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From Kant to Fichte:

Reply to Franks

In his paper Prof. Franks uses philosophical material that will be unknown to many of us to answer some questions which we can all recognise. Briefly: how did they get there from here? How was it that in such a short space of time German philosophy moved from the transcendental idealism of Kant's first Critique to the Absolute and Speculative Idealism of Schelling and Hegel? Bundled up in that question are some familiar further issues:

(1) How much of a move was it? In what sense were the German Idealists continuing, in what sense were they opposing, Kant's transcendental enterprise?

and:

(2) How cogent was the move? How far can the birth of German Idealism be represented as the outcome of an intelligible, perhaps even persuasive, argumentative process?

Let me start by reviewing the story that Franks tells. There are four characters: Kant, Reinhold, “Aenesidemus” (real name Gottlob Ernst Schulze) and Fichte. Although the first and the last of the four are off-stage for much of the action, attention focuses on them insofar as the story links to our wider question about the origins of German Idealism: Kant as the acknowledged founder of transcendental philosophy and Fichte as the first of the German Idealists. The plot, in outline, is this. Reinhold presents himself as a loyal disciple of Kant. Nevertheless, he believes that the Kantian philosophy as presented by Kant himself needs completion. In particular, it requires complementing with an account that will show that its central doctrines can be derived from some more fundamental principle. Aenesidemus takes issue with Reinhold from an avowedly Humean, sceptical position. Kant, he argues, has failed to refute Hume. Fichte, who until this time has considered himself a Kantian, reads Aenesidemus and is taken aback. He finds Aenesidemus’s arguments at least partly convincing and is persuaded that they must be met. He sets out to do so and, in so doing, is led beyond Kantianism to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The story does not end with everyone living happily ever after – this is, after all, philosophy – but Reinhold is brought to see that Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* does indeed represent the continuation of Kantianism for which he himself had been looking and so German Idealism is born.

Putting things so crudely will have the virtue, I hope, of showing us that there is something quite peculiar about this story, insofar as it is supposed to trace an intellectually cogent development. We start out with Kant and his

argument against the Humean sceptic. Reinhold accepts this argument. What dissatisfies him is that Kant's system itself, in his view, requires foundation. That is, Kant's philosophy must be strengthened with a further argument. Aenesidemus rejects this kind of attempted foundation for Kantianism. But Aenesidemus doesn't just reject Reinhold's attempt to take Kantianism further; he actually rejects the initial Kantian argument against the Humean. Fichte is impressed by Aenesidemus. But what is his response? Not, as one might have supposed, to go back to try to reconstruct the Kantian style of transcendental argument against Hume in a more modest and successful form. (That response was made by Friedrich Niethammer, a minor character in our story.) On the contrary, Fichte thinks that it is necessary to take something like Reinhold's idea and develop it in an even stronger form, thus putting yet more distance between himself and the Kantian philosophy's initial, anti-sceptical starting-point. In other words, Fichte seems to have responded to Aenesidemus's attack with a case of what the Germans call "*Flucht nach vorn*" – escaping to the front. Rather than retreating to a less exposed position, Fichte wants to go even further than Kant himself.

To assess this story, it is necessary to ask two questions regarding each of the characters. First, how valid is the criticism that he has to make of his predecessor?, and, second, how compelling is the alternative that he proposes in response? In what follows, I shall confine myself to the pivotal character, Reinhold. The author of a series of open letters published in defence of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and occupying a chair of philosophy specifically

established for the teaching of Kant's philosophy, it seems not unreasonable to suppose Reinhold to have been the epitome of Kantian orthodoxy. Yet he was by no means an intimate of Kant's and, as we shall see, his understanding of Kant was, to say the least, somewhat partial.

The central point that Reinhold makes is that Kant has only completed a part of the task of philosophy, for reasons that I shall now briefly explain. What Kant has done successfully, Reinhold claims, is to cut the ground from under the feet of dogmatic scepticism, empiricism and rationalism – positions that Reinhold identifies with Hume, Locke and Leibniz, respectively. Hume, in Reinhold's view, was a convincing critic of both Leibniz and Locke, and Kant, in his turn, has dealt with Hume. According to Reinhold, both Locke and Leibniz, in their different ways, adopt a criterion of truth that involves a commitment to the possibility of a correspondence between thoughts and a transcendent object. Locke assumes that simple ideas necessarily correspond to the objects that give rise to them while Leibniz smuggles this correspondence in tacitly; it is only because Leibniz thinks that a correspondence obtains between thought and reality (or so Reinhold alleges) that he can believe that the contrary of a true proposition should lead to a contradiction. For this reason, according to Reinhold, both empiricism and rationalism are vulnerable to the classic Humean objection which he phrases as follows: "Simple representations can found objective truth and attest to it, only if we *assume* with regard to them precisely what has to be established through them, i.e., their agreement with objects differing from them." (Reinhold 1985: 58) (When

talking about these issues, Reinhold uses the term *Vorstellung*, which, when dealing with Kant and post-Kantian philosophy, is now conventionally translated as *representation*. It is important to remember, however, that *Vorstellung* was the word used in German to translate the Lockean term “idea”.)

Kant’s subsequent achievement, according to Reinhold, was to show that Hume’s “dogmatic scepticism”, as he calls it, just as much as empiricism and rationalism, rests on an arbitrary foundation. Each of the three systems incorporates an unfounded assumption regarding the nature of “representations”. In the empiricists’ case it is that “representations (ideas) are derived exclusively from experience”. The rationalists believe in innate representations, whilst Hume himself asserts without proof the thesis that “Representations (ideas) are originally nothing but impressions”. Kant, however, according to Reinhold, “was the first to call attention to the *essential* distinction between simple impression and representation that Hume ignored entirely” (Reinhold 1985: 62).

While Kant’s predecessors got the nature of representations wrong, Kant, according to Reinhold, got them right. Kant’s achievement lay in establishing the conditions of the possibility of experience “through an exhaustive analysis of the *faculty of cognition*”. Kant, as Reinhold puts it:

... did not utter the propitious thought the “the origin of representations is to be found neither in experience alone, nor just in the nature of the

soul, but in the two together” as one utters a generality.¹ He did not simply announce, so to speak, that the ground of the coming to be of those representations that carry with them the character of necessity is to be sought in the possibility of experience as determined in the mind, but that for all other representations the ground of their coming to be is to be sought in actual experience; or that nothing can be *innate* save the determinate possibility of experience (i.e. the faculty to generate experience), but that nothing on the other hand can be drawn *from experience* save the material for the representation of objects that belong to the sensible world. He definitely identified, rather, *what* our representations owe to experience, and what to the soul. He exhaustively enumerated the number of the original representations that have their ground in the possibility of experience determined in the mind (i.e., the *a priori* representations). In brief, he measured what is innate to the human spirit and accurately separated it from what is obtained from experience while making visible the connection between the two. (Reinhold 1985: 61-62)

In other words, Kant is a dualist, occupying a compromise position between the empiricism of Locke and Hume (all ideas originate in sense-experience) and the rationalism of Leibniz (all ideas are innate). For Kant, as Reinhold reads him, those ideas are innate that contribute to the form of experience and those that contribute to the content of experience are not.

¹ As a matter of fact, Kant did not utter this phrase at all – it is an invention of Reinhold’s.

This account of Kant's view of the nature of ideas – familiar enough, surely – leaves one thing extremely puzzling, however. It is not at all evident how Reinhold supposes that Kant should have successfully overcome Hume's sceptical epistemological challenge. Hume's challenge, as Reinhold presents it, is to call into question the correspondence between ideas and objects. Yet what Reinhold represents as Kant's response is merely to have offered a superior account of the origin of ideas (representations) to Hume's. What isn't made clear is how these two issues – the origin of ideas and the correspondence between ideas and objects – are supposed to be connected to one another. Is Hume's challenge to correspondence in some way *logically dependent* on his account of the origin of ideas such that a convincing attack on Hume's account of the origin of ideas will somehow undermine the force of his sceptical challenge to the notion of correspondence? On the face of it, it is not. An account of the origin of ideas seems to be one thing; a justification of their objectivity another. To put it bluntly, if Kant can offer us no more than an alternative to the hitherto dominant accounts of the operations of the human mind, then he would seem to have abandoned what is, properly speaking, transcendental philosophy for an enterprise that he himself calls so memorably (in relation to Locke) "physiological". (Kant 1970: A87, B119)

At the same time, it will be recalled, Reinhold argues that, as it stands, the Critical Philosophy does not go far enough. It deals, he says (rather oddly, given what we know about Kant's own understanding of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) only with "metaphysics", leaving the need for another science, one

which would be “the science of the characteristics (determined *a priori*) of *mere representations*”. (Reinhold 1985: 67) What this latter would do is to reconstruct the critical philosophy as, in Franks’s phrase, “a single analytic transcendental argument that begins with an absolute first principle”. (Franks 1997: 6) This principle, the *Grundsatz*, states that “in consciousness representation is distinguished through the subject from both object and subject and is referred to both”. (Reinhold 1985: 70) Reinhold hopes, according to Franks, that “the discovery of the *Grundsatz* will allow him to *justify* some of the aspects of Kant’s philosophy against its opponents, such as the table of categories ... and the concept of possible experience...” (Franks 1997: 6)

I think that I find myself in disagreement with Prof. Franks at this point. As Franks presents it, the *Grundsatz* is supposed so to derive the Kantian concept of possible experience that it will no longer be “a *petitio principii* against Hume’s skepticism”. (Franks 1997: 6) I have failed to find, either in my reading of Reinhold or in Prof. Franks’s account, an argument that would vindicate this claim on the *Grundsatz*’s behalf. Yet, in the absence of such an argument, we must conclude that either Reinhold has failed to provide the support that Kant needs (as the Humean critic, Aenesidemus, would say) or, as someone more sympathetic to Kant might put it, that Reinhold has failed to notice that the resources to meet the Humean challenge were present in Kantianism all along. From all of this, the outsider might wonder how much of a service Reinhold has in fact performed for Kant. On the one hand, his

reconstruction of Kant's own argument, as an account of the dual role of sense and understanding in the constitution of experience, hardly seems fit to meet Hume's challenge: the question of the objectivity of that experience still remains unaddressed, it would seem. On the other, its further development into a theory of representation seems equally unlikely to meet the Humean challenge.

The odd thing is that this does not seem to have deterred Fichte and his successors. Did they simply not see that Reinhold had failed to provide a convincing argumentative response to the sceptic or was there another more compelling reason for their taking the route that they did? The implication that I see in Prof. Franks's excellent account is that there was such a reason and it seems to me to illustrate perfectly a point that we should always bear in mind when we try to represent the history of philosophy as a process of continuous argument. We should remember that philosophical argument is never quite like a chess-game. In a chess-game we have a single goal and the rules and procedures according to which we pursue it are fixed. In philosophy it is the standards themselves that are, as much as anything, at issue. What seems to have been the case here is that the *desideratum* of finding a single principle for the foundation of philosophy has overridden the desire to respond to the sceptic from premises that the sceptic himself would accept. According to Franks, "Kant, Reinhold and Fichte thought that the Principle of Sufficient Reason demanded not only a ground for everything, but an absolute or unconditioned ground for all grounds." (Franks 1997: 3) This "absolute", says

Franks, was the agreed object of philosophy. It is at least debatable, I think, how far this does indeed represent Kant's own conception of his enterprise. But what is certainly true is that, once such a conception of philosophy had been accepted by Kant's successors, the standards of what counted as intellectual progress could not fail to be affected. In particular, as Prof. Franks shows, transcendental arguments conceived within this framework are necessarily far removed from what would be recognised as "transcendental arguments" in the Anglo-American context. As one German commentator has very pithily put the same point, in German Idealism after Kant, "the place of transcendental processes of determination is taken by transcendental processes of generation". (Haag 1967: 31)

From which it follows that the idea of providing an answer to the Humean challenge in its own terms comes to have a surprisingly low priority. As Prof. Franks says, Fichte "seems sometimes to suggest that, in transcendental philosophy, there is no room for a gap between necessary thinking and truth". (Franks 1997: 16) To take such a position, one might think, is simply to rule scepticism out rather than provide rational arguments to refute it. As Franks admits: "Whatever response to scepticism might be offered by post-Kantian Idealism, it would not take the form of an inference from a premise that any skeptic would grant." (Franks 1997: 12) Yet Franks makes the valuable (and easily missed) point that the fact that German Idealism does not confront scepticism with arguments that engage on scepticism's own terrain does not mean that it has no philosophically

interesting response to scepticism at all. On the contrary, for German philosophers stretching from Hegel's *Phenomenology* through to Heidegger and Adorno, scepticism is not a position to be confronted by argument so much as an attitude to be diagnosed and, if possible, cured. For Hegel, as we trace through the stages in the development of *Geist*, we discover that scepticism "is itself one of the patterns of incomplete consciousness which occurs on the road itself." (Hegel 1977: 51) But we can discover this only by committing ourselves to participating actively in a "Science" for which scepticism has already been overcome. Similarly, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger takes issue with Kant's characterisation of the fact that philosophy still does not have a proof of the existence of the external world as a "scandal". According to Heidegger, the scandal "is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again.*" (Heidegger 1967: 249) Philosophy should not aim at a refutation of scepticism but promote a transcendence of the ontological attitudes from which *both* scepticism *and* the idea of giving scepticism an argumentative refutation arise: attitudes that lead to the assumption, as Heidegger expresses it, that epistemology must start "with *something* of such a character that independently *of it* and 'outside' *of it* a 'world' is to be proved as present-at-hand." (Heidegger 1967: 249) Here is not the place to assess the value of such responses to scepticism. But it is one of the many virtues of Prof. Franks's paper to have reminded us that this distinctive kind of response has its roots in what may seem to many of us the rather obscure debates of the 1790s.

In conclusion, then, let me return to the questions from which I started. How distant were the German Idealists from Kant? The answer is that, in giving such priority to the idea of philosophy as a system proceeding from a single principle, they moved a very long way indeed from Kant. In particular, their “progressive” conception of transcendental argument takes them away from what many of us might suppose was essential to the idea of a transcendental argument: that of confronting the sceptic with arguments on his own terrain. The evolution of this position is certainly argumentatively intelligible, but not, it seems to me, in the sense that it was compulsory to arrive at it on purely rational grounds. On the contrary, to give priority to the idea of philosophy as proceeding from a single, self-determining principle involved an overriding commitment to a certain ideal of philosophical method that, with hindsight, appears more quixotic than compelling.

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July 1997