10-31-2005

Review of *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* by Günter Zöller

Michael Vater

*Marquette University, michael.vater@marquette.edu*

Book Review of Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will, by Günter Zöller.

Michael G. Vater
Department of Philosophy, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI


This brief, but lucidly written and well-argued volume collects together eight essays on Fichte's Jena systems. The essays were individually authored, but fit together harmoniously to present a more or less seamless view of Fichte's philosophical achievements 1794-1800. Zöller's constant reference back to Kant's understanding of transcendental philosophy is one of the book's unifying elements; constant attention to the difference between the well-known first Jena system (Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre, 1794/95) and
the recently available second system (*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, 1796/99) is the other unifying device.

The first of Zöller’s interpretive guide stars is Kant’s transcendental project: the attempt to deduce a thick theory of human knowing by asking after the conditions that must be supposed on the side of the knowing subject in order to account for human cognition and willing. Fichte early on decided to broaden the Kantian project by asking after not only the subjective, but the objective conditions of cognition, so that both self and world are elucidated by the philosopher’s postulation and subsequent analysis of a complex of conditions which one might call the ‘worldknot’ of experience. Key to Fichte’s idiosyncratic use of “transcendental method” is the seeming arbitrariness or sheer freedom of the initial postulation of a dense synthesis and the virtually inexhaustible stream of analysis that is generated in its unraveling. For Fichte, philosophical elucidation (or analysis) of the enduring synthesis justifies the initial posit of free activity or the ascent from empirical awareness to its transcendental conditions; philosophy thus generates a seemingly inexhaustible discourse that illuminates but in no sense dissolves the prediscursive knot of self and world. Nowhere does it attempt, much less achieve, an exhibition of a transcendent origin for the ‘worldknot’. A simple or unitary source for either awareness or objectivity is beyond reach; the transcendental field that opens up in experience and which is clarified by philosophy is their ultimate and irreversible interdependence. Zöller clearly understands Kant’s project and Fichte’s fidelity to it even as he widened its scope and undermined its transphenomenal implications. Zöller’s identification with this Kantian basis provides a secure foundation for his more detailed explorations of Fichte’s Jena writings.

Zöller’s other guide star is Fichte’s rejection of the ultimate difference between theory and practice, or cognition and willing. Under the banner of Kant’s methodological dictum “the primacy of the practical,” Fichte offered, starting in 1795, a model of cognition in which the basic structure of presentation (including primitive awareness and its focal differentiation into subject and object) is an offshoot of a spontaneity or free activity that is self-affecting; this
primitive self-affection he called ‘feeling,’ equally the ground of cognitive presentation and conative relation.

It is on the basis of these two transformed Kantian problematics, the complementary difference between intelligence and will and the interactive difference between subject and object in transcendent world construction, that Zöller formulates the book’s thesis: following out Kant’s hints about the mutually conditioning structure of consciousness and the worlds it both creates and experiences, Fichte points to a complex of mutually distinguishing but interrelated activities, intelligence and will, as the complicated point of origin for both the experienced world of freedom and the world of fact. This complementarity is the “original duplicity of intelligence and will” of the book’s subtitle, which Zöller better explains as “essential cooperation: [which means that] the original duplicity is at the same time an original complicity.” Perhaps the English terminology Zöller employs for this task is unfortunate; ‘duplicity’ and ‘complicity’ carry negative connotation when used, as they typically are in common speech, to describe human behavior.

Zöller divides his discussion into four parts, the first concerned with Fichte’s relation to Kant and with the methodology of the Wissenschaftslehre, the second with the relation of knowing and doing, the third with the parallel relation between intelligence and willing, and the fourth specifically with willing in general and the ‘pure will.’ In all these essays, one of his main concerns is to show the continuity in Fichte’s thought between the first presentation of Wissenschaftslehre in 1794/95 and the »new presentation« of 1796/99.

The first of the two essays on what Wissenschaftslehre attempts to do deals with Fichte’s programmatic and critical essays, 1794-1801; these are On the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre (1794), the First Introduction to the Attempt at a New Presentation (1797), and the 1801 Crystal Clear Report to the Public. Fichte detected a crucial flaw in Kant’s philosophy, argues Zöller. As he expanded the compass of his philosophy, Kant did not stay true to the methodology of the First Critique, transcendent idealism, but strayed into a »critically mitigated nonempirical realism« in his treatments of morals and of aesthetic and scientific teleology. Even in the First Critique
transcendental idealism remains a theory about the form of sensibility, spatial-temporal intuition. Since Kant failed to extend the methodology to the treatment of the categories, the general approach of inquiring into the grounds of possibility for a phenomenon or its constitutive elements — supposedly Kant’s claim to fame — is not exploited in the treatment of the intellectual elements (concepts, principles, judgments) within the domains of feeling, cognition and volition.

In light of Kant’s methodological failure, then, Fichte conceives his Wissenschaftslehre as a radicalized transcendental philosophy, one which gives scientific or systematic form to human cognition and action by depicting the origin of consciousness (and its contents) in laws that are mind-given. The methodology of such an account is constructive and ‘transcendental’, since the philosopher freely deploys abstraction and reflection upon her experience. On this basis two mutually exclusive philosophical accounts are seen to be equally possible: an idealism based on the primacy of the I, or a realism based on the primacy of the thing-in-itself. The choice between the two is left an existentialist imperative: “Choose what you will be!”, or rather, make your choice on the basic of the human being you already are. This leads Fichte to advance an idealist philosophy based on the notion that the self is radically independent, spontaneous activity. Knowledge is thus constructed according to a law that the intelligent being “gives itself its own laws in the course of its acting.” Zöller also notes that in Fichte’s hands, ‘critique’ (which in Kant’s hands was mostly critique of metaphysics) becomes ‘metacritique,’ inquiry into the possibility, rules and conditions of a philosophy (in this case, mostly critique of natural consciousness). The project takes the form of a deliberative philosophical reconstruction of cognition as it occurs in life, or the elaboration of a system that exists only in and through reflection. Fichte terms such a reflective system Fichte a ‘fiction’, a picture of consciousness as if it were elaborated according to abstract principles or mind-given laws.

Zöller’s second essay, “An Eye for an I” covers some of the same ground. Given the nature of his material and the stubborn fact that Fichte’s philosophy, to be understood at all, must be understood as a series of changes worked upon Kant’s philosophy, some basic points about Fichte’s notion of philosophy as Wissenschaftslehre
(theory of knowledge) and of Wissenschaftslehre as idealism can bear repeating. But remarks offered here about the experimental nature of Fichte's project are new and illuminating. Unlike other domains of explanation, philosophy's object here is not ready to hand, but must first be achieved by employing a method of abstraction (systematically disregarding what is merely empirical) and reflection (focusing on what is nonempirical). The double method leads to a distinction between two series of acts in the philosophical experiment, those of the individual I of the philosopher doing the experiment and those of the preindividual I upon which the experiment is conducted. The philosopher discovers, by experimenting on his own mind — or rather by experimentally uncovering in his own mind that which is not his own — a general structure of consciousness. As Fichte used to urge his (no doubt somewhat bewildered) students, “Think yourself, and observe how you do that.” Following out this abstractive-reflective methodology, Fichte fashions a philosophical reconstruction of the I that mirrors its natural complexity. The anti-foundationist legitimation (or ‘deduction’) of this endeavor is provided by the convergence of the I’s principled self-construction and the reconstruction of empirical consciousness and its objects — ultimately by the deduction of an individual, empirically concrete I that is bounded by an interaction with other intelligent beings and awakened to independent agency through an interactive ‘solicitation’ of rational agents, one upon the other.

A latter section of this second essay attempts, for the first time, to integrate Fichte's work in 1794 with the new perspective of the Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo. Where the earlier work has three more of less discordant principles derived from “facts of consciousness” — an absolute I, a not-land the limited or divisible I which is their synthesis, all dynamically integrated in the striving to eliminate the not-I — the new version of Wissenschaftslehre begins from the postulation of basic principles that are nonempirically intuited or given in “intellectual intuition.” Though on a Kantian understanding, the philosopher’s claim to intellectual intuition sounds preposterous (since human intuitions are sensible only, according to him, while concepts are devoid of content), Fichte uses the term to primarily signify the original structure of the land only derivatively to signify the philosopher's grasp of the nature of the pure I. “Intellectual intuition”
means that the I is a knowing that is a doing, and equally a doing that is a knowing — or, more technically, that its very being is to posit itself as positing. Intellectual intuition thus involves an immediate and prereflective self-consciousness; this is the property of the pure I, the I as such, not the mediated self-consciousness that comes to the empirical I in reflection. Fichte expresses this insight, tantalizingly, through a simile: the I is an eye, a mirror that mirrors itself, so that whatever we see, “we see everything in us, we see only ourselves, only as acting.” Zöller is admirably clear that, despite the fact that the pure I is the original consciousness involved in every other consciousness, it is not accessible at the empirical level but must be inferred by philosophical reflection directed back upon on empirical consciousness. In assessing the project of the Wissenschaftslehre, Zöller notes that though one might read Fichte's work in its initial moves as a solipsistic idealism, all it really does is to ‘deduce’ (or heuristically elucidate) a generic form of subjectivity that must be factually instantiated by a community of interacting individuals on the ethical and social-political level, a community under law, and on an ultimate metaphysical level, by a harmoniously coordinated realm of spirits.

A third essay explores themes common to both versions of the Jena Wissenschaftslehre, 'positing' and 'determining.' Fichte's use of 'positing' to designate the grounding dimension of knowledge in the 1794/95 Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre is novel. Zöller traces its roots back to controversies between Reinhold and Schulze on the possibility of a first principle for all philosophy, and to Fichte's wish to embed the cognitive or theoretical wholly in the practical. Strictly speaking, it is only the absolute I that 'posits' itself, and this I is called I only in anticipation of the empirical location of consciousness that emerges from the more metaphorical 'positings' of not-land the finite, determinable I. Fichte's thought is not radically egological here, as it will be in the nova methodo system, stresses Zöller. The I'’s self-positing instead points toward a ground of spontaneous, self-reverting activity. Fichte introduces the concept of 'determination' when he moves to the construction of the limited or finite I out of the opposition of the I's self-positing and the not-I's posited in opposition to it. The theoretical and practical parts of the theory are elaborated as the play between the finite land the (apparently) opposed not-I. In the
theoretical section, determination is the logic of the play between the sheer positing of the absolute land the apparent passivity of the limited I in the face of the not-I. The ‘reality’ of the not-I turns out not to be explicable on theoretical grounds; the passivity of the I in presentation is presupposed by, but does not explain, the not-I's standing. Only the 1795 Wissenschaftslehre's practical part — where Fichte invokes elements such as the action of “something alien,” or ‘feeling,’ or the self-finitizing character of the I as intelligence — approaches the accomplishment of this quite problematic deduction. Fichte's solutions here are not very satisfactory at that: there is space for a not-I only because the I posits itself as self-posited, a situation that Zöller opaquely calls “auto-predicative positing” or, more plainly, reflection. Reflection is the I's fundamental trait, viz., attending to its own activity. Fichte is hardly clear about how finitude and determinacy enter in here, but Zöller is correct in looking to the “check” in the theoretical domain and “obligation” in the practical as the closest Fichte gets to finding a transcendental ground of determinacy.

Zöller devotes a fourth essay to Fichte's philosophy of action and his ethics, noting that though Fichte wished to exert a ‘real-life’ moral influence upon his students and through them, upon social and political life, the two-part practical philosophy expounded in the 1796/97 Foundations of Natural Law and the 1798 System of Ethics is a transcendental theory of action, not a normative ethics. The basic prepersonal structure of consciousness, elucidated in the Wissenschaftslehre itself, permits a description of the conditions of moral knowledge and action. Whereas Kant had used the term ‘reason’ to describe the set of a priori conditions that underlie empirical cognition, Fichte uses the term ‘I’ to signify the radical heterogeneity between the transcendental ground of cognition and action — a “super-I” of sorts — and the empirical cognition and action seen in the finite human person. Since for both Kant and Fichte, individualized human consciousness is situated in the middle of a continuum of social-communal interactions, the reason or ‘I’ that is its explanatory ground is a tension of infinity and finitude. This transcendental ground enacts itself as a process of self-realization within the finite, the salient feature of which is a juxtaposition of subjectivity and objectivity that is in turn mirrored at a higher level in the opposition of theoretical and practical consciousness. The factors distinguished in this analysis exist
as united in consciousness: the finite agent’s action is based on the nature of consciousness as such, while at the same time it is conditioned by the interpersonal actions and barriers of concrete social life. Transcendently viewed, action involves a many-sided provision for, and simultaneous limitation upon, the freedom of individuals. What Fichte tries to do in his practical philosophy is explain why rationality must be embodied in a society of coordinated but free individuals, why no model of freedom other than this socially situated self-limitation (for the sake of the possibility of others’ free action) can count as rational that is, as exhibiting the deep structure of the I as such.

The basic strategy of Fichte's practical philosophy, argues Zöller, is to argue that morally constrained action is both a condition for and a consequence of self-conscious rationality. This two-sided argumentation is reminiscent of the regressive and progressive treatments of the nature of consciousness in the transcendental deductions of Kant's first Critique. Basic to Fichte's view of the transcendental I is that it is a two-sided synthesis of agility (the spontaneity of subjectivity) and intelligence (the dual and object-oriented nature of consciousness). Since this knot is never to be untied, much less cut, consciousness appears in the finite individual as both knowing and acting. Self-knowledge must, therefore, be ultimately characterized as the knowing of the agent by the agent in the midst of its act: “I find myself as myself only [in] willing.” From the side of its content too, action displays this same self-knotting or self-locating character: consciousness simultaneously gives itself a world in (and against) which to act and gives itself the task of attaining total independence within it. Morality becomes the translation of the I’s unconditional spontaneity into a categorical “ought”: I ought to determine my freedom according to the concept of total independence. Freedom becomes the basic goal of action, and mutual freedom of a plurality of agents under the constraint of law its socially embodied agenda.

The remaining essays in the volume explore in more detail Fichte's version of the grand project of German philosophy after Leibniz, to present subjectivity and its structure as fundamental ontology, and in particular the interrelation between intelligence and
will which Zöller finds at the core of Fichte’s Jena systems. The fifth essay, “Willing as Thinking”, explores the account of willing and thinking that Fichte offered in the revisions of and metaphilosophical reflections upon the 1794/95 Wissenschaftslehre. These are found chiefly in the two “Introductions” of 1797/98 and the nova methodo lectures of 1796/99. These texts focus on the phenomenon of thinking as the entry-point into philosophy (rather than the abstract 1 and not-I of the earlier version) and the closely associated theme of willing. Starting out, as Kant had, to furnish a system of what is necessary in experience, Fichte calls upon his reader to think for herself the ‘ground of experience’. Such a ground is never actually given or ready to hand, but must be enacted by the individual who is invited to, in Fichte’s famous words, “think yourself, and notice how you do this.” This simultaneous abstraction and reflection initiates one into the philosopher’s activity, experimentally constructing a pure I that is simple self-positing or self-reversion.

The philosopher’s experiment produces “intellectual intuition,” immediate knowledge of the I’s original activity, a knowledge not yet worked up by concepts. Like Kant’s sensible intuition, this intellectual self-intuition is blind, and needs to have the determinacy of concepts added in order to become what it is: concrete individual subjectivity. Thinking, then, works upon the inchoate presence supplied by intellectual intuition, and brings to a stand, defines and determines the sheer activity of the latter. It proceeds by way of the principle of determinability or opposition, the strategy of moving back from every determinate aspect to the unspecified or merely determinable state that preceded it and is its ground. Fichtean ‘thinking,’ argues Zöller thus alternately employs two principles, the principle of grounding and the principle of opposition.

As applied to the I itself or to pure I-hood, thinking involves agility or the activity of determination. It consists in a transition or going-over from determinability to determination on the part of the I, or its unfolding in a progressive series of free self-determinations. In this thinking, the only thing the I intuits is these free activities which, however, all have a double structure: in one aspect the activity is constructive or productive (‘real activity’), while in another it observes itself (‘ideal activity’). That both of these activities can occur only by
accompanying one another is the ‘original duplicity’ of the I, the feature whereby it is subject-objectivity. That they are the inevitable features of the sole I that enacts itself is the ‘absolute identity’ of the I. Against this background of the I’s original double nature, the closely associated features of thinking and willing can be displayed. Though one can distinguish deliberation from willing in a narrow sense, Fichte insists that willing is a kind of thinking, viz., self-determined thinking. Yet Fichte’s whole concept of thinking is volitional in a sense too, since thinking is nothing other than free self-determination. Thinking is, among other things, willing, while willing is always a species of thinking.

Zöller completes this quite abstract account of the inter-involvement of willing and thinking with an explanation of pure willing, the synthesis of absolute freedom and facticity whereby the I finds itself having to freely act within a determinate situation not of its choosing. It is this pure willing that underlies the I’s thinking and functions as the explanatory ground of consciousness. Though characterized as volitional (and thus determinable), pure will has an intellectual (or determined) aspect whereby the I appears as a finite I juxtaposed to a plurality of other I’s. The social conditions of finite existence, then, represent a ‘sensification’ of the will. Thinking poses the question of how a rational being can explain its possibility; the only answer available is cast in terms of perpetual but oblique reference to a community of consciousness, where the I is always shadowed and summoned by its other, which is equally the I.

The sixth essay returns to familiar ground, but recasts materials already presented under two headings: the character of consciousness as both subject and object of its thinking, and the nature of its thinking as both real (finite) and ideal (absolute). These themes are pursued especially through the 1796/99 Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo lectures. A seventh essay, »Determination to Self-Determination, »picks up the thread of the I’s situated willing and follows it through the Ethics and the nova methodo lectures. Zöller begins by again situating Fichte’s philosophy within its Kantian heritage, transcendental philosophy, here interpreted not as a local strategy within the account of cognition, but as a broad framework for explaining human practice in the widest, social-political as well as
moral, perspective. Fichte translates Kant's slogan "the primacy of the practical" into a transcendental theory of the subject that underscores the role of will. Zöller begins his account of the practical philosophy with the content-neutral description of the moral law (dating back to the 1793 edition of Critique of All Revelation) as a constant striving toward action, driven by an interaction between will as such and a 'sensory drive.' For Fichte, a drive endows a presented matter, in this case sensory perceptions, with a form; the synthesis achieved imposes a eudaimonistic calculus on the sensory presentations and imbues the activities of the embodied I with a prudential order. This order is subjected to the I's free choices as well, explained by a pure drive, "willing because one wills." Both these levels of embodied willing are in turn subject to the absolute spontaneity of a transcendental freedom, which guarantees the independence of the I’s practical determination from the laws of nature. It is easy to see that in this early account, Fichte closely follows the path of Kant's moral philosophy.

Zöller turns again to the 1798 System of Ethics for a clearer picture of willing. While the 1794/95 Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge presented a synthesis or ideal unity underlying concrete consciousness, the Ethics begins with finite consciousness or subject-objectivity and presents the various activities of the I, theoretical and practical, as so many views or aspects of that ideal unity. The subject as thinking finds itself in the place of the object, as thought, in the situation of willing; the consciousness of this thinking-willing is my first direct self-experience. Claiming he is unable to give a theoretical or real explanation of this situated activity, Fichte appeals to 'intellectual intuition,' one's experience of one's self-givenness. Zöller describes this somewhat cryptically as a "voluntaristic conception of thinking and [a] corresponding intellectualistic conception of willing." Generally following Kant's moral philosophy, Fichte describes this willing as autonomous in three distinct ways: it consists in free choices, made under the conceptual determination of the moral law, which in turn furthers the I's basic drive toward self-realization. Fichte followed Reinhold's reading of Kantian practical philosophy in this respect, replacing a moral psychology that opposed a 'selfish' drive to an 'unselfish' drives with a three-part scheme: one basic drive (to self-realization) is doubly instantiated as a 'natural drive' (empirical causality as displayed in nature) and a 'purely intellectual drive' (the
willed impulse toward the execution of an act). Ethical action then becomes a willed appropriation of the natural drive, or the overlay of will upon natural forces. While this account does not explain the particular content of any action, it structurally explains the causal efficacy of free will within a natural order in terms more elegant than Kant's talk of the ‘supersensible causality’ of the will.

Zöller continues this meditation on willing into the nova method lectures, where the idea of the finitude or situatedness of original willing is spelled out in its mental and corporeal aspects. Fichte here again replaces opaque Kantian talk of supersensible and sensible worlds, but with an equally opaque language of ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’ orders of activity. Zöller points to one virtue of this account, that: Kant's perplexing talk of the noumenal in quasi-ontological terms is turned into a pure exercise of thought: an intelligible world is invoked as a pure ens rationis to explain the unexplainable, the original determination of the I to concreteness or physically and socially situated experience.

The collection's final essay, “The Unity of Intelligence and Will”, finally brings Zöller's interpretive thesis to plain statement: Fichte radically extended Kant's program for unearthing the transcendental conditions of experience into an integrated account of the conditioning structures of consciousness and of the worlds of cognition and action to which they give rise. Fichte's effort is nonreductive (and non-foundational): his account retains the complexity of the two lived worlds even in formulating their principles, so that an »original duplicity of intelligence and will« is offered as the explanation of the interlocked, complementary worlds of experience and freedom. In this culminating essay, Zöller traces the theme of unity and complementarity through the nova methodo lectures and the 1800 Vocation of Man.

In his lectures of 1796/99 on Wissenschaftslehre, Fichte introduced a parity of thinking and willing, founded on an analysis of intellect as equally requiring ideal (cognitive) and real (volitional) activities. From the first, however, willing is subordinated to thinking, or cast in the form of thinking. Thought takes willing as its original object and assumes the complicated stance of willing thought, or the
thinking of willing. Zölßler proceeds to explain this complicated idea in two parallel ways: a meditation upon Fichte's noumenalism and one on thinking as synthetic unity.

Fichte's ‘noumenalism’ is a complicated affair, part of an ascending account of cognition (and willing) in preindividual or abstract terms. The activity of thinking is to determine the determinable, but thought itself produces the determinable in and through the workings of the imagination. As it delimits and defines the determinate, thinking produces objects or the sense world, but it does so only by juxtaposing it to an intelligible world of noumena. ‘Noumena’ signifies not things that are objective and transcendent, as in Kant, but immanent or transcendental structures — similar to Kant's transcendental object or its correlated transcendental subject—that provide, as it were, the template for the synthesis of experience. From a purely transcendental point of view, then, it is a threefold thinking that imbues sensible object with intelligible relations — the thinking of willing, of phenomena, and of noumena. This ascending (or pure transcendental account) of consciousness is mirrored by a descending (or transcendental-historical) account, wherein the will is seen to produce first determinateness, then individuality, then concrete situation of its individual Gestalt in a spatio-temporal locus. Just as the ascending account subjected the sensible to the intelligible, so the descending account subordinates the intelligible to the sensible and regards the volitional world of individualized consciousness as the materialization or ‘sensification’ of the noumenal.

Much in this account is highly abstract and preliminary. A second section on ‘synthetic thinking’ takes the theme of thinking and willing toward the finite, situated and individual character of self-consciousness. It is synthetic thinking that gives rise first to a series of explanatory (or presupposed) distinctions such as synthesis and analysis, free thinking and constrained thinking, determination and determinacy. These »duplicities« in turn account for the distinctions that characterized finite, individuated consciousness: knowing and willing, mind and body, self and world. The synthetic thinking behind these distinguished items is both formal and material: it produces the determinable as such (Kant’s sensible manifold) and determines it through thinking. Synthetic thinking, then, is the Wissenschaftslehre.
nova methodo’s replacement for the cumbersome and abstract triple positings of the 1794/95 Grundlage.

The ‘thinking’ of synthetic thinking both introduces finitude and temporality into pure will, and prescribes the law of finite being as well: to be determined to self-determination. It poses the original limitation of willing or the primary task of acting over against that limitation. Zöller explains how this unfolds as feeling, the situated character of finite individuality, and how this is further specified as ‘solicitation to freedom’. Willing realizes itself as a community of individuals in dynamic interaction; the concrete or appearing form of individual consciousness is a finite willing, challenged to free activity in interaction with other similar beings. Personality thus manifests within interpersonality, subjectivity within intrasubjectivity. Other wills function in the second Jena Wissenschaftslehre as noumena, meaning both entities of thought and entities that are in their own right thinking beings. If individuation involves being determined by another whom I think, ultimately individuation is fully accounted for by an ultimate Other, a first individual, an incomprehensible or inexplicable being. Nonetheless, insists Zöller, all of this explanation is deployed within the space of thinking or pure willing, or as Fichte put it, “Everything is appearance, even the I itself.” The determining dual aspects, the others, the transphenomenal ultimate Other are all noumena-entities presupposed by and determined inside thinking. Though it gets noticeably harder to detect Kant in the background, all of Fichte's moves in the second Jena system are still transcendental explanation: seeing what must be presupposed within consciousness in order to explain the very consciousness one is experiencing.

Zöller closes off this difficult but valuable chapter with a brief investigation of the popular 1800 essay, Vocation of Man. Fichte there integrates basic descriptions of the cognitive terrain (“knowledge”) and of the moral-practical domain (now called “faith”) with meditations on freedom and the ultimate ground of interpersonal community. These latter show the influence of Jacobi’s “philosophy of faith,” and respond to some of the charges raised against transcendental idealism in the Atheismusstreit that forced Fichte to migrate from Jena to Berlin. They also prefigure the different and difficult turn Fichte's thinking takes in 1801, where the nonfinite ground of individuation and the
interpersonal character of finite thinkers relative to one another are explained as an “intelligible world.” Zöller claims this essay recaptures some of the early influence that Jacobi's essays and novels had worked on Fichte, moderating the claims of reason or knowledge in favor of those of feeling and belief. Jacobi's influence may also explain some of the proto-romantic or proto-existential cast of Fichte's thought.

What can be said of Zöller's efforts in this book? That the individual essays are careful, that individual items within Fichte’s thinking are brought to lucid account is beyond doubt. No can one fault the book on the grounds of omission: all of the themes, the major explanatory strategies Fichte employs, all of his proliferating terminology are brought into the tapestry of the discussion.

One cannot help wishing, however, that Zöller had written one book instead of collecting eight essays—were it possible for him to do so. The fact that Fichte himself was forever incapable of producing a final presentation of Wissenschaftslehre, that his philosophy remained ever project and not product testifies against that possibility. As Zöller rightly emphasizes, the wish to represent and explain the complexity of consciousness without reduction or oversimplification is essential to Fichte's vision of his task. A false philosophy can be simple, and a simple philosophy is likely to be false to what it represents and explains. At least as Fichte does it, philosophical thinking is both free and overdetermined. I doubt that there is a way for the scholar to avoid the excesses of Fichte's thinking too many explanations, too many levels of analysis, too much argumentation, too many synonymous terms and two many complementary (or 'duplicitous') explananda and still engage its core. Zöller's plural essays are valuable, each by itself and all taken together. Each will repay the reader's serious effort. I have tried to summarize each essay extensively so that each reader can choose the thread she judges most reliable to gain entrance to the labyrinth; whether she can emerge again from the labyrinth, once entered, is best judged empirically.