

The Perspectival Nature of Consciousness in German Idealism and Analytic Philosophy

Katharina Kraus
Johns Hopkins University

*This text appears in **The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Analytic Philosophy**, edited by James Conant und Jonas Held. London: Palgrave.*

Abstract:

This chapter explores three different theories explaining the fundamental perspectivity of human consciousness, focusing specifically on the reflexivity or subjective character of consciousness. The comparison of Kant's, Fichte's and contemporary analytic theories shows that there is a crucial difference in the way the relationship between form and matter or between mode and content of a state of consciousness is conceived. The first part examines Kant's reflexive but pre-reflective model of (self-)consciousness, according to which the fundamental reflexivity of consciousness is understood not as a reflection upon a state of the subject, but as the universal and irreducible form that any content must have in order for it to be representationally significant and potentially conscious to a subject. The second part explores Fichte's conception of consciousness as the result of an original (fact-)act of self-positing. In this act, the form of reflexivity itself becomes constructive in constituting the I's own being for itself from the absolute standpoint of consciousness. The third part examines analytic theories that explain the reflexivity (or what is often called the subjective character) of consciousness on a model of mental indexicality. These theories tend to reduce reflexivity to a constituent of a wider content, which, although often implicit or inarticulate, can be read off from the contextual situation and hence grasped from the absolute standpoint of (scientific) objectivity. As a result, Kant's theory can be understood as a moderate, human-centered kind of perspectivalism that avoids two extremes: Fichtean absolute subjectivism and naturalist absolute objectivism.

Biographical Information:

Katharina Kraus is Associate Professor at the Johns Hopkins University, Maryland (USA). She is the author of *Kant on Self-Knowledge and Self-Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and various articles on Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, published in journals such as *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, *European Journal of Philosophy* and *Noûs*.

Introduction

That human consciousness is fundamentally perspectival is an insight shared by the tradition of Immanuel Kant and German Idealism as well as by contemporary analytic philosophers of mind. As conscious beings, we are aware of ourselves as being oriented in time and space and as having a subjective perspective or point of view onto the world. That all contents of consciousness are viewed from a particular subject's point of view to which they are reflexively related and that in their appearance in consciousness the present moment is singled out seem to be the two most fundamental aspects of this perspectivity. Despite this perspectival nature of our consciousness, we are nonetheless capable of representing objects in the world and of making objectively valid judgments about these objects. This chapter compares the theories of consciousness of Kant and Fichte with contemporary analytic theories on the following issues: the two essential aspects of this perspectival nature – the reflexivity and the temporality of consciousness – as well as the possibility of objective intentionality and higher-order reflection by which we can abstract from this essential perspectivity. Section 1 surveys Kant's theory of consciousness, based primarily on his *Critique of Pure Reason*; Section 2 identifies key differences with the theory of consciousness offered by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (in his *Wissenschaftslehre*); Section 3 provides a comparison with selected contemporary theories. As a result, the chapter elaborates on the following key differences: Kant's aim is to explicate the perspectival limitations of human consciousness in order to understand how objectivity can still be possible within – and is indeed constituted by – this limited human perspective. By contrast, Fichte, while accepting the perspectival nature of human consciousness, shifts the focus to a transcendental standpoint of reflection in which such limitations can be transcended toward an absolute I (or absolute subjectivity). In contrast to these idealist accounts, contemporary analytic philosophers of mind often attempt to explain perspectival features such as reflexivity by using the model of indexicality in language. Since they often presuppose a naturalistic framework informed by the natural sciences, they tend to reduce the subjective character of consciousness to objectifiable relations in nature that can be grasped in a non-perspectival, absolute sense.

1. Kant on Perspectival Consciousness

At the beginning of Kant's theory of consciousness in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the idea that all consciousness requires a synthetic activity on the part of the subject: The contents of consciousness are generated by combining more basic elements into unities and taking these unities up into temporal consciousness.¹ Kant's theory of synthesis is complex, as he distinguishes a variety of different syntheses as well as different faculties involved in such synthetic activities. Three kinds of synthesis (according to the terminology of the B-edition of the *Critique*) are the most important for current purposes: (1) the *synthesis of apperception*, by which a subject combines multiple representational elements in one and the same consciousness and thereby reflexively relates the resulting representation to this common consciousness (§16, B-Deduction of the Categories of the Understanding); (2) the *synthesis of apprehension*, by means of which representational elements are reproduced and combined in consciousness under the condition of time (§26, B-Deduction); and (3) the *figurative synthesis*, by means of which objective contents of consciousness are produced in accordance with the conditions of the intellectual faculties, specifically the conditions of objective judgment as defined by the understanding (§24, B-Deduction). Common to all these syntheses is that the subject takes an active role, but must also be provided with adequate material to begin with. The synthesizing subject thus generates the contents of its consciousness on the basis of sensible-passive affection through the senses, on the one hand, and productive activities of the imagination and the understanding, on the other hand.

While his predecessors partially shared the idea of a subject of consciousness that is both productive and receptive, Kant's major innovation is to offer a *transcendental* theory of consciousness in line with his transcendental philosophy in general. According to his transcendental turn, our representations no longer conform to things as they exist in themselves; rather, the objects of our experience correspond to the ways

¹ The interpretation of consciousness, reflexivity, temporality, and objectivity in Kant in this chapter follows my presentation in *Kant on Self-Knowledge and Self-Formation* (2020).

All references are according to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Ak.), 29 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1902–). I usually provide the *Akademie* page number. With respect to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I employ the standard A/B pagination. In citing Kant's text the following abbreviations are used:

Anth	<i>Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i> (1798) (Ak., vol. 7)
CpR	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (1781/1787) (Ak., vols. 3–4)
Prol	<i>Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science</i> (1783) (Ak., vol. 4)

in which we represent them, and thus to the specific character of our mental faculties. The contents of our consciousness thus partly depend on the way in which the subject (re-)produces them and hence on the specific mental faculties involved in this production. More precisely, each faculty is characterized by a distinctive *form*, which it applies – in a sense to be clarified – to appropriate sensible matter and thereby contributes *form-matter units* to the content of consciousness. In this sense, Kant distinguishes between *transcendental* consciousness, which concerns only the *a priori* formal aspects of consciousness, and *empirical* consciousness, which includes all empirical contents insofar as they are manifest in consciousness at a particular time *t*.

Considering the various faculties and their forms that contribute to consciousness is thus key both to understanding the distinctive perspectival situatedness of the conscious subject in relation to its intentional objects and to discerning the necessary conditions that make objectivity possible despite this perspectivity. Sections 1.1. and 1.2. examine the two perspectival aspects in terms of their corresponding forms: reflexivity in terms of the form of apperception (defining transcendental self-consciousness), and temporality in terms of the form of inner sense (conditioning empirical consciousness). Section 1.3. turns to the forms of the understanding that guarantee objectivity and explores the possibility of abstracting from perspectivity by higher-order reflection.

1.1. Reflexivity

If I am conscious of something, for instance the lemon I am currently looking at or the plans for today I am pondering, then I am conscious not only of the particular object or event, but also – at least implicitly or dispositionally – of myself having such and such perception or thought. Kant captures this basic insight in a famous passage that begins as follows:

The *I think* must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise ... the representation would either be impossible or else at least nothing for me. (CpR B131-2).

The “I think” here functions as the expression of a certain kind of self-consciousness that is necessarily involved in any representation that is to mean something *for me*, that is, to be representationally significant *for me*. But how can a representation mean anything at all to me? To answer this question, Kant refers to the fact that it is I – the subject – who combines a multitude of representational elements to form the complex

representation of an object, such as my perception of the lemon or my thoughts about my plans for the day. And because I myself combine these elements within one and the same consciousness, the resulting representation is necessarily related to me, so that I can become aware not only of its specific content, but also of the representation as my own and hence of myself as the bearer of this representation. Any significant representation is typically made up of a multiplicity of more basic elements (e.g., what Kant calls, in the case of perception, the “manifold of sensible intuition”) in order to provide sufficient representational material for differentiation within an object and distinction between objects. But none of these elements by themselves, nor their manifold as such, can actually represent something or have significant content, unless they are unified in one and the same consciousness. Therefore, for Kant, consciousness is essentially unified: its unity is produced by the subject itself and all the states belonging to such a unity are necessarily bound to that subject.

It is a decisive step in Kant’s complex argumentation in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories that all conscious representations are necessarily related to the subject that unifies them. I call this un-mediated relation of representations to the subject *reflexivity*. (The ultimate aim of this Deduction is for Kant to show that the concepts of the understanding – such as substance and causality – are conditions of the objectivity of cognition, that is, that they are categories of objects.) Kant introduces not only a new faculty, the *faculty of apperception*, but also a new kind of synthesis, the *synthesis of apperception*, in order to account for the “original-synthetic unity” of consciousness (CpR B132). Moreover, since this unity is a necessary condition of the possibility of cognition, Kant calls it the *transcendental unity of apperception* (CpR B139), and the corresponding faculty *transcendental apperception* (as opposed to empirical apperception; CpR A107). The self-consciousness mediated by it is in the literature often called *transcendental self-consciousness* to contrast it with empirical kinds of (self-)consciousness, which are additionally conditioned by the forms of sensibility, especially time (see 1.2.).

There has been much debate about an adequate understanding of apperception. Two major lines of interpretation, or interpretive tendencies, can be seen in the recent literature, which I call the psychological and the logical reading. Both of them I have argued fall short in accounting for the specific kind of form that apperception contributes to consciousness and that explains the fundamental reflexivity of consciousness. The psychological and the logical reading differ in how they understand

the synthetic act that unifies consciousness. According to the psychological reading, the act of apperception consists in a pre-discursive, non-conceptual (or at least non-judgmental) synthesis that results in the awareness of the synthesizing act itself and hence of the subject qua its synthesizing act.² By contrast, according to the logical reading, the synthesis of apperception consists in a discursive act of judgment, namely a self-ascription by which the subject ascribes to herself the resulting representation of which she is conscious (and by extension all representational elements of which the representation is made up of).³

In my view, both interpretations face serious objections because they run into problems of dogmatism, circularity or infinite regress. The reason is in both cases that the readings do not adequately distinguish the *form* under which the apperceptive act is performed from the *content* it produces; both assume that the apperceptive act consists in adding content – psychological content in terms of an act-awareness or logical content in terms of reference to oneself as the logical subject – rather than contributing form. Let me explain this for each case in turn.⁴

The psychological reading assumes that the unification of representational elements in one and the same consciousness depends on, or is even produced by, the awareness of the unifying act (or of its agent). Hence, transcendental self-consciousness consists precisely in this act-awareness, that is, in the consciousness of the unifying act (or the unifying agent). There are variants of this reading, depending on whether the agent is thought of in empirical terms as an empirical subject or in transcendental terms as a noumenal substance. The psychological reading faces problems of dogmatism and circularity. This act-awareness must represent the act itself (or its agent) as a real unity throughout the act of apperception. But this raises the question of where the real constitution of a unified subject comes from in the first place. Either this real unity of the subject must be presupposed as fundamentally given and pre-existing the act of apperception, or it is itself in need of a unifying act. The former solution relapses into dogmatism, the latter solution may lead to the postulation of a mysterious self-constitution based on self-observation that runs the risk of being circular. In either case,

² A tendency towards the psychological reading can be seen, e.g., in Kitcher (2011, esp. pp. 123-60). Other commentators argue that apperception involves the consciousness of an act or of oneself as the agent of thought, e.g., Longuenesse (2017, pp. 81, 84, 86, 94), Brook (1994, p. 80), and Carl (1997).

³ The logical reading assigns a crucial role to the expression “I think”, which is typically understood as a self-referential judgement about one’s state of thinking. Its proponents include Strawson (1966), Keller (1998), Rosefeldt (2000), and Howell (2011).

⁴ For a close discussion of these readings and my critiques, see Kraus (2020, pp. 92-105).

the transcendental self-consciousness that is supposed to accompany the conscious grasp of any significant content is itself understood as a consciousness *about* something, namely about the real unity of the synthesizing subject – whether this content is thought of in empirical-psychological or in transcendental-noumenal terms.

The logical reading, by contrast, assumes that the apperceptive act consists in a self-ascriptive judgment of the general form “I think *R*”, whereby *R* is the resulting representation of which the subject is conscious. In this case, the apperceptive act does not add real content about an empirical or noumenal agent actually exercising the act, but it adds logical content expressed by the self-referring indexical “I”: “I think” refers back to the subject who carries out the act regardless of her real constitution. However, a problem of regress is lurking in this case. In construing the apperceptive synthesis as a self-ascriptive judgment, the content of the apperceived representation changes: its content is no longer simply the content of *R*, such as the content of my lemon-perception or of my thoughts about my day’s plans, but of myself having *R*, e.g., of myself as perceiving the lemon or of myself as entertaining plans for the day. Hence, in adding a self-referential “I think” to *R*, we turn ourselves into the objects of “I think”-thoughts. The apperceptive synthesis, rather than being an enabling condition of significant contents, depends itself on grasping a particular significant content about myself as the logical subject of these “I think”-thoughts. This content regarding the logical unity of *I think* and *R*, however, can only be significant for the subject if it is itself apperceived through a higher-order self-ascriptive thought of the form “I think that *I think R*”, which leads to an infinite regress of “I think” thoughts.

As an alternative interpretation, I propose that the apperceptive synthesis should be understood as exclusively contributing form – the *form of reflexive consciousness in general* – to the manifold of representations. By unifying a manifold of representation according to the universal *a priori* form of reflexivity, apperceptive synthesis imprints the characteristic form of the faculty of apperception on suitable representational matter. Since this form is common to all representational elements thereby unified, it guarantees the formal identity of consciousness throughout the act. By synthesizing representational material, e.g., my visual impressions of the lemon, according to this form, this material is reflexively related to the subject, so that it can constitute a representationally significant *content for the subject*, e.g. perceptual content about the lemon. Contents are then understood as *matter-form units* that the subject can be aware

of as such, or also as *enmattered forms*, or *forms manifest in matter*.⁵ Since reflexivity is the most fundamental form of our consciousness, it must apply to all content of which we can potentially be conscious, for otherwise it would be nothing to us. In consequence, for Kant, the unity of apperception is a necessary condition not only for judgment and cognition (as the logical reading would have it), but also for a much larger range of mental states, including perceptions, desires, and affects, that is, for all those states that can potentially underwrite judgments. As states of consciousness, they all share the same general form of reflexivity by which they are connected to the subject, but because they are states of particular kinds, e.g., a perception or a cognition, they also instantiate more specific forms, such as the temporal and spatial forms of perception or the logical forms of theoretical judgment.

This reading is supported by those passages that refer to the formal nature of apperception: the unity of apperception is described as the “formula of our consciousness” (A354), the “formal condition of my thoughts” (A363, also A398) and the “mere form of cognition” (B427). The “I think” is considered as representing the “form of apperception” (A354) or the “mere form of consciousness” (A382) that can accompany both judgments and intuitions.

The “I think”, if attached to a representation *R* in thought or speech, then does not express a self-referential thought about myself having *R*, but it merely *expresses* the actualization of the universal form of reflexivity in an act of conscious representation: it expresses the actual apperceiving of *R* into consciousness. Without grasping the subject as a real or logical content, the “I think”, if attached to an empirical mental episode, explicitly manifests the subject and its formal identity throughout the act. The “I think” thus serves as the conceptual expression of the universal form of reflexivity, without thereby *representing* the subject as a self-referential content, i.e., as an object. Only upon further reflection can the “I think” (and subsequently any use of the first-person pronoun “I”) be used to represent self-referential content about the subject and its current state of consciousness.⁶ As a mere form of apperception, reflexivity is itself non-individual; only as a form applied to suitable matter and manifest in a subject’s empirical consciousness can it express the subject’s individuality.

⁵ There is a lively debate about whether, according to Aristotelian hylomorphism, form is simply a mereological part of a matter-form compound. For an insightful critique of mereological readings of form, see Shields (2022). Similarly, I submit that Kantian forms should not be understood as mereological parts of a content.

⁶ On this expressivist reading of “I think”, see Freitag and Kraus (2020).

1.2. Temporality

Human consciousness is fundamentally temporal: we are immediately conscious of ourselves only in the present moment, and states of consciousness appear to us as following one another in an endless flow of time. We can, moreover, represent these states (and hence ourselves) as changing over time. While representing ourselves as changing already calls for more complex reflective operations, the fundamental temporal perspectivity consists in the fact that consciousness is centred on the present moment, the “now”, and that there is a seemingly endless passage of “nows”.

While philosophers have long debated how we can adequately understand the present, the “now”, and the passage of time, Kant offers an original theory of time as the form of inner sense, the faculty for inward-directed receptivity: time is the form that a human subject impresses on all sensory matter when taking it up into empirical consciousness. But how? The key insight for Kant is that not only can mind-external objects affect outer sense, for example through one’s visual and tactile organs, but also the mind-internal activities of synthesis can affect oneself internally in inner sense. Inner sense, then, is the part of sensibility that is receptive to mind-internal activities and states. It not only conveys a kind of state-consciousness, but is also crucial for the temporal constitution of empirical consciousness as such. Inner sense is the “one totality in which all of our representations are contained” (CpR A155/B194) and its *a priori* form of time is “the *a priori* condition of all appearance in general” (CpR A34/B50).⁷

Again, the details of Kant’s theory of synthesis are complex. For present purposes, it suffices to give an overview of how Kant conceives of the constitution of empirical consciousness on the basis of synthesis and self-affection. In a passage in the Transcendental Aesthetic in which Kant argues for the “transcendental ideality of time” (CpR, B67), that is, for the fact that time is an *a priori* condition of our experience, Kant describes three constitutive aspects of empirical consciousness:

⁷ Inner sense has often been understood one-sidedly, either as an internal monitoring sense that alone produces empirical awareness of the subject’s inner state (e.g. Kitcher (2011) and Sethi (2021)), or as a faculty that is subordinate to outer sense and merely rearranges outer sensation in a temporal structure (e.g. Allison (2004)). In contrast, I construe inner sense as the faculty for empirical consciousness and distinguish between its matter and form, which only together constitute the content of such consciousness.

It is not merely that (i) the representations of outer sense make up the proper material (ii) with which we occupy our mind, (iii) but also [that] the time in which we place these representations, which itself precedes the consciousness of them in experience and grounds the way in which we place them in mind as a formal condition, already contains relations of succession, of simultaneity, and of that which is simultaneous with succession (of that which persists). Now that which, as representation, can precede any act of thinking something is intuition, and, if it contains nothing but relations, it is the form of intuition, which, since it does not represent anything except insofar as something is posited in the mind, can be nothing other than the way in which the mind is affected by its own activity, namely this positing of its representations, thus the way it is affected through itself, that is, it is an inner sense as far as regards its form. (B67-8, numbers added)

This passage identifies three constitutive elements necessary for perception, which is for Kant the prototype of a conscious state: it requires (1) “representations of outer sense” (in the case of the perception of an external object), which (2) “we place in the mind” (3) under the “formal condition” of “time”, in order to yield “the consciousness of [these representations]”, that is, perception. It then elaborates on this formal condition and traces it back to “an inner sense” that is “affected” through the mind’s synthetic activity itself. In later passages, he calls this activity of positing or placing intuitions in the mind the synthesis of apprehension by which empirical consciousness itself is generated (esp. CpR B160, also B162, B202, A166/B208, A191/B236, A499/B527).

Further analysis shows that the mind, through its synthetic activity, produces the “material of consciousness” (Anth 7:141) in accordance with the form of reflexivity, as discussed above (1.1.).⁸ This synthetic activity itself then appears to us in the present moment of our empirical consciousness under the condition of time. That is, in empirical consciousness we are aware of our activity not in itself, but always only as temporally conditioned: states appear primarily as simply successive, following one another in an endless flow. We can understand the form of time primarily as imprinting a basic temporal indexing on all content that enters our subjective consciousness: each content is imprinted with the “now” at which it enters the mind.

In the second Principle of the Understanding, the Anticipations of Perception, Kant introduces time, alongside with space, as a *quantum continuum*, a magnitude that is “*flowing*”, “since the synthesis (of the productive imagination) in their generation is a

⁸ This material aspect of consciousness is rarely acknowledged. An exception is Indregard (2018).

progress in time, the continuity of which is customarily designated by the expression ‘flowing’ (‘elapsing’))” (CpR A170/B211-2). He repeats on several occasions that “time, ... and thus everything that is in inner sense, constantly flows” (CpR B289) and that there is a constant “stream of inner appearances” (CpR A107).

But this basic idea of temporal indexing raises some questions: how can we distinguish one “now” from the next? Does a “now” have a temporal extension, even if it is only infinitesimal? How can we distinguish the present “now” from past ones and from future ones? And how can we move from this primary subjective indexical relation to the more complex temporal relations in which the objects we perceive seem to stand?

These questions cannot be answered on the basis of inner senses alone. To obtain more complex determinations of time, probably even a basic sense of *earlier than* and *later than*, as well as the direction of time from past to future, we require more than the mere form of inner sense, which defines only the most primitive *consciousness-internal* ordering of one-after-the-other. In the passage above, Kant already notes that we can represent the external objects we perceive (as well as our own states) in more complex temporal relations, such as being simultaneous, (objectively) successive, and permanent. However, to represent these more complex temporal relations requires reflection and abstraction from the present moment, the current “now”. The primitive form of time itself must then be determined in accordance with those forms that can guarantee objective relations of time, namely the forms of the understanding (see 1.3.). Kant therefore introduces the idea of transcendental self-affection, which concerns the synthetic influence of the understanding on inner sense and hence an *a priori* effect that the understanding’s forms have on the form of time. Inner sense considered in isolation from its relation to the understanding provides only the rudimentary indexical centering of consciousness on the present “now” and its endless passing.

1.3. Objectivity within the Human Horizon

A major aim for Kant is to prove that objectivity is possible despite the perspectival nature of human consciousness: we can represent objects in an objectively valid way, abstracting from our subjective point of view and our own spatiotemporal situatedness. Such an objective representation is called *cognition* (*Erkenntnis*). Objectivity presupposes that we can abstract from the concrete “I” and the concrete “now” (and also “here”). According to his Transcendental Idealism, however, this abstraction from

the concrete is not tantamount to abstraction from the subject and from time (and space) per se. Rather, for Kant, cognition necessarily involves a synthetic activity of the subject and, if based on experience, cognition is necessarily temporally (and spatially) conditioned. Indeed, as we shall see, Kant's account of objectivity is fundamentally tied to the "universal and true horizon" (CpR A659/B687): it is supposed to show how our cognition can be objective despite the fact that we cannot leave our limited human horizon.

Kant thus seeks to prove that objectivity can be found within the limitations of a finite subject and in particular within the limits of human sensibility and particularity. This requires a suitable reflection on what is immediately given in sensation: the reflection must be normatively guided by the logical forms of judgment, or the "forms of thought" (CpR B150). Judgments are the kind of representations that are valid regardless of the distinctive perspective of the particular judge. In judgments, "representations are combined in the object, i.e., regardless of any difference in the condition of the subject" (B142); they are assumed to be valid "for everyone", that is, for all subjects of the same type (Prol 4:299).

The logical forms of judgment can guarantee objectivity because they are themselves non-perspectival: they are independent not only of the particular subject and its momentary state, but even of the kind of subject and the conditions of sensibility per se. Kant speculates that if there are other intellects capable of judgment, it could be possible that they have other forms of sensibility than humans, but they still must share the same logical forms with humans. If the synthesis of apprehension by which representational elements are taken up into empirical consciousness is itself normatively guided by these logical forms, then the resulting content of consciousness abstracts both from the particular subject by which the content has been synthesized, and from the particular temporal features of the subject's states of consciousness.

Kant defines another kind of synthesis to account for this: the *figurative synthesis*, which captures the "synthetic influence of the understanding on inner sense" and is carried out by a "transcendental action of the imagination" (CpR B154). This synthesis explains how the form of time that structures consciousness is itself influenced by the forms of the understanding such that objective temporal relations can be represented: for example, a necessary temporal order of objects (or their states) according to the form of causality, the simultaneity of objects according to the form of community (or

reciprocity), and the persistence of an object with changing states according to the form of subsistence (or substantiality).

With the example of causality, we can see most clearly how we can move by the help of the understanding's forms from the subjective contents of a perspectival consciousness to objectively valid representations of objects. The principle of causality is supposed to explain how we can move from the merely subjective time-order of consciousness – the time in which our mental states are apprehended into empirical consciousness – to objective time, the time in which objects are represented to move and change in an objectively valid way. Or as Kant puts it: the “*subjective sequence* of apprehension” must be derived from the “*objective sequence* of appearances” “*in accordance with a rule*”, i.e., a causal law (CpR A193/B238). For example, when I look at a moving object, say the lemon rolling off the kitchen table or a boat floating down a river, there seems to be an objective order of states – of the lemon or the boat – that I cannot reverse in my mind without distorting the object itself. One state of the object is inevitably followed by the next, in accordance with the law of motion (and gravitation). If, on the other hand, I look at the still life of my fruit bowl on the kitchen table or the static façade of a house, then it seems unproblematic which part of the scene I focus on first and which afterwards. I can simply reverse their order in my mind without distorting the scene.

The principle of causality guarantees the possibility of cognizing objective temporal orders, i.e., those orders that are necessary and cannot be reversed. It is derived from the logical form of hypothetical judgments (“If A, then B”). If this form is understood as a rule of figurative synthesis, it defines a relational category, namely that of causality and dependence: “A” can then be cognized as the cause of “B” and “B” as the effect of “A”. If this form is applied more specifically to the synthesis of apprehension, which is temporally conditioned, then a series of states of an object can be cognized as a necessary causal order, for example the order of states of motion of the lemon or the boat. Hence, only if we presuppose the principle of causality can we understand a series of apprehended states of consciousness as representing a series of objective states, that is, a series in which one state follows another according to a necessary rule (i.e., a causal law). The motion can then be understood as the effect of a cause, e.g., of the momentum that sets the lemon in motion and the laws of motion that govern this particular physical body.

This example shows how objective content can be obtained *through reflection* (*Überlegung, Reflexion*) on subjective content in accordance with the non-perspectival logical forms of judgement.⁹ This reflection is not to be understood as taking place *after* the subjective contents have been grasped. Rather, reflection can take place within one and the same complex mental act. In distinguishing different types of synthesis, Kant is not identifying different temporally successive acts, but analytic elements of a complex mental act. Hence, only if a reflection by means of concepts is involved can we abstract from the perspectival situatedness of particular subjects operating at particular times; only then can we generate objectively valid representations of objects. An act of first-order reflection is already present in the normative guidance of the synthesis of apprehension through the categories as the most general, fundamental rules of reflection, which leads to the perception of particulars, e.g. of an objective series of states. This first-order act can be understood as a reflection on a lower-order state of consciousness, a state of pre-reflective sensible awareness in which we do not yet distinguish particulars. A second-order act of reflection then involves the actual making of judgement: it is the reflection upon a (lower-order) state of perception under empirical concepts, which are thereby combined into a judgement, resulting in empirical cognition, e.g. a causal judgment.

In this context, it is important to pause for a moment and clarify the difference between *reflexivity* and *reflection* (*Überlegung, Reflexion*). Etymologically, both terms derive from the Latin verb *reflectere*, which means “to bend back” or “to turn around”. Reflection derives straightforwardly from the active verb forms, for example, from the first person singular *reflecto*, which means “I bend back” or “I turn around”. Kant himself uses both the Germanised version of the Latin noun *reflexiō* (*Reflexion*), derived from this verb, and *Überlegung*, the equivalent term of Germanic origin (e.g., CpR A260f./B316f., Anth 7:141).¹⁰ Reflection is thus understood as the *act of bending back or turning around onto oneself*, onto that which happens within or belongs to one’s consciousness, i.e., one’s own state of mind. Reflection therefore requires active engagement on the part of subject in addition to the state of mind being reflected upon. For Kant this activity is typically mediated by a conceptual understanding, e.g.,

⁹ See: “The apprehension of the manifold of appearance is always successive. The representations of the parts succeed one another. Whether they also succeed in the object is *a second point for reflection* (*Reflexion*), which is not contained in the first.” (CpR A189/B234, emphasis added).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of Kant’s notion of *Überlegung*, see Merritt (2018).

judgment, and is (at least conceptually) distinguishable from the state reflected upon, e.g., perception. In contrast, reflexivity derives from the past participle passive *reflexus*, *reflexa*, *reflexum* – a participle typically used to express not an activity but a relational state.¹¹ I thus understand by reflexivity an *immediate relational state*, namely the state by which any representational content – in virtue of being apprehended into consciousness – is directly related, i.e., without mediation by an additional act of reflection, to the subject of consciousness to which it belongs.

In consequence, the reflexivity of consciousness explained by the synthesis of apperception is an unmediated feature of consciousness per se, which requires *no* reflection, not even the basic normative governing by the understanding.¹² Kant's conception of apperception thus explains the fundamental feature that any content to be taken up into consciousness must be immediately related to the subject, and only thereby can a content have cognitive significance for that subject. This feature, as we shall see, bears resemblance to what is called “for-me-ness” in the contemporary debate. Kant thus affirms a *reflexive, but pre-reflective model of self-consciousness* in which the basic reflexivity of consciousness is understood not as an objectual (or content-ful) reflection *about* the current state of the subject, but as a *formal* built-in feature of any state of consciousness.

Reflexivity, however, is not only a necessary condition of consciousness per se, but also a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for objective representations (i.e., cognition). Kant's account of objectivity as universal validity is based on the idea that we can abstract from the particular perspectival situatedness in time (and space) and from the particularity of an individual subject through reflection by means of the non-perspectival logical forms. Yet, despite this emphasis of universal validity, Kant's account does *not* abstract from the perspectivity of human experience as such and hence from the universal form of reflexivity. Human cognition is understood as being accomplished by human subjects with generally shared mental faculties, and as being conditioned by their distinctive, generally shared kind of sensibility, i.e., by time (and space). The principles that are supposed to guarantee objectivity are applications of the

¹¹ The Medieval Latin adjective *reflexivus* has given rise to the term *reflexive* (in modern English) and *reflexiv* (in modern German). In mathematics, reflexivity refers to the relationship that exists between any element of a set and the set itself. Similarly, in my interpretation, the relationship between any element of the unity of apperception and the unity itself is called reflexive.

¹² This consequence of my interpretation is controversial. Many commentators (e.g. Sethi (2021)) assume that apperception is for all intents and purposes associated with synthesis according to the categories.

non-perspectival logical forms to sensible matter that is itself received according to the forms of time and space. These sensible forms are shared by all humans and condition the way in which things appear to us humans and hence in which we must cognize objects. To put it succinctly: only through the reflection of sensible forms under the forms of judgement can sensible matter become *an objective content of cognition for human subjects*.

It remains open whether there can be other kinds of subjects with different (or even without) sensible forms and whether the world of things in themselves is spatially and temporally structured. Objectivity for *humans* can be attained only within the human “universal and true horizon” (CpR A659/B687). This horizon concerns primarily the worlds of objects as they appear to us and is therefore structured according to the forms of the human mind. A content is objectively valid, if it is valid for every *human subject*, regardless of our particular, momentary perspectival situatedness. We can thus distinguish two kinds of perspectivity at work in Kant’s account: the *particular perspective of a concrete subject* (manifested in the concrete “I” and the concrete “now”) and the *universal human perspective* from which we cannot escape, even though our highest intellectual faculty – reason – with its ideas of completeness and totality attempts to lead us beyond this limit. In a positive sense, the task of reason – by way of employing its ideas as regulative guidelines – is to delimit the boundaries of human cognition, i.e., to demarcate the horizon within which the truth-apt cognition of objects is at all available for humans.¹³ For Kant, objectivity thus means transcending the particular perspective of the individual to find validity within (and from) the universal human perspective.

2. Fichte on absolute subjectivity

Kant’s successors are worried that his transcendental philosophy leaves many dualisms unresolved or unfounded, such as the dualisms between sensibility and understanding, between appearance and thing-in-itself, between the theoretical and the practical use of reason, and, most salient in my hylomorphic reading of reflexivity, the dualism between form and matter. The German idealists succeeding Kant thus seek to complete (or revise) his project, but in doing so show a tendency to transcend the human perspective

¹³ For a discussion of the role of ideas of reason in defining human perspectivity and demarcating the horizon of human cognition, see Kraus (forthcoming) and Zuckert (2017).

towards something absolute. An important figure in this development is Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), who introduces a conception of absolute subjectivity. In his effort to offer a refined, or perhaps rather radicalized version, of Kant’s transcendental idealism, he aims to develop a new foundation for philosophy, which he calls *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*) and which proceeds from the fundamental insight into the reflexivity of consciousness.

In his search for a single, fundamental principle that is to ground all human knowledge, both theoretical and practical, and is itself groundless, Fichte begins with an account of what an *I* (*Ich*) is and argues that an *I* is essentially characterized by its activity of self-positing. In what follows, I discuss Fichte’s account of self-positing in relation to my interpretation of Kant’s conception of apperception. In particular, we can understand Fichte’s account as affording a solution to the problems that have plagued the psychological reading of apperception: Fichte can be seen as supplying an account of self-constitution in the basic activity of consciousness, which neither relapses into dogmatism nor is caught in circularity. Highlighting how Fichte’s self-positing differs from Kant’s apperception will also be instructive for understanding the hylomorphic interpretation I have proposed for Kant. Fichte substantially changes the presentation of his theory of self-positing through the various versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The following discussion draws mainly on early versions such as *The Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-95), the First and Second Introduction of *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797-98), and the lecture series *Wissenschaftslehre, nova methodo* (1796-99).¹⁴

According to Fichte, the first principle of philosophy states that “the I posits itself purely and simply (*schlechthin*)”(WLf I:97). In Fichte’s terminology, “to posit (*setzen*) X,” understood in the most basic sense, is the act of thinking X and thereby producing a representation of X in consciousness. To posit something “purely and simply (*schlechthin*)” is to perform the act of positing without ground or cause beyond itself. In the course of his analysis of this first principle, Fichte makes a set of claims that

¹⁴ References to Fichte’s work refer to the edition *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke* [SW], (ed. I. H. Fichte), Vol. I, if not stated otherwise. In citing Fichte’s text the following abbreviations are used:
 WLf *The Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-95)
 EE First Introduction of *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797)
 ZE Second Introduction of *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (1798)
 WLnM *Wissenschaftslehre, nova methodo* (1796-99).

relate to Kant's apperception in interesting ways. First, self-positing is the essential activity of an *I*: what it means to be an *I* is precisely to engage in the "self-reverting activity" of self-positing so that the "'I' and 'self-reverting activity' are completely identical concepts" (ZE I:462). Second, in self-positing, the *I* brings forth – in a sense to be specified – its own being (or existence). "The being (essence) [*Seyn (Wesen)*] of the *I* ... consists simply in positing itself as existing [*als seyend*]." (WLf I:97). The relevant sense of existence is limited to consciousness itself: "*the I exists for the I*" (WLf I:97).¹⁵ Third, in self-positing, "the *I* is *immediately conscious of itself*" (WLn 31 (114)). More precisely, the *I* has an "intellectual intuition" of itself, which is "the immediate consciousness that I act and of what I do when I act" (ZE I:463). Fourth and finally, according to this first principle, the self-positing *I* is understood as an "*absolute subject*" (WLf I:97), that is, as an "absolute unity" in which the *I* is "at once subject and object" and "the identity of the posited object and the positing subject is absolute" (WLn 31 (114), also 34 (120)).

The following discussion of these four claims in relation to Kant's theory of apperception will show that Fichte's theory of self-positing transforms Kant's universal form of reflexivity into a self-realizing form, that is, a form that gives itself its own matter, at least matter for consciousness. This major point of departure is especially evident in Fichte's claim that self-positing implies existence (albeit only existence for consciousness), in his appeal to intellectual intuition, which for Kant is not available to human minds, and in his postulation of an absolute subject or an absolute standpoint of consciousness.

Fichte's basic idea that consciousness is grounded in an activity of the *I* and that this activity brings forth an immediate self-consciousness is still compatible with Kant's theory of apperception and, in particular, with my interpretation of it as fundamental, pre-reflective reflexivity of consciousness.¹⁶ Indeed, Dieter Henrich (1967) famously praised Fichte for this "original insight" – an insight that Henrich (1976) later also attributed to Kant – namely that consciousness can only come about and be explained if the relation of conscious states to their subject is an immediate one, without mediation by higher-order acts of reflection.¹⁷ Otherwise, an infinite regress of

¹⁵ See also: "its very essence is to posit itself as positing" (WLn 31 (114)).

¹⁶ Commentators who emphasize the similarities between Fichte's self-positing and Kant's apperception include Zöllner (1998, p. 34) and Wood (2016, pp. 50-51). For discussion of the divergences, see Neuhauser (1990, pp. 89-102) and Ameriks (2000, pp. 234-264).

¹⁷ Henrich (1967).

yet higher orders of reflection would arise, which could never get off the ground to explain the basic fact of consciousness; hence, there would be no consciousness at all.¹⁸

The first fundamental step beyond Kant consists in Fichte's claim that self-positing implies existence. Fichte also calls the activity of self-positing a "Tathandlung", a *fact act* (or *f/act*), in which the *act* of producing consciousness is taken to be identical with its real product, which can later be reflected upon as a *fact* of consciousness.¹⁹ For Fichte, the "I is at the same time the acting subject and the product of this action, what is active and what is brought about by means of this activity" (WLf I:96). Fichte is obviously familiar with Kant's critique of the paralogisms, that is, Kant's rejection of rationalistic inferences about the real constitution of the thinker, e.g., substantiality, from the merely logical judgment "I think". Hence, Fichte is careful to concede that the existence brought about by self-positing is "not supposed to produce an I that, so to speak, exists as a thing in itself and continues to exist independently of consciousness" (SW I:529). Rather, the *I* exists only for itself and only as long as it is performing the activity of self-positing. Fichte expresses this insight in the proposition "I am I (*Ich bin ich*)," whereby the former "I" expresses the formal condition of self-positing and the latter "I" the existing I that realizes this condition and has *being for consciousness*; the entire proposition therefore "has no validity beyond that of a fact" of consciousness (WLf I:94-5).²⁰ By contrast, for Kant, the existence of the thinker cannot be derived from the mere form of apperception, the formal "I think". The "I think" can designate a really existing thinker only if it is combined with a sensible "self-intuition" and thought in empirical consciousness under the condition of time, since for Kant only "sensation ... grounds this existential proposition" 'I exist': only then can the "I think" "signif[y] something real... as something that in fact exists" (B422-3n, see also B157n).²¹

Several commentators stress that Fichte's self-positing should nonetheless not be understood as self-creation or self-causation, as this would be a capacity that only an

¹⁸ See WLnM 30-31n (113).

¹⁹ Fichte distinguishes between the "standpoint" of natural consciousness – the perspective of an individual finite human subject – and that of transcendental reflection or speculation – the perspective of the philosopher whose task it is to explain the former by uncovering its necessary and unavoidable presuppositions (see ZE I:454). From the standpoint of the philosophy, the *f/act* of self-positing can be reflected as a fact of consciousness (see ZE I:458ff.).

²⁰ In various phrases, Fichte shifts seamlessly from "*Seyn*" as essence (*Wesen*) to "*seyend*" as existing (*existieren*), that is, he passes from a formal condition to the existence of a real act and hence to the content of a real proposition (about the subject).

²¹ See Kraus (2020, pp. 124-128).

infinite, divine intellect could have and would therefore be a glaring contradiction to human finitude.²² Wood proposes instead to understand self-positing as self-assertion, that is, as the assertion of one's own identity in (or throughout) every act of empirical consciousness.²³ Henrich takes self-positing to produce a "knowing self-reference".²⁴ But Henrich also criticizes Fichte for still presupposing a self-referential structure of consciousness and thereby an internal self-relation between the *I as* subject and the *I as* the object referred to, which may lead to an infinite regress – a worry that I share with Henrich.²⁵

Since, for Fichte, self-positing necessarily implies the existence of the *I* as the product of that activity, its immediate self-consciousness cannot be merely logical but must be intuitive. Consequently, Fichte appeals to an intellectual intuition to explain the nature of the self-consciousness gained through self-positing. A concept, Fichte argues, could only grasp a given fact or object of consciousness, whereas we need intuition to grasp a "sheer activity – not an activity that has been brought to a halt, but one that continues; not a being [*Seyn*], but something living" (ZE I:465). This again is in contrast to Kant, since the latter denies humans the possibility of intellectual intuitions. Humans are only capable of sensible intuition based on the affection of their senses through something external to them (or through their own mental activity) under the condition of empirical consciousness, i.e., time.²⁶ Traditionally, an intuitive intellect is understood to be creative in the sense that the thought of an object (as a whole) brings about its existence (as a whole). Again, it would be a misunderstanding of Fichte to think that the self-positing *I* is creative in this sense. Nonetheless, it now becomes clear that Fichte uses conceptions reserved in the Aristotelian tradition for the characterization of a divine intellect (in contrast to the human mind) to account for the distinctive self-constituting activity of the *I*.

²² See Neuhouser (1990, pp. 112f.) and Wood (2016, pp. 38-40). By contrast, Förster (2012, p. 192) offers an interpretation of Fichte's absolute subject as "a quasi Spinozan substance (*causa sui*)", which as the posited *I* is then "the limitation of that substance".

²³ See Wood (2016, pp. 38-40).

²⁴ Henrich (1970, p. 275); Henrich (1971, p. 19).

²⁵ Henrich (1970) and (1971), see also Rosefeldt (2015). Fichte frequently invokes the notion of "self-observation" and uses the terms "subject-*I*" and "object-*I*" to explain the intrinsic self-relation of the self-positing *I*, e.g.: "The intellect, as such, *observes itself*, and this act of self-observation is immediately directed at everything that the intellect is." (EE I:435).

²⁶ Several commentators detect a similarity between Kant's apperceptive "I think" and Fichte's "intellectual intuition", e.g., Zöllner (1998, p. 34), and Wood (2016, pp. 50-51). Yet Fichte's appeal to "intellectual intuition" represents a major departure and would, in my view, face similar problems as the psychological reading of Kant's apperception, which assumes the necessity of (sensible) self-intuitions for transcendental apperception (see Kraus, 2020, pp. 96-98).

For Fichte it is only consistent to introduce the concept of an *absolute subject* (or *pure I*). This concept denotes the “absolute unity” and identity of the positing subject with itself as the posited object (see WLnm 31(114)). The *I* is not simply a “mere subject” in relation to a particular object, as in Kant, but a “subject-object” (WLnm 31(114)) or “subject-objectivity” (ZE I:502). There is a consensus in the literature that Fichte’s absolute subject is not to be understood as an individual *I*, such as a Leibnizean monad, since individuality, according to Fichte, presupposes the positing of the *non-I*, which is Fichte’s second fundamental principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the limitation, or determination, of both the *I* and the *non-I*, which is his third fundamental principle.²⁷ More specifically, individuality presupposes the consciousness of other *I*s and the recognition of their freedom.²⁸ So Fichte states unambiguously that “I-hood and individuality are very different concepts” and that “the concept of I-hood comprises not merely our own specific personality, but our entire mental or spiritual nature” (ZE I:504). Compared to Kant’s formal “I think,” Fichte’s absolute subject “underlies all ... thinking and is present in ... every act of thinking” (ZE I:506). That is, the absolute subject is understood both as the formal condition of any state of human consciousness and as the first actualization of that formal condition, the original actualization of human consciousness. It may be more aptly characterized as an “archetypal instance of consciousness,” which in a fundamental sense eludes all individuation and objectification.²⁹

If we compare this reconstruction of Fichte’s self-positing *I* with my earlier hylomorphic interpretation of Kant’s apperception, the main difference can be understood as follows: Whereas for Kant, the act of apperception consists in imposing the universal form of reflexivity on suitable representational matter given from elsewhere, e.g., from encountering the world that affects us sensibly, for Fichte, self-positing is a “real activity” (WLnm 44 (140)) that actually produces matter according to the essential form of an *I* or that gives itself the matter required to actualize this form. The absolute unity of subject and object, of concept and content, of activity and product

²⁷ See, e.g., Neuhauser (1990), Ameriks (2000), Breazeale (2014), and Wood (2016). For the second principle, see WLf I:101-105; for the third principle, see WLf I:105-122.

²⁸ Breazeale (2014, p. 185) offers an insightful discussion of the need for an external check (“Anstoß”) in Fichte’s theory of subjectivity in three respects: (1) for the determination of the external, phenomenal world; (2) for the recognition of the freedom of others; and (3) for the feeling of a moral “ought” in the empirical world. Fichte’s check should not be identified with the noumenal or with things in themselves in Kant.

²⁹ Zöllner (1998, p. 37), also Frank (2007, pp. 152–73).

of activity in the first principle of self-positing can now be construed as a *self-realizing form*, as Fichte himself indicates: “As an intellectual intuition, the I contains nothing but the *form of I-hood*, self-reverting acting, which, to be sure, also becomes the *content of the I*.” (ZE I:515, emphasis added). To be sure, this self-realizing form cannot produce determinacy or individual personality out of itself. For determinacy and individuality, the form must go beyond itself to posit the *non-I*, and most importantly, it requires an external “check” (*Anstoß*) that sets limits for its own self-determination. Hence, while the self-positing *I* can produce content for itself, it cannot produce its own limitations that would make it into this rather than that particular being.³⁰

Like Kant, Fichte distinguishes the standpoint of natural consciousness, i.e., of the finite, embodied human subject, from the standpoint of transcendental speculation, i.e., of the philosopher (see ZE I:454). Only the standpoint of transcendental speculation can reveal the absolute subject and its self-realizing activity, which grounds natural consciousness. This standpoint, however, exceeds what I have characterized as the universal human perspective in Kant. For Kant, there is no absolute standpoint of consciousness from which the human mind could be understood as producing its own matter according to its characteristic form. Rather, for Kant, human perspectivity consists precisely in being fundamentally constrained by the fact that matter must be given from elsewhere.

In conclusion, Fichte, like other German idealists after him, shows a tendency to transcend perspectival human consciousness towards something absolute by transforming the mere form of reflexivity, which for Kant gives a formal structure to human consciousness, into a self-realizing form that gives itself its own material being. Reflexivity, for Fichte, is ultimately grounded in a self-positing *I* that produces itself as a real, albeit still indeterminate, being for itself. Even though Fichte conceives of this being only as being for consciousness, his theory leads him to accept an absolute standpoint of subjectivity available to human beings, at least in transcendental reflection. By contrast, Kant’s transcendental standpoint only formally demarcates the universal human horizon within which we can find objective knowledge about the world and ourselves as individual persons.

³⁰ See, e.g., WLf I:344. On the need for an external check (“Anstoß”) and the abstract realism that Fichte’s theory of individuality must presuppose, see Breazeale (2014, esp. pp. 188ff.)

3. Analytic Theories of Perspectival Consciousness: Mental Indexicality and Absolute Objectivity

There are numerous contemporary approaches to accounting for the perspectival nature of human consciousness, and I cannot do justice to them all. Some claim for themselves to be in the tradition of Kant and German idealism, others claim to be in opposition to this tradition. In this section, I focus on those accounts that aim to explain the perspectivity of consciousness by invoking a distinction between the *mode* and the *content* of experience, and discuss how they compare to Kant's and Fichte's accounts based on the distinction between *form* and *matter*. As a result, I notice a tendency in contemporary analytic philosophy to objectify the subjective mode of experience by incorporating it into the wider objective content of experience (or of the corresponding proposition). This approach, as will become clear, presupposes an absolute notion of objectivity according to which contents of consciousness are truth-evaluable in absolute terms, independently of any particular subjective perspective and even of the universal human perspective.

With the seminal studies of Hector-Neri Castañeda (1966), Sydney Shoemaker (1968), John Perry (1979), Roderick Chisholm (1981), and Gareth Evans (1982), the issues of self-consciousness and the subjectivity of consciousness have been increasingly discussed within a language-theoretical framework, explaining the subjective perspective of conscious thought and experience by invoking linguistic phenomena such as indexical and self-referential expressions. The starting point is often the idea that thoughts (or beliefs) and (perceptual) experiences are in some sense self-conscious, that is, involve an awareness of oneself as the subject of the thought (belief) or experience in question.³¹ This self-consciousness, or awareness of oneself as subject, is often understood on the model of the indexical "I" (and its cognates) as a kind of *mental indexicality*. Accordingly, every thought or experience stands – at least implicitly – in an indexical relationship to its subject, whereby the indexicality is understood either as an implicit, *self-referential content* of the state of thought (or experience) or as the distinctive *self-relational mode* under which the content is grasped. Examining selected accounts of such mental indexicality will reveal their

³¹ Many accounts (e.g., Perry (1979), Lewis (1979), Recanati (2007)) focus on self-conscious beliefs and invoke truth-conditional and epistemic considerations in their explanation of subjectivity. I will confine my analysis to thoughts (without considering a potential epistemic attitude that concerns the holding of the thought content to be true) and basic perceptual experiences.

tendency to explain the subjectivity of consciousness by tracing it back to a self-referential structure or constituent of thought. This explanation, however, not only presupposes the distinction between subject and object as a given, but ultimately understands subjectivity by turning it into an objective content that can be grasped from a non-perspectival, absolute standpoint.

The underlying account of linguistic indexicality often presupposes a theory of direct reference, such as that pioneered by David Kaplan (1977, 1989). According to Kaplan, every type of indexical (e.g., “I”, “here”, and “now”) has a distinctive character that defines the semantic rule for how an indexical latches onto or picks out some feature of reality in the particular context in which it is uttered. The indexical type is understood, more precisely, as a function from a *context of use* to a particular content (e.g., “I” refers to the speaker of the utterance containing “I”, also called the agent of the context of use; “here” refers to the place where the utterance is made; “now” refers to the time of utterance). Others prefer a token-reflexive account of indexicality, as introduced by Hans Reichenbach: The indexical “I” is understood as a token-reflexive expression that is realized (or, if it occurs in a full, truth-evaluable sentence, made true) by being tokenised by a particular subject.³²

According to a first attempt, mental indexicality can then be understood in terms of a *mental indexical element* that is contained in every conscious state and whose content is fixed by the situation in which the state occurs and is held by a particular subject. Every state of thinking or experiencing is assumed to contain as – at least implicit – part of its *content* a self-referential proposition. This self-referential proposition, which can be expressed by sentences such as “I think *p*” or “I experience *e*,” (whereby *p* and *e* stand for the content of the thinking or experiencing), is made true precisely by the fact that the subject thinks *p* or experiences *e*. In this sense, all conscious states are the kind of state that James Higginbotham calls *reflexive states*: the state itself “figures as a constituent of the thought that is the object of the state” and “the thinker of the thought is in [the content of] the state”, hence making the thinker a constituent of the *content* that is thought (Higginbotham (1995, p. 248)). Similarly, according to recent *self-representationalist* accounts of experience, such as Uriah Kriegel (2009), it is assumed that every experiential state contains as part of its representational content a representation of itself. This self-representation does not have to be propositional, but

³² For discussion, see Garcia-Carpintero (1998).

must display a suitable indexical relationship to the subject of consciousness and thereby gives the experience its subjective character or “for-me-ness” (Kriegel 2009).

Even though these attempts avoid explaining consciousness through a model of higher-order reflection, which has been criticized since Fichte, they nonetheless face a related problem of *nested regress*. For if the indexical element is a part of the *content* of the state, then the following disjunction arises: *Either*, on the one hand, the self-referential content is itself conscious, in which case – in order to be conscious – it must contain another indexical element in the form of a self-referential proposition, expressed by a nested sentence such as “I think [I think *p*]”, leading to a nested regress, in which every conscious state represents itself infinitely many times like a fractal on an ever smaller scale; *or*, on the other hand, the self-referential content is itself unconscious – but then it is unclear in what sense one still is conscious of oneself as the subject of thought or experience.³³

In order to avoid this problem, a further distinction from the language-theoretical framework has been invoked: the distinction between *content* (that is uttered) and (illocutionary) *force* (with which this content is uttered). Transferring this distinction to the mental sphere, John Searle (1983) introduces what he calls the *psychological mode*, as opposed to the content of, a psychological state to describe the mode by which a content is grasped, and which thus defines the type of state the subject is in, e.g., perception, memory, belief, or desire. David Lewis (1979) introduces what he calls the *de se* attitude (as opposed to *de re* and *de dicto* attitudes) as the primary attitude realized in thinking and argues that any propositional content is primarily thought under the *de se* mode and thus grasped in the context of a centered world, i.e., the world centered on the thinking subject at the time (and place) of thinking.

A set of proposals have since been made to explain the subjectivity of thought and experience as a *mode* under which a certain content is grasped. François Recanati (2007) analyses the first-personal character of intentional thought by distinguishing between genuine constituents of contents and aspects of the situation with respect to which the thought content is evaluated. For him, first-personal character consists not in the fact that the subject is a constituent of the cognitive content of the thought, but in

³³ Garcia-Carpintero (2008) argues that this approach can be rescued by distinguishing between explicit and implicit self-referential (or *de se*) thoughts and between two levels of content, and thus comes close to Recanati’s solution, which criticizes Higginbotham’s reflexivity account along similar lines (see Recanati (2007, pp. 180-88)). But this manoeuvre still leaves open the problem of how to account for implicit self-consciousness and its transition to explicit self-consciousness, which I discuss below.

the fact that the subject features in the mode in which the thought is had and hence as part of the “Austinian proposition”, that is, the complete truth-conditional content of the thought, which can be “determined in part by psychological factors and in part by environmental factors” (Recanati (2007, p. 215)). The Austinian proposition of an utterance is, for Recanati, its complete content in given circumstances: it often contains unarticulated constituents, such as the psychological mode of the subject or spatiotemporal features of the environment of utterance, but is itself truth-evaluable in absolute terms.³⁴ With respect to mental states, he similarly argues that “the content of an intentional state is its complete truth-conditional content – a classical proposition endowed with absolute truth-conditions”, i.e., an Austinian proposition (Recanati (2007, p. 19)). Moreover, “the ‘content’ of a mental state essentially contrasts with its ‘mode’” in Searle’s sense. The first-personal character of thought is then understood as a *mode of presentation*, which “determines a function from the context of tokening to some implicit aspect of the representation’s satisfaction conditions” (Recanati (2007, p. 277)). However, Recanati (2007, pp. 285-289) acknowledges that there are very few intentional states, such as perception, that exhibit what he calls an *egocentric* mode of presentation, where the complete (Austinian) content of the state is fixed by the context of its tokenisation (e.g., the subject, time, and place of perceiving). Other states, such as memory, exhibit a so-called *anaphoric* mode of presentation, in which a previous stage featuring the same subject serves as the cognitive background for determining the complete content of the currently entertained thought. Despite Recanati’s complex analysis of subjective modes, the question remains as to how the subject, understood as a distinctive situational aspect, can be reflected upon as the genuine content of an explicit *de se* thought.

Following the phenomenological tradition, Dan Zahavi (2005), Kristina Musholt (2015), Frank (2022), and others explain the subjective character of conscious states in terms of a pre-reflective self-consciousness, which similar to Recanati’s mode-of-presentation proposal, can be understood as an implicit awareness of oneself as subject without explicitly representing the subject as the object of consciousness – an account

³⁴ Recanati’s position eliminates Kaplan’s contents (i.e., the determination of an indexical in a context of use) as an unnecessary intermediary level of content between the *lekton* (as the linguistic meaning of a sentence, e.g., Kaplan’s character) and the content of utterance (i.e., the complete Austinian proposition in the context of evaluation) (see Recanati (2007, p. 18)). The position also differs from Perry (1986), who acknowledges the existence of unarticulated constituents in *de se* beliefs, but still conceives of these constituents as genuine contents of the belief.

that also comes close to Dieter Henrich's proposal for solving Fichte's problem of self-positing. As with Recanati, the idea of a pre-reflective self-consciousness still leaves open the question of how an implicit self-awareness can be made explicit and thus how the subject can – upon reflection – become an explicit content of consciousness. The proposed solutions typically assume some kind of *self-relation* that suitably links the subject to the content of its state of consciousness so that the subject can be articulated as an objective content of thought: for instance, in terms of causally self-tracking information in memory cases (e.g., Perry (2001)) or a self-concerning-relation that gives each conscious state a distinctive affective character.

However, all these proposals seem to come to a similar dilemma: either this self-relation is understood as purely subjective, given only to the subject in question and therefore unanalysable in general terms; or the self-relation is finally traced back to objectively given, situational features of the context in which the content is had (and evaluated), which go beyond an intrinsic relationship between subject and conscious state. The first horn of the dilemma has similarities with Fichte's absolute subjectivity, in the sense that the individual subject is the source of an unanalysable, inarticulable self-relation, which resembles Fichte's notion of the absolute, indistinguishable unity of subject and object in self-positing. The second horn of the dilemma presupposes the possibility of an objective description of a situation independent of the subjective features of consciousness, as is often sought in naturalistic reductions of consciousness to relations in nature that can be traced by the methods of the natural sciences.

Following the second horn, Recanati concludes that the first-personal character of thought, even if it is primarily a mode of presentation rather than a genuine component of the thought content, is ultimately explained as that which specifies a determinant in the context of evaluation. In this way, however, the subjective mode ultimately becomes a constituent of a *wider content*, i.e., the Austinian proposition, that is truth-evaluable in absolute terms. Therefore, Recanati's account presupposes an absolute standpoint of objectivity from which all subjective features of consciousness can be grasped in absolute terms.

This conclusion of many analytic theories of the subjective character of consciousness thus differs fundamentally from the Kantian insight that content is always perspectival and can only result from the apprehension of some matter under a suitable form – a form that, even if applied by a particular subject, is nevertheless

generally describable and can be objectively reflected upon. This brings me to the final conclusion of my comparative study.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored three different theories explaining that human consciousness is fundamentally perspectival, focusing specifically on the reflexivity or subjective character of consciousness. The comparison of Kant's, Fichte's and contemporary analytic accounts of consciousness has shown that there is a crucial difference in how the relationship between form and matter, or between mode and content, of a state of consciousness is conceived.

For Kant, there can be no content that is not tied to a perspective, either to the particular perspective of a concrete "I" (and "now") or to the universal human perspective. Content always results from grasping some matter under an appropriate form. Kant affirms a reflexive but pre-reflective model of (self-)consciousness: the fundamental reflexivity of consciousness is understood not as a reflection upon a state of the subject, but as the universal form that any state of consciousness must have in order for it to be representationally significant and potentially conscious to a subject. The form of reflexivity, expressed by the famous "I think" that must be able to accompany all representations, is thus a necessary form imprinted on any content, including objective content, in order for that content to be meaningful for human subjects, and as a form, it is irreducible to a constituent of any kind of content.

Fichte, while following Kant's transcendental philosophy in important respects, deviates from it at a decisive point in his conception of a self-positing *I*. For Fichte, the reflexivity of consciousness is ultimately grounded in the self-realizing activity of the *I* that produces itself as a real, if still indeterminate being for itself. Fichte thus turns Kant's mere form of reflexivity, which gives a formal structure to human consciousness (with its given sensible matter), into a self-realizing form that gives itself its own matter, at least from the absolute standpoint of consciousness.

The analytic accounts of consciousness that draw on a conception of mental indexicality, by contrast, tend to reduce the subjective character of consciousness to a constituent of content that is assumed to be implicit or inarticulate, but can be read off from the contextual situation. Even those accounts that invoke subjective modes under which the content of a conscious state is apprehended, such as Lewis's *de-se* attitude or Recanati's egocentric mode of presentation, still assume that these modes can be

reduced – at least in truth-relevant terms – to constituents of a wider content that goes beyond the narrow content of a single state and concerns an objectifiable relation of the subject to its natural environment and its causal history (in a non-centered Lewisian world) – a relation that can be described in absolute terms from a standpoint of absolute (scientific) objectivity.

In sum, Kant's theory can be understood as a moderate, human-centered kind of perspectivalism that avoids two extremes: Fichtean absolute subjectivism (according to which human existence is ultimately grounded in the self-producing activity of an absolute subject) and naturalist absolute objectivism (according to which the subjectivity of consciousness is ultimately explained by objectifiable relations in nature).

References

- Allison, Henry E. 2004. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism (2nd ed.)*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ameriks, Karl. 2000. *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breazeale, Daniel. 2014. *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre. Themes from Fichte's Early Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brook, Andrew. 1994. *Kant and the Mind*. New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carl, Wolfgang. 1997. Apperception and Spontaneity. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 5: 147–63.
- Castañeda, Hector-Neri. 1967. On the Logic of Self-Knowledge. *Noûs* 1(1): 9–21.
- Chisholm, Roderick M. 1981. *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Evans, Gary. 1982. Self-Identification. In *Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell, 205–66. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1794/1997. *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre als Handschrift für seine Zuhörer*. Hamburg: Meiner.
English edition: Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 2021. *Foundation of the entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794–95)* (trans: Breazeale, Daniel). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1796-99/1982. *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Hamburg: Meiner.
English edition: Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1992. *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo (1796–99)* (trans: Breazeale, Daniel). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1797-98/1971. *Erste und Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*. In *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, (ed. I. H. Fichte), Vol. I (pp. 422-449 and pp. 453-518). Berlin: De Gruyter. [SW]

- English edition: Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1994. *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings (1797-1800)* (trans: Breazeale, Daniel). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Förster, Eckart. 2012. *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy. A Systematic Reconstruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frank, Manfred. 1991. *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis: Essays zur analytischen Philosophie der Subjektivität*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Frank, Manfred. 2007. Non-Objectal Subjectivity. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14(5–6): 152–73.
- Frank, Manfred. 2022. In Defence of Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness: The Heidelberg View. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 13 (2): 277-93.
- Freitag, Wolfgang and Katharina Kraus. 2022. An Expressivist Interpretation of Kant's 'I think'. *Noûs* 56(1): 110-32.
- García-Carpintero, Manuel. 1998. Indexicals as token-reflexives. *Mind* 107 (427): 529-64.
- García-Carpintero, Manuel. 2008. Relativism, Vagueness and What Is Said. In *Relative Truth*, ed. M. García-Carpintero and M. Kölbel, 129-54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henrich, Dieter. 1967. *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht*. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann. English edition: Henrich, Dieter. 1982. *Fichte's Original Insight*. In *Contemporary German Philosophy, Vol. 1*, ed. Darrel E. Christensen, 15-53. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Henrich, Dieter. 1976. *Identität und Objektivität: Eine Untersuchung über Kants transzendente Deduktion*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Henrich, Dieter. 1970. Selbstbewußtsein. Kritische Einleitung in eine Theorie. In *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, ed. Rüdiger Bubner, Konrad Cramer, and Rainer Wiehl, Vol. 1, 257-584. Tübingen: Mohr. English edition: Henrich, Dieter. 1971. Self-Consciousness. A Critical Introduction to a Theory. *Man and World* IV: 3–28.
- Howell, Robert. 2001. Kant, the 'I Think', and Self-Awareness. In *Kant's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Lewis White Beck*, ed. Predrag Cicovacki, 117-52. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Indregard, Jonas Jervell. 2018. Consciousness as Inner Sensation: Crusius and Kant. *Ergo* 5(7): 173–201.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1999. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2011. *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Trans. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2010. *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*. Trans. Henry Allison, Peter Heath, Gary Hatfield, and Michael Friedman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, David. 1989. Demonstratives. In *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog, John Perry and Howard Wettstein, 481-563. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Keller, Pierre. 1998. *Kant and the Demands of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kitcher, Patricia. 1990. *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kitcher, Patricia. 2011. *Kant's Thinker*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kraus, Katharina. Forthcoming. *Kant's Ideas of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kriegel, Uriah. 2009. *Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1979. Attitudes De Dicto and De Se. *Philosophical Review* 4: 513–43.
- Longuenesse, Béatrice. 2017. *I, Me, Mine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merritt, Melissa. 2018. *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Musholt, Kristina. 2015. *Thinking about Oneself: From Nonconceptual Content to the Concept of a Self*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. 1990. *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perry, John. 1979. The Problem of the Essential Indexical. *Noûs* 13(1): 3–21.
- Perry, John. 1986. Thought Without Representation. *Supplementary Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 60: 137–52; reprinted with Postscript in Perry, John. 1993. *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, 205–55. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Perry, John. 2001. *Reference and Reflexivity*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Recanati, François. 2007. *Perspectival Thought: A Plea for (Moderate) Relativism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosefeldt, Tobias. 2000. *Das logische Ich*. Berlin: PHILO.
- Rosefeldt, Tobias. 2015. Zwei Regresse des Selbstbewusstseins bei Fichte. In *Begriff und Interpretation im Zeichen der Moderne*, ed. Sarah Schmidt, Dimitris Karydas and Jure Zovko, 63–76. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter.
- Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sethi, Janum. 2021. Kant on Empirical Self-Consciousness. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2021.1948083>
- Shields, Christopher. 2022. Hylomorphisms. *Ancient Philosophy Today: DIALOGOI* 4.1: 96–127
- Shoemaker, Sidney. 1968. Self-Reference and Self-Awareness. *Journal of Philosophy* 65: 555–67.
- Strawson, Peter. 1966. *The Bounds of Sense*. London: Routledge.
- Wood, Allen. 2016. *Fichte's Ethical Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2005. *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Zöller, Günther. 1998. *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy: The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zuckert, Rachel. 2017. Empirical Scientific Investigation and the Ideas of Reason. In *Kant and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Michela Massimi and Angela Breitenbach, 89–107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.