1. Introduction
In this paper I will discuss Fichte's idea of what he calls “complete consciousness”. An understanding of this key idea will show, contra the interpretation first put forward by Dieter Henrich, that Fichte is not first and foremost concerned with the problem of self-consciousness. Rather, we must investigate consciousness in its complete state, something that involves looking in to both the question of subjectivity and the question of objectivity. Indeed, it is the relation between the two where Fichte's insight is to be located. I will first discuss the position of Henrich and then turn to the more interesting issue of this relation. Towards the end of this paper I will then briefly discuss some of the consequences this may be seen to have for abstraction as philosophical method. Fichte's idea of complete consciousness makes clear that the nature and structure of experience cannot be properly understood in abstraction from the concrete contents of this experience.

2. The Henrich School
An interpretation of Fichte’s work that continues to be influential is that first given by Dieter Henrich in an article from 1966, titled “Fichte's Original Insight”. Fichte is situated within a debate on the nature of self-consciousness in light of what Henrich calls the “reflection model of consciousness”. In a nutshell, Fichte's insight, according to this reading, would consist in having solved, or at least in having attempted to solve, the problem of self-ascription, that is, the necessity for the subject to be aware of the fact that one is aware of some object. That this reading is still influential may be deduced from the fact that it is at present being advocated by,
for instance, Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel\(^2\) in France, by Manfred Frank\(^3\) in Germany, and, in more indirect manner by Robert Pippin\(^4\) and Paul Franks\(^5\) in the English speaking world.\(^6\)

As Manfred Frank explains it, the problem Fichte sought to address was one that followed out of conflict between two commitments held by Kant. On the one hand, according to Frank, Kant was committed to a representationalist model of knowledge; on the other hand, he was also committed to the immediacy of the Cartesian "I think".\(^7\) According to his representationalist commitments, all knowledge is representational, composed of sensible intuitions and concepts of the understanding. Only if intuitions can be given to the senses and brought under concepts can we speak of a possible object of experience.

But Kant also appealed to the “I think”. Only under the assumption of the transcendental unity of apperception, or self-consciousness, could we explain how intuitions and concepts were united in representation. This form of consciousness had to be thought of as “pure” and “original”, i.e., not given by the senses, and “prior to all thinking” (KrV B 131-2). The “original-synthetic unity of apperception” had to be able to accompany all my representations, “otherwise something would be represented in me that would not be thought at all” (\textit{loc. cit.}). That is, for there to be object-consciousness (representations), we need to


\(^{4}\) Pippin discuss Fichte in Chapter III: ‘Fichte’s Contribution’ to his \textit{Hegel’s Idealism}. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42-59. Pippin claims not to be following Henrich’s reading of self-positing as self-identification (p. 49), but later on he makes precisely this point when speaking of the “I=I” (p. 54). What Pippin does not adequately account for is how self-positing has an internal relation to opposition and reciprocal determination (Wechselbestimmung). As a consequence Pippin falsely concludes that Fichte has no account of the “co-originality of identity and difference” (p. 55). Although for Fichte the two terms are not identity and difference but rather subjectivity and objectivity, it is precisely his \textit{co-genetic} account of subjectivity and objectivity that is so valuable to contemporary discussions.

\(^{5}\) Paul W. Franks \textit{All or Nothing. Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). See e.g. p. 309: “Fichte is responding to ... the perceived demand for an actual ground of the capacity for immediate self-ascription and rational agency.”

\(^{6}\) In fact, much of the origin of this reading can be traced back to G.W.F. Hegel’s early \textit{The Difference Between the Fichtean and the Schellingean Systems of Philosophy} (1801). Hegel, as is well-known, opens his chapter on Fichte’s system with the following sentence: “The foundation of Fichte’s system is intellectual intuition, the pure thinking of itself, pure self-consciousness I=I, I am.” G.W.F. Hegel \textit{Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie} [1801]. In Idem \textit{Werke in zwanzig Bänden}, Bd. II, 52 (Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 1970).

\(^{7}\) Frank 1991, 446.

assume self-consciousness. The unity of self-consciousness is the first principle that makes all experience possible, therefore it could not be something given to the senses, hence Kant states that it is given in an intuition (ibid.).

According to the Henrich school difficulties appear as a result of Kant’s adherence to the representationalist model of consciousness. This model claims that consciousness means consciousness of something; consciousness is representational or object-oriented, and the representation is represented to (Vor-gestellt) the subject of consciousness. The object thus stands opposite the subject. But to be aware of an object one also needs to be aware that one is aware of the object. Object-consciousness requires self-consciousness, for otherwise one could be aware of an object without being aware that one is aware, which would be absurd. To know that one is self-aware entails a relation to oneself. But how do you know that this object (i.e., the self) is really one and same (i.e., identical) as oneself? For self-consciousness to be really consciousness of the self and not of some entity closely resembling it (e.g., the unconscious, the body, or the proverbial “vat” in which the brain is suspended) we would need to be able to recognise this self as identical to the self. But this is precisely to presuppose what we aim to establish. Henrich:

Thus anyone who sets reflection into motion must himself already be both the knower and the known. The subject of reflection on its own thereby satisfies the whole equation “I = I”. Yet reflection alone was supposed to bring about this equation.

Fichte’s solution, according to this reading, was to have effectively cut the Gordian knot by assuming the immediacy of consciousness. This is why, for Henrich, Fichte wrote that the

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9 That Kant had problems in his account of the nature of the “I think” can be deduced from the footnote to KrV B422: “An indeterminate perception [of the “I think”] signifies only something real, which was given, and indeed only to thinking itself, thus not as appearance, and also not as thing in itself (a noumenon), but rather as something that does in fact exist and is indicated as an existing thing in the proposition ‘I think’” (KrV B 423n). This passage seems to raise a number of difficult problems for an orthodox account of Kant’s philosophy. The “I think” is given in indeterminate but empirical intuition, yet it is given “only to thinking itself”. Hence it appears not to be given to the senses, and indeed how could it be? Yet it has factual existence. But how is this possible if, as Kant claims in this same footnote and contra Descartes’ cogito, existence entails a relation to the I that can only be given through a sensible manifold?


faculty of representation is not a thing but that it exists “for and through itself” (RA, SW, I, 11). Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel explains: “Fichte’s discovery is the discovery of self-referentiality as a model of truth, that is radical in way never thematised before.” It is radical because Fichte claims that 1.) there is no alternative to it; 2.) it is not a representationalist model; it does not refer to anything external; and 3.) self-consciousness is neither a logical identity of I and I, nor a real identity (ascribing I to itself).

2. Immediacy of experience, not of consciousness

It is not possible to deny all the above as Fichte, to an extent, does make these claims and to an extent he probably did understand his project in this way. Indeed, Fichte claims that when we “think the I” this is “both agent and action” (GWL, SW, I, 96). And in the Foundations an important role does seem to be given to the derivation from “I=I” (see GWL, SW, I, 94). Hence it seems as though Fichte indeed pursues a relation of self-identity. But as I will argue, this not the case: the key notions of “self-positing” and Tathandlung are not concerned with an attempt to establish a relation of self-identity. Far from simply positing an opposition of I and world (“not-I”), and far from simply assuming the existence of some subject and some object, that then have to either establish a relation with each other (knowledge of the world), or a subject that has to establish a relationship with itself (self-consciousness qua self-identification), Fichte starts with something far less assuming, something, in fact, far more concrete than his very abstract argumentation would lead one to think. What Fichte effectively starts from is what we might want to call concrete experience, that is, experience as it is given to us, prior to any notion of self or world or even of a directedness, or orientation, to the world. When Fichte speaks of an “absolute I” that is said to be “spontaneous” or “self-positing” this does not refer to any self-identical subject, but when he speaks of a self-positing I

14 Ibid.
16 To demonstrate the precise function of Fichte’s “I=I” requires a very detailed reading of the first paragraph of the Foundations that cannot be attempted here. An article on the first paragraph of the Foundations is forthcoming. Detailed discussion is given in my Ph.D thesis Towards a Philosophy of Freedom: Fichte and Bergson, Chapter II, Section 2 (University of Warwick, 2010).
schlechthin this signals something that is simply given. Leaving aside for a moment what this “I” is, the I, as it were, supports itself and cannot be reduced to the mere imprint of material objects, nor is it the emanation of an absolute mind. Against what he calls dogmatic realism and against dogmatic idealism, what needs to be accounted for is precisely a certain division found within experience of an active I and a passive not-I. This is something both kinds of dogmatism already assume when they speak of a subject and an object, and what they are unable to account for. But to understand such division we must depart from a consciousness said to be complete (see VND, SW, I, 463-417). The tradition of interpreting Fichte’s “I” as referring to some kind of individual, that is, a psychological, and not epistemological reading has obscured this ambition. Fichte himself explicitly warns his readers against interpreting the “I” as denoting some self, ego or individual. As he writes, the concept of self (Selbst) signifies “a relationship to something that has already been posited. (...) Hence the word ‘self’ presupposes the concept of the I (Ich)” (VND, SW, I, 530, emp. added).18

About the opposition of I and not-I Fichte writes:

[T]he philosopher must first show how the I exists and comes into being for itself. Secondly, he must show that this being of the I for itself would not be possible unless a being outside the I also arose for that I at the same time (VND, SW, I, 458).

The first I, so I claim, refers to experience as it given to us. It refers to complete consciousness, seen more precisely as the activity of determination (Bestimmung). What is given is this activity, something said to be self-positing, and we must attempt to understand first how the activity of determination is given to us, and then, secondly, the precise form this takes, namely of an I and a not-I. Hence we need to understand how this first I, as spontaneity of the activity of determination, “exists and comes into being for itself”. If we refrain from regarding this I as some subject, but see it firstly as the activity of determination, then the question is, how is that this activity cannot be reduced to the mere sense-impressions of material objects, but that a spontaneous, i.e., irreducible, and original, i.e. “self-positing” act of synthesis must be

18 DiGiovanni, in his translation of the ‘Review of Aenesidemus’ translates Ich with “ego”; Heath and Lachs, in their translation of the Foundations, translate it with “self”.

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assumed? The question here is about determination or experience and not, or at least not yet, about the subject or about self-consciousness.

But once we have agreed on the status of this experience, or of this activity, namely as something that is not merely passively received but is both a passivity and an activity; once this is agreed upon, then a second question appears. Once we agree upon the irreducibility of the activity of determination, then the second, and, as it were, more internal, question is: How is it that this activity is only possible under the form of an I set over against a not-I? How is it that this experience is only possible if with an I, a being outside of the I arose, at the same time? How is it that I come to separate within the experience as it is given to me between myself and my experience? How do I separate between I and world? Hence this is no longer the same I, but an I that appears in what Fichte calls a “reciprocal determination” with a not-I (GWL, SW, I, 131). This question comes second, for if, as dogmatic realism wants, experience is reduced to the interaction of already constituted things, or if, as dogmatic idealism wants, the thing is a mere emanation of mind, then the question of the reciprocity of thing and mind could not even be posed. But although this question comes second, this denotes only a logical order and not a sequential or historical order of events. When we do not clearly separate the two we are quickly led to the psychological reading.

I and not-I appear as necessarily conjoint. Here reference is to a limited I and a limited not-I, and not to an absolute I. The co-genetic account of I and not-I is explicitly conceptualised by Fichte as consisting of different forms of activity. As he writes in the Foundations, passivity is a lower degree of activity (e.g. GWL, SW, I, 146). Experience does not already provide us with a ready-made subject-object opposition, but it gives us relative distances, relative forms of intimacy, relative interests between “I” and “not-I”. Fichte’s account allows us to understand the precise relation of subject and object. It is this that makes his account so very valuable. Generally, when the subject-object split is discussed and when a Cartesian division is lamented, the attempt is to work back to either the one, or to the other, or to some third, but the relation itself is left unaddressed. What Fichte shows is how this relation must be understood, and how from within this relation subject and object may be seen to appear in their reciprocal determination.19

19 Paul Franks (2005), who follows the Henrich school in his construal of Fichte’s argument as turning around the problem of immediate self-ascription of states of consciousness, misreads the argument as a result. He
3. Abstraction and the method of philosophy

I would like to use the remainder of this presentation to discuss some of the consequences the idea of complete consciousness and the notion that subject and object are necessarily conjoined. Indeed, it can be seen to have quite an impact on abstraction as a method for philosophy. Fichte makes clear the fact that, since the question of subjectivity is nothing outside of the question of objectivity, and indeed, outside of any determination of experience, we cannot attain a proper understanding of the nature of experience through an effort of abstraction from the concrete contents of experience. Hence it is in the actual execution or presence of experience that we may investigate its structure. To understand this properly, we must appreciate Fichte's early eureka!-moment of the ‘Review of Aenesidemus’ where he exclaims: Consciousness is not a thing, but it is an activity (RA, SW, I, 11, 8). Much of the radical novelty of Fichte’s construal of subject-object relations lies in this thinking in terms of “activities”.

Although Kant too speculated about subject-object relations in terms of a difference between activity and passivity, it is first with Fichte that this is put to its full effect. Again, we must be careful not read this in an overly psychological manner. Activity is not the activity of someone, but rather denotes the attempt to re-conceptualise an extrinsic and static opposition of things or constituted entities into an intrinsic and relational distinction, and of elements that only first get defined within this relationship.

For Fichte the self-positing I refers to the synthetic conscious activity that results in the determination of experience. When we direct our attention to this very process we are quite naturally lead to grasp this process itself as some sort of thing or object to be determined. This “object” for thought we then assume to be the subject of thought: a thinking subject. We ask: Who or what thing is it that thinks? But this is to confuse two levels of inquiry. We confuse, as

interprets Fichte’s use of intellectual intuition as an account of the necessity for someone to say “I” about him or herself in a way that is not mediated by anything else. This would be the self-positing I. This makes of intellectual intuition something that, as Franks writes, “ordinarily” does not occur on its own, that is, only contingently so (see p. 311). Whereas in the passage that he himself quotes in this context Fichte stresses more than once that intellectual intuition never occurs on its own, and is always conjoined with sensory intuition (VND, SW, I, 463-4). Franks’ account remains overly psychological because he does not see clearly enough the importance of Fichte’s demonstration of the co-genesis of subjectivity and objectivity. See Franks, op. cit., 305-313 esp.

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Fichte explains in the *Foundations*, “the I as subject” with “the I as object of reflection for an absolute subject” (GWL, SW, I, 97). We confuse the I as subject, something that is already part of a relationship with the world, with a reflection on the structure and possibility of experience. Within the tradition of subjectivity it is commonly assumed that the subject is responsible for this structure. When we confuse the latter investigation with the idea of a subject, already in relation to an object, we then depart for the confused quest of attempting to locate this subject somewhere within experience. We think of it as some quasi-real entity in the brain. We then think it can be investigated in abstraction from the object. But as we have seen, for Fichte we must start from experience seen as the activity of determination and not as some spatio-temporal entity. Indeed, outside of the actual execution of experience it cannot even be spoken of. Only first with the investigation into the form that determination takes may we begin to speak of an I and a not-I. And only then may we progress to the self or subject. Consciousness, however, is an “activity” and can only be grasped in its actual execution. Hence Fichte also speaks of it as a Tathandlung. It is this active, performative nature, that again makes a straight-forward abstraction from the content or object of experience problematic. Fichte:

> This agility [of thought – MK] is intuited as a process by means of which the active force wrenches itself away from a state of repose, and it can be intuited in no other way (VND, SW, I, 531, emp. added).

For Fichte thought or consciousness is an activity that consists of the determination of experience. We are naturally inclined to think of it as something thing-like. But when we speak of a subject-object split, the “subject” in question concerns not myself as individual but the self-led investigation of one's experience. And the “object” is equally less a thing, than the experience that I have in its concrete, actual state. To the extent that we would want to speak of a subject and an object, it concerns more properly the distinction between myself and the content of experience. But this I is nothing outside of its experience. Fichte:

> I cannot discover myself to be acting without also discovering some object upon which I act (VND, SW, I, 464).
Only what he calls “complete consciousness” can be investigated. This means a consciousness engaged in the actual determination of experience. Within this determination we find a passivity and an activity. These two are co-related. Hence what I call I and what I call not-I only makes sense from within this relation. The relation thus allows us to understand how the two hold together, whereas if we start from an already constituted object and the subject’s being-directed-towards the object it becomes very difficult to conceive of the subject’s access to the object. The language of different activities is philosophically relevant because it makes clear that the awareness of thought, consciousness, or experience, is something that can only be understood when we are engaged in the actual process of determination.

4. Conclusion
Briefly then, Fichte’s philosophy is not first and foremost concerned with subjectivity, nor simply with objectivity, but despite the abstract language, it tries to start very nearby: from experience as it is directly given. Within this givenness, stressed by Fichte to be “self-positing”, “spontaneous” or “absolute”, we then need to account for how I distinguish myself from my experience. This takes the form of separating what concerns myself from what is “not-I”. But the two are necessarily conjoined and cannot be truly separated. I am only what I am in distinction with what is not-I. Any philosophical method that aims to reduce the objects or content of experience to attain a subject or the structure of experience is thus bound to fail. They would do well to reorient themselves on the work of Fichte.