Relations of the Self

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SELF-REFERENCE IN FICHTE’S LATE WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE

Fichte tried, as no other philosopher has done, to ground all philosophy upon the idea of reflection, with the utmost coherence. I will try to show here that reflection is both the main concept and content of the whole Science of Knowing, with special reference to the later expositions. In those texts, reflection is presented as a “law”¹ that regulates philosophy as a system. Fichte’s Science of Knowing is intended to be a systematic examination of reflection, an exploration of every conceptual direction opened up by reflection, in order to scrutinise all the consequences that this implies for thought. Reflection is the main concern and methodological instrument of Fichte’s thought, and can also help us understand what the late expositions of the Science of Knowing added to that first and most influential exposition, the Foundations of 1794/95

1. The Meaning of Reflection in Fichte’s transcendental philosophy

Within transcendental philosophy, reflection means basically an operation that, together with abstraction, conducts the mind in the process of constructing concepts. Reflexio or “Überlegung” means for Kant, as he states in his Logic, the act of pointing out the similarities which, together with the abstraction of differences, results in a general representation or concept. In this sense, “reflection” is a principle of recognition of identity and difference of characteristics or, as Fichte writes, a “concept, in its qualitative unity, is the essential sameness in the essential not-sameness”.² Reflection signifies the construction of concepts, and is thus the principle of continuity and unity of intellection that must accompany any apprehension of difference.

This binding of sameness and not-sameness is a necessary condition for the employment of concepts in general. As will be shown later, Fichte argues that this binding must be understood as an organic principle, which he describes as “vivacity” or “life”. Reflection can only be conceived as a property of an organized whole and thus, points to knowledge or