

Striving for Freedom. Some Notes about Fichte's Idealism



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Abstract: Moving from Fichte's assumption that "the essence of the I is its activity", this paper tries to analyze the meaning and implications of the idea of "activity" [*Tathandlung*] in order to explicate the peculiarities of Fichte's critical, transcendental, and moral idealism. Fichte's idea of activity will be examined with reference to such basic concepts as collision [*Anstoss*], interaction [*Wechselwirkung*], inter-determination [*Wechselbestimmung*], and striving [*Streben*]. However, it is freedom which frames and connects the core components of Fichte's thinking and sets up the goal of his philosophy of action. What freedom accounts for, can be identified both at the transcendental level, in the internal dynamic of infinity and finitude constituting the subjectivity of the I, and at the moral and social levels of Fichte's thought, as the goal of the human action in history and in the society. In assuming the unitary character of Fichte's philosophical system, concluding remarks are developed concerning the moral meaning of the act of striving for freedom and, conversely, the immorality of attitudes and feelings such as fear, resignation, and fatigue.

Keywords: Fichte; critical idealism; striving for freedom; Anstoss; activity; Tathandlung.

I. The I as Activity

It is well-known that Fichte aims with his philosophy at bringing back all the reality to one single principle. In this way, he intended to go beyond the Kantian dualism between phenomenon and thing in itself [*Ding an sich*]. He identifies this principle in the consciousness as the "I" whose core characteristic is to be absolutely free, that is, to be the cause of itself. This is the meaning of the first principle of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* 1794: "The I poses itself" (GA/I, 2, 255–264).

What is posing? It is activity [*Tätigkeit*], or, in Fichte's terms, the preoriginal and essential activity. The German term repeatedly used by Fichte is activity [*Tathandlung*], which stands for an unconditional and undetermined activity, that is, an activity without conditions and conditionings – an absolutely free activity (GA/I, 2, 261; for the "double sense" of Fichte's "setzen" see Wood [2017, 3–6]). This freedom is essential for the entire activity of the I and specifically for the constitution of subjectivity. "The essential of the

I originates from its activity” [*das Wesen des Ich besteht in seiner Tätigkeit*] (GA/I, 2, 405), as Fichte emphasizes in one of his most famous works. Some consequences of this fundamental assumption will be identified and explained below.

I.1

Fichte’s idea of the “I” [*Ich*] is not associated with a substance. The I is not a thing, or an object to grasp intellectually like a chair or a tree. Considering the I as a thing means to fix it through concepts, meanings, stuff, and matter. In fact, the things are subject to determinations making them recognizable and identifiable, but also limited and conditioned. Each determination works both as a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* for the being of the thing. On the contrary, the activity continuously reshapes the conditions of its becoming, and the I becomes the I existing through the activity of thinking. In fact, “Freedom, such as I have laid claim to” – as Fichte puts it – “is conceivable only of intelligences; but to them, undoubtedly, it belongs” (GA/I, 6, 183–309)¹.

Once admitted that “intelligence and thing are opposed the one to the other” (GA/I, 4, 183–208; 196)², this difference is assumed to ground the distinction between dogmatism and idealism, which Fichte thematizes in many passages of his books. In *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* a clear synthesis is provided: “The conflict [*Streit*] between the Idealist and the Dogmatist is actually about this: whether the autonomy of the thing has to be sacrificed to that of the I, or inversely, the autonomy of the I to that of the thing” (GA/I, 4, 193). If, on the one side, “the dogmatic principle is the faith in things by themselves” (GA/I, 4, 194) the only valid alternative is, on the other side, the Idealism, which “explains (...) the determinations of the conscience by the acting intelligence. According to it, this is only active, and absolute, not passive” (GA/I, 4, 199). What is *primum* is free and the idealism accounts for the faith in freedom. This freedom belongs to the activity of the I – namely to the I as activity, as “according to idealism, intelligence means activity” [*die Intelligenz ist dem Idealismus ein Thun*] (GA/I, 4, 200).

I.2

The I cannot be determined in any other way than by itself. To make it a thing means to miss the proper essence of the I that is endless freedom. But which is the meaning of this pursued freedom?

Freedom can be said in many ways. Regarding the activity of the intelligence, namely the intelligence as activity, we can distinguish between two components of the connected freedom. The first one can be fall under the question: Freedom from what? Here the freedom from external conditions and influences is meant. This is the point in which the influence of Rousseau and

1 J. G. Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, in the following cited as GA/I, 6.

2 J. G. Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*, in the following cited as GA/I, 4.

Kant on Fichte emerges: according to the two thinkers, to be free means not to have any other law but those which each subject has given to himself. The I is the law to and for itself (GA/I, 1, 203–404; 237)³. This is the way in which freedom becomes coincident with the meaning of autonomy, opening again the door to the faith of the idealism. “The assumption of the Idealism, therefore, will be this: the intelligence acts; but, by following its own essence, it may act only in a certain way”. This “certain way” implies that “by acting, it gives the law to itself, and this legislative power [*Gesetzgebung*] occurs through a higher necessary act, or representational act” (GA/I, 4, 201).

If the activity of the I has to be consistent with the freedom, it has to be neither accidental nor forced. Thus, the freedom must be inherent in the activity itself. The second component of freedom is captured here, which can be expressed through the question: Freedom towards what? The answer which Fichte gives to it involves the complete self-consciousness, that is the fact that all the reality will be reconciled with goals and tasks of the I, with goals and tasks which the I has given to itself. That condition will be the complete realization of liberty. The mutual connection of freedom and connection – the latter also as a condition for freedom – is at the core of the Fichtean Idealism, which, in consonance with the tradition of Classic German Philosophy, delivers a systemic and organic view of what authentic freedom is. “This Idealism ensues from one single law of the reason” (GA/I, 4, 204). Further, the necessary way by which the reason acts and works “is grounded in the nature of the intelligence and does not depend from the arbitrariness [*Willkür*]; it is something necessary, which, however, occurs only in and through a free act; it is something which is found, still the act of finding is contingent on freedom” (GA/I, 4, 204).

I.3

Finally, Fichte's ideal of liberty is an idea of unity and harmony. The goal of his philosophical thinking is coincident with the goal of reason in the sense that his philosophy aims at showing the ideal necessity of subordinating all reality to the goals of reason. “The perfect harmony of man with himself, and that this may be practicable, the harmony of all external things with his necessary practical ideas of them, the ideas which determine what these things *should be*; this is the ultimate and highest purpose of human existence”. Several lines below the idea is repeatedly stressed: “To subject all irrational nature to himself, to rule over it unreservedly and according to his own laws, is the *ultimate end* of man” (GA/I, 3, 23–68; 32)⁴. In this way the will of the I, made coincident with the law and goals of the reason, gets to become the cause of the whole of reality (as in GA/I, 3, 30–33; GA/I, 6, 183–309; 259; 293–298): “The present world exists for us only through the law of duty; the other will be revealed to us, similarly, through another command of duty; for in no other manner can

³ J. G. Fichte, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution*, in the following cited as GA/I, 1.

⁴ J. G. Fichte, *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, in the following cited as GA/I, 3.

a world exist to any reasonable being” (GA/I, 6, 284). The ideal of harmonization applies both to the multitude of subjects sharing and shaping the social world and to the plurality of forces and attitudes building the human personality:

The ultimate vocation of every finite, rational being is thus absolute unity, constant identity, perfect harmony with himself. This absolute identity is the form of the pure Ego (...). Not the Will alone should be always at one with itself, this belongs to morality only; but all the powers of man, which are essentially but one power, and only become distinguished in their application to different objects, should all accord in perfect unity and harmony with each other (GA/I, 3, 30).

II. Critical Idealism: Freedom and Resistance

The realization of the goal of a harmonized unity is not free of obstacles and impediments. On the contrary, at the heart of Fichte’s philosophical view, there is an acute feeling of tension and dualism, which can be depicted in terms of fight and conflict.

The I poses itself freely by giving tasks and law spontaneously to itself. But the achievement of those tasks and goals is not at all spontaneous. By the infinite activity of posing itself, that is a spontaneous movement towards the unity – unity of the I with itself and with the reality of the world – the I is confronted with two kinds of opposition.

II.1

Firstly, there is the existence of the external world, where “external” denotes what is immediately extraneous to the I. This can be both the material world, the matter, all that which is not pure reason and intellectual activity (also, the nature, the world in its natural and material substance), and the social world, the world made up by other Is, by other rational beings. The not-I is dependent on the I for its cognition, yet not for its material existence (GA/I, 2, 411–413). Again, the link between freedom and connection, subjectivity and condition, is constitutive of the I:

It is not true, I say, that the pure Ego is a product of the Non-Ego; such a doctrine would indicate a transcendental materialism which is entirely opposed to reason; but it is certainly true, and will be fully proved in its proper place, that the Ego is not, and can never become, conscious of itself except under its empirical determinations; and that these empirical determinations necessarily imply something external to the Ego (GA/I, 3, 28).

II.2

Secondly, the conflicting and self-contradictory character of the I in itself is another source of resistance to the rationality of the I. The I, in fact, has a complex constitution: “Thus, in so far as man possesses a determinate existence, he is a *sensuous* being. Still, as we have already said, he is also a reasonable being; and his Reason must not be superseded by Sense, but both must exist in harmony with each other” (GA/I, 3, 29).

The completeness of the human being is given by the integration of reason and

sensitivity in the form of a synergetic co-habitation guided by reason.

Both forms of resistance have to be taken into account for the explication of the human activity and have to be philosophically accountable. The way by which Fichte tries to carry out this task is putting what is not-I in a relationship of co-existence and ineliminable reciprocity and interaction with the I. In fact, as he writes:

The empirical determinations of our Ego depend, however, for the most part, not upon ourselves but upon something external to us. (...) They depend upon things external to the Ego, the character of which is multiplicity, not identity. If the Ego is to be constantly at one with itself in this respect also, it must strive to operate directly upon the things themselves on which the sensations and perceptions of man depend; man must endeavor to modify these, and to bring them into harmony with the pure form of his Ego, so that his conceptions of them likewise, so far as these (his conceptions) depend upon the nature of their objects, may harmonize with that form (GA/I, 3, 30–31).

Harmony is always the result of a kind of striving, which is more than a mere aspiration: it is a strenuous endeavor embracing a joyful, yet persevering and tough will.

This stance has a cause and a main implication. The ground of this philosophical choice is to see in the absolute primacy of the I in the sense we explained before, that is as an infinite and absolute activity, where the adjective “absolute” implies both the “freedom from” and the “freedom towards”. This movement has to be permanent and infinite because – as Fichte states – without self-posing there is no I, no consciousness, no reality (GA/I, 2, 389; 408–410). The reality can be grounded and explained only through the cognitive and scientific act of the I. “The concept of acting, which becomes possible only through this intellectual view of the autonomously acting I, is the only one unifying the two worlds which exist for us, the sensible and the intelligible one” (GA/I, 4, 209–269; 220). This is – as we have seen – the essential message of Fichte's transcendental idealism.

The consequence of such a connection is the fact that also the I *idealiter* depends on the not-I. This dependency is represented by what Fichte calls *Wechselwirkung*: that is, interaction, reciprocal action, and determination. The one cannot exist without the other. The identification of such a condition is the peculiarity of Fichte's critical (or transcendental, respectively) idealism (GA/I, 2, 318–321; 328–330; 342–350).

The I, we said, is a non-stop and pure activity. It has an infinite tendency towards being free: the I is “the becoming free”. But an endless activity has no object and no determination, and without determination, there is no knowledge: there is only a fluid unconditional and indefinite movement. Posing itself means to find a basis, a fixed point by and upon which to build itself. In Fichte's idea building itself in order to be itself means to know itself. In order to know itself, determination is necessary. Setting out a determination means to pose an end to the infinite activity of the I. Knowledge needs self-determination, reflection needs self-limitation, consciousness means the consciousness of its limits, then it needs self-consciousness. “Without self-consciousness there is no consciousness at all” [*ohne SelbstBewusstseyn ist überhaupt kein Bewusstseyn*], however, “the self-consciousness is possible only in a way: I am only active” (GA/I, 4, 219). The necessity moving the free activity of the I is a practical one because given

from the own active reason.

III. “Anstoss” and Freedom

The type of *Wechselwirkung*, which Fichte ascribes to the connection between the I and not-I, is a dynamical and conflictual one. It follows from the principle summarized by the formula: “No I without reflection” (GA/I, 2, 423) where reflection is meant as an activity following from the combination of two opposite forces, a centripetal and a centrifugal one. The dynamic ruling the combination of these two movements makes up the subjectivity and crystallizes in the moment of the *Anstoss*.

The paradoxical condition of the I ensues from the fact that the I as pure activity, in order to come to the consciousness of itself, needs to be limited, i.e., needs to meet with something which hinders the activity of the I and obstructs its tendency to expand to infinity. This experience is not properly a meeting, an encounter, but rather a crash, a collision. The German word used by Fichte is *Anstoss*, which denotes the experience made by the I of something objective outside itself, objective in the sense of something extraneous and not coincident with its intellectual and in(de)finite activity (GA/I, 2, 3; 55; 387–388; see Eidam 1997; Soller 1997).

What is important to stress here is that the collision [*An-Stoß*] with the objective is not something incidental and accidental: it is necessary according to a transcendental necessity. Being necessary, it requires that the I finds the objective in itself, i.e., it finds in itself the conditions of its self-determination – otherwise the I would not and could not be free, but always dependent on something external to it, which is contrary to the Kantian and Fichtean idea of autonomy. *Anstoss* is the pre-original impulse [*l’impulsion originaire; sans l’existence d’un être objectif(...) on ne voit pas comment le dynamisme subjectif pourrait être limité, ce qui est la condition sine qua non de la réflexion*], as Druet (1972, 384–392; 385; see also Breazeale 1995) explains. Fichte is quite incisive and logical on this point: “No activity and self-determination of the I would be possible without the pre-original impulse” [*Keine T athigkeit des Ichs, kein Anstoss; Kein Anstoss, keine Selbstbestimmung*] (GA/I, 2, 356).

The *Anstoss* takes a central role in Fichte’s philosophical system: it is the condition of each knowledge up to the highest level of it, the philosophical science, which, according to Fichte, corresponds to «the absolute knowing of the absolute knowledge” (De Pascale 1995, 43–63; 57). With these words, he defines his philosophical doctrine, the *Doctrine of Science*. The philosophical importance of the *Anstoss* ensues from the fact that

on the one hand, it allows the intelligent thinking I to pinpoint itself as I and, on the other hand, stimulates this I to confront something external and extraneous, which in addition does not stay immobile in its passivity, but, in turn, urged the I into a proper, partially active, answer (through its resistance). This is the play of mutual determination [*Wechselbestimmung*] and then of mutual action [*Wechselwirkung*], which is not to understand as a weak effect of a lifeless mechanism, but rather as revealing a view ruled by an inner dynamism (De

Pascale 2001, 10).

As the quotation suggests, the experience of the *Anstoss* is not even important in itself, but rather for the reaction it causes in the I. With its objective presence, the *Anstoss* forces the I to react going beyond the obstacle and bringing it back under the control of its intelligence.

Following Fichte's assumption, we have admitted that the intellectual activity of the I is an infinite movement consisting in continuously expanding the limits of its knowing: these limits, which obstruct the knowing and the reflection of the I, are also those which, exactly by hindering the I in his self-posing process, compel it to go beyond them (De Pascale 1995, 60). Under this condition, the *Anstoss* given by the not-I, that is by the objective being, is an essential and not eliminable component of the process of knowing because it is responsible for putting in movement the cognitive process of knowing itself (GA/I, 2, 356–361). Here the centrifugal force, going outside the I, and the centripetal one, returning to itself as a consequence of the impediment to confront and collide by crashing into each other, they meet and act mutually. For the same reason, the reaction to the crash with the objective limit is an essential part of the reflection process.

Given that the *Anstoss* is the experience that the I makes of something objective outside itself, the existence of such an extraneity is also the necessary condition urging the subject to return to itself and so not to stop its endless activity. By returning back to itself (still a form of activity as well), the I comes to re-reflect on the self which has made the experience of a partial irreducible alterity, the not-I, which can be seen at this point both as ontologically independent *and* as transcendently dependent on the conscience of the I. Thus, this act of reflection is not only an activity in itself but works also as a necessary action of the subjectivity to move on beyond any resistance and keep its activity up (GA/I, 2, 355; 387–388; see Rivera de Rosales 1999).

This reaction takes the name of *Streben*, or effort: this term indicates a view of activity as an infinite tendency to overcome the limits posed to liberty and conscience, an endless reaction to overcome the obstacles to the realization of the I's freedom that corresponds to the realization of the unity between I and not-I, between the I and the world. In the words of an acute Fichtean scholar, "the intervention of the effort indicates that in the infinite pure activity of the absolute I (absolutely identical to itself) an element of finiteness has arisen in that the centrifugal direction taken by this activity has been interrupted in that this activity has 'found,' 'crashed,' 'bumped' into, something objective; in conclusion, that something different and heterogeneous has started to react against the tendency of the absolute I to remain identical to itself" (De Pascale 2005, 9–10).

Positing the I as I means to immediately oppose a not-I and the condition of this possibility is given by no other but the *Anstoss*: the I crashes into the not-I and then reflects on itself (in the worthy meaning of coming back to itself), becoming conscious of itself, of

its proper limit but also of its tendency to go beyond each limit (GA/I, 2, 392–394)⁵.

The I comes to itself through the not-I. This is the core of Fichte's idea of *Wechselbestimmung*, in which the effort is [like] the propelling force of the process, the condition and the way in which the activity expresses and realizes itself. Therefore, the effort is a crucial moment in Fichte's theoretical system because it appears to be the condition for the realization of the identity of the I with itself. "Without *Streben* no reflection is possible"; "No I without reflection" (GA/I, 2, 423).

Since the reflection builds itself up through the process above-described, that is to say through the effort, one can say that the *Streben* is a constitutive activity of the I. "From the impulse [*Trieb*] the reflexive action of the I upon himself follows immediately" (GA/I, 2, 423). Since, however, the *Streben* is a reaction to the *Anstoss*, so, more originally the *Anstoss* expresses both i) a necessary condition for the reflective constitution of the I, and ii) the *occasion* for something new beginning: a starting point for the making of the subjectivity. Additionally, a third consequence is to admit: iii) the dynamic of collision and reaction engenders also the constitution of the not-I. So, briefly, the constitution of the not-I ensues from the activity of the I.

IV. From the Theoretic Opposition to the Practical Unity: The Paradox of The I – in the I

"The pure activity of the I reflecting on itself is, with reference to a possible object, effort [*Streben*] (...), an infinite effort. This infinite effort is endlessly the condition of the possibility of each object: without effort, there is no object" (GA/I, 2, 397). In fact, without a crash, there is no identity, without collision, there is no unity, without effort, there is no reflection, and without reflection there is no knowing and no being. "An object can be posed only in so far as the activity meets a resistance" (GA/I, 2, 395). The connection between activity and resistance is necessarily indissoluble and its seal is the figure of the *Anstoss*. "Without effort, there is no object as *Anstoss*, without the *Anstoss* there is no representation" (Janke 1970, 164).

Presenting the opposition between I and not-I, the subject and the clash with an object, Fichte has shown the paradox intrinsic to the I, a paradox present in the core of his philosophical system. It is a contradiction that cannot be resolved (GA/I, 2, 392; 401–403). It consists in the fact that the I is at the same time infinite and limitless and finite and limited (by the object). "The I is finite because it has to be delimited, but in this finiteness, it is infinite because the border limit can always be moved further away, over and over" (GA/I, 2, 394). At the same moment, "the I is infinite but only according to I's effort: It strives for being infinite" (GA/I, 2, 404). That is to say, it makes the effort of being an

⁵ „Dem Ich [gehört] nichts weiteres, als das Zurückkehren in sich“ (GA/I, 4, 213).

endless effort. "Limited by the not-I, the I is finite; but in itself, posed by its proper activity, it is infinite. Both these elements, finitude and infinitude, have to be unified in it. But this unification is impossible" (GA/I, 2, 301). Fichte is confronted here with a difficulty that forces him to go decisively beyond the original dualism.

A solution could be i) to remove or ii) to cancel the finite: to make all the limits disappear and to make only the infinite One exist. This can be the final end of the intellectual process, which is an ideal and not achievable goal. This is the conclusion to which the theoretical knowledge arrived, presenting a frontal opposition between the subjective and the objective side of the reality, the I and the not-I. But for Fichte, this is not a satisfactory solution. In order to explain how he conceives the relationship between the two parts, he uses a metaphor taken from the intuitive knowledge: this is the metaphor about light and darkness, which exemplifies a relationship of inverse proportionality: "Light and darkness are not generally opposed, but they differ only by degrees. The dark is not but a very small quantity of light. Exactly in this way, it happens between I and not-I" (GA/I, 2, 301).

This explains how Fichte sees this difficult point in the relationship between the I and the not-I. But Fichte tries to handle this problem also systematically, not only by intuition. Thus, he shows that the theoretical knowledge comes to the point of recognizing the opposition between the subject and the object and admitting that the second one is necessary for the determination of the intellectual activity of the first one. But then it stops here. In fact, the theoretical part is the I observed from the point of view of the limitation of the not-I⁶. To overcome this impasse, it is necessary to react to the opposition represented by the *Anstoss* by concentrating and stretching the intellectual energies of the I in order to transform the obstacle into a stimulus for the I. In this way the I can carry on with its self-positing and self-reflection. "Only through the impulse [*Trieb: Vorstellungstrieb*] does the I get to intelligence" (GA/I, 2, 424; 386–387).

However, thematizing the necessity of a reaction, of a counter-movement to the movement of the I (a counter-movement through which, we can say, the I comes to be a Self), Fichte is no longer in the field of the theory alone: he has taken a step towards a practical solution of a theoretical impasse. Then for Fichte what at a theoretical level is irreconcilable and continuously conflicting, can be reconciled at the practical level, through and by the praxis. And in fact, the section of the *Grundlage der Wissenschaftslehre* dedicated to practical knowledge is focalized on the concept of the effort as an intellectual device to impress a movement and to dynamize a situation of immobilism and contraposition.

The *Streben*, considered as an irrepressible unlimited tendency towards a goal, overcoming the reactive movement of the *Anstoss* given by the objective, is both the «origin of the conscience» and the infinite, i.e., never-ending, and never removable "condition

⁶ "Das Ich setzt sich selbst, als beschränkt durch das Nicht-Ich" (GA/I, 2, 285). On the contrary, by the practical point of view the not-I is observed from the point of view of the selfdetermination of the I: "Das Ich setzt das Nicht-Ich, als beschränkt durch das Ich" (GA/I, 2, 285).

of the possibility of an object”, that is to say, the condition for the constitution of an object (GA/IV, 2⁷, 17–266; 62; GA/I, 2, 297). Self-reflection is a reaction to the *Anstoss* represented by the objective. It has to be considered as a limit to the pure endless activity. But self-reflection is simultaneously and immediately combined with [the] striving for a never-ending activity (activity of reflection) (GA/I, 2, 392–394).

Reacting is already a form of acting [*Handeln*]. Considered thus, the importance of the *Streben* within Fichte’s philosophy stands out: by it, we have an intellectual device that makes it possible to reconcile what at a speculative level is divided and cannot be unified, i.e., the purity of the intellectual activity, on the one hand, and its faculty to be related to something objective, on the other hand.

Consequently, the importance of the *Streben* for Fichte’s Idealism can be detected in a twofold level: at systematical level, it makes emerging the priority of the practical above the theoretical, showing that the inner core of the theoretical knowledge is of practical nature because it is in itself a form of movement and reaction (for more on the ambiguous practical in Fichte see Cesa 1992, 101–119). It is not a thing but a goal-oriented tendency. Fichte’s remark in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* is fully consistent with this view:

Kant speaks of interest of the speculative reason and interest of the practical reason, and he opposes them; this is correct only by his point of view but not in itself, because the reason is always one and only one and has only one interest. Its interest is the trust in autonomy and freedom, and from these issues the interest for unity and connection (GA/IV, 2, 23, translation after De Pascale 2001, 7).

The role of the *Streben* comes out also at the transcendental level, where it allows it to overcome the difficulty represented by thinking together the identity of the I and the plurality of the not-I (the reality). The Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson masterfully explains this point:

The *Streben* is the synthesis between the pure activity and the perception of the limit, i.e., a limited activity which nevertheless holds the impulse (*élan*) of its infinity. When the opposition (i.e., the resistance) appears, the activity for which the I is identical to itself (...) turns into a tendency for recovering the identity and the totality (...); but identity and totality are set as an ideal, as an unattainable goal of the effort, so the activity of the reason, which was previously infinite because it was unlimited, becomes now infinite exactly because it is limited, in the sense that it tries to pass the limit of the opposition in order to refound its own original identity in the totality (Pareyson 1976/2011, 199).

“Identity in the totality” which presupposes the co-existence of activity and limitation, and simultaneously, the dynamic interconnection between the presence of the limit and the activity endlessly urging us to go beyond the limit:

The effort (...) only exists through the presence of a limitation: it represents the infinite activity of the absolute reason, which is yet withstood, blocked, and then limited to a point. The effort is limited because it arises from a limitation, and infinite because it is in itself infinite activity, which, in the moment of the limitation, does not give up its own infinity (Pareyson 1976/2011, 200).

7 J. G. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, in the following cited as GA/4, 2.

By displaying the meaning of the connection between *Anstoss* and *Streben*, i) we have not only tried to clarify an essential point of Fichte's philosophical logic, and ii) also a crucial point of the logic underlying his transcendental Idealism. We have also found out and exposed iii) the logical structure which according to Fichte is inherent in each acting, not only at cognitive level but also at moral, ethical, and even social level.

Admitting that the identity of the I with itself and with [the] reality passes through this "clash-and-reaction"-play with the not-I [*Anstoss* and *Streben*], then also the achievement of the moral goals of the human being ought to be thought like a struggle against the opposing forces of nature, against the darkness of the material world and the lack of order (moral order), against the resistances opposed by the matter and by natural impulses, by what is not activity and pure reason and intelligence. This is a "fight" because "it is a matter of reconciling what is conflicting and irreconcilable". In fact, "the I tries to welcome the infinite in the form of the finite, then, pushed back, posits the infinite out of this form and, in the same time, tries another time to welcome it in the form of the finitude" (Pareyson 1976/2011, 201).

Fichte's whole philosophy is erected on this conceptual ground and through this intellectual device: there is no being (of the human being) without acting, the acting needs objects to determine itself; but at the same time it is a goal-oriented activity launched towards goals which are set by the reason and as such are unachievable. Thus, the acting is at the same time finite and infinite, determined and endless. But most of all, and most interestingly for us here, we have to notice the paradox according to which the acting needs a limitation to express itself. The moment of limitation takes in Fichte's philosophy an essential place: it is the element that puts the process of thinking-acting in movement. It represents the condition for the possibility of the activity of the I, for the existence of the subject, for the explication of the reason. This logic stays valid even if the goals set by the reason are unachievable because it issues from theoretical grounds: the elimination of the effort would mean the abolition of the object, but without an object, there would be no subject (GA/I, 2, 332) without effort there would be no reflection, and without reflection, there would be no consciousness. In order to preserve the possibility of getting conscious, the effort has to be kept on, so its goal has to remain out of reach, unattainable.

The fulfillment of the effort to the unlimited posing of itself would mean the abolition of each opposition, of the object at all. Since by the abolition of the conscience building difference (between subject and object), conscience would not be conscience (anymore), the fulfillment of the effort remains an unattainable ideal (Schurr 1974, 76).

The unity of the I with itself is the endless and final goal of the I, even if it is unattainable and has to stay in this way.

V. A Philosophy for Action

Conclusively, some consequences will be drawn from this previous analysis:

V.1

Here, in the never-ending tendency to the infinite, Fichte recognizes the mark of the infinitude of our being, the mark of our destination to eternity (GA/I, 2, 404)⁸, i.e., the sign that the human being is made for infinity and eternity. The goal of our reason can be extended to infinity, over and over. To this extension belongs a feeling of longing and desire. “The longing-for is the primary and completely independent manifestation of the effort lying in the I” (GA/I, 2, 432).

So, we can affirm that Fichte’s thought is based on the feeling of desire: a feeling of unfulfilled desire.

V.2

Impossibility is the mainspring of Fichte’s philosophy. Not the possibility but the certainty of failing is the intellectual premise of Fichte’s theoretical discourse about the human being. It represents also the element giving the drive to all his practical discourse and to the ethical program he proposes. The combination between irrepressible striving for a goal and the certainty of the impossibility of the satisfaction of that longing constitutes the driving element of his ethical anthropology and the propelling force for his idea of social and cultural processes (De Pascale 1995, 62).

V.3

What is valid for the transcendental I in its transcendental speculative activity, is valid also for the historical and social worldly I. Given that culture is a process of (self) cultivation of the natural impulses and passions proper to human beings, it represents a kind of struggle against what makes resistance to the cultivation of that nature: against those impulses and passions the culture opposes the disciplining measures aiming at bringing the disconnected variety of the world into a reason-controlled unity (GA/I, 3, 31; 49)⁹.

In Fichte’s view, the goal of history is the establishment of a realm of reason, where all the human beings freely act according to the goals of reason. Nevertheless, a worldly order ruled only by reason is not fully possible for human beings as a result of their very human – too human nature. “To subordinate to itself what is without reason, to have it in control and accorded to its own law: this is the highest goal of the human being; a goal which cannot be in any way achieved and which will not be forever, unless the human being stops being a human being” (GA/I, 3, 32).

These are the conditions (first transcendental, then historical) in which human beings

8 In German: „Das Gepräge unsere Bestimmung für die Ewigkeit“.

9 For this topic and the connection between philosophical reason and history see Vieillard-Baron (2016, 9–39; 7–211) and my Introduction to the Italian edition of J. G. Fichte (Alessiato 2020).

have to act and work. History is the totality of the efforts made by human beings and by humanity in its whole to try to arrive at their or its destination [*Bestimmung*] to get closer to their goals (GA/I, 6, 266–276; GA/I, 3, 38–41).

V.4

Even if the goal is unattainable, this evidence is, according to Fichte, not a good reason for being resigned and feeling a sense of fatigue.

Fatigue as an emotional reaction to an obstacle, to the difficulties issuing from the height of the set tasks and to the labour associated with the effort of duty, does not belong to Fichte's anthropological view. At the same time, neither tiredness nor fear, neither resignation nor disillusion belongs to his moral Idealism. Fatigue as a subjective negative feeling appears to his sensibility as a pejorative experience of the being, and, for this reason, it does not play a role in his philosophy, which is, and wants to be, a philosophy of action¹⁰ – a philosophy *for* action.

If subjectivity is the “effort to act,” and if the effort is the transcendental condition for the being and becoming of the subjectivity (GA/I, 2, 293; 404–408), which means that there is no longer space for asking whether acting is demanding and exhausting: even if it generates tiring effects on our sensitivity, acting is our necessity (in transcendental terms), is our task and our duty (in ontological and ethical terms). It is our destiny and, in Fichte's terminology, our destination. What is then fatigue? Fatigue and, most of all, the subjective perception of it are only signs of the still defective and incomplete morality, the symptom of the still lacking self-consciousness [*Selbstbewusstsein*] of the I.

V.5

At the place of fatigue and resignation, a feeling of trust and self-confidence has to prevail. This is a feeling of self-confidence in the faculty of the human being to pursue what he has to, in his capacity not to resign by following the voice of the reason and in his power to follow through, towards his own destination. This is also a feeling of trust in the rightness of the struggle for reason and liberty; it is the trust in the superior force of tasks and ideas which human beings experience within themselves. In our time of lukewarm beliefs and relative views, Fichte's burning confidence in the reasonable will's potentials and powers is particularly impressive:

Whether it is my acting [*That*] which is successful or hindered or the *That* of someone other, this is indifferent to me. I regard myself anywhere only as one of the instruments of the goals of the reason, and respect and love myself, and I feel sympathy for me only as such (GA/I, 6, 303).

This moral feeling shows the belonging of the human being to a superior intelligible world. In this trust-inspired philosophical framework, the effort is the tangible sign not of the weakness of the human being and his failure-oriented attitude: on the contrary,

¹⁰ A philosophy based on the “joy of acting” (Bertinetto 2016, 95–109).

it represents the evidence of his supernatural nature and the mark of his high oriented destination, that is to say, of his belonging to a realm that is not only this earthly world (GA/I, 6, 280–282).

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