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# Fichte, Kant and the Copernican turn

Fichte, Kant y el giro copernicano

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**Abstract:** The paper studies Fichte's views of the cognitive problem, especially his account of the three fundamental principles. I argue three points: first, Kant's position includes two incompatible approaches to knowledge I will be calling representationalism and constructivism; second, in his early writings Fichte defends a version of the so-called Copernican Revolution or Copernican turn, more specifically a revised conception of "representation"; and, third, though Fichte's version of the Copernican turn improves on Kant's, it is not a satisfactory solution to the cognitive problem.

**Keywords:** Representation; constructivism; theory of the subject; Copernican Turn.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo estudia la consideración fichteana del problema del conocimiento especialmente a partir de sus tres axiomas de 1794. Primero se argumenta que la posición kantiana contiene dos abordajes al problema del conocimiento que son incompatibles entre sí: representacionalismo y constructivismo; en segundo lugar se sostiene que Fichte defiende en sus primeros escritos una versión de la así llamada revolución copernicana o giro copernicano o, dicho más específicamente, una concepción revisada del concepto de "representación"; en tercer y último lugar se muestra que la versión fichteana del giro copernicano, a pesar de ser un mejoramiento de la kantiana, no es una solución satisfactoria al problema del conocimiento.

**Palabras clave:** Representación; constructivismo; teoría del sujeto; giro copernicano.

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Attention to the conception of the subject is central to the modern debate. In a recent paper, I discussed the Fichtean subject in the epistemic context of German idealism. I argued 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. More precisely, Fichte's distinctive revision of the Kantian subject goes too far in making cognition overly, even wholly, dependent on the subjective dimension.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will extend the analysis of the Fichtean subject with reference to the so-called Copernican turn.

Fichte's view of subjectivity arises in the context of the German idealist effort to formulate a cognitive theory of a new type. In rejecting cognitive approaches committed to metaphysical realism, Fichte participates in the effort to rethink cognition from an idealist perspective. For purposes of this paper, I will understand idealism from a Kantian perspective, in informal terms, as the anti-metaphysical, epistemically-constructivist view that we know only what we in some way "construct."

The paper begins with remarks on the origin of the cognitive problem in ancient Greece, before turning to the critical philosophy. I next depict Fichte as defending Kantian Copernicanism, or constructivism, and rejecting Kantian representationalism. The paper then studies Fichte's views of the cognitive problem, and his account of the three axioms (*Grundsätze*)<sup>2</sup> in his *Grundlage der*

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1. See T. ROCKMORE, *Fichte, Kant, the Cognitive Subject, and Epistemic Constructivism*, "Revista de Estudios sobre Fichte" 12 (invierno 2016) [<https://journals.openedition.org/ref/675>].
  2. The term "Grundsatz" is sometimes imprecisely translated as "fundamental principle" (see i.a. *Science of Knowledge*, 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*, 120). This translation makes it difficult for the English reader to see that the *Foundations of the entire Science of Knowledge*, as Acosta suggests, follows a geometrical model of demonstrations, since it is composed of three axioms (*Grundsätze*) and eight theorems (*Lehrsätze*). Hence, it follows that Fichte is not a foundationalist. See E. ACOSTA, *Transformation of the Kantian table of the categories in Fichte's Foundations of the entire science of knowledge of 1794/95*, "Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía" 33/1 (2016) 113, n. 47.

*gesamnten Wissenschaftslehre*. I will be arguing three points: first, Kant's position includes two incompatible approaches to knowledge I will be calling representationalism and constructivism; second, Fichte defends a version of the so-called Copernican Revolution or Copernican turn, more specifically a revised conception of "representation" (*Vorstellung*), which no longer means "accurate representation"<sup>3</sup> but rather, in Kantian language, "the appearance of something that appears"; and, third, though Fichte's version of the Copernican Revolution improves on Kant's, it is not a satisfactory solution to the cognitive problem.

#### PARMENIDES AND THE COGNITIVE PROBLEM

Theories are formulated to resolve problems and cognitive theories are formulated to resolve what I will be calling the cognitive problem. The cognitive problem arises in ancient Greek philosophy and ramifies throughout the later discussion. Parmenides invented metaphysical realism, or the claim that to know is to know mind-independent reality as it is beyond mere *appearance*.

In his poem *On Nature* Parmenides formulates a version of the epistemological problem that later echoes through the entire tradition in writing: *to gar estin noein kai einai*.<sup>4</sup> His claim that knowing and being are the same anticipates the so-called identity thesis often identified with German idealism, especially Hegel. The claim for the identity of knowing and being suggests there are only three main solutions to the cognitive problem: metaphysical realism, epistemic skepticism and epistemic constructivism. Metaphysical realism is the view that to know requires a grasp of what is as it is, or, in another formulation, mind-independent reality. Epistemic skepticism is the view that, since we cannot grasp what is as it is, knowledge is not possible but impossible. Epistemic constructivism, which arose much later in the modern debate, gives up metaphysical

3. See M. WILLIAMS, *Pragmatism, Sellars and Truth*, in J. O'SHEA (ed.), *Sellars and his Legacy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016) 223-260.

4. DK 28 B 3, Clem. Alex. Strom. 440, 12; Plot. Enn. 5, 1, 8.

realism as the cognitive standard in retaining the identity of knowing and being. Epistemic constructivism is the view that, though we cannot grasp metaphysical reality, we can grasp, hence know, what we construct.

Metaphysical realism runs through the entire tradition starting in ancient Greece in providing a widely influential standard of cognition. Plato's commitment to metaphysical realism is central to his notorious theory of forms (or ideas). He rejects a causal approach to knowledge in denying the backward inference from effect to cause. In the *Republic* he suggests knowledge requires intellectual intuition. In other words, knowledge is only possible if some among us, in his view philosophers, can intuit reality. Metaphysical realism remains influential in the present debate. Thus in his internal realist phase, Putnam defends the view, anticipated in the apocryphal story of the blind men and the elephant, that different theories provide different perspectives on the same mind-independent world.<sup>5</sup>

#### A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Kant suggests that it is easy to interpret a position from the angle of vision of the whole.<sup>6</sup> But there has never been more than minimal agreement about how to understand the critical philosophy. Kant is difficult to interpret for several reasons. He does not write precisely; he has difficulty in making up his mind; when his view evolves he fails to discard materials that no longer accurately depict his position, and so on. It has not been noticed or sufficiently noticed that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant presents two inconsistent approaches to cognition side by side: cognitive representationalism and cognitive constructivism.

Translation is crucial here. The term *Vorstellung* can be translated as either "presentation" or "representation." If it is rendered as "presentation," then it refers to what is present to mind only. If

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5. See H. PUTNAM, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1981).

6. See I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer, Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1998) B xliv, 123.

it is rendered as “representation” then it refers to correct depiction of a mind-external object as it is. Kant employs “representation” to refer to a cognitive grasp of the world. Fichte uses the same term to refer to what is present to mind without reference to the external world. I come back to this point below.

#### KANT ON REPRESENTATIONALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

A phenomenon is what arises within mind for whatever reason. According to Kant, there cannot be an appearance without something that appears.<sup>7</sup> An appearance is the appearance of something including representations. A representation is the correct or accurate appearance of something however defined. Since things in themselves do not appear, they can be thought, as Kant says, without contradiction, but neither experienced nor known.<sup>8</sup>

Representationalism and constructivism relate differently to metaphysical realism. Representationalism invokes metaphysical realism as its cognitive criterion. Constructivism abandons metaphysical realism in claiming to know only what we construct.

It has already been pointed out that Plato denies the backward inference from effect to cause in invoking intellectual intuition of the real. Modern philosophy rehabilitates the backward causal inference in returning to a causal approach to cognition in Descartes and others. According to Descartes, clear and distinct ideas are effects on whose basis we can reliably infer to the mind-independent objects as their cause.

Kant is mainly understood against the background of modern philosophers. In following Kant’s suggestion, the critical philosophy is often seen as focused on a response to Hume. Kant, who is committed to Newtonian mechanics, thinks that Hume’s attack on causality undermines modern science. Since Hume’s skepticism is directed against empiricism, this approach suggests Kant aims to reestablish it. In that case there are other important influences

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7. See I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxvi, 115.

8. *Ibidem*.

as well. Kant's claim to know Plato better than he knew himself<sup>9</sup> calls attention to his relation to Platonism, hence to metaphysical realism.

What I am calling representationalism is Kant's version of the influential modern causal approach to cognition. In a causal approach the mind-independent object is the cause of which the representation is the effect for which mind-independent reality is the cause. Representationalism and a causal approach to cognition go hand in hand. Plato rejects representationalism as well as a causal approach to cognition in favor of intuitionism. The Platonic rejections of intuition, representation, and causality are overturned in the modern debate.

Kant is often described, incorrectly in my view, as a representationalist.<sup>10</sup> In the first *Critique* Kant mentions representation in a cognitive sense in many passages. Representationalism is popular throughout the modern debate, including during the period when Kant was active. If Kant is a representationalist, then he is committed to the view that the thing in itself (or noumenon) is the cause and the representation is the effect.

It does not follow that, if Kant discusses representationalism, he is committed to it. Kant also discusses constructivism, which is

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9. See I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 370, 396.

10. See, e. g., B. LONGUENESSE, *Kant and the Capacity To Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998) 17. "Kant's first formulation of the problem which eventually becomes that of the transcendental deduction of the categories in the *Critique* is to be found in his Letter to Marcus Herz of February 21, 1772. The problem of the relation between a priori concepts and given objects is the occasion for a more general inquiry into the relation between a representation and its object, an inquiry taken up again, almost word for word, nine years later in the *Transcendental Deduction*. However, the two texts differ in a fundamental respect. While the Letter to Herz presents the relation between a representation and its object as a causal relation between two heterogeneous entities, the representation that is 'within' the mind and the object which is 'outside' it, the *Critique* internalizes the relation between the representation and the object within representation itself, so that the problem assumes a new meaning. This fundamental shift is what I now want to examine." Note that Longuenesse, who closely follows Kant, is, like many Kantians, apparently mainly interested in understanding the critical philosophy as a categorial analysis of experience and not in its role as a solution to the general problem of knowledge.

inconsistent with cognitive representationalism. According to Kant, there has never been any progress toward grasping a mind-independent object. That means, in Kantian language, that we cannot show that we can cognize the metaphysical real. This inference is consistent with Kant's view that the thing in itself, or noumenon, is the cause of which sensory intuition is the appearance, or effect. Yet no road leads from the effect to the cause, or from the appearance to what appears. Hence representationalism in Kant's formulation fails.

If Kant had no other cognitive approach, then we would remember him today as an important modern representationalist, even as the thinker who brought representationalism to a high point and an end. And the epistemological quest would end in cognitive skepticism. Yet he has another, more important approach to cognition, or epistemic constructivism, that is often mentioned but only rarely studied in any detail. I point out in passing that the most detailed study of Kantian constructivism comes to the conclusion that Kant was unaware of the Copernican theory.<sup>11</sup>

#### ON KANT'S COPERNICAN TURN

Epistemic constructivism and epistemic representationalism are epistemic alternatives. Epistemic constructivism, at which I have only been hinting so far, is a second best theory, more precisely a cognitive approach that appears plausible as an alternative if representationalism fails. Now it cannot be demonstrated that representationalism is false. Virtually any representational claim about the way the world is could conceivably be correct. It is possible, though not probable, that, say, through a miracle, supposed representations of reality, say the claim that the earth is flat, are not false but true. Yet, as Kant points out, after some two and a half millennia of effort no longer appears promising.

Kant, who seems to harbor no doubts about what the future

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11. See H. BLUMENBERG, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, transl. by R. Wallace (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000) 607.

will bring, who abandons the effort stretching from pre-Socratic philosophy to the late seventeenth century to represent reality, formulates the so-called Copernican revolution to fill the void caused by the inability to demonstrate knowledge of mind-independent objects. The “Copernican revolution” is a term already in use by Reinhold and Schelling to refer to the critical philosophy when Kant was active. Surprisingly, Marx uses it as well.<sup>12</sup>

Kant formulates the so-called Copernican turn in a single passage in several very brief claims. According to Kant, mathematics and natural science reached the secure path of science through a revolution, not, say, a developmental process. He has in mind a similar revolution for metaphysics understood as “rational cognition.” This has not been possible up to now, Kant says, in virtue of the assumption that “all our cognition must conform to the objects.”<sup>13</sup> I understand this statement as a clear reference to metaphysical realism.

In other words, though it was assumed that the criterion of cognition is metaphysical realism, in practice this approach has always failed to yield cognition a priori through concepts. I add, in going beyond what Kant says, that it further fails to yield cognition at all since it has never been shown how to cognize a mind-independent object, nor how to grasp the metaphysically real.

If this is correct, then it seems plausible that Kant’s central aim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, since epistemic representationalism fails, to provide a replacement theory through his conception of epistemic constructivism, or the so-called Copernican revolution. To avoid cognitive skepticism, Kant suggests as an experiment “the objects must conform to our cognition.”<sup>14</sup> He does not think this

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12. “Similarly, first Machiavelli and Campanella, then later Hobbes, Spinoza, Hugo Grotius, through to Rousseau, Fichte and Hegel began to consider the state through human eyes and deduced its natural laws from reason and experience and not from theology, just like Copernicus, who disregarded the fact that Joshua had ordered the sun to stop on Gabaon and the moon above the valley of Ajalon.” K. MARX, *The Leading Article of the Kölnische Zeitung*, in D. MCLELLAN (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1977) 19.

13. I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xvi xvi, 110.

14. *Ibidem*.

will make cognition possible, but rather that this will, as he says, “agree better”<sup>15</sup> with the possibility of a priori cognition.

Three points are important here. First, Kant seems to have in mind a geometrical model. In Euclidean geometry, the construction of a single object, for instance, an isosceles triangle, proves the existence of the entire class of objects. Kant, who thinks there is only a single geometry, believes the a priori construction of geometrical objects justifies a posteriori inference about the objects of experience and, on this approach, knowledge. Second, post-Kantian German idealists, who agree we cannot cognize reality, reject the a priori cognitive model in favor of a posteriori cognitive models. In other words, they accept the general Kantian view that we cannot grasp mind-independent reality, in Kant’s view the thing in itself, but we can only know what we construct. Third, the effort to formulate an acceptable version of the constructivist approach begins in modern philosophy in Hobbes, Vico and independently in Kant. German idealism is usually thought to begin after Kant, according to Franks in Reinhold’s reaction to the critical philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Yet if constructivism is idealist, then Kant is already an idealist, and the German idealist tradition can be described as an ongoing effort by Kant, Fichte, Hegel and others to formulate a constructivist approach to cognition.<sup>17</sup>

#### ON FICHTE’S COPERNICAN TURN

I have so far pointed to the relations between epistemic representationalism, epistemic constructivism, and metaphysical realism. I have suggested that, if not earlier, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant rejects representationalism in favor of constructivism. Kantian constructivism, which features a theoretical subject, is *a priori*. Fichte’s subject, which features a practical subject, is *a posteriori*.

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15. *Ibidem*.

16. See P. FRANKS, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2005).

17. See, for this argument, T. ROCKMORE, *German Idealism as Constructivism* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016).

Fichte follows but also transforms Kantian a priori constructivism into a posteriori constructivism.

Kant's position arises in his response to modern thinkers such as Hume, Leibniz, Locke and Wolff, and ancient thinkers such as Plato and by implication Parmenides. Fichte's position arises in reaction to Kant as well as to such important contemporaries as Schelling, and slightly earlier Spinoza, and more minor figures including Schulze, Reinhold, Maimon, and others.

It would be useful to follow the interaction between the different thinkers active in the post-Kantian debate on which Fichte draws. Kant, who holds that his position is misunderstood by his contemporaries, took steps to correct that misunderstanding in writing the *Prolegomena*, which was intended as a simplified version of his view, in formulating the basis of a theory about how to interpret a philosophical text, in preparing the B edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and so on. Suffice it to say here that Fichte's position arises in his effort running throughout his writings to present Kant's position that he, like Kant, thinks is misunderstood.

Kant suggests that an original thinker often knows how to work with but is unable to formulate an original insight. Fichte presents himself as the only one to understand the critical philosophy, in any case as someone who understands it even better than Kant. His view differs from Kant's in numerous ways. Though Kant was one of the first philosophers to teach anthropology in Germany, he typically seeks to isolate his conception of the epistemic subject from finite human being. In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant deduces the subject as an epistemic function that is not and should be conflated with a finite human being. Despite this and other differences between their positions, Fichte typically suggests that he is a deep Kantian, entirely faithful, if not to the letter, at least to the spirit of the critical philosophy.

Fichte's rethinking of the theoretical subject as finite human being totally transforms the critical philosophy. The point I wish to bring it out is that in the transition from Kant to Fichte the approach to cognition leaves behind the effort to describe the general

conditions of cognition for the very different effort to describe how finite human beings are capable of cognition.

Kant's Copernican turn breaks with the causal approach to cognition in suggesting that the cognitive subject cognizes the cognitive object it constructs. Fichte breaks with Kant's causal approach to reality as the cause and the representation as its effect. Fichte rejects the very idea of the thing in itself as "produced solely by free thought" and without any "reality whatever,"<sup>18</sup> hence he breaks with a representationalist approach to the cognitive problem. He indicates his agreement with Kantian constructivism, in writing that "the [cognitive] object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object."<sup>19</sup>

#### FICHTE ON THE SUBJECT OF COGNITIVE CONSTRUCTION

In rejecting representationalism, Kant turns attention from the object, or thing in itself, to the subject. In the Transcendental Deduction he claims to provide the *quid juris*,<sup>20</sup> that is to "deduce," or perhaps more accurately to justify, or argue in favor of, the categories or so-called pure conditions of the understanding. The "Transcendental Deduction" culminates in the Kantian subject, or transcendental unity of apperception that constructs what it knows. The Kantian cognitive subject meets four conditions: to begin with, it constructs what it knows as a condition of knowledge. Second, it is the highest point of the deduction, Further, unlike the Lockean subject, it is not "physiological," hence avoids what later comes to be called psychologism. Finally, the subject, or the *I think*, must, as Kant obscurely says, be able to accompany all my representations."<sup>21</sup> In short, no subject, no representation.

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18. J. G. FICHTE, *Science of Knowledge*, edited and trans. by Peter Heath, John Lachs (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1982) 10.

19. J. G. FICHTE, *Science of Knowledge* cit., 4.

20. I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 116, 219.

21. I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 132-133, 246.

Fichte builds on but also alters Kantian constructivism. He implausibly claims to rigorously follow Kant, and even more implausibly that the critical philosophy follows from his own, hence logically prior, principles. Descartes, who was as important in mathematics as in philosophy, provides a quasi-mathematical deduction of the conditions of knowledge in his epistemic foundationalism. In the interval between Descartes and Kant the strictly mathematical conception of deduction is discarded. In the Transcendental Deduction Kant claims to deduce or, if the deduction depends on the so-called “quid juris,” at least plausibly describe the general conditions of knowledge. Fichte does not “deduce” but rather describes the cognitive process. His view of the subject, hence his conception of its cognitive role, largely arises in reacting to Schulze and Reinhold in his “Review of Aenesidemus.” In his review, Fichte endorses Schulze’s criticism while rejecting his skeptical conclusions. He reformulates Reinhold’s principle as the claim that the “presentation [*Vorstellung*] is related to the object as an effect to its cause and to the subject as the accident to the substance.”<sup>22</sup>

Fichte’s precise view is difficult to grasp, and perhaps even confused. It will be helpful to distinguish among “presentation,” “appearance” and “representation.” Above it was noted that “*Vorstellung*” can be translated as both “presentation” and “representation.” A presentation is something that is given to mind. According to Kant, if there is an appearance, then something appears.<sup>23</sup> An appearance is the effect of something given to mind without the claim to correctly depict it, since the inference from effect to cause does not hold. A representation claims that something given to mind that, through the inference from effect to cause, correctly depicts reality, or the independent object.

Kant denies that we can infer from the contents of mind to reality he refers to as the noumenon or thing in itself. Fichte follows Kant on this important point. He employs representational termi-

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22. J. G. FICHTE, *Review of Aenesidemus*, translated and edited by D. Breazeale, *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988) 72.

23. See I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvi-xvii, 115.

nology while limiting his cognitive claim to mere appearance, or an appearance to a subject that does not permit an inference to reality. Like Kant he does not claim to know the real in limiting cognition to appearance, or again anything more than the object for us.

Fichte describes his theory in quasi-phenomenological fashion. According to Fichte, experience, which does not provide consciousness of the world, provides no more than the contents of consciousness, or presentations (*Vorstellungen*). The contents divide into two general classes: those accompanied by a feeling of freedom, for instance, one may speculate, imagining or free phantasy; and those accompanied by a feeling of necessity for which philosophy needs to provide an account. “The system of presentations [*Vorstellungen*] accompanied by a feeling of necessity is also called experience.... Philosophy, in other words, must therefore furnish the grounds of all experience.”<sup>24</sup> He has in mind the explanation of the contents of consciousness dependent not on ourselves but on the external world that limits our sphere of action.

How is experience to be explained? The “Aenesidemus-Review,” in which Fichte provides the initial statement of what later becomes his original position, suggests that Fichte takes the interaction between subject and object as his basic experiential model. He distinguishes four kinds of subject, or self. The term “self” refers to finite human being as practically limited through interaction with the surrounding world. This suggests that Fichte understands the finite human being as in practice situated within and as interacting with the surrounding world. Absolute subject or absolute self refers to an individual considered in theoretical abstraction from the interaction between a human and the surroundings. Since the absolute self is not accompanied by a feeling of necessity, it cannot be an object of experience. This concept is invoked as a theoretical construct only in order to explain experience.

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24. J. G. FICHTE, *Science of Knowledge* cit., 6.

## FICHTE ON THE ACTIVE SUBJECT

The enormous attention to the role of the subject is a key feature in the modern tradition. Montaigne and, following him, Descartes both present views of the subject as passive. Fichte argues for a very different, highly original view of the subject as always and basically active in two ways: on the one hand, he is constrained to do so by the logic of his argument. On the other hand, he holds each of us can immediately verify our own activity through “intellectual intuition.”

Fichte further develops a theory of the interaction between subject and object, self and world. According to Fichte, subject and object stand in a relation of inter-determination. Each element of the relation determines and is determined by the other. Since the self is active by definition, only three basic forms of activity are possible. Either the subject acts to limit the object, or it is limited by the object, or again it acts independently of the object. These three kinds of activity are called respectively positing, striving, and independent activity. To posit (*setzen*) literally means to set, to place, or to put (something). Positing is a positioning of something in regard to something else, and the term suggests opposition.

Positing is the form of activity through which Fichte accounts for consciousness. Fichte employs this concept to refer to a supposedly necessary condition that is inferred but not given in experience. “It is intended to express that Act [*Thathandlung*] which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.”<sup>25</sup> According to Fichte, although positing cannot be experienced, it must nevertheless be thought. To strive (*streben*) means to struggle or aspire to, for, or after. Striving implies a perceived lack as well as an attempt to rectify it. Independent activity (*unabhängige Thätigkeit*) is in no sense determined by the subject-object relation, although it takes place within the bounds of this context.

A presupposition is an idea or concept that is accepted without adequate justification or perhaps justification of any kind at the

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25. J. G. FICHTE, *Science of Knowledge* cit., 93.

beginning of a line of argument or action. Modern thinkers like Descartes and Husserl claim to avoid presuppositions of any kind in their theories. Cartesian foundationalism notoriously begins in describing the *cogito* as a principle that must be accepted since it cannot be denied. Fichte employs the term “presupposition” in a nonstandard sense in attempting to justify the presupposition of his position.

The claim that the self is absolutely and merely active is Fichte’s “absolute presupposition.”<sup>26</sup> He argues in favor of this claim, which is hence not a presupposition, claiming, as noted above, that the self is conscious of, hence able to verify, its activity. Selfhood and activity are synonymous terms. We remember that in reacting to Kant Fichte provides an anthropological rethinking of the subject as the basis of his theory. It follows that a self or individual is active, to be active is to be a human being, and we are not only active but also aware of our activity. Yet though a human being is aware of its activity or being active, it does not follow, and Fichte does not attempt to show, that human beings are aware of the specific kinds of activity through which they can be said to construct the contents of experience accompanied by a feeling of necessity.

The Kantian categories refer to forms of activity of the mind. Fichte replaces the Kantian categories through which the object is constructed by his own set of types of activity, or laws of the mind. Positing occurs according to the three axioms depicted in the *Science of Knowledge*. The three axioms, which describe the relation of subject and object are identity, opposition, and grounding or so-called quantitative limitation. The three axioms are quasi-logical laws in terms of which experience must occur, and that can be known as well as explained. Taken together these axioms describe the unity and diversity, or identity and difference, of any cognitive object.

Grounding should not be confused with the first axiom, or the hypothesis that the self is active or activity, or again with an epistemological ground in a Cartesian sense. Positing, and hence all experience, belongs to a single paradigm of dialectically rational

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26. J. G. FICHTE, *Science of Knowledge* cit., 221.

development. It follows that conscious experience must conform to laws of the mind, and there is no limit to our knowledge of the content of consciousness accompanied by necessity.

#### A NOTE ON FICHTE'S THREE AXIOMS

Fichte is, like Kant, a systematic thinker. He says that his system is the Kantian system presented in a different way. It needs to be judged not through its relation to the critical philosophy, but rather through its own merits. We see this especially in his account of the three axioms that begins the exposition of his position.

Kant and following him Fichte propose transcendental theories. Transcendental Deduction follows Leibniz' view that perception requires the unity of a multiplicity.<sup>27</sup> Kant, who transforms this Leibnizian insight view into the highest principle of human knowledge,<sup>28</sup> He famously describes it as "The I think [that] must be able to accompany all my (re)presentations."<sup>29</sup> Kant's point seems to be that there cannot be a cognitive object without the subject that accompanies it, by which it is constructed and on which it depends. In other words, presentation (or representation) depends on the subject in which and to which it occurs as experience. Left unclear is the precise role the subject plays in either merely passively receiving or, on the contrary, as the Copernican turn suggests and Fichte makes explicit, in constituting the representation.

Fichte accords special attention to the three axioms. They include in order the first, absolutely unconditioned axiom that, in his words, is conditioned neither with respect to form nor content; then the second axiom, conditioned as to content; and finally the third axiom, conditioned as to form. These principles constitute Fichte's reformulation of the Kantian view that the consciousness forms a unity in respect to which experience occurs. Experience must meet three conditions or limits, including: an underlying unity or iden-

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27. See §14, in *Monadology*, in G. W. LEIBNIZ, *Basic Writings*, with an introduction by Paul Janet, translated by George R. Montgomery (Open Court, La Salle, 1957).

28. See I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 135, 348.

29. I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 13-132, 246.

tity, as well as difference and, finally, the unity or identity of identity and difference.

Fichte's account describes as well as speculatively reconstructs what from his perspective must occur for experience to be possible. According to Fichte, the first axiom and the second axiom both derive from a fact of empirical consciousness. The first axiom, which is "absolutely primary," hence depends on nothing prior to it, can neither be proven nor defined, but is the basis of all consciousness. This principle is an identity or unity that, as the basis of consciousness, underlies and makes possible all diversity in its role as the initial principle of conscious experience. We can infer that without a single unifying absolute subject, experience is not possible.

According to Fichte, the second axiom conditioned as to form, is disunity, diversity or again difference that is given in consciousness against the background of an underlying unity or identity. Since the subject is by definition a unity, Fichte describes diversity as the so-called not-self, or what the subject is not. In a dizzying set of remarks, he goes on to suggest that a necessary condition of experience is for the subject to contain what is not, in other words a divisible not-self, or again difference opposed to the self, in short the identity of identity and difference.

#### FICHTE, KANT AND THE COGNITIVE SUBJECT

Elsewhere I have argued that Fichte goes too far in seeking, perhaps under the influence of Reinhold, to derive everything from the subject. I do not want to repeat that argument here. The point Fichte brings out is that subject and object limit each other within the subject. I take Fichte to be suggesting that the final explanatory concept from which the entire theory is derived is what he calls the absolute self.

I have argued that Kant presents representational and constructivist approaches to cognition. I have further argued that Fichte, like the mature Kant, adopts constructivism in place of representation as Kant understands it. According to Fichte, theory serves to explain

practice. From Fichte's perspective, the version of the critical philosophy that depends on reality is unrelated to practice.

Fichte's effort to present the Kantian position in independence of Kant is both laudatory, since he thinks Kant makes a basic breakthrough through the constructivist shift as well as critical. Kant thinks there has been no progress on the assumption that the subject depends on the object. He recommends as an experiment that the relation of subject and object be inverted so that the object is not independent of but rather dependent on the subject.

Fichte approves the idea that the object depends on the subject, but thinks that Kant only goes half way so to speak. Fichte is especially critical of the Kantian position that is based on the indispensable but also unknowable thing in itself. According to Fichte, a theory based on anything other than or beyond the self is transcendent, hence dogmatic and necessarily leads to skepticism, since it is based on what we must know but cannot know. Fichte favors a theory that, on the contrary, is wholly and solely based on the subject, hence immanent, or critical. In the final analysis, an approach to cognition through the subject shows that in practice we know objects only in so far as they pose limits to our activity. We do not know objects in themselves, but we can and do know them insofar as they are objects for us, or constructed through the interaction between subject and object. In this way Fichte develops the transition from a theoretical account of the general possibility of cognition to a descriptive account of cognition as it occurs. This belongs to the post-Kantian anthropological turn in classical German philosophy.

#### CONCLUSION: FICHTE, KANT AND THE COPERNICAN TURN

This paper has argued two points. On the one hand, Kant's position includes incompatible approaches to knowledge I have called representationalism that he explores and rejects, and constructivism to which he barely refers but adopts. On the other hand, Fichte, like the later Kant defends a version of what is sometimes designated as the Copernican turn or the constructivist alternative to Kantian

representationalism while rejecting any form of the venerable claim to base cognition on metaphysical realism.

The difference between Kantian and Fichtean constructivism is significant. Kant is concerned with demonstrating the general conditions of cognition. He does this in part by drawing attention to the distinction between finite human being and the abstract subject reduced to what is sometimes called an epistemic placeholder. Kant's theory depends on a non- or even anti-anthropological conception of the subject variously described as the transcendental unity of apperception, the original synthetic unity of apperception, and so on. Kant insists, and Husserl later insists, on the difference between an abstract conception of the cognitive subject to avoid conflating the logic and the psychology of cognition. Kant's Copernican turn is intended as a solution to the cognitive problem that, however, fails in that as Fichte, Hegel, Peirce and others later point out, human knowledge is limited by the limits of the human subject.

The Kantian difficulty lies in part in invoking a philosophical subject as the condition of cognition. Fichte corrects this difficulty in replacing the Kantian philosophy subject by finite human being. Though Fichte's reformulation of the Copernican Revolution improves on Kant's, it is also not a satisfactory solution to the cognitive problem.

Fichte like Kant develops a causal view of experience and knowledge. In an important early remark on his relation, under Reinhold's influence, to Schulze, Fichte remarks "...rather than employing Aenesidemus' terms, the reviewer [Fichte] would prefer to say that the presentation is related to the object as the effect is related to its cause and to the subject as the accident is related to the substance."<sup>30</sup>

This early statement already commits Fichte to the Copernican turn. The clue here is the change in the meaning of "(re)presentation." Kant understands this term in traditional fashion as the accurate, hence correct depiction of the cognitive object. Fichte un-

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30. J. G. FICHTE, *Review of Aenesidemus*, in D. BRAEZEAL (ed.), *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988) 72.

derstands the same term as referring not to the mind-independent object but rather to the object for us in experience.

Fichte's basic insight improves on Kant's Copernican turn, but is covered up by his baroque language. Fichte holds the subject does not create the object *ex nihilo*. It rather constructs the object experienced by us through an interaction between subject and object, or subject and its surroundings.

Kant invokes a philosophical subject that Fichte replaces through a finite human subject. The Fichtean subject is limited as well as unlimited, limited by its relation to the mind-external object and unlimited in its capacity of free action. This cardinal point, which appears to me to be both simplistic and incorrect, is also correctly contradicted by Fichte. In conceding one cannot decide between idealism and dogmatism on rational grounds, he famously suggests that "What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is."<sup>31</sup>

In sum, Fichte cannot have it both ways. Either the subject is free in the philosophical sense and one can in this way explain the possibility of experience or, on the contrary, it is always constrained within context. Rather than rely on the philosophical fiction of an absolute self, a better, more satisfactory explanation would rely on a view of the subject as always within and hence in that sense constrained by its surroundings.

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