

# Fichte in Reverse: From Onto-theology to Materialist Ontology

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## Abstract

The research article discusses the role of Fichte's concept of *Anstoss* in his early theory of self-consciousness. The term first appears in his *Science of Knowledge* and is used by Fichte to denote and explain the simultaneousness of the three elements of self-consciousness. The text demonstrates that *Anstoss* as impulse/inhibition is to be situated at the cross- or inter-section of the domains of subjectivity and objectivity, thus standing for the paradoxical "activity as object."

**Keywords:** activity, *Anstoss*, Fichte, Hegel, Lacan, materialism, object, *objet petit a*, self-consciousness, subject

In *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* from 1801, Hegel distinguishes between two kinds of philosophical dogmatism – dogmatic idealism and dogmatic realism – which can be differentiated against the backdrop of the notion of disavowal (*Verleugnung*).<sup>1</sup>

While dogmatic idealism posits subjectivity as the Real ground (*Realgrund*) of experience, dogmatic realism deduces subjectivity from the ground of objective reality to which it attributes the absolute status. Thus, dogmatic idealism is characterised by a disavowal of objectivity proper, insofar as it deduces the latter from the evidence of the subject; dogmatic realism, on the other hand, presents us with the opposite, inverted form of dogmatism, characterised by the disavowal of subjectivity as a mere a posteriori derivative of objective reality. Hence, at the very beginning of Fichte's system (and of the system of transcendental idealism as such) we are confronted with a *double disavowal*. In this sense, transcendental idealism can be conceived of as a philosophical system that strives for the abolishment of this (doubly) disavowed element of dogmatism, in turn deriving the subjective and the objective from one single principle, from their primordial transcendental co-incidence.

This is the anchoring point of Hegel's reference to Fichte as the most paradoxical critic of dogmatism, whose philosophy cannot but seem the ultimate example of the idealist dogma of absolute subjectivity, absolutely conditioning objective reality, i.e. of the dogma of a World

1 See Hegel 1977, p. 89. Hegel uses the word *Verleugnung* only once; I translate it into English as "disavowal," thus alluding to the well-known Freudian notion.

which is but the immediate product of the Self (subjectivity).<sup>2</sup> That is why it might prove difficult to discern in Fichte's system the uprooting of philosophical notions grounded in dogmatism, or "the total eradication and complete reversal of current modes of thought,"<sup>3</sup> as Fichte himself describes his philosophical project at the very beginning of his *First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge*. But before I proceed, let me first add a few general remarks on Fichte's science of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

In his science of knowledge, Fichte presents his system in the form of principles. He accounts for his choice of method in a text from 1794, titled *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* [Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*], in which he defines "principle" in terms of a sentence whose certainty precedes any connection to other sentences that are derived from it, i.e. in terms of a sentence that has the character of a priori knowledge and which, due to its absolute character, is not conditioned by any connection. Differently put: any connection is but its derivative, its inferred product (just as the World is but the product of the self-positing Self). However, to this single principle that is the proper object of the science of knowledge, testifying to the primordial positedness of Subject and Object, form and content have to be subsequently ascribed, so that there can be "something about which one has knowledge, and there also must be something which one knows about this thing,"<sup>5</sup> i.e. an object, as well as knowledge about this object. And this is where Hegel's discussion of Fichte's system is to be situated. When Fichte writes about the discovery of "the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge,"<sup>6</sup> when he talks about the unconditioned recognition of absolute certainty of the first sentence, adding that its content must condition its form and its form its content (self=self), the analysis of the notions of form and content (of the first principle) lead him to posit the necessity of not one but three principles: "there can be no more than one absolutely

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2 Let me add an arbitrary quote from Fichte: "[Ma]n ought to be what he is simply because he is. In other words, all that a person is ought to be related to his pure I, his mere being as an I. He ought to be all that he is simply because he is an I, and what he cannot be because he is an I, he ought not to be at all." (Fichte 1993b, p. 148)

3 Fichte 1982a, p. 4.

4 For a discussion of the difficulties in translating Fichte's notion of *Wissenschaftslehre* see Breazeale 1993, p. xv.

5 Fichte 1993a, p. 109.

6 Fichte 1982b, p. 93.

unconditioned principle, one conditioned as to content, and one conditioned as to form, no other principle is possible apart from those established."<sup>7</sup> Put very briefly, the first principle affirms the absolute self-positing of the Self, hence positing the Self as infinite; the second principle aims at the absolute opposing, or positing of the infinite non-Self; and the third principle displays the absolute unity of the first and the second principles, via the absolute division of the Self and non-Self, and via the division of the infinite sphere into the divisible Self and divisible non-Self under the paradigm of Self's self-identity.

The positing of one single absolute principle that would guarantee the primordial positedness of Subject and Object, and, thus, introduce into philosophy the idealist "complete reversal," proves impossible without the introduction of two additional principles. One (principle), as it were, splits into Two (additional principles). The science of knowledge hence begins with the introduction of one single fundamental principle, but as soon as it is introduced, two additional principles are posited in a paradoxical simultaneity. For Hegel, these three fundamental principles represent/stand for the three absolute acts of the Self, or for its three (inner) moments, and not so much for the primordial identity of Subject and Object that Fichte strives to conceptualise. Hegel takes recourse at this point to the conceptual distinction between the transcendental and the transcendent. The unity of Subject and Object has to be a transcendental one, because this connection presupposes the opposition of the two acts as at once preserved and sublated (*aufgehoben*), and because it is only this operation that opens the path to the simultaneity of "ideal and real synthesis." In Fichte, this synthesis is posited by the third fundamental principle that necessarily performs the function of synthetically unifying the other two; its formula is: "*In the self I oppose a divisible not-self to the divisible self.*"<sup>8</sup> But for Hegel the objective Self, as it appears within this synthesis, is irreducible to the subjective Self. Here, the subjective Self is perceived as the objective Self with the supplement of the non-Self. For this logic, Hegel proposed a simple formula: subjective Self = objective Self + non-Self. For Hegel, this is not the way at all how the identity of the two elements is established, because pure consciousness Self = Self and the empirical Self = Self + non-Self remain opposed to one another. Prior to the synthesis, the

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7 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

opposed elements differ substantially from the two elements that follow from it. Prior to the synthesis, they are merely opposed to one another without any other qualification: “the one is what the other is not, and the other is what the one is not. [...] As one comes in, the other goes out.”<sup>9</sup> Fichte is well aware of this problem when he says that there is an unsurpassable difference, an abyss (*Abgrund*) even, between what the Self is and that by which the Self has to be elucidated.

Fichte struggled with this problem, which is also the fundamental and initial problem of German idealism as such, throughout his life, so much so that the numerous versions of his science of knowledge could be viewed as so many attempts to come to terms with it, by developing a theory of the foundation of the phenomenon of self-consciousness. But, despite all the differing attempts to solve this problem, or at least to provide its definite formulation, he nonetheless never relinquished the basic framework of his doctrine of 1794, trying to subordinate, or bring in line the contradictory relationship between the Self and its Other with the identity of the subject, suspending the opposition of the Subjective and the Objective in a higher unity of self-consciousness. But, the main problem is the following one: How is it possible to pass from absolute subjectivity without exteriority to consciousness and self-consciousness which, by definition, presuppose something strictly external to them? How to pass from the absolute Self to objective reality as the condition of self-consciousness as consciousness of One-Self as an object of experience?

Upon the first look, it seems that Fichte fell prey to the paradoxes and sideways of transcendental philosophy, i.e. to the deadlocks ascribed to his thought by most thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard, it may come as a surprise that Dieter Henrich, one of Fichte's most succinct interpreters, in a way radically inverts this common-sensical perspective. For Henrich, the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical perception of German idealism was deeply marked by the Heideggerian critique of Cartesian subjectivity, and Fichte's subject was seen as its perhaps ultimate successor, i.e. the successor of a notion of subjectivity that brought about the “repression” of Being, and its reduction to the monotonous identity of objects of consciousness. But, Fichte's paradigmatic formula of “the self-positing subject” did not deprive the Self of its dispersed and heterogeneous character, but rather structurally marked its pure identity and self-evidential nature with a

9 Hegel 1977, p. 125.

dark spot of Otherness. Hence, Henrich argues, Fichte's wager and novelty is to be sought in his very interrogation and problematisation of “the reality of self-consciousness,”<sup>10</sup> i.e. in the problematisation of the subject's involvement in the world, or his “being thrown into the world,” to use Heidegger's dictum. Fichte is not an author of the (misperceived) Cartesian tradition, the advocate of the totality of modern consciousness, but in fact its first critic. How, then do we free Fichte from this prevailing opinion? How do we preserve Fichte's subjectivity from the reproofs of identitarian reductionism and solipsism? And – last but not least – how do we protect Fichte from his own deadlocks and sideways, pointed out already by Hegel? How to defend Fichte, not from the generally unfavorable philosophical climate, but from Fichte himself?

In this respect, let us recall Marx's famous letter to Feuerbach, in which Marx attacks Schelling's theosophy, reaching out to Feuerbach for help in this endeavor, calling him “Schelling in reverse.”<sup>11</sup> Along the same lines, the present article tries to bring to the fore another Fichte, a “Fichte in reverse.” However, it attempts do so not by way of abandoning Fichte's philosophical project, but rather by way of rendering visible the obverse side of Fichte's thought itself. Can Fichte's controversial three steps be read “in reverse”? In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that a paradoxical object, which Fichte calls *Anstoss*, provides a possible way out of the muddle-headedness of Fichte's explication of the “reality of self-consciousness.” But, before I proceed with the analysis of this problematic notion (whereby its problematic nature might provide the key to the problematic of Fichte's self-consciousness), let me first examine the problem of the two periods in the development of the theory of self-consciousness, as proposed by Dieter Henrich.<sup>12</sup>

The first period, concluding with Kant, is characterised by the so-called “reflexive theory of self-consciousness.” For Henrich, Fichte was the first philosopher to radically challenge this theory, hence becoming the originator of the second epoch. But, Fichte's risky gesture, which earned him this privileged position of the founding father of the new

10 Henrich 1982, p. 71.

11 “To the French romantics and mystics he replies: ‘I is the union of philosophy and theology’, to French materialists: ‘I is the union of flesh and idea’, to the French sceptics: ‘I is the destroyer of dogmatism’, in a word, ‘I’. [...] You would therefore be doing a great service to our enterprise, but even more to truth, if you were to contribute a characterization of Schelling to the very first issue. You are just the man for this because you are *Schelling in reverse*.” (Marx [1843])

12 See Henrich 1982, pp. 60-82.

theory of self-consciousness, was not some radical act which would imply an exhaustive “positive” programme: Fichte’s significance lies not in the answer he provided but rather in the problem he detected and incessantly followed throughout the various articulations of his philosophical project. We could claim that “Fichte” is not so much a name of a Break, but rather a name of a Gap, or a fissure, that he didn’t fill in with a positive programme, rather leaving it open in its problematic persistency. (Thus, one could claim that Fichte is not a significant philosopher due to the problem he solved, but due to the fact that he never ceased solving it.) The reflexive theory begins with the thinking subject that forms the foundation of consciousness, and hence also the foundation of any possible knowledge of an object. But as such, it presupposes something that demands a preceding explication: if the Self reaches self-consciousness by way of taking itself as an object, i.e. by reflecting itself, then a preceding Self has to be presupposed, a Self that precedes all possible knowledge and self-consciousness, i.e. all reflexivity. The Self is, thus, simultaneously the act of positing and the (produced) result of this act, at once reflecting and reflected.

One can discern this problem in Fichte’s first principle: the act by which the Self posits itself is simultaneously a part of what is posited by this act itself. Consequently, the question remains how the Self can be a positing instance, when in fact it comes into being only through the act of positing, i.e. as its effect. This circular structure lies at the core of Fichte’s problem: How to think the act of self-positing of the Self in such a way that it would remain irreducible to that which is posited by it? Differently put: Is it possible to think the act of self-positing as distinct from the posited Self?<sup>13</sup> Henrich proposes two possible exits from this deadlock of reflection: we either renounce the quest for the foundation of self-consciousness, or we locate this foundation in the exteriority of the Self, thus relinquishing the essential character of self-consciousness. The first solution would lead us to affirm the deadlock of reflexive theory, whereas the second would obviously lead to dogmatic realism, for the Self, which is grounded in exteriority, loses the nature of a foundation.

The problem of the first period in the theory of self-consciousness, hence, concerned the paradox of reflection that is at once the cause and

13 “In this regard, his [i.e. Fichte’s] first theory entails a certain ambiguity which is often emphasized: it suggests that the Self posits itself, while at the same time maintaining that the Self precedes all knowledge and all self-consciousness.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 72-73)

the product, or effect of self-consciousness. So, how is it possible to think this “double character” of self-consciousness? Fichte begins by positing the Self as an “absolute activity,” which is nothing but a pure affirmation of an unlimited, un-determined, un-differentiated Self that is not yet an object of consciousness, since it precedes all objectivity. The absolute Self is a bare, un-reflected form devoid of any determinate content. Hence, the absolute Self is not yet its own object, but rather a pure act of positing without an object. It is infinite precisely because it is not its own object. Objectivity (of the Self) implies (its) determinedness, (its) limitation; the object as *Gegenstand* is always opposed to the Self as a non-Self, i.e. as Self’s limit. Hence, the first principle aims at the purely abstract, unconditional self-consciousness that abstracts from all empiricity. How, then, do we conceive of the passage from absolute activity to the realm of experience, i.e. from an *absolute* to an *objective* activity? How does the non-differentiated Self reach reflection, how does it “objectify” itself, thus constituting self-consciousness as the condition of all possible knowledge? In Henrich’s terms: How do we infer from the first principle the reality of self-consciousness, how do we derive the latter from the foundation of absolute subjectivity? One has to proceed from the following point of departure, proposed by Breazeale and Žižek:

“Fichte was the first philosopher to focus on the uncanny contingency at the very heart of subjectivity: the Fichtean subject is not the overblown Ego=Ego as the absolute Origin of all reality, but a finite subject thrown, caught, in a contingent social situation forever eluding mastery.”<sup>14</sup>

At this point (the concept of) *Anstoss* enters Fichte’s theoretical edifice to explain the aforementioned passage from absolute to objective activity, i.e. from the platform of experience to experience proper. A quote from Fichte:

“The objective element [the Not-I] that is to be excluded [from the I] has no need at all to be present; all that is needed, if I may so put it, is the presence of an *Anstoss* for the I. That is to say, the subjective element must, for some reason that simply lies outside of the activity of the I, be unable to extend any further. Such an impossibility of

14 Žižek 2012, p. 115. See also Breazeale 1995, pp. 87–114.

further extension would then constitute the indicated mere interplay or meshing; such an *Anstoss* would not limit the I as active, but would give it the task of limiting itself. All limitation, however occurs through opposition, and thus simply in order to be able to satisfy this task, the I would have to oppose something objective to the subjective element that is to be limited and would then have to unite both synthetically, in the manner just indicated. And thus the entire representation could be derived in this way. . . . What [this explanation] assumes is not a not-I that is present outside of the I, and not even a determination that is present within the I, but rather the mere task, on the part of the I itself, of undertaking a determination within itself – that is, the *mere determinability* of the I.”<sup>15</sup>

In the first approach, *Anstoss* is understood as external impulse or impetus. The absolute and limitless Self requires something other than itself to be limited by it and to reflect itself; so as to be able to reflect itself in its interiority, the Self requires an instance of exteriority. Since it is situated beyond all objectivity, absolute activity precedes the opposition between the Inner and the Outer. *Anstoss* is an external impulse; an impulse of the non-Self, differentiating the pure Self by way of intervening in its non-differentiated realm, thus constituting the Self as limited and finite. Here, we encounter the first paradox of Fichte’s notion of *Anstoss*: through this exterior impetus the Self becomes an object, hence acquiring a consciousness and a minimum of knowledge of itself; however, this impetus nonetheless cannot be simply exterior to the Self, since it precedes any opposition between the Inner and the Outer, between interiority and exteriority. It seems that this first attempt at a conceptualisation of *Anstoss* once again leads to the deadlocks of reflexive theory: here, *Anstoss* is understood in terms of an exterior impetus that intervenes into the in-finite realm of the self-positing absolute Self, thus introducing the opposition between the Self and the non-Self, or between the Inner and the Outer. However, Fichte has to prove that this limitation of the (absolute) Self is nothing but an act of the Self, he has to demonstrate that the limitation is but a self-limitation, which also means that the *exterior* impulse of the determination of the Self is nothing but an *interior* act of self-determination.

In *The Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte thus asserts that an exterior impulse is only possible with the subject’s *Zutun*,

15 Quoted in Breazeale 2013, p. 162.

i.e. on the condition of subject’s “participation.” Thus, without this activity, without the absolute act of self-positing, there is no *Anstoss*; its intervention reflects “the outwards striving activity” [hinaus strebende Tätigkeit], directing it back onto itself. Furthermore, the *Anstoss* – being conditioned by Self’s activity – is nevertheless *durch das setzende Ich nicht gesetzte Anstoss*, i.e. an impetus which is not posited by the positing Self.<sup>16</sup> In short, there is no *Anstoss* without the activity of the Self; there is no self-determination of the Self without *Anstoss*; there is no objectivity without the self-determination of the Self:<sup>17</sup>

*activity --- Anstoss --- (self-)determination --- objectivity*

With such a characterisation, Fichte effectively situates *Anstoss* at the very cross-section of subjectivity and objectivity, in the field of interference of pure activity and materiality. Therefore, one could argue that *Anstoss*, being both exterior and interior – an impetus that is both exterior to subjectivity and nothing but the act of a self-positing subjectivity –, is effectively a paradoxical *activity as object* (or object-activity).

Activity itself, which is infinite and unlimited, since it has no exteriority that would limit it, receives an impetus, *Anstoss*, that reflects activity onto itself, driving it back into itself, *nach innen getrieben*. But this interiority, this *Innen*, is effectively the first interiority that emerges with the external impulse. We are thus faced with an interiority that precedes exteriority, as well as with an exteriority that precedes exteriority; and in their collision reflection is produced. Fichte proposes the following image of absolute activity:

A --- B --- C --- D --- etc.

“A” stands for the absolute act of the self-positing of the Self as the absolute, un-limited, infinite Self, encompassing All, i.e. the Totality, which however is not yet a limited Totality (and hence not yet Total at all), but rather a Totality in its un-differentiated One-ness which is at the

16 Fichte 1971, p. 212.

17 “The *Anstoss* (which is not posited by the positing I) occurs to the I insofar as it is active, and is thus an *Anstoss* only insofar as the I is active. Its possibility is conditioned by the activity of the I: no activity of the I, no *Anstoss*. And *vice versa*: the I’s activity of determining itself would, in turn, be conditioned by the *Anstoss*: no *Anstoss*, no self-determination. Moreover, no self-determination, nothing objective, etc.” (Quoted in Breazeale 1995, p. 92)

same time Nothing since it has no part and is not limited by anything. This implies that it lacks any possible representation: *for itself*, this Self is Nothing; it contains no difference between the Positing and the Posited, between the subject and its predicate, between the Self and its counterpart. Let us now suppose that in “B” an impetus occurs, i.e. that the Totality of the absolute Self is affected by an *Anstoss*, the cause of which doesn’t lie in the Self, but rather in something external to it, in the non-Self, that reflects the direction of activity that leads from A to C back from C to A, thus forming a finite limited Totality of the Self. However, Fichte argues, the Self cannot be effected, it cannot undergo any effect (*Einwirkung*), without a retroactive moment; the reason for this is that it always already presupposes the movement of absolute activity. Therefore, *Anstoss* functions in reverse, retroactively, and it is this retroactive functioning that establishes the objectivity of the Self, as well as the Self in its absolute positedness. Pure activity is *an activity without an object* that perpetually returns back to itself in circular movement. *Anstoss*, thus, entails a double temporal vector which generates the movement, passing from A to C *as well as* from C to A. This “double course of the Self” is *mit sich selbst streitende Richtung der Tätigkeit des Ich*, an activity of the Self which is at cross purpose with itself: on the one side we are presented with the Self as pure spontaneity, and on the other side we are presented with the Self as *leidend*, suffering (affected), passive, empirical, finite. The result is a passivity that is only through an activity, and an activity which only comes into being as mediated by passive suffering. The Self as pure intelligence thus depends on the non-Self as its exterior impulse which – first – drives it to reflection and – second – provides an obstacle to its infinitive striving. *Anstoss* is thus posited as an impulse, impetus, as well as an obstacle that deals a blow to the endless spreading of the absolute Self.<sup>18</sup> In the next step, Fichte tries to abolish this initial relationship that subordinates the Self to an exterior, contingent impulse:

“Since they [sc. the Self and the non-Self] are not the same, the question always remains which follows which and to which we must ascribe the cause of the equation [Gleichung].”<sup>19</sup>

18 See also Žižek 2012, p. 115.

19 Fichte 1971, p. 260.

Here is the answer: everything has to be determined within the Self, the Self should be independent. By reintegrating the exterior impulse into the structure of the absolute Self, *Anstoss* is no longer an external *cause* of reflection, but becomes an *effect* of the Self on the Self; here, Fichte once again asserts the double nature of the impulse that testifies to a specific causality, which however has to be understood as an effect, consequence, or derivative of Self itself. With this move, Fichte puts in question the very nature of *Anstoss* as a cause of reflection.<sup>20</sup> Hence, Self and non-Self stand in a relation of a tension, they are at odds with one another (*Widerstreit*), and this “dispute” between them cannot be sublated by way of inferring the non-Self from the Self, because in this case the non-Self would not be a non-Self at all but merely one of the moments of the Self, i.e. Self itself. But at the same time, one cannot simply affirm the pure exteriority of the impulse of the non-Self as constitutive of the Self, for in this way one loses the Self itself. The non-Self has to become the object of the Self; we have to demonstrate the existence of a causal relation between the Self and the conditioned object. Fichte accomplishes this move by introducing the aforementioned distinction between two types of activity: one that is absolute and hence without an object, and the other that is objective, and hence is characterised by being oriented towards an object. The second is possible only against the backdrop of the first, hence enabling Fichte to demonstrate the indirect link between the absolute activity of the Self and “its” object. There is no object without activity that opposes it; there is no object without the objective activity, and there is no objective activity without absolute activity.

To Fichte, *Anstoss* seemed a plausible and promising solution to the deadlock of self-consciousness, but subsequently turned out to be an insolvable problem, repeating the deadlock of reflexive theory. *Anstoss* is conceived as something *fremdartiges*, alien (to the Self), and as a bearer of a specific inequality that impedes the Self’s striving for self-identity, i.e. for immediate identity with itself. Both poles are “at odds [im Streit] with Self’s striving for immediate identity.”<sup>21</sup> Here, we encounter the second of the two principle moments of *Anstoss*, namely *Anstoss* as an obstacle to the direct self-identity of the Self. *Anstoss* is the condition of subject’s self-identity, enabling the consciousness of the Self by way

20 “The expressions: to posit the non-Self, and: to limit the Self, are completely univocal [...]” (*Ibid.*, p. 252)

21 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

of establishing the difference between the Self and the non-Self; but at the same time, *Anstoss* as *Hemmung*, as inhibition, necessarily remains un-reflected, resisting being incorporated into the Self, thus inhibiting its activity. Hence, *Anstoss* as impulse/inhibition is precisely the ultimate difference, the *Abgrund*, abyss of self-consciousness that Fichte spoke about.

From this perspective, Fichte's initial principle ("The Self posits itself") becomes very problematic. Fichte presents a series of oppositions (infinite-finite, absolute-objective, unconditional-conditional), traversed by an un-sublatable contradiction. However: Is the impulse/inhibition not precisely some sort of junction of irreducible elements, a paradoxical *infinite objectivity* or *activity as object*? As I've already shown, *Anstoss* is not simply an exterior impulse, but a piece of the absolute, i.e. infinite and indeterminate activity, emerging as a singular finite object that limits the Self by introducing the alien realm of the non-Self, or the realm of objectivity. *Anstoss* is a finite impulse, and only as such can it limit the Self in its absoluteness (that which has no limit cannot be the limit of anything else). But on the other hand, *Anstoss* is also a barer of a specific infinity; it is both an infinite "organ without a body" which is not a mere part of something else and, thus, is not limited by any "corporeal" exteriority, *and* finite in its function of the limit of the Self. It seems that the only possible way out of this circle of endless mutual implications is to affirm the paradoxical notion of *activity as object* (which, of course, is not identical with objective activity and) which pertains to the Self (as an activity) and is at the same time radically alien to it (as an object). Recall in this respect Hegel's reading of Fichte, i.e. his distinction between the subjective and the objective Self: the subjective Self of self-consciousness equals the objective Self plus the non-Self, i.e. it equals the Totality plus its part. But this part, or activity as object (a), should be conceived of as being inherent to the Totality of Self (I = I), while at the same time remaining radically heterogeneous in relation to it:

$$(I=I) = (I=I) + a$$

We can further illustrate this last point by recourse to Fichte's reformulation of the first principle: "The Self posits itself as Self-positing [Sich-selbst-Setzen]." Henrich is right to emphasise that by positing itself the Self also posits the notion of itself, since without this

re-doubling it would have had no knowledge of itself.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the act of self-positing results in the emergence of the object-Self, as well as in the notion of the Self, which correspond to this object, whereby the act of positing necessarily precedes both of these results.

The formula Self=Self thus involves two splits: the first split is the split between the Self as absolute activity, on the one hand, and the objective Self, on the other; the second split concerns the re-doubled result of activity (object-Self, the notion of the Self). Hence, the objective Self is both an empirical objectivity *and* the notion without which this objectivity of the Self would necessarily remain un-thought; it would simply dissolve in an un-reflected, notionless intuition beyond any possible knowledge. Fichte's reformulation of the first principle of science of knowledge has to be interpreted as follows: the Self as absolute activity can only posit itself by positing the concept of itself, however this "signifying positing" is only possible as mediated by a non-reflected object that stands at the cross-section of the object-Self and its concept while remaining irreducible to them. The Self as other, i.e. as opposed to itself, is the totality of thing (*Gegenstand*) and concept, traversed by a paradoxical object (*Objekt*).

Fichte's problem with the notion of *Anstoss* can also be formulated in temporal terms: *Anstoss* at once precedes the determination of the Self and functions as the effect of its self-determination that emerges in the cross-section of the posited Self. One way out of this deadlock is to interpret *Anstoss* as a structural function that "always already" occupies its space in the interference of Self and other. This would imply a double causality, so that the Self, on the one hand, and *Anstoss*, on the other, would display two different modes of causal relation. *Anstoss* is irreducible to the causality of the Self; rather it is characterised by Deleuzian quasi-causality: hence, *Anstoss* is not the (exterior) cause of self-consciousness, but rather a paradoxical quasi-cause that can only be apprehended retroactively, i.e. from the point of view of self-consciousness. As such, it presupposes absolute activity that defends the Self from its determination. Fichtean subjectivity is to be found neither on the side of absolute, un-limited activity of the Self, nor on the side of the objective activity of the finite subject: the transcendental subject is neither the Absolute nor an empirical subject; the problem with the latter is that they exclude the uncanniness of the subject, embodied in the concept of *Anstoss* as the *Abgrund* of self-

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22 Henrich 1982, p. 66.

consciousness. Fichte's subject emerges in relation to this un-reflected object that the Self can never fully appropriate and which persists as its inherent split.

In his text, Henrich proposes three formulations of Fichte's theory of self-consciousness. The first two formulations are explications of the "theory of positing" that replaced the "reflexive theory" without relinquishing the moment of reflection and, hence, without radically breaking with the classical theory of self-consciousness. And if reflexive theory interpreted this moment in terms of a succession, the theory of positing interprets this reflexive moment in terms of a simultaneity of Self and self-consciousness. To quote Henrich: "where the self is, there is always self-awareness."<sup>23</sup> The third formulation introduces into the science of knowledge the metaphor of the eye. Self-consciousness is now interpreted as an activity into which an eye has been installed, to paraphrase Fichte's formula. Fichte wrote numerous versions of the science of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The science of knowledge is a metonymical project, and what slides through it is precisely the object that Fichte tries to grasp with the notion *Anstoss*, with the metaphor of the eye, with the notion of God, etc. But the metaphor of the eye is not a simple explication of the notion of *Anstoss*; Fichte used it to give a better account of the three principles and to address the problem of the simultaneity of the three moments of self-consciousness. The first, absolute, un-conditioned principle only posits the Self and nothing more; it merely affirms its (un-conditioned, *unbedingt*) existence, not unlike Spinoza's substance. The second and the third principles are conditioned (are affections of the substance, so to speak): the second principle, concerning empirical consciousness, is conditioned in relation to its content (insofar as what is given is not given *by* the Self while nonetheless being given *through* it), while the third one, concerning the non-Self, is conditioned in relation to its form (insofar as the form is dependent on the Self). Differently put: the first principle is unconditioned, the second principle is unconditioned in relation to its form, and the third principle is unconditioned in relation to its content. However, the unconditioned (*unbedingt*) character of the first principle aims at something different from the unconditioned character of the second and third principles. The difference between

23 Henrich 2003, p. 244.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 206–207, footnote 3.

the first principle and the remaining two corresponds to two different meanings of the term *unbedingt* that should be understood either in an *absolute* or in a *relative* sense. In the first principle, *unbedingt* should be translated as "un-conditional," hence aiming at the Self which has no opposite, while in the second and the third principle one should understand it in the sense of "un-conditioned," i.e. in opposition to what is conditioned, *bedingt*. To put it yet another way: there "exists" an un-conditional moment of the un-conditioned character of the Self in relation to its form and the conditioned character of the Self in relation to its content; and there "exists" an un-conditional moment of the un-conditioned character of non-Self in relation to its content and the conditioned character of non-Self in relation to its form. And *Anstoss*, this intermediary *activity as object*, is nothing but the split of the un-conditional and (un-)conditioned; it is the activity (of the absolutely un-conditional) as object: *Anstoss* as an element of the non-Self within the Self, as the un-conditional of the (un-)conditioned enables us to think the simultaneity of the finite and the infinite. If from here we take a look at Fichte's metaphor of the eye, we notice that it follows the same logic: the activity (of the eye) is dependent on a third element, acting as an impulse that sets it in motion. This element structurally corresponds to the function of *Anstoss* and Fichte calls it "the gaze." But, the gaze is not simply an "inner light of activity," as Henrich suggests: with such an assumption one loses the crucial distinction between the gaze and the eye of activity – the eye of activity emerges in the gaze as a paradoxical object, as the objectal un-conditional moment of the opposition of the (un-)conditioned. The object-gaze is extimate, to use Lacan's formulation, it is excluded into interiority and it represents that particular structural moment that affects both the interior and the exterior of the Self, but only as a moment of their (non)coincidence, as a dark spot of the eye of activity which corresponds to Fichte's early conceptualization of *Anstoss*, the impulse/inhibition that persists as the blind spot of Fichte's project.

Much has been written on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, mostly by Fichte himself. Against the backdrop of Hegel's critique we denoted Fichte's project as a project of a double disavowal. To this double disavowal we can now add a third one, namely, the disavowal that somehow pertains to the history of philosophy and is inherent to the philosophical thinking as such as the conceptual thinking of the impossible. But, the task of philosophy is not to grasp a certain notion or a problem that is to be solved; its task is to conceptually grasp the

impossible of conceptual thinking itself. That is why Deleuze rightly defined philosophy as an invention or creation of concepts, insofar as the latter are discovered at the points of impossibility of conceptual thinking as such. In this regard, Daniel Breazeale and Slavoj Žižek, each in their own way, undertook the first radical theoretical step towards conceptually thinking the impossible in Fichte. They both fully grasped what Fichte detected but wasn't able to articulate properly, namely the uncanny core of subjectivity. By addressing and analysing the shift in Fichte's doctrine from the Jena period to the Berlin period, Žižek's analysis is in line with the proposed reading of the science of knowledge as a metonymical project. In Fichte's later writings the ground, Žižek argues in *Less Than Nothing*, is no longer "identified with the I qua absolute I but with something absolute prior to and originally independent of the I,"<sup>25</sup> namely *Sein* and/or *Gott*. In later Fichte, God thus becomes another name for this paradoxical object, sliding through the metonymical chain of the doctrine of science.

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