “Aphorisms” in some respects, prior to the major shift in his thinking later in 1790. The Fichte of the *Wissenschaftslehre* confidently chooses the idealist “system of freedom” with no anxiety about it.

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48. Wood: *Ethical Thought*, pg. 5 also notes continuities from the deist to the Kantian Fichte.

49. Regarding idealism and dogmatism, Fichte writes: “Neither of these two systems can directly refute the opposing one; for the dispute between them is a dispute concerning the first principle, i.e., concerning a principle that cannot be derived from any higher principle” (GA I,2: 191 | *Science of Knowledge* 15).

But there is still this pair of options and a good deal of theater, which makes Fichte an exciting predecessor to many other thinkers with existentialist leanings, and might even help us to see what is at stake as we face a renewed interest in rationalism within contemporary metaphysics.<sup>50</sup>

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50. On recent work in this area, see again my notes 7 and 30 above. I am grateful to an anonymous referee, Martin Bollacher, Daniel Burnfin, Michael Della Rocca, Eckart Förster, Michelle Kosch, Dean Moyar, Michael Nance, Rory Phillips, Allen Wood, and David Wood as well as attendees at a conference organized under the umbrella of the Leuven Research Group in Classical Germany Philosophy, participants at a colloquium session of the German Philosophy Reading Group at the University of California-San Diego, and organizers of a workshop associated with the Goethe Society of North America's Atkins Conference at the University of Chicago for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also indebted to Daniel Breazeale for sharing his draft translation of the "Aphorisms," which enabled me to make several improvements to my own.

## Appendix: “Some Aphorisms on Religion and Deism”

J. G. Fichte

- 1) The Christian religion is built on a set of propositions that are presupposed as accepted. There is no room for inquiry beyond these.<sup>51</sup>
- 2) In order to determine the content of this religion precisely, one must first search out these propositions. From them, everything else follows, and through the most correct inferences, with utmost clarity. A collection of these propositions *without the slightest interference from philosophical reasoning* [*Raisonnement*] would be a canon of this religion.
- 3) This religion considers God only insofar as he can have a relation to the human being. Investigations concerning God's objective existence are restricted [*abgeschnitten*].
- 4) It seems to be a universal need of the human being that it seek certain properties in its God — properties which the first step to speculation must *deny* to the human being. Speculation will indicate to the human being that God is immutable and incapable of any passions; and the human heart craves a God that may be petitioned, that feels compassion and friendship. Speculation indicates that God is a being that has no point of contact with man or anything else finite; but the human heart wants a God that it may confide in, alongside whom it could participate in reciprocal modification.

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51. Here I present for the first time in English a complete translation of GA II,1: 287-291, i.e. the material initially published by Fichte's son under the title “Einige Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus (Fragment),” including editorial notes. Bracketed three-digit numbers refer to pages of the GA. Only a partial translation into English was previously available in Stine: *The Doctrine of God*, pgs. 3-7. Notes marked solely by an Arabic numeral are either mine or those of the GA; notes accompanied both by an Arabic numeral and an asterisk are Fichte's own.

- 5) The religions prior to Jesus, even the Jewish one, all made use of anthropomorphism in order to satisfy these needs of the heart — initially more, but then progressively less.
- 6) This means was only sufficient until human reason raised itself to a more consistent concept of the deity. [The earlier one] did not fit a religion for all times and peoples. In the Christian religion, which was supposed to be that, the system of mediation was chosen.<sup>52\*</sup>
- 7) All properties of God that can relate to humans [288] are attributed to Jesus; he is posited as the God of man. Beyond this, concerning the objective being of Jesus, investigations are restricted.
- 8) Those properties that the human heart seeks in its God are also ascribed to Jesus, though man's understanding does not find them in him, i.e. compassion, heartfelt friendship, mobility. A consideration of the apostles: He is tempted as we are, in order that he would learn to be merciful,<sup>53</sup> and the like.<sup>54\*</sup> Investigations into the manner in which this gentle humanity exists simultaneously with God's higher divine properties are, again, restricted.
- 9) The first principle [*Grundsatz*] of the older religions, and also of the newer, so far as I am aware, has been: there is *sin*, and the sinner cannot draw near to God in any way other than through certain *reconciliations*. A proof that, again, this proposition is grounded in the general sentiment of the non-speculating

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52. \*In the pagan religions, the lower gods—particularly the Penates, the Lares, etc.—were truly personal mediators between men and the higher gods. Since, after Jesus, mankind sank down again, a set of mediators emerged in the papacy, namely the saints (proof, it seems to me, that this need [which I have spoken of above] is grounded in the innermost nature of the non-speculating [portion of] humanity).

53. Hebrews 4:15.

54. \*Observations concerning the fate of Jesus from this point of view, *as formation and presentation of the human God of human beings*, would cast new light on the entirety of religion, and give the meager state of the life of Jesus a new fruitfulness.

portion of humanity.

10) The Christian religion presupposes this proposition as a proposition of sentiment [*Empfindungssatz*], without getting involved with its *how* and its objective validity. — Anyone who becomes a Christian is not in need of any ulterior reconciliation; through ordained religion (by means of the death of Jesus), the path to the grace of God is opened to anyone who believes in it in a heartfelt manner. Anyone who feels the need for a reconciliatory sacrifice [*Versöhnopfer*] may simply see this death as one's own:<sup>55</sup> — That, it seems to me, is what the apostles say.

11) When one proceeds from these propositions, Everything [sic] in the [Christian] religion seems to fit together perfectly. When one goes beyond these propositions in one's investigation, one becomes entangled in infinite difficulties and contradictions.<sup>56\*</sup>

12) These first principles of the religion [*ersten Grundsätze der Religion*] are grounded more in sentiments than convictions; in the need to unite with God; in [289] the feeling of one's sinful misery [*Sündenelend*] and of one's culpability; etc. The Christian religion thus seems more determined for the heart than for the understanding. It does not want to impose itself via demonstrations; it wants to be sought out from need. It seems to be a religion of good and simple souls. — The strong have no need of the doctor, rather the *sick* — I am come to call the *sinners* to repentance — and such sayings.<sup>57</sup> — Hence the obscurity that floats around it and *should* float around it; hence the fact that very feasible means of [securing] an urgent conviction, e.g. the appearance of Jesus before the entire

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55. Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:16; etc.

56. \*Even Paul, it appears to me, overstepped this boundary of Christianity with his subtle investigations concerning predestination in his letters to the Romans.

57. Matthew 9:12-13.

Jewish nation after his resurrection,<sup>58</sup> the desired sign from heaven,<sup>59</sup> and the like — were not employed.

13) It is curious that in the first century unlearned apostles restricted their investigations just where the greatest thinker of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Kant*, certainly without reference to them, draws the boundary — at investigation into the objective being of God, at the investigations concerning freedom, imputation, guilt, and punishment.

14) When one goes beyond these boundaries, without, however, letting one's investigation take its free course; when one, at the outset of one's thought, sets the goal regarding where one wants to arrive, in order, so far as possible, to unite speculation with the dicta of religion, then a house emerges, built in the sky, that has very loosely been put together with disparate materials — for a fearful Crusius, less capable of fantasy, a religious philosophy,<sup>60</sup> and for braver and wittier newer theologians, a philosophical religion, or a deism that, as deism, is not worth much. Moreover, with this sort of activity one arouses the suspicion that one does not go about one's work entirely sincerely.

15) If one proceeds with one's contemplation straight ahead, looking neither left nor right, and without caring about where one might arrive, then one comes, it seems to me, surely to the following results:<sup>61\*</sup> [290]

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58. Acts 2:32, 3:15.

59. Matthew 12:38; Luke 11:29; Matthew 27:40, 42.

60. Fichte may have in mind Crusius's *Thorough Treatise on the Proper Use and Restriction of the So-Called Principle of Sufficient, or Better, Determining Reason* (1744). Fiedler mentions some of Crusius's relevant views in a 1785 letter discussing Fichte's early metaphysical rationalism; see my discussion above in Section 3.

61. \*I know that the philosophers that come to different [results] prove theirs just as cleverly; but I also know that they sometimes *look inward* in the *ongoing series* of their inferences in order to start a *new series* with *new principles* [*Principien*] that they allow themselves to provide, from somewhere or other. Thus, for instance, for the sharpest defender of freedom that there ever has been, in *Kant's* antinomies etc., the *concept of freedom generally* is given from somewhere else (from sentiment, no doubt), and he does nothing in his proof aside

- a) There is an eternal being whose existence, and whose manner of existing, is necessary.
- b) In and through the eternal and necessary thoughts of this being, the world emerged.
- c) Every alteration in this world is necessarily determined by a sufficient cause [*zureichende Ursache*] to be the way it is. — The first cause of every modification is the original thought [*Ur-Gedanke*] of the deity.
- d) Thus, even every thinking and sensing being must necessarily exist as it exists. — Neither its activity nor its passivity can without contradiction be otherwise than how it is.
- e) What the common human sentiment calls *sin* emerges from the necessary, greater or lesser limitation of finite beings. It has necessary consequences for the condition of these beings that are just as necessary as the existence of the deity, and thus indelible.

16) This purely deistic system does not contradict the Christian religion, but rather leaves to it its entirely subjective validity; it does not falsify Christianity, for it does not come into any collision with it; deism has no damaging influence, but rather has, next to the system that it entirely oversees, an exceedingly useful influence on morality;<sup>62</sup> it does not hinder our honoring Christianity to be the best folk religion, and our recommending it with the most inner warmth to those that need it, if one only has a little consistency and sensitivity. But the purely deistic system effects a certain inflexibility, and hinders one's own participation in the pleasant sensations that flow from religion.

17) Nevertheless, there can be certain moments wherein the heart takes vengeance on speculation, wherein it turns with fervent desire to the God that

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from [trying to] *justify* it and *clarify* it: since he, on the contrary, never would have come to a concept of the sort *in* undisturbed, ongoing inferences from the first principles [*erste Grundsätze*] of human cognition.

62. As I have explained in Section 4 above, Fichte reverses his perspective on this key issue later in 1790, arguing that the determinist, necessitarian stance is reactionary and of benefit only to the upper classes, as an ideological tool. See GA III,1: 193f.

has been recognized as implacable, as though he will change his great plan for the sake of an individual, [291] wherein the sensation of some observable help, of an almost undeniable prayer-answering [*Gebets-Erhörung*], shakes the entire system into pieces, and — when the feeling of the disapproval of God regarding sin is universal — wherein an urgent desire for a reconciliation emerges.

18) How should one handle such a human being [who is experiencing as much]? In the sphere of speculation, this human being seems immovable. One cannot get at someone like this with proofs of the truth of the Christian religion; for someone like this admits such truth only insofar as one can prove it to them, and they claim the impossibility of accepting such a truth themselves. Such a human being realizes the advantages that pass by as a result; they can wish for them with the most fervent desire; but it is impossible for them to believe. — The only means of rescue for them would be to restrict speculation that goes beyond the boundary line. But can someone like this do what they want to do? if the deceptiveness of these speculations is proven to them so convincingly — can they do it? can they do it, when this kind of thinking has already become natural, has already been woven together with the entire twist of their spirit? —

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