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2008

### Apriority from the 'Grundlage' to the 'System of Ethics'

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#### Recommended Citation

Rand S. Apriority from the 'Grundlage' to the 'System of Ethics'. *Philosophy Today*. September 1, 2008;52(3-4):348-354.

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## Apriority from the *Grundlage* to the *System of Ethics*

Rand, Sebastian. *Philosophy Today* 52.3/4 (Fall 2008): 348-354.

This essay addresses the general topic of apriority in Fichte's writings in the mid- to late 1790s; more specifically, I will be asking what we can learn about the Fichtean conception of apriority from its deployment in the *System of Ethics*. This means I will be using the *System of Ethics* to answer a question not entirely "within" the *Sittenlehre*. But the relation is not strictly one-way - while the *System of Ethics* can help us understand Fichtean apriority in general, such a general understanding of Fichtean apriority can help us understand the *System of Ethics*.

Before getting started, I would like to say something about the larger research project in which this present sketch finds its home. My larger project is focused on theoretical philosophy in German Idealism, and in particular on the philosophical treatment of the natural sciences. Kant's approach to theoretical philosophy by means of the question: "How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?" already indicates the central role apriority and the a priori/a posteriori distinction in general will play in his treatment of the constitution of ourselves and of the objective world. And then there is the fact that the most prominent postKantian Idealist philosophers of nature Schelling and Hegel - are both commonly taken to have erected more-or-less fantastical a priori systems of nature. Understanding these Idealist philosophies of nature correctly, whether to agree to disagree with this common assessment, requires understanding the significance of the a priori/a posteriori distinction across the German Idealist tradition. Such a broader understanding must not only grasp apriority as it is deployed in theoretical philosophy, but also in practical philosophy, in each of the four major Idealists. Finally, given the general theme of the primacy of the practical uniting the thought of the four major Idealists, the use of the a priori/a posteriori distinction in their varying conceptions of practical philosophy takes on particular importance, even for someone with expressly theoretical interests.

Fichte plays a very important role in this aspect of the story of Idealism, insofar as he dismantles the specifically Kantian conception of apriority. Ultimately, apriority and the entire a priori/a posteriori distinction will lose much of its philosophical force for the post-Kantians, and will finally be abandoned by Hegel. Indeed, the term barely appears in Hegel's work at all when he is not summarizing Kant. This trajectory makes sense only when we see that in this respect, Hegel was following Fichte's lead. Note, for instance, that Fichte only deploys the term in six passages in the *System of Ethics*, and that (I would claim) only two of those uses manifest important doctrinal characteristics of apriority.<sup>1</sup> Now, compare that with Kant's frequent use of the term in the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. The a priori/a posteriori distinction does some heavy lifting for Kant, so to see it so thoroughly demoted by Fichte should pique our interest.

In what follows I will say something brief about Kant, and then lay out what I take to be the gradual development of Fichte's position on apriority from the mid- to late 1790s, and the way in which this development is evidenced in the *System of Ethics*. I will close with some reflections on the larger philosophical significance of this development.

### **Kantian Apriority**

Kant establishes the criteria for apriority early in the Introduction to the B-edition of the first Critique. These criteria are independence from experience, universality, and necessity. But because of the way he divides this discussion between sections 1 and 2 of the Introduction, Kant leaves the impression that apriority can be characterized in two distinct ways (both of which he endorses, of course, and which he thinks are interrelated in various ways): independence from experience (hereafter Kantian Apriority 1, or KA1), and universality and necessity (hereafter Kantian Apriority 2, or KA2). So Section 1 states that the question about apriority is

whether there is any . . . cognition independent of all experience. . . . One calls such cognitions a priori and distinguishes them from empirical ones, which have their sources a posteriori, namely in experience. In the sequel therefore we will understand by a priori cognitions . . . those that occur absolutely independently of all experience. Opposed to them are empirical cognitions, or those that are possible only a posteriori, i.e., through experience.<sup>2</sup>

Section 2, on the other hand, says the following:

First, then, if a proposition is thought along with its necessity, it is an a priori judgment; if it is, moreover, also not derived from any proposition except one that in turn is valid as a necessary proposition, then it is absolutely a priori. Second . . . if a judgment is thought in strict universality, i.e., in such a way that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is . . . valid a priori.<sup>3</sup>

From here on in this essay I take these definitions as the basis for further discussion, although of course they themselves are far from completely transparent.<sup>4</sup>

One other bit of Kantian distinction-mongering is important here: the distinction between understanding *in abstracto* and understanding *in concreto*. *The Critiques* provide (for the most part) understanding *in abstracto*, but are necessarily accompanied by works that exhibit the principles they discover *in concreto*. In the case of the theoretical philosophy, the *in concreto* demonstration is accomplished by the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*; in the case of the practical philosophy, it is accomplished in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (and, as has been suggested to me by a Kantian friend, in the doctrine of moral feeling in the second *Critique* - a suggestion I will follow here). In both cases, the idea of an *in concreto* exhibition is to show an actual manifestation of the synthetic a priori principles discovered in the Critiques properly so called.<sup>5</sup> So, in the theoretical philosophy, Newtonian mechanics is taken to exhibit *in concreto* - that is, in actuality - the pure principles of the understanding; in the practical philosophy, a theory of inclination or moral feeling - a kind of moral psychology - is taken to exhibit *in concreto* the practical principle of the categorical imperative.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, we are to understand these *in concreto* demonstrations, in both cases, as showing only *one* actualization of the form of all possible empirical cognition or willing. Hence in a strictly Kantian sense, matter could just as well have been otherwise (for instance, not impenetrable, or not movable), and there would still be a nature, and that nature would still only be a possible object of experience insofar as cognition of it was synthesized according to the categories and the forms of space and time.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the practical philosophy, our moral

feeling could just as well have turned out to be different, and yet whatever action we undertook and however we felt about it - however our moral feeling or inclination was in fact constituted - the moral law (the categorical imperative) would still hold.

### **Early Fichtean Apriority**

In the first edition of *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* - in sentences deleted for the second edition, a circumstance we will return to momentarily - Fichte appears to endorse both KA1 (independence from experience) and KA2 (universality and necessity) as characteristics of the a priori. He affirms KA1 when he writes that "strange as it may seem to many natural scientists," the *Wissenschaftslehre* will demonstrate "that the scientist has imposed on nature all of those laws which he believes he learns by observing nature," and that therefore "all of these laws-the most specific as well as the most general, [those governing] the construction of the smallest blade of grass as well as [those governing] the movement of the heavenly bodies - must be derivable in advance of all observation from the first principle of human knowledge."<sup>8</sup> He affirms KA2 insofar as he accepts the Kantian distinction between the a priori and the absolutely a priori, and says that any concept derived from the absolutely a priori concepts of the I, the Not-I, and negation is itself a priori.<sup>9</sup>

What is of primary interest here is not so much Fichte's apparent commitment to a quite large-scale a priori derivation of natural laws, as the characterization of those laws as being "derivable in advance of all observation from the first principle of human knowledge." I want to say that this program counts as a clear endorsement of KA1. Later, when Fichte deletes these passages, it is not, I claim, because of the commitment they contain to an a priori philosophy of nature - a commitment he maintains in his later lecture notes on Platner<sup>10</sup> - but because of the commitment to the particular KA1 version of apriority.

The *Grundlage*, for its part, also emphasizes independence from experience, but this time in favor of the "filling-out" or concretizing role played by experience. So we read:

The argument of the *Wissenschaftslehre* holds absolutely *a priori*; it establishes only such propositions as are certain *a priori*; reality, however, it first obtains only through experience.<sup>11</sup>

And again:

The *Wissenschaftslehre* is possible *a priori*, whether or not it is to relate to objects. The object is not *a priori*, but is first given to that science in experience; objective validity is furnished to everyone by his own consciousness of the object, which consciousness can only be postulated *a priori*, but not deduced.<sup>12</sup>

We should understand this passage as asserting that the line between the a priori and the a posteriori is marked by what is deducible from the three absolutely a priori concepts, and that the "reality" that Fichte is referring to here is the application or manifestation of the a priori principles to or in an a posteriori content - in other words, their exhibition *in concreto*, as Kant would have it. But if this is the right reading, then Fichte is still committed to KA1, for it is KA1 that insists on the need for the exhibition in experience of a transcendental structure itself

somehow available independent of all experience, and indeed before experience. What is exhibitable only in experience, according to KA1, is of a different sort from what is available a priori - that is, the a priori and the a posteriori mark out different domains of objects. One is the object of transcendental constitution, the other is the object of empirical consciousness.

### **The Shift in Fichte's Apriority**

It is in 1797 that the major change in Fichte's way of talking about the a priori surfaces. The change consists in abandoning KA1 in favor of an exclusive reliance on KA2, and this in turn requires reconceptualizing how KA2 might function as a criterion for apriority on its own. How Fichte reconceptualizes the distinction in that way is what I want to focus on in the rest of this essay.

Fichte announces this reconceptualization in "[First] Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre," where we read:

To the extent that these final results of idealism are viewed as results, i.e., to the extent that they are viewed as conclusions of a chain of argument, they are "*a priori*" and contained within the human mind. To the extent, however, that argument and experience actually coincide and one views these same results as something given within experience, then they can be called "*a posteriori*" For a full-blown idealism, *a priori* and *a posteriori* are not two different things, but are one and the same thing, simply looked at from two different sides, and they can be distinguished from each other only in terms of the different means one employs in order to arrive at each.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage we can see that Fichte has chosen to reconceptualize the a priori/a posteriori distinction not in the KA1 sense of two distinct domains of objects (those which can be cognized a priori, and those which cannot), but rather in a new sense of two approaches to the same objects (the "final results" of Idealism). This new sense is designed to work with KA2. So how can we understand a priori and a posteriori in terms of the view of cognition and its objects presented in the Wissenschaftslehre up to this point?

One way to do so is to understand this distinction in terms of the basic Fichtean distinction between the ideal I and the real I. This distinction famously structures the majority of the *Grundlage* of 1794/5; in that version, the a priori view is the one tracing the determinations of a given cognition or act of will back to the activity of the ideal I, whereas the a posteriori view is the one tracing those same determinations back to the real I and its object. At that stage of the development of the theoretical philosophy, of course, Fichte tells a story in which the original endlessly outreaching activity of the ideal I encounters the check, and in doing so limits itself and produces thereby the real I and its objective correlate, the Not-I as objective thing. It makes sense, therefore, that Fichte would relate a conception of apriority grounded in this story to KA1, since both explain in terms of a sequence.

It also makes sense that when developing the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, in which this sequential story is abandoned in favor of a picture of the I as originally complex or originally doubled into the ideal and real at once, Fichte would maintain the a priori/a posteriori distinction

as grounded in the ideal/real distinction, but would abandon KA1, insofar as KA1 depends on a sequential notion of the priority of the ideal I. That is, the a priori here will be the account that traces the cognition in question to its rational ground in the complex I, the original unity of ideal and real, whereas the a posteriori will be the account that stops at the subject/object divide in ordinary consciousness.

Thus the ideal I/real I distinction is the transcendental foundation of Fichte's version of the a priori/a posteriori distinction: When we regard our cognition of the objective world as always already structured by a relation between something objective (the Not-I) and our subjective selves (the real I), we understand ourselves and that world in the a posteriori way. The a posteriori view stops with the real I. Its highest, or most basic and abstract, view of the relation of mind to world involves an irreducible basic opposition between the real I and its given objective correlate, the Not-I as object. The a priori view penetrates beyond this point and understands our cognition of the world as the self-limiting activity of the ideal I. But the ideal/real distinction itself, as we have said, has been transformed by the time of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. What are the implications of this transformation for the a priori/a posteriori distinction, beyond the abandonment of KA1?

### **Fichte's Positive Conception of Apriority**

In the wake of criticism of the *Foundations of Natural Right* - in large part for its apparently lavish apriority claims-Fichte defended himself vigorously, publishing, among other things, what was to become the only number of the *Annals of Philosophical Tone*. In this piece he develops his positive account of the a priori/ a posteriori distinction as he now understands it. Recall that in the "First Introduction," Fichte's claim was that one could comprehend objects either in the a priori way or in the a posteriori way, depending on whether one took the viewpoint of the ideal I or the real I. Hence there a priori and a posteriori are two possible modes in which one can cognize the object.

In the *Annals*, the provocative formulation is delivered in question form: "Is there anything a priori which must not, precisely for this reason, be a posteriori? Can anything be a posteriori for any reason except that it is a priori!"<sup>14</sup> What is a posteriori is a posteriori insofar as it is found in experience by the real I. But it is found in experience only insofar as it is cognized, and hence insofar as an act is performed by the ideal I. Thus the claim that the a posteriori is a posteriori only because it is also a priori expresses the fact that the given is given to the real I only because it is produced by the ideal I. At the same time, the a priori is the result of series of *necessary* and *universal* acts of the I; but since these acts are precisely those that produce the distinction between the ideal I and the real I, as well as the concept of the Not-I as the objective opposed to the subjective real I, the a priori syntheses in question must also be a posteriori from the perspective of the real I, a perspective just as necessary as that of the ideal I. Indeed, just as in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* Fichte had asserted the mutual interdependence of ideal and real activity in the I, here he asserts the interdependence of the a priori and a posteriori. We can thus see that this new, KA2-compatible but not KA1-compatible version of the a priori/a posteriori distinction is grounded in the new version of the ideal/real distinction.

Fichte makes his detailed argument against KA1 also in the *Annals*, meaning that in this text he both gives the argument for his reconceptualization of KA2 and the argument for his rejection of KA1. KA1, recall, is the version of apriority that defines it as independence from experience. Fichte attributes this position in polemical terms to "so-called Kantians."

I pass over here Fichte's first argument against KA1, which is directed against substance-ontological hypostatizations of the I. The second argument is aimed at those who claim a certain kind of conceptual or logical priority for the a priori. The idea here is that because the categories are in some sense constitutive of experience, we must be able to act, to perform the acts for which the categories are the rules, in advance of any experience, which experience itself is the carrying out of such acts - hence the priority here is the priority of potency over act.

Fichte's objection to this priority claim is revelatory of the core of his own positive position on apriority. Cognition, according to Fichte, is an intentional act, an act that must have an object; for cognition to occur, something must be cognized. Can we be said to have a concept, or the rule for performing such an act, in the total absence of any objects for that act? Consider, he says, the category of cause. The meaning of this concept is "that one thing contains the basis for the *being* of another." But these things "are both objects," and hence "without these objects you couldn't possess this concept at all." Therefore, "if this *concept* is presented to you *a priori*, then the objects must be presented *a priori* along with it."<sup>15</sup> Conversely, my consciousness of objects that actually do stand in a causal relationship is a posteriori; and what I cognize in this case is that "the one contains the basis for the specific, existent form of the other." But then what I know in this case is "that one object contains the basis for the being of another," and this cognition is just the cognition of "an embodiment of the concept of causality." According to Fichte, I thus "possess this concept *a posteriori*."<sup>16</sup> We can recognize in these criticisms Fichte's emphasis on the act-character of the I here,<sup>17</sup> Fichte objects to the priority of potency over act. The further point Fichte is trying to make in this case is that there cannot be an act that is a priori without its intentional object being a priori as well, and the same goes for the a posteriori. And this claim shows just how far Fichte has gone from the Kantian conception of apriority expressed in KA1. The a priori is so little independent of experience that it functions only as an explanation of experience, which itself is conceivable only as an activity explained by the a priori activities of the I.

So, one might well ask at this point, what does all of this have to do with the *System of Ethics*! If Fichte has indeed developed a conception of apriority according to which priority - seemingly embedded in the very word a priori itself - is no longer at issue, what problem can this solve? And how does it help us understand what is going on in the *System of Ethics*?

### **The System of Ethics and Apriority**

Apriority is not a prominent concept in the *System of Ethics*. While this circumstance may seem to stand in the way of the goal of this paper, in fact it is helpful to us, since we can regard its infrequent deployment as evidence of the limited but precise role it has to play in Fichte's thinking. To illustrate this role, recall the Kantian distinction between the *in abstracto* and the *in concreto*. This is a distinction based on the a priori/a posteriori distinction, one in which the a

priori form of all possible willing or cognizing is given an exhibition, that is, an actual instance of the law for all possible willing or cognizing, a manifestation of an object that displays the law or rule. In the case of the theoretical philosophy, this instance is the Newtonian physical system of nature; in the case of the practical philosophy, this instance is the system of human inclination or moral feeling. Thus the pure principles of the understanding get an *in concreto* exhibition in our world, and the categorical imperative gets an exhibition in human moral psychology as it happens to be constituted within us.

Now, given the transformation to which Fichte has subjected the a priori/a posteriori distinction, it seems safe to assume that he will not cling to this Kantian demand for an *in concreto* demonstration of the moral law. Yet in fact upon reading the text, what one finds is that Fichte deploys the term "a priori" for the first time in the *System of Ethics* precisely when he wants to talk about the "material content of the moral law," that is, in §17. He has just finished a review of his theory of conscience, according to which "whatever is confirmed by this inner feeling is a duty." He goes on: "This would suffice for acting, and nothing more would be required in order to make possible such acting."<sup>18</sup> So the possible has in fact been established. But, says Fichte, "This ... is not sufficient for the purposes of science. We must either be able to determine a priori what conscience will approve of in general, or else we must concede that ethics, as a real, applicable science, is impossible."<sup>19</sup> What this means is that we must, from the "transcendental standpoint," grasp "a law that is grounded in reason" for the determination of our conscience. And "once we have exhibited this law, we will at the same time have an answer *a priori* . . . to the question: what is our duty?"<sup>20</sup> A few pages later, we are told how to do this: "The way to discover the material content of the moral law is by synthetically uniting the concept of I-hood and the concept of absolute self-sufficiency. ... All we have to do," says Fichte, "is provide a complete presentation of the conditions of I-hood and show how these conditions are related to the drive for self-sufficiency and how this drive is determined by these conditions; by doing this, we will have provided an exhaustive account of the content of the moral law."<sup>21</sup>

We can distinguish this demand for an a priori law of the determination of conscience from two other, allied operations:

- (1) A deduction of the categorical imperative—which is done already in the *System of Ethics*, long before we get to this point; and
- (2) A discussion of moral psychology, so to speak, in terms of drive and affect, which Fichte has also already given at this point.

And it is important to note that he has done these things without feeling any apparent need to designate any of them as a priori.

What Fichte is asking for here is the demonstration that the theory of conscience and drives (presented already, as in (2) above) in fact counts as the real manifestation of the categorical imperative (itself established earlier, as in (1) above). Science requires this demonstration not in order to satisfy itself that it can obtain a formal moral law, nor in order to satisfy itself that our actual system of drives, feeling, conscience, and conviction is such that we can decide to act in accordance with that law. These needs have already been satisfied. Rather, science requires this



demonstration in order to show that in deciding to appropriate the content of a drive in the will as a result of our conviction in conscience that it is our duty to do so, we are in fact acting according to the necessary structure of our rationality. That is, science demands an exhibition of the inner connection between the CI and our moral psychology of drives, and this is, given Fichte's modification of Kant's a priori/a posteriori distinction, both appropriately characterized as a priori demonstration and the analogous move to providing an *in concreto* exhibition of the moral law in Kantian philosophy. The drives must have content, and if they are to have content, this must be the content of the moral law. The drive, as Fichte says, "is to be determined," and it is to be determined "by these conditions" of I-hood. But to show how a feeling is determined by a concept that itself is a necessary constitutive moment of the I is to exhibit that feeling as a manifestation of the condition. And this is the Fichtean equivalent to exhibiting a concept in intuition for Kant.

Looking at the demand announced at the start of §17 in this light helps to explain why apriority is invoked here and not (really significantly) elsewhere in the *System of Ethics*. Given Fichte's conception of the interdependence of the a priori and the a posteriori, as well as his view that, because of the intentional structure of our willing and cognition, no a priori act of either could be thought without thinking its object a priori as well, it makes sense that he would invoke the a priori/a posteriori distinction precisely at the point at which he needs to show the identity of what is encountered a posteriori (the drive as experienced by the ordinary consciousness) and what is produced a priori (the drive as determined by the moral law through the productive ideal I). At this point in the development of his thinking about apriority, then, the a priori/a posteriori distinction names the fundamental interdependence of the ideal and the real.

Though structurally analogous to it, this is of course far from Kant's demand that philosophy exhibit one of the many possible actualizations of the conditions of all possible willing or cognition. But the demonstration here in the *System of Ethics* ought not to strike us as any more surprising than the demonstration of the polar and dynamical composition of matter in the *Grundriß*. There, too, what for Kant was the object of an *in concreto* exhibition is for Fichte the object of an a priori demonstration, namely, the impenetrability of matter as composed of forces of attraction and repulsion.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the apparently both minorly technical and systematically peripheral nature of apriority for Fichte's system, the issue addressed here is really of some broad significance. At the very least, the a priori/a posteriori distinction is another of Kant's rigid dualisms that Fichte did so much to overcome. But more importantly, a focus on this distinction reveals Fichte's move away from a certain conception of the origin - a conception in which explanation, rationality, and ultimately truth depend on our cognition having the proper connection to some origin or other. And although Fichte was no more able, at least as far as the Jena period is concerned, to entirely rid himself of this conception than was Hegel, Fichte made enormous strides in that direction. As is indicated in the passage from the "First Introduction" quoted above, Fichte began to shift the focus from origin to results, and in doing so began a process which contemporary philosophy is still working out.

## ENDNOTES

1. These uses are found at: SE, 198/SW IV:208; SE ,199/5WIV, 209; SE, 210/SWW, 221; SE, 214/SW IV, 225; and SE, 25/SW W, 227.
2. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B2-3. References to the Critique of Pure Reason are to the standard A- and B-edition paginations. The translation used for citations is: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans, and ed. Guyer and Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
3. Ibid., B3-4.
4. In particular, in what follows I will understand the Kantian claim about independence from experience in one common fashion, where it is understood as availability *before* or *in advance of* experience. As we will see below, it is in arguing against this view that Fichte begins to transform the Kantian conception.
5. The Kantian notion of an *in concreto* exhibition is by no means clear, and the secondary literature on the topic has not yet settled the issue. I discuss *in concreto* exhibitions and apriority in relation to theoretical philosophy in Chapter Two of my dissertation, **From A Priori Grounding to Conceptual Transformation: The Philosophy of Nature in German Idealism** (Evanston: Northwestern University Department of Philosophy, 2006).
6. This reading makes the Doctrine of Virtue alone the concrete manifestation of the moral law, but Kant also has a Doctrine of Right, in which the moral law is related to the condition of filling space developed in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. (Thanks to Arthur Ripstein for bringing this to my attention recently.)
7. For a Strawsonian vision of Kantian experience without matter, see R. C. S. Walker, "The Status of Kant's Theory of Matter," in Lewis Beck, ed., *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972), 591.
8. *EPW*, 121n / GA 1/2, 65n.
9. *EPW*, 134n/ GA 1/1, 151n.
10. See, e.g., GA II /4, 264, 267.
11. SW1, 253. Translations from the *Grundlage* are taken from J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans, and ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Note here the idea of transcendental philosophy as a priori precisely to the extent that it establishes what must first of all be the case for some situation S to obtain, and then considers any actual S as a posteriori - the idea of a *sequence* of some kind is obviously at work here, in which first an antecedent possibility is shown, and then an actualization - always a *consequent* actualization, or *later* actualization - is shown.
12. Ibid.
13. *IWL*, 32/SW1, 447.
14. *EPW*, 34S/SW II, 474.

15. *EPW*, 351/SW II, 478.

16. In his own words: "This is what happens to you: to the extent that you wish to cling to what is *a priori*, you lose what is *a posteriori*; to the extent that you grasp the latter, the former eludes you" (*EPW*, 351/ SW II, 478).

17. "What is comes down to is this: the I is, to begin with, nothing but a 'doing'" (*IWL*, 81/SWI, 495).

18. *SE*, 198/SW W, 208.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *SE*, 201/SW IV, 211-12.

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