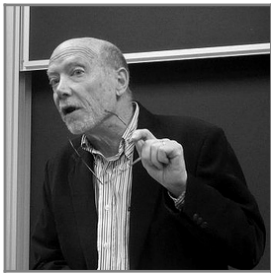


## GERMAN IDEALISM, EPISTEMIC CONSTRUCTIVISM AND METAPHILOSOPHY

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This paper concerns the nature and a significance of metaphilosophy with special attention to German idealism. Metaphilosophy, or the philosophy of philosophy, is understood differently from different perspectives, for instance, if philosophy concerns the consciousness of the object, as the self-consciousness of the knowing process. If we assume that the Western philosophical tradition consists in a long series of efforts to demonstrate claims to know, then metaphilosophy is not present in the ancient Greek tradition. It only arises in the modern tradition through the turn from a theory of knowledge that depends on consciousness, more precisely consciousness of the independent object, to a theory of knowledge that depends on self-consciousness, more precisely consciousness of the independent object as well as consciousness of consciousness of the independent object.

**Keywords:** German idealism, metaphilosophy, constructivism, Greek tradition

## НЕМЕЦКИЙ ИДЕАЛИЗМ, ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКИЙ КОНСТРУКТИВИЗМ И МЕТАФИЛОСОФИЯ

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В статье анализируются природа и значение метафилософии в контексте немецкого идеализма. Метафилософия, или философия философии, осмысливается с различных перспектив. Так, если философия имеет дело с сознающим объектом, то метафилософия касается самосознания процесса познания. Если мы допускаем, что западная философская традиция заключена в серии утверждений о знании, то метафилософия не представлена в древнегреческой традиции. Она появляется лишь в современной традиции благодаря повороту в теории познания. А именно благодаря переходу от идеи обусловленности познания сознанием (сознанием независимого объекта), к теории познания, которая зависит от самосознания – или, точнее, сознания независимого объекта, так же как сознания сознания независимого объекта.

**Ключевые слова:** немецкий идеализм, метафилософия, конструктивизм, греческая традиция



## Metaphilosophy

Metaphilosophy is not present in the Greek tradition but arises later in the modern debate. If we suppose that the entire Western philosophical tradition consists in a series of efforts to know, then we can distinguish between theories of knowledge dependent on the object, for instance in the Heideggerian conception of *aletheia* in which something, if not being at least a being, supposedly shows itself, and views of knowledge dependent on the subject. The latter takes three main forms, including the null view in which the object shows itself, the weak view in which the subject knows a mind-independent object as it is, and a strong theoretical view of the subject presupposing a distinction between the real and the real for us in which claims to know directly depend on the subject. An example of the former might be the Platonic view and an example of a weak view of subjectivity could be the Cartesian or Husserlian views that both support cognitive inference by the subject to what is. An example of the latter is a view of cognition as limited to what is for us in various forms of epistemic constructivism.

Metaphilosophy presupposes a theory of cognition dependent on the cognitive subject. The modern cognitive subject, as the name suggests, is absent in the ancient Greek tradition. It only arises in the modern tradition through what I will be calling a gradual anthropological shift, or the shift from a general solution of whatever kind to the problem of knowledge that is routinely understood as the view that *S* knows *p* to the very different view that *S* knows itself as knowing *p*. As concerns cognition, metaphilosophy depends on the subject's awareness of the cognitive process. If the subject is not merely an epistemic placeholder, but rather a finite human being, then awareness of the cognitive process ultimately refers to the relation of the human individual or individuals to the social and historical surroundings.

## Parmenides and the Epistemic Tradition

Western philosophy has a beginning though perhaps not an end. Western philosophy originates in early Greek thought. Parmenides founded the Eleatic School and in the process even Western philosophy itself. At the dawn of the philosophical tradition Parmenides claims that to know is to know being. Being neither comes into being nor passes away, nor changes in any sense, hence can be known, and that we do not know and cannot even refer to nonbeing that is not. The claim that we do not know what is not is the initial form of the Greek debate on nonbeing that much becomes the modern discussion of reference. This theme was revived around the beginning of the last century by Frege,



Russell, Strawson and others, and most recently Kimhi [Kimhi, 2018]. The claim that knowing and being are the same is the initial formulation of a thesis of cognitive identity that echoes through the entire later tradition. This thesis can be interpreted in at least three different ways. On the one hand, there is the canonical view running from Parmenides throughout the entire later tradition that the criterion of cognition is to know that thought and being are the same, or identical. This criterion functions in two ways: as the standard of cognition that must be met in theory as a condition of claiming to know in practice. Yet despite enormous and continuing efforts since Parmenides over two and half millenia, it has never been shown that there is knowledge of the real. It follows though not in theory, at least in practice the Parmenidean view of the only acceptable cognitive standard as the identity between thought and being leads to epistemic skepticism.

We can expand this point slightly to redescribe the Western philosophical account of knowledge from a Parmenidean perspective in three points. To begin with, there is the claim for the identity of thought and being that at least since Parmenides has always functioned as the cognitive criterion. Second, there is the inability to demonstrate cognition of independent objects, hence the failure in practice following from the persistent inability to demonstrate cognition of the real, hence to avoid cognitive skepticism. Suffice it to say that the Parmenidean thesis of the identity of thought and being understood as requiring a grasp of the independent object is as popular now as it has ever been despite the obvious practical inability to meet this theoretical standard. Finally, there is the effort by a minority of modern thinkers to work out an alternative formulation that meets the Parmenidean standard of the unity of thought and being through cognition not of the independent but rather of the dependent object.

## **Epistemic Constructivism as a Parmenidean Cognitive Solution**

Parmenidean constructivism follows from an important passage in his poem in which he asserts thought and being are the same. This passage points to an identity between conceiving, that is presumably knowing, on the one hand, and being, on the other, in the crucial phrase: “for the same thing is for conceiving as is for being” (“to gar auto noein estin te kai einai”) [Coxon, 2009, p. 58]. We can take Parmenides to be pointing to identity as the condition or criterion of cognition. In other words, being and knowing are the same. If to be and to be known are the same, then what is and cannot not be can be known and, conversely, what is not and cannot be cannot be known. This crucial statement is the main source of Parmenides’ influence on the entire later debate.



This crucial statement is interpreted in different ways. Observers think that Parmenides is a strong realist, hence committed to the view that the real neither comes into being nor passes away. According to Myles Burnyeat, “[T]he fragment (frag. 3) which was once believed, by Berkeley among others, to say that to think and to be are one and the same”<sup>1</sup> is rather to be construed as saying, on the contrary, that “it is one and the same thing which is there for us to think of and is there to be: thought requires an object, distinct from itself, and that object, Parmenides argues, must actually exist.” [Burnyeat, 2012, p. 225]. This suggests Parmenides thinks cognition depends on an identity between being, the real or reality that neither comes into being nor passes away, and our cognitive grasp of it. This influential claim echoes throughout the entire later tradition where since the Eleatics it has continued to function as the criterion of cognition. Parmenides is right to think that in cognition knowing and being are the same. But there is no reason, and Parmenides gives none, why this identity thesis depends on the cognitive grasp of an independent object. The view that knowing and doing are the same echoes through the debate. Yet, despite heroic efforts it has never been shown that we can know the real. Kant pointed out several centuries ago there has never been any progress at all toward knowing an independent object.

In sum, the initial interpretation of the Parmenidean cognitive criterion, the one Parmenides himself supposedly accepts, is some form of the view that both in theory and in practice cognition depends on cognizing the real. If this is correct, then Parmenides is committed to the view that his theoretical criterion of cognition is in fact realized. Though he does not give an example, they are plentiful in the discussion, for instance in the Platonic theory of forms that depends on grasping the real lying beyond appearance. This points towards the widely known view that the subject depends on the object and not conversely.

A second interpretation of the Parmenidean cognitive criterion is that the object depends on the subject. This view, which reverses the relation between subject and object, is linked to the modern constructivist cognitive approach. Modern constructivism is the first and to the best of my knowledge so far only plausible alternative to the ancient view that cognition requires cognition of the real. Modern constructivism is any form of the view that the subject does not depend on the object but the object rather depends on the subject. This view comes into the modern debate through Hobbes, F. Bacon, and Vico, and independently through Kant.

Epistemic constructivism and idealism are closely related. The precise idealistic claim has often been misunderstood, for instance in G.E. Moore’s infamous claim that idealists of all stripes deny the existence of the external world. On the contrary, idealists do not deny but

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<sup>1</sup> “To understand and to be are according to Parmenides the same thing.” [Berkeley, 1747, §309, p. 149]



rather affirm the existence of the external world that they believe cannot be denied but also cannot be known. Kant, for instance, insists that if there is an appearance there must be something that appears though he clearly denies cognition of the real, the thing in itself, or the noumenon. The Kantian view is illustrated in his reference to what is routinely called the Copernican turn or again the so-called Copernican revolution (in philosophy), though Kant never uses this term to refer to his position. By “epistemic constructivism” I will understand the view that we do not know the real that we do not construct but rather know only the real for us that we can in some way to be said to construct.

The epistemic approach to cognition arises through the modern philosophical turn away from the view that cognition depends on grasping the real and towards the replacement view that we know only what is real for us. I call epistemic constructivism the appropriation for purposes of philosophical cognition of Euclidean or again plane geometry. According to Euclidean geometry, geometrical construction of a two-dimensional figure with a straight edge and compass enfranchises the entire class of geometrical figures, for instance isosceles triangles or any other plane figure.

There is a difference between constructivist mathematics, also called intuitionist mathematics and epistemic constructivism. Intuitionist mathematics of all kinds asserts that mathematics is a creation of the human mind. Constructivist mathematics asserts it is necessary to construct mathematical objects to demonstrate their existence. I call epistemic constructivism a cognitive approach in philosophy that depends on the construction of the cognitive object. Classical epistemology holds that the subject, hence cognition, depends on a mind-independent object; epistemic constructivism rather holds that the object depends on the subject. Epistemic constructivists hold we do not and cannot grasp the mind-independent real; we rather grasp and know the real for us. Epistemic constructivism depends, which denies that to know is to know independent objects, suggests we only know dependent objects.

Epistemic constructivists argue against the Cartesian view in two ways: in claiming we do not and cannot know the world, and in further claiming we know only what we construct. Metaphysical realists, including Parmenides, think that the failure to grasp what is leads to epistemic skepticism. Epistemic constructivists think, on the contrary, that metaphysical realism leads to epistemic skepticism, but epistemic constructivism enables us to avoid epistemic skepticism, not in cognizing the real, which is not possible, but rather in cognizing what we construct.

The emergence of modern epistemic constructivism provokes a sea change in the epistemic debate. The modern rise of a constructivist approach to cognition leads to an ongoing contest running throughout the entire modern debate between an anti-constructivist approach on the one hand and a constructivist approach on the other. Anti-constructivists hold we must cognize the real that is the only road to cognition and on



which the subject depends; epistemic constructivists hold that the only road to cognition lies in the construction of the real for us since the object depends on the subject.

## **Idealism, German Idealism and Epistemic Constructivism**

It seems there has never been a detailed discussion of idealism. To the best of my knowledge the earliest reference to idealism as a theory is due to Leibniz. The opposition between idealism and realism arises with what is apparently the initial philosophical usage of the term by Leibniz in 1702. In responding to Pierre Bayle, he objects to “those who, like Epicurus and Hobbes, believe that the soul is material” in adding that in his own position “whatever of good there is in the hypotheses of Epicurus and Plato, of the great materialists and the great idealists, is combined here.” [Leibniz, 1875–1890, vol. 4, p. 559–560]. For Leibniz, what later came to be called idealism refers to the Platonic theory of forms or ideas.

For present purposes I will understand “idealism” as a general approach to cognition that originates in ancient Greece and, through its insistence, continues today, and “German idealism” as a specific strand of idealism. Kant, who is apparently the first thinker to call his theory idealism, defends two different, incompatible cognitive approaches: an earlier strategy I will be calling epistemic representationalism and a later strategy I will be calling epistemic constructivism. The German idealist tradition records an effort by different hands to develop an acceptable version of epistemic constructivism invented independently by Kant and further developed by his successors, including Fichte, Hegel, but not Schelling, who is not influenced by and does not participate in the reaction to Kant’s effort to develop epistemic constructivism and, if Marx is an idealist, by the latter as well.

## **Kant, Epistemic Representationalism, and Epistemic Constructivism**

German idealism beginning in Kant consists in a series of efforts to formulate an acceptable constructivist approach to cognition. German idealist cognition arises in the change introduced in the writings of the mature Kant, especially the so-called Copernican revolution in philosophy.

Plato’s view is influenced by Parmenides, who in turn influences Kant. We recall the Platonic view that cognition occurs in the relation between a subject, appearance and reality. Plato rejects the backward causal



inference from appearance to reality in favor of the direct, intuitive grasp of the real. Kant, who also thinks that cognition occurs in the relation between subject, appearance and reality, parts company with Plato in rejecting the claim for direct cognition intuition of the real.

Kant interprets this basic view in two ways in what I will be calling his epistemic representationalist and his epistemic constructivist views. By “representational” I will understand the claim to represent the real that causes the appearance. By “cognitive constructivism” I will understand the claim that subject constructs and knows not the object but rather its appearance. A representational approach to cognition presupposes the validity of the backwards causal inference, that is the cognitive inference from the appearance or what appears to its cause. Though it is clear that Plato rejects the backwards causal inference, the reason is unclear. Perhaps is aware that though a cause determines its effect, an effect can be the result of many causes. Kant distantly follows Plato in denying the backwards causal inference but further rejects the latter’s epistemic intuitionism in turning to a constructivist alternative.

In a famous passage, he suggests a similar approach in metaphysics: “Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this supposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer to revolve and left the stars at rest.” [Kant, 1998, p. 110].

According to Kant, cognition requires the secure path of a science. He makes three further crucial points in this passage. To begin with, there is his view of knowledge. Kant, who prefers a priori cognition to all other possibilities, takes pure mathematics, which he thinks is a priori, as his cognitive model. Kant combines his preference for a priori knowledge with a rejection of the standard view of knowledge. According to Kant, cognition is not possible if it must conform to objects, since we cannot find out anything about them a priori. Since he rejects epistemic intuition, Kant is suggesting that we cannot cognize a mind-independent object, or the real. But cognition is possible if the object must conform to the subject. In short, we can know objects constructed by, hence dependent on, the subject. In other words, cognition that is not possible on the standard model, since, according to Kant and other constructivists we cannot know an independent object, or cannot know the real, is possible on the non-standard



constructivist model in which the object is constructed by, hence depends on, the subject.

Further Kant here silently relies on the view inspired by his understanding of plane geometry that we can know a priori what must necessarily be true a posteriori, for instance that the sum of the interior angles of a right angle triangle are equivalent to a straight line. This point combines the idea of what is useful from a speculative perspective with Kant's normative preference, following Descartes and more distantly Aristotle, for apodictic cognition. Finally, Kant draws attention to the similarity between his view that the cognitive object depends on the subject and Copernican astronomy in cashing out his suggestion that basic changes in knowledge are revolutionary.

Kant clearly thinks Copernican heliocentric astronomy constitutes a revolutionary step forward from a cognitive perspective that will not and cannot later be refuted, nor require modification. It will, hence, not only solve the problem of knowledge, but further, never need, nor tolerate any later correction of any kind. According to Kant, his constructive approach resembles the Copernican view in that what we know is not independent of, but rather centrally depends on, the subject.

## Criticism of Kant's Epistemic Constructivism

Kant is a central figure in the Western philosophical tradition. There is a before and after Kant since his influence radiates throughout the later debate. Yet there is a deep disparity between the objections to the critical philosophy raised by other German idealists and the enormous and steadily growing debate in the secondary literature. In simplifying we can say that Kant's contemporaries and near contemporaries often raise basic objections, for instance about the central concept of the thing in itself that was not accepted as Kant formulated it by any contemporary thinker. Yet the debate about his position is less often critical and more often confined to sketching the outlines of the position. If Kant's epistemic constructivism were successful, if it met the questions raised about it, there might still be reasons to discuss it. But there would be no need to develop it further.

Kant was and still is enormously influential. He was particularly influential on the small group of thinkers of the very first rank who together with Kant comprise the German idealist tradition. The single main theme running through the main German idealist thinkers, with the exception of Schelling, is epistemic constructivism. Kant was a German idealist, that is a thinker committed to an epistemic constructivist approach to cognition. Kant's colleagues were influenced by his constructivism, and were with exceptions also constructivists. But they did not share Kant's form



of constructivism they tended to criticize in favor of other constructivist formulations.

There is no space to discuss the nature and limits of the critical philosophy in detail. Suffice it to indicate what a critical approach to Kant's might look like. Constructivism, like ice cream, comes in different flavors. Kant's theory depends on a priori constructivism, more precisely on what he calls synthetic a priori judgments. According to Kant, cognition is possible on two conditions: if there are synthetic a priori judgments, and if it is possible to infer from the a priori to the a posteriori in order to determine a priori what must necessarily be true a priori. In each case, presumably with Aristotle and Descartes in mind, Kant thinks it is possible to demonstrate, that is to formulate apodictic cognitive claims. In this way Kant thinks it is possible to solve or resolve the central cognitive themes in a way beyond the possible need for later revision.

Kant gives three examples of synthetic a priori cognition: pure mathematics, pure natural science, and the future science of metaphysics. All three examples are problematic. We recall that Euclidean geometry features construction with a straight edge and compass. A single geometrical construction, for instance an isosceles triangle, suffices to enfranchise the class, in this case the class of isosceles triangles. At the time that Kant was active, non-Euclidean geometry had not yet been established. The discovery of non-Euclidean geometry successfully undermined the inference from geometry to the world that relies on but that can no longer guarantee cognitive claims.

A similar problem arises with respect to the laws of nature. In his seminal account of Newtonian physics Kant argues on geometrical grounds that the only possible formulation of the inverse square law has been given by Newton, hence is necessarily true. Yet in the age of relativity we know that the laws of physics can be contradicted on empirical or a priori grounds. There is no way is no way to infer from experience, or in another formulation: from the a posteriori to the a priori or from the a priori to the a posteriori.

More generally, the Kantian view of cognition relies on a supposedly incorrigible inference between the a priori and the a posteriori. Yet this point is doubtful for two reasons. On the one hand, despite Kant's best efforts, he fails to show that either an inference from the a priori to the a posteriori or from the a posteriori to the a priori is incorrigible. On the other hand, though Kant thinks that cognition is ahistorical, it rather depends on time and place. At different times different cognitive approaches are in the wind. None has ever been shown to be a-historically correct. Despite Kant's interest in an incorrigible cognitive standard, there is currently no reason to think, and Kant provides none, that this Kantian standard can ever be realized in practice.



## Fichte and Epistemic Constructivism

German idealism begins in Kant, whose later turn to epistemic constructivism was extremely influential. For chronological and philosophical reasons, the German idealist closest to Kant is Fichte. Fichte claims to understand Kant better than the latter understood himself. Fichte's influential reading of Kant was accepted by the young Schelling and the young Hegel.

A main difficulty in Kant's mature position is how to understand epistemic construction. According to Kant, the subject brings the contents of sensory intuition under the categories in constructing a cognitive object. This claim meets the Parmenidean criterion of the identity of thought and being at the evident cost of the inability to describe the activity through which the subject constitutes its object that arises as Kant reports through what he obscurely calls "a hidden art in the depth of man's soul..." [Kant, 1998, p. 283]. As this passage suggests, Kant does not describe but rather deduces the cognitive subject. In practice, this means that Kant begins from the object in describing the subject to which he attributes the capacities required to explain cognition. The transcendental deduction reaches a high point and an end in the supposed deduction of the cognitive subject whose relation to finite human being, since Kant sternly rejects an anthropological solution, remains mysterious.

Though he claims to be a faithful Kantian, Fichte, as Kant saw, formulated a highly original position of his own. In the critical philosophy, the subject is said to construct and know an object dependent on it. Fichte expounds his position in the *Science of Knowledge* (1794), which was centrally influential in the post-Kantian debate. Very much like Kant, Fichte links experience and cognition. Fichte's aim in this and other writings is always to explain what he describes as "the ground of all experience." [Fichte, 1982, p. 6].

Fichte's single most important innovation lies in his conception of the philosophical subject. He explains experience and knowledge through a new view of the subject as practically finite, hence constrained in its actions by its surroundings, but theoretically infinite. Kant sketches a supposedly transcendental account of the interaction of the transcendental subject and reality as a third-person, causal account. Fichte reformulates the Kantian view as a first-person account of the interaction of subject and object in a statement of the fundamental principles that begin the *Science of Knowledge*.

Kant deduces a philosophical conception of the subject that Fichte replaces through an anthropological shift. Kant's transcendental deduction reaches a high point in his conception of the transcendental subject, or original synthetic unity of apperception as "the supreme principle of all use of the understanding." [Kant, 1998, p. 248]. According to Kant,



the subject of “I think” that “must be able to accompany all my representations” is a “pure apperception,” not “an empirical one” [Ibid., p. 246]. Fichte, on the contrary, approaches the cognitive problem through finite human being in a social context.

According to Fichte, cognition depends on a subject that cannot be deduced but must be assumed. Fichte, who understands deduction as a progression from conditioned to condition, hence as regressive, invokes a pragmatic perspective in contrasting dogmatism and idealism. Though neither can refute the other, dogmatism cannot explain experience. The thing in itself is an arbitrary assumption that explains nothing, but through intellectual intuition the subject perceives itself as active. In this way, idealism explains experience through intellectual activity based on the necessary laws of the intellect. If the subject is independent and the object is dependent, then philosophy finally depends on subjective factors, according to Fichte on the kind of person one.

Fichte, like Kant, begins with the problem of the conditions of knowledge and experience, in considering the finite human subject from two perspectives. As a finite human being, a person is both a theoretical entity, namely, a subject of consciousness, who is unlimited, as well as a practical, or limited moral, being. As a real finite being, the individual is limited through the relation to the external world. Fichte further invokes the concept of absolute being on the philosophical or meta-experiential level, as a philosophical concept useful in the explanation of experience.

To the types of finite human being or so-called self (*das Ich*) Fichte associates three kinds of activity. As theoretical an individual posits, as practical he strives, and as absolute he acts in theoretical independence of his surroundings. The concept of an ideally existent absolute being is justified as a means to understand the experience of the really existent finite being. Forms of activity are theoretically subtended by activity in general. Fichte understands finite human being as above all a practical being. Fichte further identifies pure activity with the absolute self that is an acknowledged philosophical construct. Since his view of finite human being follows from the concept of absolute self, Fichte may be said to “deduce” the concept of the individual from that of the absolute. As he notes in a letter: “My absolute self is clearly not the individual... But the individual must be deduced from the absolute self” [Fichte, 1925, p. 501].

Fichte’s rethinking of the subject removes the ambiguity in the critical philosophy about the status of the noumenon, or mind-independent real that Kant inconsistently describes as both uncognizable as well as indispensable for cognition. Fichte’s shift to cognitive explanation from the perspective of subjectivity or the finite human subject overcomes some problems in the critical philosophy, but leads to others.

Fichte’s anthropological reformulation of the subject reinstates the psychologism Kant seeks to avoid. The Fichtean subject removes the Kantian ambiguity in the critical philosophy due to a simultaneous commitment to



epistemic representationalism, hence to metaphysical realism, as well as epistemic constructivism and empirical realism on the other. This point can be explained in referring to the triple distinction between a phenomenon, an appearance, and a representation. In simple terms, a phenomenon is simply given to consciousness but does not refer beyond itself; an appearance is given to consciousness and further refers beyond itself but does not necessarily represent or correctly depict that to which it refers; and a representation refers to and correctly depicts that to which it refers beyond itself.

Fichte rejects Kantian representationalism in criticizing a causal approach to knowledge. Fichte's enormous contribution lies in rejecting the representationalist causal model, hence in removing the inconsistency in Kant's simultaneous but inconsistent commitment to two rival views of cognition in restating the Kantian epistemic constructivist model on the basis of the subject's activity. In this way, Fichte sets the agenda running throughout post-Kantian German idealism consisting in an effort to restate the a priori Kantian constructivist approach to cognition in an acceptable a posteriori form.

Fichte's view of cognition is, however, deeply problematic. His solution consists in replacing the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity through the single explanatory theme of subjectivity. This improves on Kant's third person account of the relation of subject to object in an account from the first-person perspective of experience in Fichte's technical sense of the term. Yet in revealing the limits of a quasi-Cartesian approach to objectivity through subjectivity, he reduces objectivity to subjectivity so to speak. Modern philosophy features the view that the road to objectivity runs through subjectivity. The difficulty lies in understanding how to combine subjectivity and objectivity within a single cognitive theory. I conclude that, though Fichte clearly improves on Kant, he fails to solve the Cartesian problem of the relation of subjectivity to objectivity within cognition, a problem that has never been solved.

## Hegel on Epistemic Constructivism

Hegel constructs his position in reacting to and building upon the prior debate. As early as the *Differenzschrift*, his initial philosophical publication, He reacts to Kant directly, to Kant as mediated by Fichte, to Fichte and to Schelling in formulating a highly original form of epistemic constructivism, and to Reinhold who supposedly misunderstands the main German idealists.

Hegel, whose contribution to cognition is often overlooked, expounds an original form of epistemic constructivism throughout the Phenomenology of Spirit, most legibly in the introduction to the book. Hegel



is sometimes thought to ignore experience, according to Engels in descending from the mind to the world. In fact, his cognitive approach rises from the world as given in experience to what he calls spirit (*Geist*). Hegel's conception of cognition is neither apodictic nor a priori, but rather a posteriori and clearly experimental. Hegel distinguishes between experiential objects and explanatory concepts (*Begriffe*). As a phenomenologist Hegel does not claim to grasp either the mind-independent object, the real or reality. He rather limits cognition to a comparison of that theory and the object it must explain. Both are situated within consciousness. The theory that arises to account for experience is tested against further experience by comparing the theory to the cognitive object within consciousness. There are two and only two possible outcomes of such a comparison: either the theory meets the test of experience, so that the concept and the object can be said to coincide in what Hegel obscurely describes as the identity of identity and difference; or, on the contrary, the theory fails the test of experience and must be reformulated.

In Hegel's approach to cognition, the relation of concept or theory to the cognitive object is circular. The object depends on the concept that is literally constructed as a result of the cognitive framework. And the concept is the result of the effort to cognize the object. The central theme of Kantian constructivism is that we know what we construct a priori, hence prior to and apart from experience. Hegel takes an a posteriori approach to cognition. According to Hegel, we know only what we construct in and through experience on the level of consciousness. When we know, concept and object are identical. But, since the world is not constructed by, but is rather independent of, the subject, concept and object are also non-identical, or different. Cognitive claims are neither justified a priori, nor through some form of foundationalism. They are rather justified through working out the self-justifying theory.

In comparison to Kant and Fichte, Hegelian epistemic constructivism differs in its resolutely historical thrust. His approach to historical phenomena applies his general constructivist approach to knowledge. His famous quip about the failure to learn from history implies we can and should do so. Aristotle famously prefers poetry to history since the former concerns what might happen, hence is universal, but history, which happens only once, has no lessons to teach. Now if it is possible to learn from history, then in some way history must be intelligible, or capable of teaching us.

Hegel points out the world is rational for someone who looks at it rationally [Hegel, 1902]. According to Hegel, philosophy brings reason that displays itself in history, reason through which human beings develop and know themselves. In related ways Hegel and Marx both contribute to developing a view of history based on Hegel's aphorism that the real is the rational and the rational is the real, which is a key to his view of the intelligibility of history. Hegel and Marx are both committed to a constructivist approach to historical phenomena.



Hegel links constructivism and idealism in clearly claiming that what we mean by idealism is that reason is all reality [Hegel, 1971, p. 179]. According to Hegel, the real is rational since otherwise it could not be known. More generally, history is rational since by implication everything that human beings do is rational. Yet it does not follow that because history is rational, that human beings fully realize themselves in the historical context, nor does it follow that they are fully free.

In rehabilitating human reason, Hegel frees it from its Kantian limits. Hegel's constructivist conception of history is comparable to Vico's. The latter famously claims that only God, who made nature, can know it, but that human beings, who make history, can know history. Like Vico, who was little known in his time, but who later influenced Marx, Hegel thinks that we know human history because we make it. Yet his view is wider than Vico's since Hegel thinks we can know everything, including nature, that occurs in consciousness.

## German Idealism and Epistemic Constructivism

Many things could be said about German idealism that is routinely underestimated. It is clear that the cognitive potential of German idealism, which is not usually studied in any detail, is rarely grasped, even by its own adherents. I will limit myself to two remarks concerning the German idealist contribution to cognition.

On the one hand, epistemic constructivism offers an important alternative to metaphysical realism that has been the main approach to cognition since early Greek philosophy. What later became the modern debate on cognition originated in the Eleatic School founded by Parmenides long ago. Parmenides made numerous contributions to the later cognitive debate. It will suffice here to focus on only two contributions, one of which was successful and the other a resounding failure. Parmenides' conviction that knowing and doing are the same was rapidly adopted throughout the cognitive debate as was his interpretation of this claim as requiring the cognitive grasp of the real, reality or the world. The Parmenidean view that thought and being are the same continues is the initial version of so-called identity theory that continues to echo through the tradition where it is adopted by all parties, including metaphysical realists, idealists and many others. There is a difference between this view that continues to function as a cognitive criterion and the interpretation of that criterion.

The Parmenidean cognitive criterion can be interpreted in several different ways. Parmenides' interpretation of his criterion led him to claim that cognition requires a grasp of the real. This interpretation of the Parmenidean criterion is doubly problematic. On the one hand, though many have followed Parmenides in seeking to demonstrate a grasp of the real,



this demonstration has never succeeded. The history of epistemology records a long series of failures to grasp the real. Kant is right that there has never been the least progress in this direction. Parmenides' own effort to show that we in fact know the unchangeable real is an unsupported dogmatic assertion. The consistent failure

On the other hand, the persistent failure of the persistent effort to base cognition on the grasp of the real suggests the interest of this other effort that arose in the introduction of epistemic constructivism in the early modern debate. In the absence of a third possibility the effort to develop this alternative at least currently seems to be the only live option on the table, the only one still in play at this point in time. If, as I think, the main theme of German idealism lies in developing a view that is open still no more than a bare intuition into a full-fledged conceptual alternative. The considerable interest of the German idealist tradition lies in its role as locus of the interaction among a small number of first-rate philosophical minds closely focused on competing versions of an epistemic constructivist approach to cognition.

## Epistemic Constructivism and Metaphilosophy

This paper has examined the relation between metaphysical realism and epistemic constructivism. I have argued that this distinction that emerged early in the tradition in the wake of the Parmenidean thesis that thought and being are the same. And I have further described metaphilosophy as a theory of cognition dependent on the cognitive subject.

Now the role of the subject is a key dimension in cognitive theories of all kinds. Philosophical theories of cognition include variations on the anti-anthropological theme that the object shows itself as well as on the very different theme that we know only what we construct. Hume and other British empiricists think that knowledge is human knowledge. In answering Hume Kant turns away from an anthropological approach. Later thinkers react to Kant in strengthening the conception of the subject. In part the answer to Kant is to return behind his rejection of anthropology to an anthropological approach to knowledge. Fichte, for instance, develops a view of the subject and finite human being. Following Fichte, Hegel points to Kant's inability to explain the relation between an uncognizable reality and the cognitive subject, or in other words the inability to explain the unbridgeable gap between ourselves and cognition, subjectivity and objectivity, thought and being, the knower and the known [Hegel, 1967, §73, p. 46–47]. Cognitive theory worthy of the name must be metaphilosophical in focusing on the role of the subject in constructing what it claims to know.



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