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“The absolute self must therefore be cause of the
not-self,
insofar as the latter is the ultimate ground of all
presentation;
and the not-self must to that extent be its effect.”
J. G. Fichte¹

- 1 German idealism can be understood as an effort by different hands, beginning in Kant, and continuing in Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and others to formulate a successful version of the constructivist approach to cognition.² Fichte, who is often understood as a philosopher of freedom,³ further contributes to the epistemic theme running throughout German idealism. This paper will consider the nature and explanatory limits of the Fichtean view of subjectivity in the epistemic context of German idealism.
- 2 Kant’s critical philosophy presupposes a distinctive conception of the transcendental subject he claims to “deduce” as the capstone of his transcendental deduction. Fichte defends a post-Kantian conception of the subject. I will be arguing that Fichte’s distinctive revision of the Kantian subject goes too far in making the objective dimension of cognition wholly dependent on the subjective dimension. After Kant and after Fichte we still lack an effective solution for the problem of cognition.

1. On Kant, German idealism and Parmenides

- 3 In a recent collection of papers on Kant’s transcendental idealism, Dennis Schulting directs attention to the distinction between “Kant’s controversial doctrine of idealism, most notably his notion of ‘the thing-in-itself’ and its distinction from ‘appearance’, which is Kant’s term for an empirically real object but of which he also notoriously says that it is a ‘mere representation’.”⁴ The distinction between reality and appearance, which goes all the way back in the tradition, points to Parmenides early formulation of

the cognitive problem in terms of the identity of thought and being. According to the Parmenidean cognitive approach, any cognitive theory must include three elements: reality, or mind-independent reality, or again what is as it is, what is sometimes called the really real; then the appearance or, if there is a difference, the representation of that reality as it really is; and finally a relation of cognitive identity as the normative criterion of cognition. The Parmenidean approach further suggests the three main solutions to the cognitive problem are: epistemic skepticism, then metaphysical realism, and finally epistemic constructivism.

- 4 The influential Parmenidean approach echoes through the later tradition. Plato, who reacts to Parmenides, suggests two basic points. On the one hand, the forms or ideas are not unreal, but real, in fact the most real, or mind-independent, eternal, unchangeable reality, and appearances depend on or derive from them as the subjective manifestation of objective reality. On the other hand, if there is cognition, then on grounds of nature and nurture some selected individuals at least some of the time literally “see” reality.
- 5 Kant’s view that prior philosophy is dogmatic suggests that, like Descartes, he begins anew from the beginning. Yet Kant depends in many ways on selected predecessors, including Hume as well as Plato.⁵ Kant, like Plato, accepts a causal approach to cognition, or the view that reality causes appearances. But unlike Plato he rejects intellectual intuition.

2. Some contemporary reactions to the Kantian thing in itself

- 6 Kant, who thought he was misunderstood, suggests there is no difficulty in mastering the idea of the whole. But the critical philosophy has always been read from widely differing perspectives. A central difficulty consists in the recognizably Platonic problem of how to understand the thing in itself as the causal source of an empirically real object that is also a mere representation.
- 7 Kant’s view of reality is shrouded in technical language he often appears to utilize in imprecise fashion. His two aspects approach to causality through a conception of reality as the thing in itself that can without contradiction be thought as intelligible in its action and, in his words, “as sensible in the effects of that action as an appearance in the world of sense,” hence as not given in intuition as an appearance⁶ has never satisfied more than a very few observers.
- 8 Kant’s contemporaries interpret this view in many ways. Maimon, for instance, thinks the thing in itself functions only as an object of inquiry rather than as an independent, noumenal entity.⁷ This approach leads to cognitive skepticism since we can never penetrate beyond appearances to grasp mind-independent reality.
- 9 Maimon was countered by various forms of epistemic representationalism ultimately traceable to Parmenides’ conviction that we know being, or mind-independent reality. Representationalism and constructivism are incompatible epistemic approaches. In the critical period, Kant still uses representationalist language, which suggests that appearances are the visible side of an invisible reality. He later moved away from representationalism and towards constructivism. In the critical period, Kant suggested that “representation” could not even be defined.

- 10 In part in reaction to Maimon, representationalist interpretations of the critical philosophy were quickly formulated by Jacobi, Schulze, Schopenhauer, Beck and others. Jacobi, who relied on belief (*Glaube*), influentially defended realism against Kant in his book on Hume that appeared in the same year as the second edition of Kant's first *Critique*. His famous aphorism "Without the presupposition [of the "thing in itself,"] I was unable to enter into [Kant's] system, but with it I was unable to stay within it"⁸ suggests that Kant must inconsistently know reality he cannot know. Schulze, following Jacobi, thinks it is incoherent to posit a mind-independent object beyond experience as its cause. He argues Kant illegitimately relies on causality through the thing in itself that is the source of sensations. According to Reinhold, there is a basic distinction between the noumenon, which is a mere idea of reason, which always lies beyond experience, where it functions as a demand or ought, and things in themselves. The latter are mind-independent objects that are closer to phenomena than noumena. Kant's student, J. S. Beck, interpreted the thing in itself as merely another way to refer to the object that appears, as distinguished from a mysterious supersensible object that does not and cannot appear.⁹
- 11 The confused debate concerning the thing in itself point to contemporary efforts to gain clarity about the Kantian conception of reality. One suggestion is that if we cannot cognize reality, then the result is skepticism. Another is the view that Kant illegitimately makes claims about reality he cannot know. A third is to claim against Kant that the thing in itself in fact appears.

3. Is Kant a representationalist, a constructivist, or both?

- 12 I believe the main interpretive difficulty consists in reading Kant as either a representationalist, or as a constructivist. We can interpret Fichte, while Kant is still active, as seeking to formulate an updated, revised form of the Kantian view from a non-representationalist, constructivist perspective.
- 13 Kant lived in a period dominated by representational, causal theories due to various rationalists and empiricists. Representationalism is any form of the effort at least as old as Parmenides to demonstrate indirect cognition of reality through its representation, in short through representing the mind-independent real. My hypothesis is that he was initially attracted to representationalism before later inventing the so-called Copernican revolution, since, as he famously writes, he was unable to make progress in grasping a mind-independent object, in other words on the assumption that the subject depends on the object.
- 14 The various representational approaches to the critical philosophy share the view that we can make sense of the critical philosophy if and only if reality under the heading of the thing in itself in fact appears. This requires a solution of the cognitive problem along metaphysical realist lines. Though they are metaphysically realist passages in the first *Critique*, Kant is not consistent. In my view Kant's best moments, are devoted to the constructivist approach at which he barely hints, which is not often discussed in detail, but which was recognized by Kant's contemporaries (Reinhold, Schelling and Fichte) under the heading of the Copernican revolution.

4. Kant, Fichte and the rise of the modern cognitive subject

- 15 Representationalism and constructivism differ i. a. with respect to the cognitive subject. Descartes distinguishes at least implicitly between the widely known view of the subject as a spectator and the nearly unknown view of the subject as an actor. A representational approach to cognition supposes a passive subject to which something appears. A constructivist view of cognition is based on an active subject that “constructs” what it knows.
- 16 Hegel correctly points out that the critical philosophy “constitutes the foundation and the starting point of the new German philosophy [...]”¹⁰ Kant, Fichte, Hegel and in a different way Marx are all cognitive constructivists. Epistemic constructivism is a view that the subject knows only what it can be said to construct. The Kantian transcendental subject describes the general conditions of cognition in focusing on the logic as opposed to the psychology of cognition. Kant rejects so-called Lockean physiology, or what Husserl later calls “psychologism.” Though Kant explain the general possibility of cognition in general through a transcendental subject, he cannot explain, despite his interest in anthropology, how finite human beings are capable of cognition in his specific sense.

5. Fichte’s anthropological shift and the thing in itself

- 17 The Kantian subject is passive in receiving sensation and active in constructing a perceptual object. Fichte simply drops the thing in itself in featuring an account of experience in which the cognitive subject is solely active. As Hegel points out, Fichte explains experience and knowledge through a new view of the subject as practically finite, constrained in its action by its surroundings, but theoretically infinite, or wholly unconstrained, hence forever suspended, as it were, between what is and what ought to be.
- 18 Kant sketches an account of the interaction of the transcendental subject and reality as a third-person, causal account. Fichte reformulates the Kantian view as a first-person account of the interaction of subject and object in a statement of the axioms (*Grundsätze*), which begins the initial, most influential version of the Science of Knowledge.
- 19 According to the modern causal approach to perception, objects “cause” ideas in the mind that justify a reverse, anti-Platonic cognitive inference from the idea to the mind-independent object. Kant, who departs from this model, suggests a functional model in which external reality affects the subject, which in turn constructs empirical objects of perception and knowledge. Fichte’s turn away from Kant’s functional account of subjectivity and toward a new conception of finite human being as the philosophical subject leads to an account of ontology from a subjective point of view –roughly to a view of philosophy as systematic but “ungrounded”– and to a view of cognitive claims as intrinsically circular.
- 20 Fichte rejects the very idea of the thing in itself as “produced solely by free thought” and without any “reality whatever,”¹¹ hence a representationalist approach to the cognitive problem. He indicates his agreement with Kant’s Copernican turn, hence with

epistemic constructivism, in writing that “the [cognitive] object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object”.¹²

- 21 Kant’s conception of the subject as passive as well as active restates a form of the Cartesian approach to passive subjectivity as a philosophical fiction whose relation to finite human being cannot be described. Fichte reacts to Kant through an anthropological reformulation of the cognitive subject as intrinsically active.
- 22 Through the shift from the a priori to the a posteriori plane, Fichte is bound by the limits of finite human being. Fichte thinks the concept of a “thing in itself” as a mind-independent, external “cause” of sensations is indefensible on critical grounds. He breaks with Kant’s denial of “intellectual intuition” in invoking the finite subject’s presence to itself in two ways: theoretically as a cognizing subject and practically as a striving moral agent.
- 23 Fichte’s distinction between idealism and dogmatism refutes the Kantian view of the thing in itself. For Fichte, taken together representationalism and constructivism exhaust the possible approaches to cognition. According to Fichte, though neither approach can refute the other, dogmatism, which relies on the thing in itself, cannot explain experience.
- 24 Kant and Kantians often rely on “representation” (*Vorstellung*) to refer, as Heidegger suggests, to what is present in its absence, in short reality. Fichte uses the same term in a different way to refer to what is given in consciousness. The Fichtean theory of cognition is an account of experience understood as “The system of representations [*Vorstellungen*] accompanied by the feeling of necessity,” or again what “is also called experience....”.¹³ Though Fichte understands experience as a series of representations in consciousness, he rejects a causal approach in favor of the constructivist alternative that, according to this line of reasoning remains as the only possible approach. In other words, he follows Kant’s view that the subject must construct the cognitive object as a necessary condition of cognition.
- 25 Kant deduces a philosophical conception of the subject, which Fichte replaces through an anthropological shift. Kant’s transcendental deduction reaches a high point in his conception of the transcendental subject, or original synthetic unity of apperception as “the supreme principle of all use of the understanding”.¹⁴ According to Kant, the subject, or “I think” that “must be able to accompany all my representations” is a “pure apperception,” not “an empirical one”.¹⁵ Fichte, on the contrary, approaches the cognitive problem to begin with through finite human being in a social context.
- 26 According to Fichte, cognition depends on a subject that cannot be deduced but must be assumed. Fichte, who understands deduction as a progression from conditioned to condition, hence as regressive, invokes a pragmatic perspective in contrasting dogmatism and idealism. Though neither can refute the other, dogmatism cannot explain experience.¹⁶ The thing in itself is an arbitrary assumption that explains nothing, but through intellectual intuition the subject perceives itself as active.¹⁷ Idealism in this way explains experience through intellectual activity based on the necessary laws of the intellect.¹⁸ If the subject is independent and the object is dependent, then philosophy finally depends on subjective factors, according to Fichte on the kind of person one is.¹⁹

6. The Fichtean subject and ontology

- 27 Fichte's view of cognition based on an active but finite subject influenced Hegel, Marx, perhaps Dewey, and others.²⁰ Fichte's approach to the subject as intrinsically active further underlies his original conception of ontology.
- 28 In "The Aenesidemus Review," the *terminus a quo* of his position, Fichte prepares the ground for a new theory of ontology in claiming all philosophy must be traced back to a single principle: the subject. He notes, in tacitly denying Kant's rejection of intellectual intuition, that what is most certain is the self, or "I am," in adding that "all that is not-I is for the I only."²¹ Fichte's suggestion that what is not the subject is only for it points to a conception of reality as mind-dependent. This approach leads to a new understanding of objectivity. In the critical philosophy, objectivity takes two incompatible forms: as the mind-independent external object, or thing in itself, as well as the mind-dependent cognitive object of experience and knowledge. In Fichte's view, objectivity takes the single form of what is experienced in practice but understood theoretically as the result of the subject's activity.
- 29 According to Fichte, an explanation of experience requires an account of its ground in an object situated outside the possibility of experience.²² Kant's regressive analysis begins from the cognitive object in running from conditioned to condition thereof and ending in the subject (or transcendental unity of apperception), the highest point of transcendental philosophy. Fichte, who "inverts" the Kantian approach, begins not from the object but from the subject –more precisely, from the assumption that "a finite rational being has nothing beyond experience".²³
- 30 Since Fichte thinks the ground of all experience lies outside experience, he, unlike Reinhold, rejects epistemological foundationalism as a cognitive strategy.²⁴ His account of "The Axioms of the Entire Science of Knowledge"²⁵ begins in describing the task as seeking a first axiom, which, since it is first in a series of axioms, can be neither proven nor defined. "Our task is to discover the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first axiom of all human knowledge. This can be neither proved nor defined, if it is to be an absolutely primary axiom".²⁶
- 31 The term "ground," which for Fichte does not refer to epistemological foundationalism, can be interpreted two ways: as the cognitive object, which, in a causal framework, is the cause or source of experience; or again, as the subject, which experiences. According to Fichte, a finite rational being cannot cognize anything beyond the limits of experience, for instance, what lies beyond these limits in the form of an object.²⁷ As for Kant, so for Fichte: one simply cannot know anything about mind-independent reality, which lies outside experience. But for Fichte, unlike Kant, the thing in itself plays no cognitive role.
- 32 Fichte's turn away from the Kantian thing in itself has three consequences. First, following Kant, whose precise view is unclear, in accepting epistemic constructivism he gives up metaphysical realism for empirical realism. It has already been noted that metaphysical realism, which goes back at least to Parmenides, runs throughout the Western tradition and remains popular in the debate. Sophisticated thinkers continue to believe to know means to grasp the mind-independent world as it is. Second, despite Fichte's retention of Kantian terminology, and despite his attention to "The Deduction of Representation," he abandons representation, hence representationalism.²⁸ For Kant,

“representation” and “appearance” are apparently synonymous terms. All appearances are phenomena, but only some phenomena are appearances. A phenomenon is an appearance if and only if there is something that appears. An appearance is a representation if any and only if it successfully depicts the mind-independent world. If one gives up the thing in itself, then one can no longer refer to reality as appearing, since in this case experience consists of phenomena only. In other words, in the absence of reality understood within a causal framework, there are no representations, since reality does not appear. Third, in ruling out a mind-independent cognitive object as an explanatory principle, Fichte’s only remaining recourse, on pain of falling into skepticism, is to appeal to the subject, or in his terminology, the self (das Ich).

- 33 The result, as Fichte quickly points out, is a comparatively simplified approach to cognition. In the *Herz-letter*, Kant suggests an analysis of the relation of the representation to the object in a triadic relationship between the subject, the thing itself, and the empirical object given in experience and knowledge.²⁹ As a result of his turn away from the thing in itself, Fichte recasts the cognitive relationship as dyadic.
- 34 The immediate occasion for Fichte to state the first version of his theory was provided by his review of Schulze's study of Reinhold. Since Schulze used the pseudonym Aenesidemus, this text is better known as the *Aenesidemus-review*. In his *Elementarphilosophie* Reinhold reformulated the Kantian position in introducing a principle of representation (*Vorstellung*). “In consciousness the presentation is distinguished by the subject from subject and object, and related to both.”³⁰ Schulze objected that Reinhold had failed to observe the asymmetry in the relation of the so-called representation to the subject and object of experience. Although representation occurs in and is in this sense identical with the subject, it differs from the object that it represents. In his review, Fichte endorses Schulze’s criticism, but rejects the latter’s skeptical conclusions.
- 35 Fichte reformulates Reinhold’s principle as the claim that the “representation is related to the object as an effect to its cause, and to the subject as an accident to its substance.”³¹ This statement gives, in the compass of a single sentence, the outlines of an ontology of consciousness based on two components only: subject, object, and their interrelation. It is this same ontology that Fichte further develops in the initial version of the WL and which is the basis of his entire position.
- 36 Fichte justifies his rival deduction of representation, in fact a rejection of representation, by his remark that Kant fails to prove that representations possess objective validity, or in other words successfully goes beyond mere appearance, and hence fails to demonstrate his theory. Fichte’s alternative deduction presupposes inter alia three points. First, there is nothing higher than the subject or self, which functions as his ultimate explanatory concept.³² Second, in philosophy we must start from the subject that cannot be deduced from something else, hence simply cannot be deduced.³³ Fichte, who takes the human subject as a given, rejects the Kantian effort to deduce the transcendental subject. Finally, in Fichte’s theory, deduction takes the form of a direct, genetic demonstration focused on the self.³⁴ In short, in abandoning the conception of the thing in itself, or the mind-independent external world as a presupposition, he gives up the Kantian aim of analyzing the relationship of the contents of mind to the world in favor of a so-called “deduction” of knowledge solely from the point of view of the subject.

- 37 Fichte's deduction, like Kant's, is extremely complex. We need not describe it here in detail. Suffice it to say that, starting from the hypothesis that the self, or subject, is active, he insists on two main points: only the subject is left when all objects have been eliminated by the power of abstraction, and the object or not-self is that from which abstraction can be made. Either can be considered as determined by the other, and conversely. The deduction concludes with the claim that the subject is finite (or determined), or on the contrary, infinite, hence determining, and that in both cases it is reciprocally related merely to itself. According to Fichte, theoretical philosophy can go no further. In summarizing his deduction, Fichte, unlike Kant, concludes subject and object mutually determine each other.
- 38 Fichte's turn to a post-Kantian form of constructivism follows from his reaction to Reinhold and Schulze in the *Aenesidemus* review. His analysis of the so-called "Axioms of the Entire Science of Knowledge" is an obviously revised version of Kant's transcendental cognitive subject. In this first part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte distinguishes three axioms: the first, absolutely unconditioned axiom, which postulates that the subject is solely active and never passive; the second axiom, conditioned as to content, which is his version of the Kantian reception of sensation through the sensory manifold; and the third axiom, conditioned as to form, which is Fichte's restatement of the Kantian analysis of the categorial synthesis of the sensory contents as a cognizable object.

7. On Fichte's deduction

- 39 Fichte's deduction of representation (*Vorstellung*) is clearly intended to replace Kant's transcendental deduction. His deduction identifies the cognitive subject, object as well as their interrelation. Fichte suggests that the subject's consciousness (of the cognitive object) as well as its self-consciousness are both explicable through the supposition of its activity through which it constructs both the object as well as itself in objectified form. Since Fichte's analysis is perhaps unduly complex, for present purposes a reconstruction of some main points will suffice.
- 40 Fichte begins from a logical proposition, which he takes as true and then later deduces through an obviously circular argument. According to Fichte, logical identity ($A = A$), which is absolutely certain, is not as an existential claim but rather a necessary connection. The statement "I am I" as absolutely valid, since in any explanation of the basis of empirical consciousness the self (*das Ich*)—again, his name for the subject—is presupposed. The activity of the human mind, which is supposedly both the agent and the product of action, or again its origin and its result, is position. According to Fichte, "action and deed are one and the same".³⁵ Fichte here is building on Descartes. The "I am," which for Descartes is an existential claim, for Fichte "expresses an Act" (*ibid.*). Fichte's self is an absolute subject, which posits that itself and the finite self exist only as self-consciousness. It follows that $A = A$ amounts to the claim that the self posits itself absolutely, since this applies to reality.
- 41 Fichte situates his view of the self as the source of all reality with respect to the ongoing debate. He thinks his view has affinities with the Cartesian *cogito* and Reinhold's principle of representation. He further thinks his view was adopted earlier in Kant's transcendental deduction. The object is the result of, hence identical with, the subject's activity, and any object is no more nor less than the subject in external form.

- 42 Fichte continues his analysis in an account of the second axiom, which, like its predecessor, cannot be proven, and also cannot be derived from the first axiom. The overall account serves to identify the cognitive object from the perspective of the subject, hence not as it supposedly is, in beginning, as for the first axiom, with a fact of empirical consciousness.
- 43 The analysis of the second axiom follows that of the first axiom. According to Fichte, though it cannot be proven, everyone will accept the proposition that $\sim A \neq A$. It follows that the absolute and unconditional opposition, which is a fact given in consciousness, must simply be posited. Fichte further observes that counter-positing is possible only on the basis of positing, or the identity of the self. This point establishes the priority of the subject over the object, which is possible only through the opposition to, or rather the negation of, the subject. Yet the subject and object, or the self and what opposes it, are not only different but also unified, since opposition presupposes the unity of consciousness. In other words, ontological difference rests on cognitive unity. From the perspective of the subject, the not-self, or object, is merely what is opposed to the self, or subject. In sum, the proposition “I am” is equivalent to $A = A$, and $\sim A \neq A$, or the principle of opposition, which presupposes negation.
- 44 Fichte has so far sketched the basis of a novel form of subject-object ontology from the subject’s angle of vision. The first axiom, in following Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception, asserts the centrality of subjectivity. The second axiom describes sensation, or formless content, through the subject. In his account of the third axiom, conditioned as to form, Fichte restates Kant’s Copernican view that we know only what we construct through an account of the interaction between the other two axioms.
- 45 In this passage, Fichte restates in many different ways his central insight in stressing his resolutely first-person perspective. According to Fichte, this interaction must be understood from the perspective of a subject that is theoretically unlimited but practically limited by its surroundings.
- 46 The analysis is divided into three parts (A, B, C). In part A, Fichte suggests that the subject and object are opposed. In part B, he describes his task as discovering, on the basis of an act of the mind (Y), the relation between subject and object (X) that preserves the identity of consciousness. The obvious answer is that subject and object limit each other in virtue of what Fichte calls their “divisibility.” This is an early form of what later becomes a theory of dialectical interaction between human individuals in a social context. In part C, Fichte examines his proposed solution. According to Fichte, consciousness contains the whole of reality; that is, insofar as reality is not attributed to the object, subject and object are posited within the subject. In other words, the context or surroundings are known through the interaction with the subject on the level of consciousness and from which they are inseparable. Fichte suggests that it is possible to bring together subject and object in an account of knowledge if and only if we take into account synthesis, or counter-positing, and the so-called act of combination. In that case, subject and object can be understood as interacting from the angle of vision of the subject. In other words, he appears to be trying to grasp the cognitive subject as simultaneously limited and unlimited by its surroundings, and on that basis to understand knowledge as arising in the interaction between the subject and object, leading to consciousness.
- 47 Since the third axiom concerns synthesis, Fichte regards his account as answering Kant’s question about the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments. According to

Fichte, all syntheses are rooted in the interrelation between subject and object. Further according to Fichte, his revised version of the critical philosophy turns on the view of the absolute self as “wholly unconditioned and incapable of determination by any higher thing”.³⁶ Since a philosophy that opposes anything to the subject is dogmatic, or not critical, Fichte sharply rejects the Kantian conception of reality, or the thing in itself, as inconsistent with the critical philosophy and akin to Spinozism, which grounds consciousness in a substance. As a further consequence of rejecting the thing in itself, he also rejects Kant’s effort to combine both subjective and objective sources in a single cognitive approach. In short, Fichte thinks that Kant inconsistently relies on a mind-independent noumenon that is incompatible with the critical philosophy. This suggests that Kant is finally a dogmatist and that Fichte’s revision is the initial version of a view that is finally consistent with Kant’s position. On Fichte’s reading of the critical philosophy, the cognitive object –hence experience– must be explained solely from the perspective of the subject. According to Fichte, for whom the only two possible approaches are criticism and dogmatism, Kant inconsistently seeks to straddle this unbridgeable divide. For Fichte, who follows a strict reading of the critical philosophy, it is not possible to go beyond the subject.

8. Conclusion: Fichte, the subject and cognition

- 48 A summary of the Fichtean view of the subject which emerges from his reaction to Kant and others in the contemporary debate through this complicated train of reasoning can now be rapidly sketched. Fichte, who like Kant begins with the problem of the conditions of knowledge and experience, considers the finite human subject from two perspectives. As a finite human being, a person is both a theoretical entity, namely, a subject of consciousness, who is unlimited, and a practical, or limited moral, being. As a real finite being, the individual is limited through the relation to the external world. Fichte further invokes the concept of absolute being on the philosophical or meta-experiential level, as a philosophical concept useful in the explanation of experience.
- 49 To the types of finite human being or so-called self (*das Ich*) Fichte associates kinds of activity. As theoretical an individual posits, as practical he strives, and as absolute he acts in theoretical independence of his surroundings. The concept of an ideally existent absolute being is justified as a means to understand the experience of the really existent finite being. Forms of activity need to be subtended on the theoretical plane by activity in general, and from the side of realism a finite human being is above all a practical being. But from the idealistic perspective, the concept of pure activity is identified with the absolute self, an acknowledged philosophical construct in Fichte's discussion. Yet, since from this perspective a view of finite human being follows from the concept of absolute self, Fichte may be said to “deduce” the concept of the individual from that of the absolute. As he notes in a letter: “My absolute self is clearly not the *individual* [...]. But *the individual must be deduced from the absolute self*.”³⁷
- 50 Fichte’s rethinking of the subject removes the ambiguity in the critical philosophy about the status of the noumenon, or mind-independent real, which Kant inconsistently describes as uncognizable but as also indispensable for cognition. Fichte’s shift to cognitive explanation from the perspective of subjectivity or the finite human subject overcomes some problems in the critical philosophy, but leads to others.

- 51 An obvious difficulty in the Fichtean position results from the anthropological reformulation of the subject that reinstates the psychologistic concern that Kant is at pains to avoid. An important virtue of Fichte's reformulation of the critical philosophy lies in its effort to remove the basic ambiguity in the critical philosophy due to its simultaneous commitment to epistemic representationalism as well as metaphysical realism, on the one hand, and epistemic constructivism and empirical realism on the other.
- 52 This point can be explained in referring to the triple distinction between a phenomenon, an appearance, and a representation. In simple terms, a phenomenon is simply given to consciousness but does not refer beyond itself, an appearance is given to consciousness and further refers beyond itself but does not necessarily represent or correctly depict that to which it refers, and a representation refers to and correctly depicts that to which it refers beyond itself.
- 53 Now Kant, whose position evolved in the writing of the first *Critique*, is simultaneously committed in his treatise to incompatible cognitive theories. In simplest terms he is both a representationalist and an anti-representationalist or again an anti-representational epistemic constructivist. On the one hand, he is committed to epistemic representationalism, or the view that to know requires a causal account, or more precisely a reverse, anti-Platonic inference from the appearance to what appears, hence a representation of reality. On the other hand, since, as he says, there has never been any progress toward grasping a mind-independent object, he is committed as an alternative to the view that we can base cognition on epistemic constructivism, or the construction of the mind-dependent object.
- 54 Plato is a cognitive anti-representationalist, who rejects the backward causal inference from effect cause in favor of intellectual intuition of reality. Modern philosophy reverses the Platonic rejection of the backward causal inference in featuring it in a series of efforts to demonstrate epistemic representation of the mind-independent real. Epistemic representation of the real, which is on the agenda at least since Parmenides, is often asserted but as Kant indicated has never been demonstrated. Hegel, for instance, points to Kant's inability to explain the relation between uncognizable reality and the cognitive subject, or in other words the inability to explain the unbridgeable gap between ourselves and cognition, subjectivity and objectivity, thought and being, the knower and the known.³⁸
- 55 Fichte rejects Kantian representationalism in criticizing a causal approach to knowledge. Fichte's enormous contribution lies in rejecting the representationalist causal model, hence in removing the inconsistency in Kant's simultaneous but inconsistent commitment to two rival views of cognition in restating the Kantian epistemic constructivist model on the basis of the subject's activity. In this way, Fichte sets the agenda running throughout post-Kantian German idealism that consists in an effort to restate the a priori Kantian constructivist approach to cognition in an acceptable a posteriori form.
- 56 Fichte's view of cognition is, however, deeply problematic. His solution consists in replacing the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity through the single explanatory theme of subjectivity. This improves on Kant's third person account of the relation of subject to object in an account from the first person perspective of experience in Fichte's technical sense of the term. Yet in revealing the limits of a quasi-Cartesian approach to objectivity through subjectivity, he reduces objectivity to subjectivity so to

speak. Modern philosophy features the view that the road to objectivity runs through subjectivity. The difficulty lies in understanding how to combine subjectivity and objectivity within a single cognitive theory. I conclude that, though Fichte clearly improves on Kant, he fails to solve the basic Cartesian problem of the relation of subjectivity to objectivity within cognition, a problem that has never been solved.

NOTES

1. GWL, GA I/2, 389 (Fichte, J. G., *Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 222).
2. See Rockmore, T., *German Idealism as Constructivism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
3. See, e. g., Philonenko, A., *La Liberté humaine dans la philosophie de Fichte*, Paris: Vrin, 1980.
4. Schulting, D. & Verburgt, J., *Kant's Idealism: New Interpretations Of A Controversial Doctrine*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.
5. See Ameriks, K., "Kant's Idealism on a Moderate Interpretation," in: Schulting, D. & Verburgt, J., *Kant's Idealism*, p. 36.
6. KrV B 566. (Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Guyer, P. & Woods, A., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 535, from now on CPR).
7. See Maimon, S., *Essay on the Transcendental Philosophy*, London: Continuum, 2010, p. 249.
8. See Jacobi, F. H., *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus. Ein Gespräch*. Breslau: Gottlieb Löwe, 1787, p. 223.
9. See Kant, I., *Correspondence*, translated and edited by A. Zweig, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 22.
10. Hegel, G. W. F., *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni, 2010, p. 40.
11. EE, GA I/4, 190 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 10).
12. EE, GA I/4, 184-5 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 4).
13. EE, GA I/4, 186 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 4).
14. KrV B 136, CPR 248.
15. KrV B 132, CPR 246.
16. EE, GA I/4, 198 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 19).
17. EE, GA I/4, 196 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 17).
18. EE, GA I/4, 199-200 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 21).
19. EE, GA I/4, 195 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 16).
20. Fichte influenced Hegel's view of the cognitive object as constructed by the plural subject in an ongoing historical process that the latter briefly describes in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Fichte further influenced Marx's approach to modern industrial society as constructed by finite human beings who objectify and alienate themselves in what they do within the confines of modern industrial society.
21. Rez.Ae, GA I/2, 62, (Fichte, J. G., *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed., Daniel Breazeale, Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1988, p. 73).
22. See *First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge* §2 (GA I/4, 187-8)
23. EE, GA I/4, 188 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 8).

24. It is therefore ironic that Fichte was understood as a cognitive foundationalist by the early German romantics, who refuted the theory they attributed to him in opting for antifoundationalism. Hölderlin, Fichte's former student, played an important early role in this anti-Fichtean reaction. See Hölderlin, F., "Judgement and Being" (1795), in: *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. T. Pfau, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
25. "Grundsätze der gesammten [sic] Wissenschaftslehre". The term „Grundsatz“ is sometimes imprecisely translated as „Fundamental principle“ (see i.a. *Science of Knowledge*, p. 93), but actually this German word is Wolff's German translation for the Latin (and originally Greek) "axioma". Further "Lehrsatz" (theorem) is often translated as "discourse" (see i.a. *Science of Knowledge*, p. 120). This translation makes it difficult for the English reader to see that the original German text says that the *Foundations of the entire Science of Knowledge* follows a geometrical model of demonstrations, since it is composed of three axioms (Grundsätze) and eight theorems (Lehrsätze). It follows that Fichte is not a foundationalist (See Acosta, E., "Transformation of the Kantian table of the categories in Fichte's Foundations of the entire science of knowledge of 1794/95", in: *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía*, vol. 33, Is. 1, p. 113, n. 47).
26. *GWL*, GA I/2, 255 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 93).
27. See *First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge* §3 (GA I/4, 188-9).
28. See Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, *Critique de la représentation: Étude sur Fichte*, Paris: Vrin, 2000.
29. *KrV B xxvii*, see *CPR* 115.
30. Reinhold, K. L., *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Missverständnisse der Philosophen, I: Das Fundament der Eelementarphilosophie betreffend*, (1790), p. 167.
31. *Rez.Ae*, GA I/2, 60 (*Fichte: Early Writings*, p. 73).
32. *GWL*, GA I/2, 390 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 224).
33. *GWL*, GA I/2, 426 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 262).
34. *GWL*, GA I/2, 399-400, 434 (*Science of Knowledge*, pp. 233, 269).
35. *GWL*, GA I/2, 259 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 97).
36. *GWL*, GA I/2, 279 (*Science of Knowledge*, p. 117).
37. *GA III/2*, 392, letter from Fichte to Jacobi of August 30, 1795 (emphasis in original).
38. See Hegel, G. W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, New York: Oxford University Press, §73, 1967, pp. 46-47.

ABSTRACTS

This paper will consider the nature and explanatory limits of the Fichtean view of subjectivity in the epistemic context of German idealism. I will argue that Fichte's revision of the Kantian conception of the subject is both a basic contribution to the cognitive problem as well as fatally flawed, hence not a viable solution to the cognitive problem. Fichte's distinctive revision of the Kantian subject goes too far in making the objective overly, even wholly dependent on the subjective dimension. After Kant and after Fichte we still lack an effective solution for the problem of cognition.

INDEX

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