

# **Institutions or Interaction? Hegel's Critique of Fichte Reconsidered**

Matthew J. Delhey

# Outline

1. Fichte's "subjectivism"
2. Fichte's interactionism
3. Some Hegelian problems for Fichte's interactionism

1. Fichte's "subjectivism"
2. Fichte's interactionism
3. Some Hegelian problems for Fichte's interactionism

## 1.1. Fichte's "subjectivism"

**Standard criticism:** Fichte is a merely *subjective idealist*.

- In practical philosophy, subjective idealism leads to *individualism*.
- "*Egoismus*" suggests both *subjectivism* and *individualism*.

## 1.1. Fichte's "subjectivism"

Hegel on Fichte as merely subjective idealist (e.g.):

"Fichte's natural right establishes, for example, the organization of the state. This organization is as unspiritual as was the deduction of natural things, and as were many of the French constitutions which have appeared in modern times—a formal, external connection and relationship, in which **individuals as such are held to be absolute**, or in which right is the highest principle. The universal is not spirit, the substance of the whole, but the external, understandable [verständige], negative violence [Gewalt] against individuals" (VGP 3:503/W 20:412).

## 1.2. Problems with the “subjectivist” critique

1. Theoretical philosophy: Fichte’s non-subjectivism.
2. Practical philosophy: Fichte’s communitarianism.
3. The deeper problem with “I = I” lies not in its subjectivism but in the reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*) it posits between objectivity and subjectivity. (Hölderlin’s insight)

### 1.3. Fichte's communitarianism

“One can talk about right only to the extent that human beings are considered \*in relationship to one another, and a right is nothing outside of a relationship of this sort, a relationship, however, that occurs on its own and unnoticed, by virtue of the mechanism of the human mind, since a human being can by no means be isolated, and no human being is possible if several do not exist alongside one another. How can free beings, as such, continue to co-exist with one another? This is the supreme question concerning right, and the answer is as follows: Free beings can co-exist only if each limits his own freedom in such a way that the freedom of others can also continue to exist alongside his own. **The validity of this law is therefore conditioned by the concept of a community of free beings. It ceases to apply where such a community is not possible.** Nor does it apply to anyone who is unsuited for such a community, and no one is suited for this who does not subordinate himself to this law. Such a person therefore possesses no rights; he is without any rights. [...] Anyone who does not accept this proposal thereby declares that he does not subordinate himself to the law of right and becomes completely without rights” (“Review of Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*,” 315–16/FW 8:430).

## 1.4. Fichte's communitarianism

“The law of right includes the idea that, when human beings are to live alongside one another, each must limit his freedom, so that the freedom of others can also exist alongside that freedom. But the law of right says nothing to the effect that a particular person should limit his freedom specifically through the freedom of a particular second, third, or fourth person. **That I must restrict myself specifically in relation to these particular human beings derives from the fact that I live in society specifically with them; but I live in society specifically with them as a result of my free decision, not through any obligation.** Applied to the civil contract, this means it is originally up to the free and arbitrary choice of every individual to determine whether he wants to live in this particular state or not, although if he wants to live among other human beings at all, then it is not up to his arbitrary choice to determine whether he enters into a state” (GNR 14–15/FW 3:14)



## 1.4. Hegel's considered criticism: reciprocity

“Some of the forms in which Fichte has presented his system might mislead one into believing that it is a system of dogmatic idealism denying the opposite principle. Indeed, Reinhold overlooks the transcendental significance of the Fichtean principle which requires one to posit the difference of subject and object in  $I = I$  at the same time as their identity. [Reinhold] regards Fichte's system as a system of absolute subjectivity, that is, a dogmatic idealism. But precisely what distinguishes Fichte's idealism is that the identity which it establishes is one that **does not deny the objective but puts the subjective and the objective in the same rank of reality and certainty**—and pure and empirical consciousness is [ist] one. For the sake of the identity of subject and object I posit things outside myself just as surely as I posit myself. The things exist as certainly as I do.—But if the I posits things alone or itself alone—just one of the two terms **or even both at once but separately**—then the I will not, in the system, come to be Subject-Object to itself. True, the subjective is Subject-Object, but the objective is not. Hence subject is not equal to object” (DS 127–28/GW 4:41).

## 1.4. Hegel's considered criticism: reciprocity

“Kant’s philosophy establishes the objective side of this whole sphere [viz., the absoluteness antithesis of finitude and infinity]. [...] Jacobi’s philosophy is the subjective side. [...] Fichte’s philosophy is the synthesis of both. It demands the form of objectivity and of basic principle as in Kant, but it posits at the same time the conflict [Widerstreit] of this pure objectivity with the subjectivity as a yearning [Sehnen] and a subjective identity. In Kant the finite concept is posited in and for itself and as the only thing philosophy acknowledges. In Jacobi, the infinite appears as affected by subjectivity, that is, as instinct, impulse, individuality. In Fichte, the infinite as affected by subjectivity is itself again made objective, as ought and striving [Sollen und Streben]” (GuW 62/GW 4:321).

## 1.5. Institutions

**Contention:** we should reevaluate Hegel's critique of Fichte's practical philosophy in terms of their respective *institutional theories*, not in terms of "subjectivism" or, even worse, as a choice between "individualism" and "collectivism."

At stake in Hegel's critique of Fichte's practical philosophy is not a decision between the objective or collective versus the subjective or individualist dimensions of social life as ultimately explanatory – but instead how to theorize the mediation of these two aspects.

This *social mediation* is accomplished by *institutions*.

Jean-François Kervégan: "So-called institutionalist theories aim to go beyond the choice between subjectivism and objectivism" (*The Actual and the Rational*, 336; cf. Maurice Hauriou, "The Theory of the Institution and the Foundation" [1925]).

## 1.5. Institutions

Interactionism and institutionalism as *institutional theories*, i.e., as ways of theorizing *social mediation*.

**Fichte's interactionism:** the paradigm of social mediation is an intersubjective *interaction*. Institutions are just iff agents consent to them and they cohere with the mutual limitation of freedom.

**Hegel's institutionalism:** the paradigm of social mediation is an institutionally prescribed pattern of behavior. Institutions are just iff they realize social freedom, which does not necessarily require that agents always recognize them as doing so.

Traditions of social theory: Weber and Durkheim.

1. Fichte's "subjectivism"
2. Fichte's interactionism
3. Some Hegelian problems for Fichte's interactionism

## 2.1. Fichte's interactionism

Institutions are *congealed consent*, i.e., merely aggregates of individual wills.  
Institutions *stand in* for interactions.

Three kinds of immediacy in Fichte's institutional theory:

1. Arbitrariness (institutional content)
2. Dyads (social relations)
3. Ideal (utopia)

## 2.2. Social immediacy as arbitrariness (institutional content)

Three kinds of immediacy in Fichte's institutional theory:

1. **Arbitrariness (institutional content)**
2. Dyads (social relations)
3. Ideal (utopia)

## 2.2. Social immediacy as arbitrariness (institutional content)

“If the will moves from indeterminacy to determinacy - and it has already been strictly proven that this is a condition for consciousness of freedom and, along with this, a condition for the I as such; and hence it has also been proven *that there is a will* and that it is determined the manner we have described - : if this is the case, I say, then **the will is always a power of choosing**, which is how it is quite correctly described by *Reinhold*. **There is no will [Wille] without arbitrary choice [Willkür]**. One calls the will arbitrary choice when one attends to the feature just indicated: namely, that it necessarily chooses among several, equally possible actions” (SS 151/FW 4:159).



## 2.3. Social immediacy as dyadic (social relations)

Three kinds of immediacy in Fichte's institutional theory:

1. Arbitrariness (institutional content)
2. **Dyads (social relations)**
3. Ideal (utopia)

## 2.3. Social immediacy as dyadic (social relations)

Dyadic social relations:

a.) Strong organic model

b.) **Unanimity**

c.) Distrust

### 2.3. Social immediacy as dyadic (social relations). Unanimity

“[E]very citizen of the state must vote in favor of the constitution, which can be established only through *absolute unanimity*; for the constitution is the guarantee that each receives from all the others, for the sake of securing all his rights within the society” (GNR 16/SW 3:16, cf. GNR 162–63/SW 3:184–85).

“[U]nanimity is necessary where the civil contract is concerned” (GNR 157/SW 3:178).

“[T]he overall end of the moral community as a whole is to produce unanimity concerning matters of morality. This is the ultimate end of all reciprocal interaction between moral beings” (SS 329/SW 4:348).

“[I]f even only one of them were to be oppressed, this one person would certainly not give his consent, in which case they would no longer all be united” (GNR 98/FW 3:107).

## 2.4. Social immediacy as ideal (utopia)

Three kinds of immediacy in Fichte's institutional theory:

1. Arbitrariness (institutional content)
2. Dyads (social relations)
3. **Ideal (utopia)**

## 2.4. Social immediacy as ideal (utopia)

“You can see how important it is not to confuse society as such with that particular, empirically conditioned kind of society which we call ‘the state.’ Despite what a very great man has said, life in the state is not one of the absolute ends of human beings. The state is, instead, only a *means for establishing a perfect society*, a means which exists only under specific circumstances. Like all those human institutions [Institute] which are mere means, the state aims at abolishing itself. *The goal of all government is to make government superfluous*” (EPW 156/FW 6:306).

## 2.5. Fichte's interactionism

Institutions are *congealed consent*, i.e., merely aggregates of individual wills.  
Institutions *stand in* for interactions.

Three kinds of immediacy in Fichte's institutional theory:

1. Arbitrariness (institutional content)
2. Dyads (social relations)
3. Ideal (utopia)

1. Fichte's "subjectivism"
2. Fichte's interactionism
3. Some Hegelian problems for Fichte's interactionism

### 3.1. Some Hegelian problems for Fichte's interactionism

a) Institutional content, ubiquity and diversity

b) Social change (short- and medium-term predictability)

c) Social weight (inertia, stability, gravity)

d) Constitutive

} Arbitrariness (**Will**)

} Dyads (**Social Ontology**)

} Institutionless ideal (**Utopia**)



## 3.2. Hegel's institutionalism

Institutions are *realizations of finite spirit* through which the rational will becomes an object for itself and, as a result of this self-externalization, determines itself (i.e., realizes social freedom) and reforms finite spirit in the process.

Institutions are therefore *impersonal*.

Three kinds of mediation in Hegel's institutional theory:

1. Rationality (institutional content and social change)
2. Systematicity (social relations)
3. Constitutive (utopia)

### 3.3. Social weight: solar system.

“Like the solar system, the state, for instance, is, in the practical, a system of three syllogisms. (1) The *individual* (the person) joins itself through its *particularity* (physical and spiritual needs, what becomes the civil society, once they have been further developed for themselves) with the *universal* (the society, justice, law, government). (2) The will, the activity of individuals, is the mediating factor which satisfies the needs in relation to society, the law, and so forth, just as it fulfills and realizes the society, the law, and so forth. (3) **But the universal (state, government, law) is the substantial middle in which the individuals and their satisfaction have and acquire their fulfilled reality, mediation, and subsistence.** Since the mediation joins together each of the determinations with the other extreme, each joins itself precisely in this way together with itself; it produces itself and this production is its self-preservation. – It is only through the nature of this joining-together, through this triad of syllogisms with the same *terminis*, that a whole is truly understood in its organization” (EL §198A/W 8:356).

### 3.4. Hegelian reciprocal recognition?

The most common way to reconstruct Hegel's institutional theory is as "spheres of reciprocal recognition" (Axel Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy*, 19. Cf. also Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, 183–281).

"[E]thical life is supposed to comprise a set of intersubjective actions in which the subjects can find individual fulfillment and reciprocal recognition at one and the same time" (*The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, 52).

"Each sphere of ethical life [is] marked by a definite pattern of social practices, which in its turn [is] characterized by a specific blend of reciprocal recognition and self-realization" (*The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, 76).

### 3.5. Directions for future work

If institutions do not embody consent or spheres of mutual recognition but instead “the rational will which has being in and for itself” (PR §29), what does this mean for Hegel’s views on ...

- Recognition; strong institutionalism?
- Labour
- Social critique.