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Johann Gottlieb Fichte  
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## **The System of Ethics**

According to the Principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre*

Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<i>page 7</i>
 <b>Part I Deduction of the principle of morality</b>	 <b>19</b>
Preliminary remark concerning this deduction	19
§1 Problem	24
§2	34
§3	43
Description of the principle of morality according to this deduction	60
Transcendental view of this deduction	61
 <b>Part II Deduction of the reality and applicability of the principle of morality</b>	 <b>65</b>
Preliminary remark concerning this deduction	65
§4 Deduction of an object of our activity as such	76
§5 Second theorem	82
§6 Deduction of the actual causality of a rational being	87
§7 Determination of the causality of a rational being through its inner character	91
§8 Deduction of a determinacy of the objects without any help from us	98
§9 Conclusions from the preceding	117
§10 Freedom and the higher power of desire	126
§11 Preliminary explication of the concept of an interest	136

*Table of contents*

§12 Principle of an applicable ethics	140
§13 Subdivisions of the ethics	145
<b>Part III Systematic application of the principle of morality, or ethics in the narrower sense</b>	<b>149</b>
First section [of ethics in the proper sense of the term]:	
Formal conditions for the morality of our actions	149
§14 The will in particular	149
§15 Systematic presentation of the formal conditions for the morality of our actions	155
§16 The cause of evil in a finite rational being	168
Second section of ethics in the proper sense of the term: the material content of the moral law, or systematic survey of our duties	196
§17 Introduction, or elucidation of our problem	196
§18 Systematic elucidation of the conditions of I-hood in their relation to the drive for absolute self-sufficiency	201
Third section of ethics in the proper sense of the term: Doctrine of duties in the proper sense of the term	243
§19 Subdivisions of this doctrine	243
§20 Universal conditioned duties	248
§21 Particular conditioned duties	259
Overview of universal immediate duties	262
§22 Subdivisions	262
§23 Duties regarding the formal freedom of all rational beings	263
§24 Duties in the case of conflict concerning the freedom of rational beings	285
§25 The duty to spread and to promote morality immediately	298
Overview of particular duties	308
§26 The relation of particular duties to universal ones; and subdivisions of the particular duties	308
§27 Duties of human beings according to their particular natural estate	310

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[More information](#)

*Table of contents*

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Duties of human beings within a particular profession	324
§28 Subdivisions of possible human professions	324
§29 Duties of the scholar	327
§30 Duties of the moral teachers of the people	329
§31 Duties of the fine artist	333
§32 Duties of the state official	336
§33 Duties of the lower classes of the people	341

## Introduction

I

I will begin by characterizing the task of philosophy as that of answering the following, familiar question: how can something objective ever become something subjective; how can a being for itself ever become something represented [*vorgestellten*]? No one will ever explain how this remarkable transformation takes place without finding a point where the objective and the subjective are not at all distinct from one another but are completely one and the same. Our system establishes just such a point and then proceeds from there. The point in question is “I-hood” [*Ichheit*], intelligence, reason – or whatever one wishes to call it.

This absolute identity of the subject and the object in the I can only be inferred; it cannot be demonstrated, so to speak, “immediately,” as a fact of actual consciousness. As soon as any actual consciousness occurs, even if it is only the consciousness of ourselves, the separation [between subject and object] ensues. I am conscious of myself only insofar as I distinguish myself, as the one who is conscious, from me, as the object of this consciousness. *The entire mechanism of consciousness rests on the various aspects of this separation of what is subjective from what is objective, and, in turn, on the unification of the two* [IV, 2].

2

The first way what is subjective and what is objective are unified, or viewed as harmonizing, is when *I engage in cognition*. In this case, what is subjective follows from what is objective; the former is supposed to agree with the latter. *Theoretical* philosophy investigates how we arrive

*The System of Ethics*

at the assertion of such a harmony. – [The second way what is subjective and what is objective are unified is] when *I act efficaciously* [*ich wirke*]. In this case, the two are viewed as harmonizing in such a way that what is objective is supposed to follow from what is subjective; a being is supposed to result from my concept (the concept of an end [*Zweckbegriff*]). *Practical* philosophy has to investigate the origin of the assumption of such a harmony.

Up until now only the first of these questions, the one concerning how we might come to assert the correspondence of our representations with things that supposedly exist independently of those representations, has been raised. Philosophy has as yet not even so much as wondered about the second point, that is, about how it might be possible to think of some of our concepts as capable of being presented [*darstellbar*] and, in part, as actually presented in nature, which subsists without any help from us. People have found it quite natural that we are able to have an effect upon the world. That is, after all, what we do all the time, as everyone knows. This is a fact of consciousness, and that suffices.

3

Ethics [*Sittenlehre*] is practical philosophy. Just as theoretical philosophy has to present that system of necessary thinking according to which our representations correspond to a being, so practical philosophy has to provide an exhaustive presentation of that system of necessary thinking according to which a being corresponds to and follows from our representations. It therefore behooves us to consider the question just raised and, first of all, to show how we ever come to take some of our representations to be the ground of a being, and second, to indicate the specific origin of that system of those of our concepts from which a being is simply supposed to follow necessarily [IV, 3].

The goal of this introduction is to summarize briefly, from a single viewpoint, what will be presented in detail concerning these issues in the inquiry that follows.

4

I find myself to be acting efficaciously in the world of sense. All consciousness arises from this discovery. Without this consciousness

## Introduction

of my own efficacy [*Wirksamkeit*], there is no self-consciousness; without self-consciousness, there is no consciousness of something else that is not supposed to be I myself. Anyone desiring a proof of this assertion will find a detailed proof of it in Chapter Two, below. This assertion is here presented merely as an immediate fact of consciousness, in order to connect it with our further reasoning.

What manifold is contained in this representation of my efficacy? And how might I arrive at this manifold?

Let us provisionally assume that the representation of my own efficacy includes the following: a representation of the *stuff* [*Stoff*] that endures while I am acting efficaciously and is absolutely unchangeable thereby; a representation of the *properties* of this stuff, properties that are changed by my efficacy; and a representation of this *progressive process of change*, which continues until the shape that I intend is there. And let us also assume that all these representations contained in the representation of my efficacy are *given* to me from outside (an expression which, to be sure, I do not understand), i.e., that this is a matter of *experience*, or however one may express this non-thought. Even if we make this assumption, there still remains something within the representation of my efficacy which simply cannot come to me from outside but must lie within myself, something that I cannot experience and cannot learn but must know immediately: namely, that *I myself* am supposed to be the ultimate ground of the change that has occurred.

“I am the ground of this change.” This means the same as, and nothing other than, the following: that which *knows* about this change is also that which effectuates it; the subject of consciousness and the principle of efficacy are one. But what I assert at the origin of all knowledge concerning the knowing subject itself – what I know simply by virtue of the fact that I know anything whatsoever [IV, 4] – this is not something I could have drawn from some other knowledge. I know it immediately; I purely and simply posit it.

Accordingly, insofar as I know anything at all I know that I am active. Consciousness of myself, that is, consciousness of myself as an active subject, is contained and thereby immediately posited in the mere form of knowledge as such.

Now it might well be that this same mere form of knowledge also contains, if not immediately, then mediated by the immediate knowledge just indicated, all of the remaining manifold that lies in the above-mentioned representation of my efficacy. Should this prove to

*The System of Ethics*

be the case, then we would rid ourselves of the awkward assumption that this manifold comes from outside, and we could do this simply by virtue of the fact that we could explain this in another, more natural way. By deriving the necessity of such an assumption immediately from the presupposition of any consciousness whatsoever, we would answer the question raised above concerning how we come to ascribe to ourselves efficacy in a sensible world outside of us.

We will endeavor to determine whether such a derivation is possible. The plan for this derivation is as follows. We have just seen what is contained in the representation of our efficacy. The presupposition is that this representation is contained in consciousness as such and is necessarily posited along with it. Our point of departure is therefore the form of consciousness as such. We will derive things from this, and our investigation will be concluded when the path of our derivations returns us to the representation of our sensible efficacy.

5

I posit myself as active. According to what was said above, this means that I make a distinction within myself between a knowing subject and a real force [*reelle Kraft*], which, as such, does not *know* but *is*; and yet I view the two as absolutely one. How do I come to make this distinction? How do I arrive at precisely this [IV, 5] determination of what is being distinguished? The second question is likely to be answered by answering the first one.

I do not know without knowing *something*. I do not know anything about myself without becoming something for myself through this knowledge – or, which is simply to say the same thing, without separating something subjective in me from something objective. As soon as consciousness is posited, this separation is posited; without the latter no consciousness whatsoever is possible. Through this very separation, however, the relation of what is subjective and what is objective to each other is also immediately posited. What is objective is supposed to subsist through itself, without any help from what is subjective and independently of it. What is subjective is supposed to depend on what is objective and to receive its material determination from it alone. Being exists on its own, but knowledge depends on being: the two must appear to us in this way, just as surely as anything at all appears to us, as surely as we possess consciousness.

### Introduction

We thereby obtain the following, important insight: knowledge and being are not separated outside of consciousness and independent of it; instead, they are separated only within consciousness, since this separation is a condition for the possibility of all consciousness, and it is only through this separation that the two of them first arise. There is no being except by means of consciousness, just as there is, outside of consciousness, no knowing, as a merely subjective reference to a being. I am required to bring about a separation simply in order to be able to say to myself “I”; and yet it is only by saying “I” and only insofar as I say this that such a separation occurs. The unity [*das Eine*] that is divided – which thus lies at the basis of all consciousness and due to which what is subjective and what is objective in consciousness are immediately posited as one – is absolute = X, and this can in no way appear within consciousness as something simple.

Here we find an immediate correspondence between what is subjective and what is objective: I know myself because I am, and I am because I know myself. It may well be that any other correspondence between the two – whether what is objective is supposed to follow from what is subjective, [IV, 6] as in the concept of an end, or whether what is subjective is supposed to follow from what is objective, as in the concept of a cognition – is nothing but a particular aspect of this immediate correspondence. If this could actually be demonstrated, then this would at the same time prove that everything that can occur in consciousness is posited in accordance with the mere form of consciousness – inasmuch as this immediate separation and correspondence is the form of consciousness itself, and these other separations and correspondences exhaust the entire content of all possible consciousness. How things stand in that regard will undoubtedly emerge in the course of our investigation.

### 6

I posit myself as active. With respect to the state of mind to be investigated, this certainly does not mean that I ascribe to myself activity in general, but rather that I ascribe to myself a *determinate* activity, precisely this one and not another.

As we have just seen, what is subjective, simply by virtue of being separated from what is objective, becomes entirely dependent and thoroughly constrained; and the ground of this material determinacy, the determinacy of what is subjective with regard to *what* it is, lies by no

*The System of Ethics*

means within what is subjective, but in what is objective. What is subjective appears as a mere cognizing of something that hovers before it; in no way and in no respect does it appear as actively producing the representation. This is necessarily the case here at the origin of all consciousness, where the separation of what is subjective and what is objective is complete. In the progressive development of consciousness, however, by means of a synthesis, what is subjective also appears as free and determining, inasmuch as it appears as *engaged in abstracting*. It is then able, for example, freely to describe activity in general and as such, even though it is not able to perceive the latter. At this point in our investigation, however, we remain at the origin of all consciousness, and hence the representation to be investigated is necessarily a perception; i.e., in this representation what is subjective appears to be entirely and thoroughly determined, without any effort on its own part [IV, 7].

Now what does “a *determinate* activity” mean, and how does an activity become determinate or determined? Merely by having some resistance posited in opposition to it – posited in opposition: that is to say, a resistance that is thought of by means of ideal activity and imagined to be standing over against the latter. Wherever and whenever you see activity, you necessarily see resistance as well, for otherwise you see no activity.

First of all, one should not fail to note the following: that such a resistance appears is entirely the result of the laws of consciousness, and the resistance can therefore rightly be considered a product of these laws. The law itself, in accordance with which the resistance is present for us, can be derived from the necessary separation of what is subjective from what is objective and from the absolutely posited relation of the former to the latter, as has just been done. For this reason, my consciousness of the resistance is an indirect or mediated consciousness, mediated by the fact that I [here] have to consider myself purely as a *cognizing* subject and, in this cognition, entirely dependent upon objectivity.

Next, one has to develop the distinctive features [*Merkmale*] of this representation of resistance and do so merely from the manner in which it originates. This resistance is represented as the opposite of activity, hence as something that merely endures, lying there quietly and dead, something that merely *is* and in no way *acts*, something that strives only to continue to exist and thus resists the influence of freedom upon its territory only with that degree of force that is required to remain what it is but is never able to attack the latter on its own territory. In short,