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Adorno's Critique of Fichte's Idealism: An Appraisal

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Abstract: This article challenges Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism as an extreme form of identity thinking that entails complete human domination of nature. Its argument consists of two main stages. First, Fichte's idealism will be shown to explain the possibility of the type of critical subject that Adorno presupposes in such a way that a certain primacy must be accorded to the subject in its relation to the object. Second, a distinction between two levels of inquiry and presentation – the transcendental level and the historical empirical level – will be drawn. This distinction is applied to the concept of a relation between the subject or 'I' and the object or 'not-I' in such a way as to (1) relate this concept to the type of 'historico-practical' concept already introduced with reference to the concept of enlightenment and (2) avoid a too literal interpretation of those passages in Fichte's writings concerning the relationship between the human mind and nature that appear to justify Adorno's characterization of his idealism.

Keywords: Adorno, Fichte, idealism, identity thinking, nature

1 Introduction

In *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor W. Adorno characterizes the system constructed by "the sovereign mind" (*der souveräne Geist*) as one driven by "rage" (*Wut*). Fichte's idealism is held to exemplify this rage, which manifests itself not only as the drive to construct a system but also as the drive to assert the mind's primacy in relation to its 'other': "Idealism – most explicitly Fichte – gives unconscious sway to the ideology that the not-I, *l'autrui*, and finally all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour it without misgivings" (ND 33/22–23). Thus, for Adorno, Fichte's idealism is a radical expression of the mind's drive to make what is other than itself, especially nature, identical to itself by imposing its concepts and laws of thinking on this other. Adorno likens this drive to eliminate the threat that otherness poses to the mind's self-sufficiency to the brute desire to consume food:

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The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism. It disfigures even Kant's humanity and refutes the aura of higher and nobler things in which it knows how to clothe itself. The view of the human being in the center is twinned with contempt for humankind (*Menschenverachtung*): leave nothing unchallenged. The sublime inexorability of the moral law was this kind of rationalized rage at non-identity. (ND 34/23; translation modified)

Fichte's writings do indeed contain passages that indicate a drive to assert the primacy of the human mind in relation to anything other than itself, and in particular 'nature,' whose otherness is identified with its lack of rationality, even if it is acknowledged that there are limits to the extent to which this end can be achieved. Here are a couple of examples taken from a text to which I shall return, *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation*:

Man's final end is to subordinate to himself all that is irrational, to master it freely and according to his own laws. This is a final end which is completely unachievable and must always remain so – so long, that is, as man is to remain man and is not supposed to become God. (GA I/3: 32; EPW 152)

Reason is [...] engaged in a constant struggle with nature, a war that can never end – so long as we are not supposed to become gods. However, nature's influence should and can become weaker and weaker, whereas reason's dominion should and can become stronger and stronger. Reason ought to gain one victory after another over nature. (GA I/3: 45; EPW 164)

Yet one may view the mind's imposition of concepts on the object of its thinking and activity as an inescapable feature of purposive action, that is, action guided by consciously adopted ends. Adorno himself emphasizes the necessity of conceptual thought, as when he claims that philosophy "must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept" (ND 27/15). "The cognitive utopia" (*Die Utopie der Erkenntnis*) is accordingly identified with the following task: "to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it equal to them (*das Begriffsslose mit Begriffen aufzutun, ohne es ihnen gleichzumachen*)" (ND 21/10; translation modified).¹

¹ Thus occasionally, as here, Adorno suggests that his aim is not to replace the primacy of the subject with the primacy of the object. The task is instead to recognize how the object is not exhausted by concepts applied by the subject to it and that the object is not, therefore, reducible to such concepts. He claims that dialectics "says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder (*Gegenstände in ihrem Begriff nicht aufgehen*), that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (ND 16–17/5). For Adorno, the way in which dialectics demonstrates that the object is not reducible to any concept of it undermines the privileged position that concepts occupy in idealism. Dialectics does not, however, reject the use of concepts. Indeed, it cannot do so because philosophy necessarily operates with concepts: "Necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into the virtue

These claims imply that the use of concepts as such is not the problem. Rather, the problem with 'identity thinking' concerns how it reduces objects to concepts, either by failing to transcend a conceptually mediated relation to specific objects, assuming that this is even possible, or by failing to establish the right kind of conceptually mediated relation to them. The second failure appears to be what Adorno has in his sights, given his description of the philosophical orientation which is to replace the idealist one as "nothing but full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection" (ND 25/13). This opens the way to interpreting Adorno's argument as being transcendental in kind, in that a certain type of relation between the subject and the object is held to be a necessary condition of experience (O'Connor 2004, 15, 54–55). This relation is one of mediation, for although the subject and the object are independent moments, they are mutually constitutive with respect to their meaning, so that the thought of the one entails the thought of the other (O'Connor 2004, 48).²

Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism appears most pertinent to practical concepts that reason employs with the aim of transforming that which confronts it as something given and other than itself. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in one of the passages quoted earlier, Adorno not only mentions Kant's concept of the moral law but also alludes to his concept of enlightenment with the phrase "leave nothing unchallenged." Kant's concept of enlightenment is a type of practical concept that cannot be reduced to a concept which conforms to a given object. Rather, it concerns an object that does not already exist or does so only imperfectly. Fichte likewise emphasizes this essential difference between a purposive concept (*Zweckbegriff*) and a cognitive concept (*Erkenntnißbegriff*). While the latter type of concept concerns afterimages of something given (*Nachbilder eines Gegebenen*) because the source of the concept is a pre-existing object whose essential properties

of their priority (*Priorität*) – no more than, conversely, criticism of that virtue can be turned into a summary verdict against philosophy" (ND 23/11). This is compatible with attributing an equal status to subject and object of the kind indicated by the following passage: "But it is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy" (ND 182/181). This is also true of Adorno's claim that "[c]arried through, the critique of identity is a groping for the preponderance (*Präponderanz*) of the object" (ND 184/183), for this could be taken to mean only that the greater attention and weight accorded to the object serves as a corrective to the privileged position traditionally occupied by the subject and its concepts in relation to the object.

2 By virtue of its independence, however, the object cannot be reduced to the subject or, to be more precise, to concepts employed by the latter. Instead, the object enjoys a certain primacy in relation to the subject, as is signalled by Adorno's claims about the "precedence" or "primacy" (*Vorrang*) of the object. See ND 184–190/183–189, 193–194/192–194.

the subject comprehends, concepts of the former type are models of something to be created or brought forth (*Vorbilder eines Hervorzubringenden*) (GA I/6: 255).

Kant's concept of enlightenment is instructive in this regard because it suggests that the distinction between these two types of concepts need not be an absolute one. Rather, the concept of enlightenment is partially derived from historical experience, and to this extent it is what Fichte terms an 'afterimage.' Yet this concept can equally be applied to experience with a view to transforming it, making it more like the 'model' of something to be created or brought forth. This transformation of experience consists in seeking to alter the historical situation from which the concept was initially derived by applying an ideal version of this concept to this historical situation with the aim of making possible a different experience of it. The type of concept in question can be termed 'historico-practical' owing to its essentially historical and practical character. I shall argue that the idea of such a concept can be used to challenge Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism. This will involve showing how this characterization of Fichte's idealism conflates the transcendental and the empirical, whereas preserving the distinction between them helps to explain how Fichte's idealism does not in fact entail an attempt on the part of the mind to overcome completely the otherness of nature in particular.

As we have seen, some passages from Fichte's writings nevertheless do appear to advocate a relationship between human beings and nature in which the former dominate the latter with the aim of overcoming the existing moment of non-identity. This suggests that an exploitative and purely instrumental attitude toward nature that furthers this goal is to be welcomed. Yet even when Fichte is claimed to be committed to the idea that "technological progress aimed at increased mastery of nature is a necessary end of rational agency,"³ it is also claimed that arguments for the preservation and protection of nature are available to him, though he himself does not make them (Kosch 2018, 171–172). The type of argument in question rests on the claim that the degradation and destruction of the natural environment on which human beings depend would be incompatible with the expansion of human capabilities and the realization of projects undertaken by humanity as a whole, including future generations. This approach does not, however, effectively undermine Adorno's characterization of the type of relationship between human beings and nature entailed by Fichte's idealism, for nature still possesses value only insofar as it serves human ends and projects that are justified in terms of their

³ Even this claim can be challenged, however, on the grounds that it focuses on the relation of humanity to nature instead of viewing mastery of nature as necessary only insofar as it serves to liberate humanity from oppressive social and political conditions. See Wood 2016, 152–153. I shall argue for a version of this claim, which will involve interpreting the term 'nature' itself with reference to a project of human emancipation.

rationality.⁴ Thus the most it shows is that it would be irrational for human beings to destroy nature completely or to degrade it so much that it is no longer fit to serve the ends of reason.

My argument, in contrast, turns on how distinguishing between the transcendental level of analysis and presentation and a more empirical one leaves room for an alternative conception of how human beings can relate to nature and to the 'object' more generally. The argument consists of three main stages. In the next section, I explain in more detail what is meant by a historico-practical concept, not only in relation to Kant's concept of enlightenment but also in relation to Fichte's concept of the human being. Next, Fichte's idealism will be shown to explain the possibility of the critical subject that Adorno himself presupposes in such a way as to justify attributing a certain primacy to this subject in relation to the object. I shall then distinguish between the transcendental level of analysis and presentation, which concerns the fundamental concepts and principles that structure and govern human knowledge and experience in general, on the one hand, and historical instantiations of these concepts and principles, on the other.⁵ This will be done

4 Kosch introduces Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* into her discussion of possible objections to Fichte's commitment to the idea of technological progress aimed at the mastery of nature as an end of rational agency, but in such a way as to reduce the type of objection attributed to them to a version of the claim that such mastery ought to be avoided insofar as it is incompatible with rational agency. For the objection in question is identified with "the danger to human autonomy of the hegemony of instrumental reason" (Kosch 2018, 173). Although it may be true that Horkheimer and Adorno target ways in which an instrumental attitude toward nature is, as Kosch claims, inextricably connected with an instrumental attitude toward other human beings and a repressive relation to one's own self insofar as one is oneself part of nature, Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism indicates a more general concern that cannot be reduced to the harmful consequences for human autonomy and selfhood of an attempt to achieve complete mastery of nature. Moreover, Adorno considers a repressive relation to one's own self as a natural being to be a condition of autonomy, making it difficult to see how an instrumental attitude to nature can explain such a self-relation, rather than presupposing it or accompanying it. Horkheimer also understands Fichte's position as one that entails the subject's domination of nature in a more general sense: "In his early doctrine, according to which the sole *raison d'être* of the world lies in affording a field of activity for the imperious transcendental self, the relationship between the ego and nature is one of tyranny. The entire universe becomes a tool of the ego, although the ego has no substance or meaning except in its own boundless activity" (Horkheimer 2013, 76).

5 My discussion of this distinction will provide some indication of how a transcendental structure of experience – the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I – relates to history. This structure can be thought to belong to the kind of 'philosophy of history' that Fichte intended to develop but did not explicitly do so, and whose actual form must, therefore, be reconstructed. On the one hand, this philosophy of history will, like the *Wissenschaftslehre*, be a theory that can, in principle, achieve completion, thereby distinguishing it from the open-endedness of history itself, and must be deducible from *a priori* grounds. See Radrizzani 2016, 222–223. I do not claim, however, to pro-

with the aim of showing that we should not interpret too literally those passages in Fichte's writings that appear to justify Adorno's characterization of his idealism. Adorno, in contrast, either conflates these two levels or wrongly assumes that the transcendental one constrains the empirical one in a way that excludes certain types of experience of the object with which transcendental philosophy is not, in fact, concerned. I shall support this claim with reference to the concept of a relation between the subject and the object that Fichte discusses in terms of the relation between two central concepts of his idealism: the I and the not-I. I conclude with a brief discussion of how my argument has certain implications for our understanding of Adorno's own critical project.

2 The Historico-practical Concept of Enlightenment

In his essay "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in December 1784, Kant responds to the question contained in the title of this essay by identifying what enlightenment essentially is. Kant's understanding of the essence of enlightenment can be inferred from what he writes about the uncritical attitude with which he contrasts enlightenment. This is the immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*) which consists in the "inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another" (AA 8/E 35). Such immaturity is "self-incurred" because a human being is capable of thinking without the guidance of another even if he or she lacks the courage and resolve to do so. Given the capacity to think for oneself and the possibility of failing to exercise this capacity, the motto of enlightenment takes the form of an imperative directed at a potentially recalcitrant will: "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding!" (AA 8/E 35). Thus the emphasis is placed on an attitudinal precondition of knowledge, rather than on the content of knowledge.

By articulating this imperative, Kant's essay represents an attempt to encourage others to think for themselves, as opposed to allowing their beliefs and values to be determined by a purely form of external authority. Moreover, according to

vide a fuller account of how this *a priori* transcendental structure relates to the *a posteriori* realm of historical facts and events. It is sufficient to show how the former does not constrain the latter in a way that might justify Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism. One way of understanding what requires the abandonment of the strictly *a priori* level is that, for Fichte, "a theory of history can only be a means for acting in history, and this acting would be its goal" (Radrizzani 2016, 224). The idea of a historico-practical concept will help to explain how this demand can be met.

Kant, the original vocation (*Bestimmung*) of human nature consists in progress measured in terms of increasing enlightenment, that is, an extension of knowledge and eliminating of error that depends on a critical mode of thinking (AA 8/E 39). Kant's essay can then be viewed as an attempt to promote the enlightenment which it seeks to define, thereby helping human beings to fulfill their vocation. Such intervention is required because of the existence of obstacles to thinking in a genuinely independent way. On the one hand, Kant suggests that enlightenment understood as a process can be explained in terms of natural human development, as when he compares beginning to think independently with the process of learning to walk accompanied by "a few falls." On the other hand, he acknowledges that enlightenment may be obstructed by "[p]recepts and formulas, those mechanical instruments of a rational use, or rather misuse, of [...] natural endowments" that "are the ball and chain of an everlasting immaturity" (AA 8/E 35–36; translation modified). In addition, the initial difficulties that accompany the act of thinking independently make it more comfortable and convenient for human beings to subject themselves to external forms of authority even "after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction (*von fremder Leitung*)," while others are eager to exploit this weakness: "I need not think, if only I can pay; others will readily undertake the irksome business for me" (AA 8/E 35).

Another condition of enlightenment is the public use of reason whereby an individual writes, as Kant does in his essay, as a scholar (*Gelehrter*) on topics that concern humanity as such, and thereby addresses "the entire public of the *world of readers*" (AA 8/E 37). This shows how Kant's concept of enlightenment is a practical concept in the sense of a concept which the author himself employs as part of a praxis aimed at influencing other human beings in such a way that they come to think and act independently. This outcome may then influence the future course of history, because the more people think and act independently, the more likely it is that humanity's vocation will be fulfilled. This is signaled by Kant's claim that human beings "gradually work their way out of barbarism (*Rohigkeit*) of their own accord if only one does not intentionally contrive to keep them in it" (AA 8/E 41). Yet this is only one feature of the type of historico-practical concept outlined earlier, namely, the way in which it provides a model that may serve to influence the course of history. As we have seen, another feature concerns how this type of concept partly derives from historical experience. Are there any grounds for claiming that Kant's concept of enlightenment exhibits this feature as well?

Although Kant does not explicitly claim this, the need to define the concept of enlightenment indicates a prior historical process, which consists in the emergence of a type of thinking that is not determined by a purely external form of authority but instead independently investigates an object of inquiry. This type of thinking has manifested itself in theories and practices that are representative of

the historical period known as the Enlightenment, to which Kant himself belonged while seeking to articulate its fundamental principle. The philosopher's task is not to describe a set of facts concerning these theories and practices. Rather, the philosopher must comprehend that which unifies the facts. In this respect, significantly more than the apprehension of a given content is involved. The philosopher can then contribute to the completion of this historical process by making explicit the fundamental principle which guides it and by expressing this principle in the form of an imperative aimed at influencing how others think and act. A distinction between an ongoing historical process and Kant's attempt to intervene in this process in the hope of contributing to its completion is evident from his characterization of the present age, that is, the age to which his own attempt to define and promote the concept of enlightenment belongs, as an age of enlightenment rather than an enlightened age (AA 8/E 40). This distinction implies that enlightenment is an ongoing process that requires a determined attempt on the part of humanity to bring about its completion.

We have now identified two defining features of the relevant type of concept: the way in which a concept is initially derived from a historical situation and the way in which this same concept can be applied to the historical situation from which it has been derived with the aim of influencing the course that history subsequently takes. I now intend to identify a third feature of a historico-practical concept, namely, its origin in an *a priori* source which explains how an agent, in conjunction with others, can exercise a conceptually guided influence on his or her own historical situation.

Although Fichte does not explicitly appeal to the concept of enlightenment in the way that Kant does, allusions to it are present in *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation*. One such allusion is Fichte's use of the metaphor of light in connection with the idea of a type of progress which can be achieved within a public sphere. He claims that "[t]he light will certainly win in the end. Admittedly, we cannot say how long this will take, but when darkness is forced to engage in public battle this is already a guarantee of impending victory" (GA I/3: 38; EPW 158). Moreover, in the preface to the published version of these lectures, Fichte signals his intention to influence people. He distinguishes between those people who remain trapped within ordinary experience and those people capable of elevating themselves to the level of ideas, by which he means concepts that currently lack any corresponding presentation in everyday experience, that is to say, ideals (GA I/3: 25–26; EPW 144–145). This does not mean that these concepts must remain ideals. Rather, by influencing others to recognize these concepts and to act in conformity with them, Fichte hopes to contribute to their actualization, that is, to a process in which ideals come to shape experience in such a way that they themselves eventually become features of ordinary experience. More specifically, this actualization

of ideals may occur through Fichte's students fulfilling their vocation by influencing others in the same way as he has influenced them in his capacity as teacher, enabling Fichte to exercise an indirect influence on other human beings, and thus extend the circle of his influence:

What I would like to help many aspiring young men to grasp clearly is that lofty vocation (*erhabene Bestimmung*) which I have indicated briefly to you today. It is this vocation which I would like for you to make the most deliberate aim and the most constant guide of your lives – you young men who are in turn destined (*bestimmt*) to affect mankind in the strongest manner, and whose destiny it is, through teaching, action, or both – in narrower or wider circles – to pass on that education (*Bildung*) which you have received and on every side to raise our fellowmen to a higher level of culture (*Kultur*). When I teach something to you, I am most probably teaching unborn millions. (GA I/3: 33; EPW 152)

This passage shows that Fichte does not merely present such concepts as that of the human being and the vocation of the human being; he equally employs these concepts in the hope of influencing the thoughts and actions of others in a way that will result in significant change for the better, that is, progress measured in terms of the increasing dominance of reason. We may then ask who and what is the subject to whom the demand to become enlightened and to promote enlightenment can be meaningfully addressed.

This question brings me to Fichte's foundational philosophical science, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, to which he alludes in *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation* when he concedes that “unless I intend to treat philosophy in its entirety within this hour, I will be unable to deduce what I have to say on this topic completely and from its foundations (*aus seinen Gründen*)” (GA I/3: 28; EPW 147). These foundations include the most fundamental principle of this philosophical science: the I's act of positing itself. This principle will be shown to explain the possibility of the enlightenment subject in a way that limits the extent to which the primacy of the subject in relation to the object of experience and knowledge can be denied.

3 Idealism and the Critical Subject

The first principle of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* informs his account of the dispute between idealism and dogmatism. This dispute concerns the basis or foundation (*Grund*) of all experience. By experience is meant not only individual representations, whether they be representations of purely mental objects or representations of what are taken to be mind-independent objects, but also representations insofar as their relations with one another exhibit a necessity that cannot be explained

in terms of any decision on the part of a subject. How, then, can this necessity be explained? In seeking to answer this question, Fichte can be seen to argue that only idealism is able to account for the critical subject presupposed by Kant's concept of enlightenment.

The basis or foundation of all experience cannot form part of the experience that it explains, for this would reduce it to another item of experience, which would in turn have to be explained. From this it follows that this basis or foundation must lie outside the experience whose possibility it explains (GA I/4: 187; IWL 9). Yet how is philosophy to discover the basis or foundation of experience when the philosopher is situated within the realm of experience? Fichte's answer to this question is that the philosopher can perform an act of thinking which separates the fundamental elements of experience from one another, though they remain inseparable within experience itself. It is in connection with this act that Fichte makes two key claims concerning the dispute between idealism and dogmatism. The first claim can be termed the incompatibility thesis because idealism and dogmatism are held to explain the basis or foundation of experience in radically different, incompatible ways. The second claim can be termed the exhaustiveness thesis because idealism and dogmatism are held to provide the only possible explanations of this basis or foundation. Therefore, only one of them can be true.

Idealism and dogmatism nevertheless have something in common: in both cases discovering the basis or foundation of experience requires the above-mentioned mental act of separating that which is combined in experience, most fundamentally the subject and the object of experience. Just as enlightenment, according to Kant, requires resolving to exercise the capacity to think for oneself, this act represents an act of freedom, whereas human beings tend to remain within the bounds of ordinary experience, which is why to them empiricism appears to be the natural standpoint. This act is described in the following passage:

The philosopher [...] is able to engage in abstraction. That is to say, by means of a free act of thinking he is able to separate things that are connected with each other within experience. The *thing*, i. e., a determinate something that exists independently of our freedom and to which our cognition is supposed to be directed, and the *intellect*, i. e., the subject that is supposed to be engaged in this activity of cognizing, are inseparably connected with each other within experience. (GA I/4: 188; IWL 11)

Both idealism and dogmatism separate the subject of experience from the object of experience. To this extent, each of these philosophical positions presupposes the same mental act. The radical difference between idealism and dogmatism concerns the direction of explanation once the subject of experience and the object of experience have been separated. For idealism seeks to explain the object in terms of the subject while dogmatism seeks to explain the subject in terms of the object. In

this way, idealism accords explanatory priority to the subject *qua* intellect (*Intelligenz*), whereas dogmatism accords explanatory priority to the object *qua* “a thing in itself” (GA I/4: 188; IWL 11). I shall now relate this difference to some remarks made by Adorno with the aim of demonstrating the relevance of Fichte's account of idealism to the question of the possibility of a critical subject.

Adorno is committed to the distinction between subject and object as a necessary condition of thinking, and thus of any knowledge. This is shown by such claims as the following one: “Thinking cannot capture (*erobern*) any position in which that separation of subject and object which is inherent in any thought, in thinking itself, would immediately disappear” (ND 92/85; translation modified). Adorno's criticisms of idealism cannot, therefore, be directed at that which Fichte terms “the law of consciousness,” which finds expression in the proposition “*no subject, no object; no object, no subject*” (GA I/2: 332; FWL 271, see also GA I/2: 362; FWL 299). Rather, it is directed at the primacy accorded to the subject and conceptual thought and the wrong relation between the subject and the object of experience and knowledge that follows from it. Overcoming idealism will accordingly require a different type of relation between the subject and the object, one in which the object is not subordinated to the subject and its otherness is respected.

Yet granting primacy to the object instead of the subject has practical implications that cannot easily be reconciled with the idea of a critical subject, for, as with dogmatism, this primacy threatens to turn the subject into a passive recipient of experience and knowledge. Indeed, it can be argued that if Adorno is to preserve the possibility of a critical subject, then he himself must avoid equating the primacy of the object with a purely passive relation to a given object on the part of the subject (O'Connor 2004, 50–52). Yet any attempt to reconcile these two desiderata – the primacy of the object, on the one hand, and the possibility of a critical subject, on the other – faces a specific challenge. This challenge can be illustrated with reference to Fichte's argument that even someone who favors the standpoint represented by dogmatism would have to accept that there is one respect in which the subject enjoys a certain primacy in relation to the object.

As we have seen, both idealism and dogmatism presuppose the mental act of separating the subject from the object prior to providing radically different, incompatible accounts of the relation between these two essential moments of experience. Adorno must agree that mental acts of this kind can and should be performed, given his commitment to the subject-object distinction and how he views them both as conditions of truth. As he puts it, “there could no more be truth without a subject freeing itself from delusions (*Schein*) than there could be truth without that which is not the subject, that in which truth has its archetype (*Urbild*)” (ND 368/375). Although this view of truth is compatible with an orientation toward the object instead of idealism's privileging of the subject, it presupposes a subject capable of

drawing the distinction in question and achieving a reflective distance between itself and any potential object of knowledge. It is also significant that Adorno himself identifies a critical moment or potential contained in the mental acts and operations of a subject:

The effort implied in the concept of thought itself, as the counterpart of passive intuition (*Anschauung*), is negative already – a revolt against being importuned to bow to every immediate thing. Critical germs are contained in judgment and inference, the thought forms without which not even the critique of thought can do. (ND 30/19; translation modified)

Adorno here stresses how mental acts presuppose a certain type of activity on the part of a thinking subject. This is signaled by the word ‘effort,’ which implies the resolve to exercise a capacity. A human being is not, therefore, a passive recipient of sensory input. Moreover, Adorno’s use of the phrase ‘critique of thought’ indicates that he recognizes how his own attack on the identity thinking which he associates with idealism itself requires mental acts of the relevant type. He himself explains how one such act, the act of synthesis, presupposes the ability to identify differences (*die Fähigkeit des Unterscheidens*), for only by identifying differences is it possible to identify common properties that allow certain things as opposed to others to be subsumed under the same concept (ND 53/43). Moreover, concepts are separated from and related to one another in judgments, whereas “thinking without a concept is not thinking at all” (ND 105/98). These concepts include that of subject and object, while Adorno’s criticism that identity thinking privileges the subject rather than the object entails the concept of a relation between these two concepts.

The negative moment that Adorno detects in mental acts such as judging – a moment which he identifies with resistance to a merely passive apprehension of the object in its givenness and immediacy – invites the question of who or what performs the relevant mental acts. It is here that Fichte’s reason for shifting to a transcendental standpoint can be located. For although both idealism and dogmatism separate the subject from the object, only idealism locates the source of this act itself within the subject, whereas dogmatism explains this act in terms of the external influence that the object exercises on the subject. Thus, in its attempt to explain the basis or ground of experience, idealism directs our attention toward the subject’s own activity and, at least to begin with, seeks to comprehend this activity in abstraction from any determinate acts in which it manifests itself. This brings me to Fichte’s concept of the I, which is identified with that act of thinking through which any I comes to exist for itself.

Fichte seeks to capture the way in which the I is both that which acts and the product of its acting by employing the idea of an act of self-positing in which deed

(*That*) and action (*Handlung*) are one and the same (GA I/2: 259; FWL 203). Since it consists in this act of positing itself, “self-consciousness does not impose itself upon anyone, and it does not simply occur without any assistance from us. One must actually act in a free manner; and then one must abstract from the object and attend only to oneself” (GA I/4: 191; IWL 14). When the human I becomes its own object by reflecting on its own mental acts, it nevertheless always encounters itself as acting in a determinate way, that is, as thinking this or believing that, representing, imagining, valuing, or willing one thing rather than another, so that, in this respect, the I “is *what* it posits itself to be, and it posits itself as *that* which it is” (GA I/2: 260; FWL 205). The human I is thus ‘finite’ according to the following definition of this term: “That [activity] which is directed at an object is finite; and that [activity] which is finite is directed at an object” (GA I/2: 403; FWL 335).⁶

This view of the subject as essentially active and undetermined by anything external to itself insofar as it posits itself provides one explanation of the possibility of a critical subject, that is, a subject with the capacity to think independently rather than being determined by a purely external authority. In this connection, the following claim made in *Negative Dialectics* is significant:

The duality (*Zweiheit*) of subject and object must be critically maintained against the claim to totality (*Totalitätsanspruch*) which is inherent to thought. The division (*Trennung*), which makes the object the alien thing to be mastered and appropriates it, is indeed subjective, the result of orderly preparation; but no critique of the subjective origin of the division will bring back together that which has been separated (*das Getrennte*) once it has been torn asunder (*sich entzweite*) in reality. (ND 177/175; translation modified)

The separation of subject and object is here acknowledged to be a condition of critical thought, even if Adorno emphasizes the need to resist the subject's tendency to dominate the object owing to its conception of itself as being absolute. If genuine critical reflection on the relation between the subject and the object, including critical reflection directed at idealism's alleged domination of the object by the subject, is to be possible, then the subject must be in some sense independent of and undetermined

⁶ This object-directedness means that although the ‘pure’ I can be thought by means of an act of philosophical abstraction through which attention is directed toward the act of self-positing that ought, according to Fichte, to form the beginning of philosophical thinking (GA I/4: 219–220; IWL 50), a human being remains subject to the principle that “consciousness is possible only by means of reflection and reflection only by means of determination” (GA I/2: 403; FWL 335). This indicates that Fichte's concept of the pure I presupposes a subject which possesses an “absolute power of abstraction,” with the more one is able to think away anything determinate about oneself, the more the empirical self-consciousness will become pure self-consciousness (GA I/2: 382–383; FWL 318).

by the object. Adorno himself appears to concede this, for he states that “[i]f passive reactions were all there is, all would – in the older philosophical terminology – be receptivity; no thinking would be possible” (ND 216/217; translation modified).

We have now seen with reference to Fichte’s account of the idealist subject that the aim at the transcendental level is partly, if only indirectly, to explain the possibility of critical reflection, and thus the possibility of the enlightenment subject identified by Kant. The transcendental level necessarily deals with philosophical abstractions. The critical subject, as an individual human being situated in a specific society and in a specific historical period, cannot, therefore, be reduced to the transcendental subject, even if features of the transcendental subject explain the possibility of a historically and socially situated critical subject. Adorno, however, assumes that the process of abstraction required by transcendental philosophy entails the reduction of the finite critical subject to the transcendental subject. This is shown by his claim made specifically in relation to Fichte’s philosophy that “the movement of abstraction allows us to get rid of that from which we abstract” in such a way that it “is eliminated from our thought, banished from the realm where the thought is at home, but not annihilated in itself” (ND 139/135). Adorno implies that the idealist understanding of the subject excludes the possibility of a social subject when he claims that “even to imagine a transcendental subject without society, without the individuals whom it integrates for good or ill, is [...] impossible. This is what the concept of the transcendental subject founders on” (ND 200/199–200). Yet this is to conflate the transcendental subject and its act of self-positing, which Fichte acknowledges to be a philosophical abstraction,⁷ with the historical and social critical or enlightenment subject.⁸

⁷ For more on this point, see Wood 2016, 54–55.

⁸ Adorno’s critique of identity thinking, as applied to idealism in particular, needs to consider such potential differences between the transcendental subject and the historical and social critical or enlightenment subject if it is not to miss its target. For this critique is meant to be an immanent one that reveals a problem or tension which is internal to the standpoint of idealism. The demand for an internal form of criticism is expressed in such passages as the following one, which shows that the critique of idealism will consist in demonstrating how it in some way turns out to be at odds with itself once the implications of concepts that are central to it are fully developed and idealism is evaluated with reference to goals to which it itself is committed: “Immanent criticism of idealism defends idealism insofar as it shows how much it is defrauded of its own self – how much that which is first, which according to idealism is always the spirit, is in league with the blind supremacy (*Vormacht*) of merely existing things. The doctrine of the absolute spirit immediately aids that supremacy” (ND 40–41/30; translation modified). The use of the term ‘absolute spirit’ indicates that the main target here is Hegel. Nevertheless, given his characterization of dogmatism and how he opposes idealism to it, Fichte’s idealism would certainly have been shown to undermine itself if it were demonstrated to be in league with “the blind supremacy of merely existing things.”

The type of relation between the subject and the object to which Fichte's idealism is committed may nevertheless be thought to exclude other possible experiences of an object. This line of criticism can be related to Adorno's distinction between philosophizing about what is concrete (*über Konkretes*), which presumably means employing concepts in a way that neglects specific and unique features of an object, and philosophizing out of what is concrete (*aus ihm heraus*), which presumably means being responsive to these features (ND 43/33).⁹ Idealism does not, however, obviously exclude the latter type of relation to the object, even if it itself does not aim at the relevant kind of experience and knowledge. For the aim of transcendental philosophy is to identify the fundamental concepts and relations between them that structure the experience of any object. Therefore, to justify his characterization of Fichte's idealism, Adorno needs to show that the transcendental level constrains experience in such a way as to exclude the possibility of a relation between the subject and the object that facilitates experience of the latter as the particular and unique entity that it is.

Adorno suggests that any attempt to ground knowledge of the object of experience in something considered to be more fundamental, which would here be a transcendental subject, inevitably misconceives the object by being insufficiently responsive to its particularity because the fixed and unchanging nature of that which is claimed to ground experience is incompatible with the changing, historical nature of the object:

9 The previously mentioned striving "by way of the concept, to transcend the concept" has therefore understandably been interpreted as a non-classificatory use of concepts which does not reduce the individual entity that forms the object of knowledge to an instance of a universal type, but instead directs attention to this object in its particularity. See Seel 2006, 76. The transformed relation to the object does not require a substantial change in the cognitive process but only a type of intellectual or epistemic virtue which consists in a change of attitude when engaging in this process, namely, the adoption of a receptive attitude which seeks to capture as accurately as possible those qualitative properties of the object that may otherwise be missed. See Honneth 2006, 19–20. This position is not easy to explain, however, with reference to such claims as the one that the concept is with respect to the particular "always its negation at the same time; it cuts short what the particular is and what nonetheless cannot be directly named, and it replaces this with identity" (ND 175/173). For even if a negative dialectics aims to show how the object transcends the concept owing to how its particularity eludes conceptualization, a reflective awareness of this non-identity of concept and object does not entail cognitive access to the object in its particularity. It is therefore not surprising that Adorno is reduced to making vague, rather mystical claims in this connection, as when he asserts that "[i]f the thought really yielded to the object (*Sache*), if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the object (*Objekt*) would itself start talking under the lingering eye of the thought" (ND 38/27–28; translation modified).

We cannot supplement and make up within the identifying approach that which this approach by its own nature eliminates; the most we can do is change the approach by recognizing its insufficiency. The fact, however, that it does so little justice to the living experience that is cognition indicates that it is false, that it is incapable of doing what it sets out to do, namely, to provide a basis for experience (*Erfahrung zu begründen*). For such a grounding (*Begründung*) in something rigid and unchanging conflicts with that which experience knows about itself, which the more open it is, and the more it actualizes itself, always changes its own forms. To be incapable of this change is to be incapable of experience. (ND 380/387–388; translation modified)

Yet we might ask why the fundamental concepts and principles identified by Fichte's idealism should be judged according to whether they do justice to experience in the relevant sense when idealism's aim is to explain only the necessity of representations in relation to one another as elements of a single unified experience. Indeed, given this specific aim, it would be surprising if the relevant concepts and principles could achieve what Adorno criticizes them for not achieving.

Moreover, since Adorno not only accepts the distinction between subject and object but also treats it as a presupposition of critical thought, he must either explain how the object can be granted primacy while avoiding the need for a theory of the subject that resembles Fichte's transcendental one or accept the primacy of such a subject as a presupposition of his own critical theory of the relation between subject and object. The absolute self-sufficiency that Fichte ascribes to the idealist subject in its act of self-positing might nevertheless still justify Adorno's characterization of his idealism as a 'rage' to overcome all otherness. This brings me to the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I, which, I shall argue, can be interpreted as both a transcendental concept and a historico-practical concept of the type identified earlier. In this way, I intend to show that Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism is an exaggerated, misleading one that conflates the transcendental and the more empirical levels of analysis.

4 History and the Relation between Subject and Object

As we have seen, Fichte identifies the I with an act of self-positing that cannot be explained in terms of any further ground. This act, which is unconditioned because it depends on nothing external to the I, is the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Any further concepts, including that of an object other than the I, must be derived from this act of self-positing. This requires understanding the object from the standpoint of the subject only insofar as the subject's own mental acts and any

concepts and principles entailed by them are the focus of analysis and presentation.¹⁰ It is with the aim of explaining a necessary feature of experience that Fichte introduces the concept of the not-I. This concept explains the necessity with which the I experiences itself as constrained and limited by something other than itself. Thus we have a distinction between a subject and an object, with the former being defined as that which is essentially active I: “the I is *only* active. It is [an] I only insofar as it is active; and insofar as it is not active it is Not-I” (GA 1/2: 297; FWL 236). Let us now turn to the relation between the subject or I and the object or not-I.

The ‘finite’ I can never fully overcome the otherness of the not-I. According to the following passage from *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation*, the subject cannot, therefore, achieve complete independence from the object, as much as it ought to strive to do so:

It is certainly not true that the pure I is a product of the not-I (which is my name for everything which is thought to exist outside of the I, everything which is distinguished from the I and opposed to it). The assertion that the pure I is a product of the not-I expresses a transcendental materialism which is completely contrary to reason. However, it certainly is true [...] that the I is never conscious of itself nor able to become conscious of itself, except as something empirically determined – which necessarily presupposes something outside of the I. (GA 1/3: 28; EPW 147)

From this passage we can see that the idea of the complete identity of the subject of consciousness and the object of consciousness is a philosophical abstraction which cannot itself form an object of experience. The human I encounters itself as an embodied subject, and thus, in part, as a material object that exists in a world consisting of other objects with which it must interact if it is to achieve ends that it has formed and adopted: “Even a human being's body (which he calls ‘his’ body) is something apart from the I. Yet apart from this connection with a body he would

¹⁰ When Fichte makes claims such as the following one, he is not asserting that all objects of consciousness are literally created through the I's act of positing them and that they must, therefore, be thought to lack any mind-independent reality: “The reason that I assume something outside me does not lie outside me but in me, in the boundedness (*Beschränktheit*) of my own person” (GA 1/6: 204). Adorno suggests that Fichte can be accused of doing precisely this, when he claims that existentialism and Fichte agree in that for both of them “any objectivity is a matter of indifference” and then asserts that the absolute freedom of the former is as illusory as the latter's idea of an absolute I that releases the world from out of itself (*die Welt aus sich heraus entläßt*) (ND 59–60/50). Yet Fichte distinguishes his ‘critical’ idealism from a ‘dogmatic’ idealism which reduces every representation to “merely an accident of the I” (GA 1/2: 310–311; FWL 248–249). Moreover, Fichte's attempt to explain the compatibility of the speculative standpoint of transcendental philosophy with the standpoint of everyday experience or ‘life’ requires that the former explain the realist commitments of the latter. See Breazeale 2013, 369–379.

not be a human being at all, but would be something quite inconceivable" (GA I/3: 28; EPW 147; translation modified). Clearly, then, there are limits to the extent to which the human I can become that 'absolute' I in relation to which the not-I "is *purely and simply nothing*" (*schlechthin Nichts*) (GA I/2: 271; FWL 214).

Through its practical activity, each human I can nevertheless seek to overcome the opposition between itself and the not-I. It is by presenting the necessary moments of the process through which the opposition between the I and the not-I is overcome, if never completely so, that Fichte seeks to derive the concepts, or categories as he otherwise calls them, that govern and structure human experience. The attempt on the part of the I to overcome the opposition between itself and the not-I has both an epistemic aspect and a practical one. The epistemic aspect consists in progressive knowledge which is a function of the extent to which the object becomes increasingly transparent to the I. The practical aspect consists in the I's acting upon the not-I in ways that transform the latter into an expression of itself.

What does it mean, though, for the I to overcome the otherness of the not-I? And if there are limits to the extent to which the human I can achieve this goal, so that "the I as an Idea" necessarily remains an object of striving (GA I/4: 266; IWL 100–101), why not view the subject and the object as dependent on and conditioned by each other, albeit in a way that retains the possibility of a critical subject, as suggested by Fichte's own idea of reciprocal interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between the activity of the I and the activity of the not-I (GA I/2: 403; FWL 335)? I shall now present an argument in defense of the claim that a position of this kind is available to Fichte. This argument will involve an account of history as the medium in which the I and the not-I interact, thereby giving the concept of a relation between these two concepts a historical inflection to which Fichte himself draws attention, but without undermining the distinction between transcendental philosophy, on the one hand, and more concrete forms of human experience, on the other.

The concept of a relation between the subject and the object understood in this way could be considered an example of the type of historico-practical concept identified earlier on the following grounds. First, the impulse to reflect on the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I has an empirical source, namely, certain historical events. Second, these events can be explained with reference to concepts that are introduced to explain the possibility of a specific type of historical experience as well as experience in general. Third, this explanation of the possibility of the relevant type of historical experience can subsequently influence the course of history. Viewed from a historical standpoint other than the one occupied by Fichte, however, a different characterization of the relation between the subject and the object may be required, as much as this relation remains a fundamental condition and structural feature of human experience. A different characterization of this relation is possible, moreover, because the transcendental level does not com-

pletely constrain the more empirical one occupied by the finite I whose activity is necessarily limited by something other than itself.

Fichte's theory of the relation of the I to the not-I would then have something in common with Adorno's alternative to identity thinking, namely, thinking in terms of 'constellations.' To comprehend (*begreifen*) a thing itself (*eine Sache selbst*), we must, Adorno claims, consider the internal relation between it, as "the single moment," (*das Einzelmoment*) and other things (ND 36/25). He later identifies a constellation with the way in which one concept points beyond itself to other concepts, which must, therefore, be introduced if we are to comprehend this concept and that which one seeks to know by means of it. In this way, or so it is claimed, "[c]oncepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents" (ND 62/53).¹¹ Adorno identifies the concept of the subject and the concept of the object as moments of the same constellation, thereby indicating the concept of a relation between them as well (ND 111/105). This is compatible with how Fichte identifies three moments: the subject, the object, and a relation between the subject and the object. I shall now argue that a transcendental account of this 'constellation' of concepts does not entail a hostile, destructive relationship between human beings and nature at the empirical level of the kind suggested by Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism. Given that the subject and the object are what are related and the concept of a relation between them presupposes them both, the phrase 'the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I' should be taken to refer to the whole 'constellation' identified above.

We have seen that the way in which Fichte opposes idealism to dogmatism concerns how only the former is compatible with freedom from a merely external form of authority. In Fichte's own time, one of the main political forms of external authority was absolute monarchy, which, with the support of religious institutions, suppressed individual freedom, thereby hindering human development and the fulfilment of the human vocation identified by Kant and Fichte. Thus certain obstacles to human freedom and development do not derive directly from nature. Rather, they concern political arrangements, which are conventions, even if the defenders of them portray these arrangements as being rooted in natural differences or some kind of natural order and others accept this. The idea that political obstacles, rather than nature as such, are what really matter, is also suggested by the draft of a letter written in 1795, in which Fichte indicates the existence of a strong connection between the act of writing the *Contribution to the Correction*

¹¹ If experience and knowledge remain conceptually mediated in this way, one may then ask how the identification of simply more concepts accompanied by a theory of how they are interconnected can facilitate an encounter with the object in its genuine otherness if this demands not imposing concepts on it.

of the *Public's Judgments concerning the French Revolution*, which was published in 1793, and his earliest attempts to construct a *Wissenschaftslehre*. In this letter, Fichte draws an analogy between the historical event that he had sought to defend in the *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgments concerning the French Revolution* and idealism's attempt to overcome dogmatism's idea of a thing in itself:

My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves, which is to say, from those external influences with which all previous systems – including the Kantian – have more or less fettered man [...] [I]t was while I was writing about the French Revolution that I was rewarded by the first hints and intimations of this system. (GA III/2: 298; EPW 385–386)

The connection between transcendental philosophy and history indicated by the analogy between “external shackles” and “the fetters” of the philosophical idea of a thing in itself can be explained in a way that enables us to view the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I as a historico-practical one in the sense discussed earlier.

As we already know, Fichte characterizes the opposition between idealism and dogmatism in terms of the adoption of incompatible standpoints on the question of the relation between the subject and the object: either one adopts a standpoint that manifests a commitment to freedom and thus grants primacy to the subject or one adopts a standpoint that reveals the lack of any such commitment by granting primacy to the object. How one conceives of the relation between the subject and the object is thus liable to influence interpretations of historical events and developments. If the events and developments promote freedom, then the idealist will welcome them as confirmation of his or her own standpoint and explain them with reference to the concepts and propositions of a *Wissenschaftslehre*. As the letter cited above suggests, historical events and developments may even inspire the construction of such a philosophical theory. The dogmatist, in contrast, would have to explain the same events in terms of a thing in itself in relation to which the subject remains passive. This approach makes it difficult to see how dogmatism could, in fact, provide an adequate explanation of revolutionary change.

Since the concepts of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* include the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I, we may ask how this concept helps to explain a historical event such as the French Revolution. By addressing this question, I shall demonstrate the possibility of some historical variation with respect to how the concept of this relation is understood. This will be done by comparing Kant's and Fichte's positions on the question of the compatibility of enlightenment with absolute monarchy.

5 Enlightenment and Absolute Monarchy

Given his concept of enlightenment and the idea of the public use of reason, Kant's opposition to absolute monarchy not surprisingly centers on how critical discussion poses a threat to the ruler's power and must, therefore, be suppressed by him or her. The following question then arises: is absolute monarchy by its very nature incompatible with the free, critical way of thinking that Kant identifies as the essence of enlightenment, or can it accommodate this way of thinking and the corresponding mode of inquiry?

Kant's acceptance of the compatibility of absolute monarchy and enlightenment is indicated by his seeming endorsement of Friedrich II's injunction "*Argue as much as you will and about what you will; only obey!*" (AA 8/E 41). Even if Kant's endorsement of this injunction were a tactical move on his part, the injunction itself is compatible with how Kant locates the free, critical use of reason in a public sphere that exists alongside another sphere in which individuals are required to fulfill their legal, social, political, and professional or occupational duties without questioning them. Although the former may be the catalyst for changes in the latter, the duty to obey remains until reform has taken place. The monarch is not, however, free from duties. As well as the duty to permit a sphere of public life in which reason is allowed free rein, the monarch ought not to act as a benevolent despot who claims to know in what his or her subjects' happiness consists, and who seeks to secure this alleged happiness for them. For this is to treat people "like minor children (*unmündige Kinder*) who cannot distinguish between what is truly useful or harmful to them," and who are thus "constrained to behave only passively" (AA 8/TP 290–291).

Nevertheless, provided an absolute monarch observes these duties, it does not look as if absolute monarchy is a political arrangement that is incompatible with Kant's concept of enlightenment. If it can leave sufficient room for the public use of reason, absolute monarchy is no more objectionable than any other form of government judged purely with reference to Kant's concept of enlightenment. This is not to say that absolute monarchy is the form of political organization most favorable to enlightenment. If a different form of government could be shown to promote an enlightened way of thinking more effectively, then this would constitute a good reason for preferring it to absolute monarchy on consequentialist grounds.

Kant might then be accused of downplaying the extent to which absolute monarchy presents an obstacle to enlightenment and the freedom which it presupposes. For one, he fails to make sufficiently explicit the materiality of the coercive means that absolute monarchs may employ with the aim of preventing the free public use of reason. For ultimately it is not the commands of an absolute monarch, and thus mere words, that count. Rather, the monarch must additionally possess the

means of enforcing these commands, including the physical power of those human beings to whom the monarch has entrusted this task and the coercive instruments and means at their disposal. This reliance on sufficient physical force is admittedly a feature of other political arrangements as well. Yet the concentration of political power in the person of a monarch coupled with the lack of constitutional constraints on this power increases the likelihood of an illegitimate use of force which is liable to increase the desire to resist it on the part of the people, thereby requiring a further, and even greater, use of force to suppress dissent and other rebellious activity.¹²

In the *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgments concerning the French Revolution*, Fichte emphasizes how arguments in defense of absolute monarchy,¹³ whether they be made by monarchs themselves or by their apologists, rely on force in a way that the arguments of the other party do not, so that the decisive factor is ultimately an alleged right of the stronger: "I know that you support your conclusions with standing armies, with heavy artillery, with chains and punishments in fortresses (*Festungsstrafe*), but they do not therefore seem to me to be the sounder ones" (GA I/1: 249; C 56; translation modified).¹⁴ Thus, if the concept of enlightenment is to achieve historical reality through the creation and securing of

12 Kant describes as 'enlightened' a monarch who at the same time has at his disposal "a well-disciplined and numerous army ready to guarantee public peace" (AA 8/E 41). Yet this monarch's being enlightened is not sufficient to ensure that these coercive means will not be employed to suppress the public use of reason, either because this use of reason ultimately proves to be incompatible with this enlightened monarch's interests, or because the coercive means are inherited by a monarch who is not enlightened.

13 Fichte's polemical account of absolute monarchy forms part of a more general critique of 'universal monarchy,' the objects of which include not only Napoleon once he had become Emperor of the French and begun to engage in wars of conquest, but also indirectly states engaged in international commerce, or so I argue. See James 2022.

14 A critic of Kant's philosophy more generally, Johann Georg Hamann, similarly draws attention to the materiality and coercive nature of certain obstacles to enlightenment when he poses the following question concerning that lack of courage of which Kant accuses individuals who fail to exercise their capacity to think freely and independently: "With what kind of conscience can a reasoner (*Raisonneur*) & speculator by the stove and in a nightcap accuse the immature ones of cowardice, when their blind guardian has a large, well-disciplined army to guarantee his infallibility and orthodoxy?" (Hamann 1996, 147). Kant claims, in fact, that the greater constraints placed on freedom by absolute monarchy, as compared to the greater civil freedom enjoyed in a free state (*Freistaat*), promotes "a people's freedom of *spirit*" by providing it with the space "to expand to its full capacity" (AA 8/E: 41). Kant can here be seen to adopt the type of argument he had already employed in his essay "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in which necessity, which in this essay is explained in terms of social conflict and conflict between states, constrains human beings, or so it is argued, to develop certain capacities and to agree to establish both a national and an international legal order.

one of its main conditions, a public sphere in which reason can be exercised freely, the obstacle to freedom and enlightenment presented by the coercive means at the disposal of absolute monarchs must be removed.¹⁵ This would, in effect, amount to the abolition of absolute monarchy, given how, according to Fichte, this institution is, in the eyes of reason, based on nothing more than this alleged right of the stronger, which cannot, in fact, give rise to any genuine obligation to obey a person who claims to possess it.¹⁶

Thus, in a historical situation in which absolute monarchy remains the dominant political arrangement, it becomes natural to think in terms of a struggle in which progressive historical forces must attempt to counteract and overcome the material resistance of obstacles to freedom. Fichte's tendency to identify nature as completely other than and opposed to the free and rational I in those writings through which he seeks to influence others, such as *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation*, can then be explained with reference to dubious natural facts on which the relevant type of freedom-obstructing political arrangement depends. Examples would include legitimizing the institution of absolute monarchy by appealing to certain alleged advantages of hereditary succession, which depends on the natural fact of being born earlier than other members of a family with the same 'royal' or 'noble' blood, and ideas about the natural superiority of some human beings and how this entitles them to rule over others. Fichte would here be right to conceive of the relation between the I and the not-I as an essentially

¹⁵ Fichte may appear closer to Kant in the same text when he claims that freedom of thought and expression would be sufficient to undermine the institution of absolute monarchy: "The unlimited monarchy cannot exist next to unlimited freedom of thought" (GA I/1: 251; C 59). We can, however, identify an important difference, which is that securing the right to freedom of thought and expression itself depends on removing the coercive means of violating these rights that absolute monarchs remain free to employ. In the *Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, Who Have Oppressed It Until Now*, which was published earlier in the same year as the *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgments concerning the French Revolution* and focuses on the right to freedom of thought and expression, Fichte equally emphasizes the material coercive means that enable princes to compel (*zwingen*) obedience, such as punishment carried out in a fortress or other building capable of performing the same function (*Festungsstrafe*) (GA I/1: 171; RFT 123).

¹⁶ The reason that force, upon which the right of the stronger depends, cannot give rise to any genuine obligation to obey is supplied by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "For once force makes right, the effect changes together with the cause; every force that overcomes the first, inherits its right. Once one can disobey with impunity, one can do so legitimately, and since the stronger is always right, one need only make sure to be the stronger. But what is a right that perishes when force ceases? If one has to obey by force, one need not obey by duty, and if one is no longer forced to obey, one is no longer obliged to do so. Clearly, then, this word 'right' adds nothing to force; it means nothing at all here" (Rousseau 1997, Book 1, Chap. 3).

antagonistic one, for in this case human beings must struggle to remove obstacles to freedom that cannot be rationally justified. Removing the relevant type of obstacle may require the energy and violence unleashed by an event such as the French Revolution, given how words are unlikely to be sufficient, even if a philosophical concept or theory may, in other respects, influence the course of history.¹⁷

Under different historical conditions, however, a less hostile attitude toward 'nature' and thus a less antagonistic relation to it may become more appropriate. These conditions may include ones in which the obstacles to freedom for which absolute monarchy is responsible have already been removed by historical forces that embody enlightenment and freedom, which, for Fichte, include the French Revolution and the republic that emerged from it. These are historical forces that do not reduce the foundations of political authority to the coercive means needed to ensure obedience and that do not seek to justify political arrangements by appealing to natural facts.

Moreover, one might argue that a historical stage has now been reached at which problems with Fichte's own radical emphasis on a freedom-motivated overcoming of otherness have become evident, demanding a revision of his conception of the relation between the subject or I and the object or not-I insofar as it applies to empirical conditions. This revision would emphasize how human beings are dependent on nature and this modified concept of the relation between the subject and the object may then be applied to history through public communication aimed at influencing people in such a way as to produce different historical effects. This modified concept would not be possible, however, in the absence of the distinction between subject and object and without assuming a subject capable of making this distinction and exercising critical judgment. A transcendental account of both the distinction between subject and object and the possibility of a critical subject would therefore still be necessary if a different attitude toward nature and relation to it are to be fully explained. As I have argued, this type of explanation operates at a different level from the one at which Fichte provides those thicker descriptions of

17 It is therefore not surprising that in the draft of the letter quoted earlier, in which Fichte considers the possibility of being granted a pension by the French Republic that would free him from various obstacles standing in the way of the completion of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, he claims that, "No king or prince will grant a pension to the author of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, for one can see from the first principles of this system that it is incompatible with kings and princes" (GA III/2: 298; EPW 385). In the *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgments concerning the French Revolution*, he seems to adopt a more conciliatory approach, in that he claims that "liberation without disorder" is to "come from above (*von oben herunter*)" (GA I/1: 207; C 9). Whether this "from above" means that the task of liberation is one for monarchs or for philosophers like Fichte himself is a question I shall not seek to answer here.

a relation between the I and the not-I that appear to justify Adorno's critical characterization of his idealism.

I do not wish to exaggerate the extent to which Fichte's concept of a relation between of the I and the not-I is compatible with a fundamentally different attitude toward nature understood as the other of reason. For a start, the dependence of the finite I on the not-I and the corresponding concept of reciprocal influence do nothing more, as it stands, than acknowledge that overcoming reason's other would undermine human agency, which is necessarily finite as much as it may seek to extend its boundaries. Constraints on the finite I's striving to achieve complete independence are here limited to how an agent cannot rationally seek to eliminate the conditions of its own agency. Moreover, it has been argued that Fichte intended to defend a type of independence which cannot be reduced to the social and political forms of it on which I have focused. Rather, he was ultimately concerned with a 'material' independence that requires overcoming external limitations whose source is nature by means of advances in knowledge and technological developments that maximize the scope for rational moral agency (Kosch 2018, 37). Yet one might then ask why *complete* independence in this material sense is an end that rational agents should strive to achieve. Why would it not be sufficient to eliminate those constraints on agency which concern material factors that enable some human beings to dominate others or in some other way obstruct the development and exercise of rational agency, as opposed to all natural constraints, some of which may present only trivial obstacles or no genuine obstacles at all to such agency?¹⁸

Thus, on the one hand, the following claim can still be considered true of Fichte's idealism: "Wherever a doctrine of some absolute 'first' is taught there will be talk of something inferior to it, of something absolutely heterogenous to it, as its

¹⁸ Certain natural obstacles may, in fact, be conducive to the exercise of rational agency in a way that favors the idea that the I cannot rationally aim at the elimination of its dependence on nature. Kosch, who emphasizes the goal of complete material independence, which is, in particular, identified with the aim of creating and maintaining an environment that is secure from and against powerful unpredictable forces that threaten rational agency, concedes that Fichte himself acknowledges the value of certain relationships and experiences that involve a loss of control. She explains this in terms of the intellectual context provided by such figures as Friedrich Schiller and the German Romantics. See Kosch 2018, 174–175. Unlike this rather ad hoc explanation, distinguishing between the transcendental level and the empirical one, instead of conflating them as Adorno does, opens up space for valuing human relationships and experiences in a way that avoids reducing them to means to the end of rational independence, in that the first level does not even concern the relevant features of such relationships and experiences and it can, therefore, accommodate other ways of understanding them, just as it does not exclude an engagement with empirical objects in their particularity more generally.

logical correlate. *Prima philosophia* and dualism go together” (ND 142/138). Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* is grounded in a first principle – the I’s act of positing itself – that is unconditioned in the sense that it cannot be explained in terms of a more fundamental act, cause, or reason. From this principle all the fundamental concepts and structures of experience in general are to be derived in such a way as to demonstrate their necessity, including the concept of the not-I and the concept of a relation between the I and the not-I. On the other hand, Adorno’s characterization of idealism in terms of a necessarily hostile attitude toward nature does not strictly follow from the transcendental distinction between subject and object and the concept of a relation between them. Rather, Fichte’s idealism is compatible with a historically inflected understanding of the relation between the subject and the object that leaves room for alternative accounts of the relationship between human beings and nature. Moreover, Adorno must accept the primacy of the subject insofar as it explains the possibility of critical thought. In the next and final section, I shall briefly discuss Adorno’s own critical project against the background of these claims.

6 The Enlightenment Subject and the Possibility of a Critical Theory

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to identify the ‘concept’ of enlightenment by critically engaging with historical developments unknown to Kant and Fichte, and by showing how these developments relate to enlightenment thinking. Yet do Adorno and Horkheimer, like Kant, also seek to apply this concept of enlightenment in such a way as to change the course of history? One indication that they hope to do precisely this is their claim that “[w]e have no doubt – and herein lies our *petitio principii* – that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking” (DA 18; DE xvi).

This claim acknowledges the emancipatory potential of enlightenment thinking and concedes that Horkheimer and Adorno’s own critique of it begs the question by presupposing that which it seeks to explain. Yet the problem is not so much that an argument contains a premise which assumes the truth of what the argument sets out to prove. Rather, Horkheimer and Adorno’s own critical project finds itself entangled with its object of criticism in such a way that it turns out to be self-undermining. For this object of criticism includes the enlightenment subject and the relation of this subject to its ‘other’ which follows from the primacy accorded to this subject, while this same critical subject is a presupposition of any critique of it. Exposing such presuppositions of the critical project itself and

how they bind this project to the object of criticism invites reflection on these same presuppositions, whereas “[r]uthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness (*ihres eigenen Selbstbewußtseins*)” (DA 26; DE 2).

Such self-reflection may result in a modification of the concept of enlightenment and the corresponding concept of the subject's relation to the object. The subsequent application of these modified concepts has the potential to disrupt the kind of historical trajectory described by Horkheimer and Adorno, even if a possibility of this kind must be thought to remain extremely small, given that critical reason finds itself entangled in the historical trajectory from which it is seeking to escape. What cannot be done, however, is to eliminate the enlightenment subject, for it is a condition of the possibility of the critical project itself. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno's own concept of enlightenment exhibits two features of the type of historico-practical concept identified earlier: how such concepts are derived from historical experience and how they can react upon the object of experience, which is here society, in ways that may change the subsequent course of history. But what about the other feature, which is a transcendental explanation of the critical subject presupposed by the concept of enlightenment?

One could argue that no such explanation is needed, on the grounds that alternative explanations of the possibility of this type of subject are available, including a genetic, naturalistic one whose object is “the mind's historically gained ‘self-consciousness’ and its breaking away (*Lossage*) from that which it negates for its own identity's sake” (ND 202/202; translation modified). Adorno explains the process through which the I separates itself from its own natural impulses (*Regungen*) to become an I-authority (*Ichinstanz*) in terms of how human beings sought to preserve themselves in opposition to a natural world which threatened to overpower them, with the subject mimicking the hardness (*Härte*) and solidity (*Festigkeit*) of that from which it sought to separate itself, namely, that world and those things within it to which Adorno himself applies the term ‘not-I’ (LGF 265–266; HF 192–193). Yet this type of account of the subject, if it is meant to represent a challenge to Fichte's transcendental account of the subject and its relation to the object, gives rise to at least two problems.

To begin with, this type of explanation does not exclude a complementary transcendental account of the critical subject and its relation to the object, for such an account concerns the fundamental concepts and laws of thinking that structure the mental activity of the subject that has thus emerged in its relation to the object. Secondly, Adorno's genetic account of the subject presupposes the possibility of a subject that performs the mental act of separating itself from an object that it considers to be other than itself, including not only a world it finds threatening but also its own natural impulses and itself as the locus of them. As we have seen, Fichte

attempts to explain the possibility of such a subject, its various acts of self-objectification, and any act through which it separates itself from an object that it views as other than itself. As regards the last type of act, this article has challenged Adorno's characterization of Fichte's idealism by showing that the transcendental level does not completely determine how the concept of a relation between the subject and the object should be understood, insofar as this concept assumes concrete historical forms.

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