

Kant, Lonergan, and Fichte on the Critique of Immediacy and the Epistemology of Constraint in Human Knowing

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ABSTRACT: One of the defining characteristics of Kant's "critical philosophy" is what has been called the "critique of immediacy" or the rejection of the "myth of the given." According to the Kantian position, no object can count *as* an object for a human knower apart from the knower's own activity or spontaneity. That is, no object can count *as* an object for a human knower on the basis of the object's givenness alone. But this gives rise to a problem: how is it possible to accept the Kantian critique of immediacy while also giving an epistemologically adequate account of the constrained or finite character of human knowing (i.e., an account that does not rely on some appeal to what is simply "given")? This paper examines how this crucial question is addressed (with more or less success) in the "critical philosophies" of Kant, Lonergan, and Fichte.

INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO KANT'S "critique of immediacy," an object cannot count *as* an object for a human knower, apart from the knower's own spontaneous, intelligent activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. In the wake of Kant's critique, many philosophers have sought to address epistemological issues in terms of the "constraint" that must be understood as rendering such activity limited and finite.¹ A crucial question thus becomes: how is it possible to accept the Kantian critique of immediacy and its corresponding emphasis on activity, while also giving an adequate account of the constrained or finite character of human knowing?

¹Thus Johann Gottlieb Fichte held that one of the primary tasks of philosophy was to give an account of the feeling of constraint or necessity that accompanies some of our representations, but not others. See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982) p. 6 (from the First Introduction). All subsequent references to Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* or to either of its two Introductions will be indicated by the abbreviation SK and shall include the volume number and pagination of the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of these works, edited by I. H. Fichte (the *Gesamtausgabe* references are given also in the Heath-Lachs translation). Thus the current reference would appear as: SK I, p. 423. Addressing similar post-Kantian concerns in a contemporary philosophical context, John McDowell asks about the ground of the "constraint on our freedom to deploy empirical concepts." See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994) p. 6.

Many post-Kantian thinkers have accepted the Kantian critique of immediacy while at the same time rejecting Kant's account of such constraint. Some, in fact, have held that Kant's epistemology of constraint commits him to backtrack on his own critique of immediacy. Two such thinkers are Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Kant's brilliant and often misunderstood younger contemporary, and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, the twentieth-century transcendental Thomist. In this paper² I shall consider the Kantian, Lonerganian, and Fichtean approaches to the critique of immediacy and the epistemology of constraint, with the ultimate intention of showing how a Fichtean perspective might help to overcome some of the difficulties in Kant and some of the ambiguities in Lonergan. My aim here is not to question or challenge the post-Cartesian, epistemological paradigm that forms the starting point for Kant's critique of immediacy.³ My aim, rather, is to begin from *within* this epistemological paradigm and to ask whether and how it might be possible to accept the Kantian critique of immediacy, while also giving an adequate epistemological account of the constraint that limits human knowing "from the outside," so to speak. My investigation will unfold under four different headings:

- (1) The Spirit of Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Critique of Immediacy
- (2) Difficulties in Kant's Critical Philosophy
- (3) Ambiguities in Lonergan's Critical Philosophy
- (4) Fichte's Radicalization of the Critique of Immediacy, in the Service of Realism

I. THE SPIRIT OF KANT'S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY: THE CRITIQUE OF IMMEDIACY

One of the crucial defining characteristics of Kant's "critical philosophy" is what has been called the "critique of immediacy" or the rejection of "the myth of the given."⁴ This element in Kant's critical philosophy entails a denial of the "naïve"

McDowell also speaks of the "friction" that distinguishes actual experience from mere imagination. For more on this issue, see Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 187–96.

²This is a heavily revised and expanded version of a paper that was presented at the West Coast Methods Institute (WCMI) conference, held at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Calif. (March 22–25, 2001). I would like to thank Elizabeth Morelli, Mark Morelli, and James Marsh for ongoing discussions regarding post-Kantian philosophy and the critique of immediacy. Of course, I am solely responsible for any remaining shortcomings in this paper.

³However, I do acknowledge that there may be good grounds for challenging and ultimately rejecting the post-Cartesian epistemological paradigm.

⁴This is not to suggest that the "critique of immediacy" means exactly the same thing that is meant by the "rejection of the myth of the given." But we can talk of both in the same breath here since both are particular specifications or implications of Kant's emphasis on the subject's spontaneity or activity in knowing. For an excellent example of a thoroughgoing "critique of immediacy," see what Hegel—following Kant—says in the first chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the chapter on "Sense-Certainty." *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). For more on the rejection of the myth of the given, see Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) esp. pp. 140, 161. See also Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997). This latter book was first presented orally by Sellars as a series of lectures at the University of London (March 1, 8, and 15, 1956) under the title "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."

or “pre-critical” (“dogmatic”) position that an object can count *as* an object for a human knower apart from the knower’s own activity or spontaneity. For Kant, genuinely human knowing is characterized not so much by mere apprehending or looking, but rather by a spontaneous activity that brings about a conceptual, formal content of its own, a content that is not just passively apprehended by the subject that knows it. That is, the proper object of human understanding is not some (formal or intelligible) content that is simply and already “there” to be looked at by the mind, but rather is a content that comes to be for the subject only because of the subject’s own act of coming-to-be one who understands. For Kant, the subjective conditions of knowing necessarily include the subject’s capacity to make its own contribution to the act of knowing by actively bringing about its own acts of understanding, without which there would be no intelligible content present to it in the first place.

According to the basic Kantian position, the given as such does not count *as* an item of knowledge—indeed, it cannot even be identified *as* a potential element in knowing—simply on account of its givenness alone. Rather, the given as given can play such a role for the knowing subject only to the extent that it is taken up into—that is, mediated by—the subject’s own intellectual activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. The sphere of epistemic commitment, then, is the sphere of the subject’s own intelligence and rationality (as opposed to mere external causality or force).

Kant emphasizes the role played by the subject’s own spontaneous, intelligent activity by noting that without the intellectual contribution made by the understanding, intuitions as merely given would not even be intuitions *of* anything at all. They would be “nothing but a blind play of representations, i.e., less than a dream.”⁵ Without the active role played by the understanding, there would be no conscious experience at all, but only an unconnected, fleeting “rhapsody of perceptions” (CPR A156/B195). This, of course, is the point of Kant’s famous observation that intuitions without concepts would be “blind” (CPR A51/B75). In other words, if intuitions were not mediated to us by the activity of the understanding, they could not even be recognized or identified *as* intuitions at all. If mere presentations, as given, are to play the epistemic role that they do in human knowing, they must be taken up into the subject’s own spontaneous (internally-driven and not externally-compelled) intellectual activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging.

This leads to yet a further dimension of the basic Kantian position. Because the sphere of epistemic commitment is the sphere of the subject’s own spontaneous intelligence and rationality (as opposed to external force or causality), it is also the sphere of the subject’s own freedom and responsibility. Precisely because human knowing is not just a matter of being confronted or affected by some presence that is given to me, I cannot explain (or explain away) my epistemic commitments by appealing to some external causal efficacy. This is shown most obviously in the fact that a given datum, as merely given, does not on its own *cause* or *commit* me to

⁵Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997) p. 235. All subsequent references to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* will be indicated by the abbreviation CPR and shall include only the A and/or B pagination of the Akademie edition of the *Critique*. Thus the current reference would appear as CPR A112.

make any intellectual claims regarding it. Knowing is not just a matter of my making contact with some content that automatically compels or causes me to assent to its veracity. Knowing is not just a matter of *responding* differentially to different images or ideas, as a piece of iron might rust in some environments and not others,⁶ or as a dog might shiver in some climates and not others. Rather, it is a matter of being *responsible* for the epistemic commitments that I alone make and that I alone am accountable for.⁷ It is for this reason that Kant emphasizes the ineliminable role of freedom and responsibility in the epistemic commitments that one makes.⁸

Following Kant, both Lonergan and Fichte want to accept the critical “turn to the subject” and its corresponding emphasis on the subject’s activity or spontaneity in knowing. Thus Lonergan favorably compares his own method to Kant’s transcendental method⁹ and argues that the main emphasis in an epistemological investigation of human knowing should be on the subject’s own activity and self-perfection as a knower (UB 159). In a similar vein, Fichte praises Kant for being the first philosopher who “knowingly diverted philosophy away from external objects and directed it into ourselves” as free and rational beings (SK I, 480). In a striking—but probably coincidental—similarity, both Lonergan and Fichte even use the same example of a wall to illustrate what is entailed by Kant’s transcendental turn to subjectivity: as a result of the transcendental turn, one deals not so much with *the object*—the wall—that one is attending to and asking about, but rather with one’s own activities of attending and asking.¹⁰

⁶This example is taken from Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994) p. 33.

⁷In other words, epistemic commitment is not explainable merely in terms of the causal efficacy that a particular image or idea may seem to exercise upon me, or merely in terms of my capacity to respond differentially to different kinds of presentations. It is a matter of responsibility and not of mere “responsibility.” Thus in seeking to account for my own epistemic commitments, I always properly rely on reasons or justifications, and not just on external causes or exculpations. This contrast is nicely articulated by John McDowell in *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994) p. 8.

⁸Thus for Kant—even though the pure concepts of the understanding are in general necessary for experience, with no room for any arbitrary choice by us—there is no determinate necessity about how these pure categories are to be concretely applied in our actual judgments about things. Thus the principle that “every event must have a cause”—while known to us *a priori*—is perfectly compatible with an infinite number of ways in which the world’s causal order might be understood and systematized. The fact that no particular explanatory framework is necessitated by the world as it is presently given to us is an index of the degree to which we ourselves are ultimately free and responsible for the explanatory conclusions that we draw about the world and our place within it. See CPR A653/B682; A767. For more on this, see Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Re-reading Kant* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994) pp. 48–62.

⁹Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972) pp. 13–14n4. But in a spirit that echoes some post-Kantian thinkers (especially Schelling, in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*), Lonergan also observes that it is not absolutely necessary that philosophical method begin with what is subjective (with knowing) and arrive later at objectivity (the known). Instead, one may begin with a metaphysics of the known and then on the basis of that metaphysics give an account of knowing. The important point, Lonergan says, is to “complete the circle,” from knowing to objectivity and, in turn, from objectivity to knowing. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*, vol. 5, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1990) pp. 177–78. All subsequent references to Lonergan’s *Understanding and Being* will be indicated by the abbreviation UB.

¹⁰See UB 138; and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo (1796/99))*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press) pp. 110–11.

Furthermore, both Lonergan and Fichte want to accept the Kantian position on the critique of immediacy or the rejection of the myth of the given in its full normative force. That is to say, for both Lonergan and Fichte, properly human knowing does not come about merely through the presence of certain kinds of physical or mental contents to me, or merely through the causal efficacy of external objects upon me. A bare presence alone cannot supply the epistemically significant input that is needed for genuine human knowing. As Lonergan stresses throughout his writings, properly human knowing is never just a matter of “looking,”¹¹ that is, it is never just a matter of confronting or being affected by some content that is simply given to the knower (whether of a sensible or intelligible nature).¹² In a similar vein, Fichte argues that it is utterly impossible to give an account of my awareness of what I take to be objects outside of me, simply on the basis of the putative givenness or presence of the objects themselves.¹³

In line with Kant’s critique of immediacy, Lonergan and Fichte also emphasize the role of freedom and responsibility in the epistemic commitments that one makes. As Lonergan notes, “A judgment is the responsibility of the one that judges. It is a personal commitment.”¹⁴ Furthermore, “The kind of man one is determines what his ideals will be” (UB 18), and these ideals include those that have to do with human knowledge and the world that might be known by us. And as Fichte famously observes, the kind of philosophical, explanatory system one accepts depends ultimately “on what sort of man one is.”¹⁵

II. DIFFICULTIES IN KANT’S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

While Lonergan and Fichte generally agree with Kant’s stance regarding the critique of immediacy and rejection of the myth of the given, they also hold that the Kantian stance is not entirely problem-free. The basic difficulty can be expressed in the form of a question: If human knowing necessarily involves my own activity and responsibility, then how am I to think of my own activity or responsibility as *limited* and finite as well (i.e., limited by what is genuinely *other* than it), yet without falling into the myth of the given?¹⁶

¹¹See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) p. 253 and p. 320.

¹²In his book, *Post-Cartesian Meditations*, James Marsh argues—from a Lonerganian, phenomenological perspective—against the myth of the given. For Marsh, what is “given” to the human knower is never an absolutely unmediated “given,” but “a structure or gestalt within a field.” For Marsh, even my recognition of something as “red” (and not green, for example) presupposes some mediation through language. See James Marsh, *Post-Cartesian Meditations* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1988) pp. 51–52.

¹³See, for example, Fichte’s First Introduction to the *Science of Knowledge*, especially SK I, 421, 428, 435–36.

¹⁴Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 272.

¹⁵See SK I, 434 (First Introduction).

¹⁶John McDowell expresses the difficulty this way: “[I]f our freedom in empirical thinking is total, in particular if it is not constrained from outside the conceptual sphere, that can seem to threaten the very possibility that judgments of experience might be grounded in a way that relates them to a reality external to thought. . . . The dualism of conceptual scheme and ‘empirical content,’ of scheme and Given, is a response to this worry. The point of the dualism is that it allows us to acknowledge an external constraint

For Kant, it is obvious that my activity in knowing must be *limited* in some way, since I am not God. Unlike God's infinite understanding, my understanding is not fully creative and I am not responsible for every aspect of the objects that I know. Unlike God, I am not in possession of an "original intuition" (*intuitus originarius*, CPR B72), and so my activity in knowing objects is not the same as the activity of creating the objects known (CPR A92/B125). But while my activity in knowing is somehow limited or constrained, it is not at all clear how such limitation or constraint is to be conceived.

In seeking to account for the constraint or limitation that characterizes our acts of knowing, it is very tempting to argue that all human knowing always includes some datum or content that plays a role in the knowing yet without being mediated by the subject's intellectual activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. Such a given content, then, would be known as given simply on the basis of its givenness alone, and would thus be completely indubitable and incorrigible insofar as it was given.¹⁷ Furthermore, such an unmediated, given content could seemingly provide the requisite constraint or limitation on the subject's activity in knowing. For, according to this way of conceiving things, the given content could count as given merely by virtue of its givenness, even apart from any activity or contribution on the part of the knowing subject.

Along these lines, for example, one might hold that it is an indubitable and incorrigible fact—one that does not depend on any intellectual involvement or activity on my part—that "there is a patch of red here and now." But this putative solution to the problem is necessarily ruled out, according to the Kantian critique of immediacy. After all, the determination of whether this "red patch here and now" really is one red patch, rather than an aggregate of a thousand red patches seamlessly held together; or whether it is really here and now, rather than there and then, is not a matter of sheer, sensible givenness, but of intellectual mediation. In fact, even the determination that this patch really is red—rather than a very intense shade of pink—is not automatically given on the level of sensible presentations. The very fact that I can raise a question about it—and wonder whether it is really red or pink or one or many—demonstrates that the allegedly incorrigible content as given is not sheerly "given" or indubitable or incorrigible at all, but is rather subject to a number of alternative interpretations and descriptions.

The main lesson of these brief reflections is that, according to the critique of immediacy, what counts as a determinate content or datum—even on the level of sensible givenness—does not count as such just because of its sensible givenness, but rather only because of the way it is mediated by—taken up into—the subject's own activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging.

on our freedom to deploy empirical concepts." Unfortunately, however, this attempt "to extend the scope of justificatory relations outside the conceptual sphere cannot do what it is supposed to do. . . . In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications." See *Mind and World*, pp. 5–8.

¹⁷For as soon as any aspect of such givenness is questioned, doubted, or subject to correction or reinterpretation, it is no longer given and immediate at all, but rather mediated by the subject's activity of questioning, doubting, understanding, reflecting, and interpreting.

Again, this is not to suggest that for Kant there is no genuine limitation or constraint at all on our activity in knowing. For the intellectual content that we contribute in the act of knowing is never just intellectual content that stands on its own. According to Kant's famous formulation of the point, concepts without intuitions would be "empty" (CPR A51/B75). But even if there is no doubt that our intellectual activity in knowing is constrained and limited in some way, it is not at all clear how such constraint or limitation should be conceived. And as we have just seen, the Kantian critique of immediacy entails that this constraint cannot be conceived in the terms that might seem most obvious to us, i.e., in terms of some allegedly incorrigible, sensible content that counts as a "datum" for us apart from our own activities of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging.

Now Kant was certainly not unaware of the difficulties here. On the one hand, he knew that our activity in knowing was finite and constrained. On the other hand, he knew that such epistemic constraint could not be accounted for simply in terms of what is immediately given on the level of sensible presentations. The problem facing Kant, then, was to give an account of the constraint that characterizes our activity in knowing, yet to do so in a way that did not run afoul of his very own critique of immediacy or rejection of the myth of the given.

For many post-Kantian thinkers, Kant's solution to this problem was ultimately inadequate. For Lonergan and Fichte in particular, Kant did not offer a properly epistemological account of the finite and constrained character of human knowing. Rather, Kant simply began with a presumption that was illicit according to his own epistemological stance; more specifically, he began with the *as-yet-unjustified presumption* that the subject's activity in knowing is constrained by and dependent on objects that somehow pre-exist or exist independently of the subject's own spontaneous activity in coming to know them.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Kant's reliance on a presumption that was illicit from the point of view of his own critique of immediacy would lead him to a rather peculiar conclusion. According to the illicit presumption, the objects that guarantee that the

¹⁸See CPR B72: our intuition is sensible, not intellectual, which means that it is "dependent on the existence of the object." See also CPR B145: "the manifold for intuition must already be *given* prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independently from it." On the other hand, Kant sometimes argues as if this presumption is not operative in his critical philosophy. That is, Kant sometimes seems to say that our talk about what is given "prior to" our activity of knowing things within experience is not meant to entail any claims about what is actually known to "pre-exist" our experience of things. Rather, our talk about what is given "prior to" our activity of knowing things within experience refers only to the constructions and inferences that we make *within* experience. See, for example, CPR B523: "The real things of past time are given in the transcendental object of experience, but for me they are objects and real in past time only insofar as I represent to myself that, in accordance with empirical laws, or in other words, the course of the world, a regressive series of possible perceptions . . . leads to a time-series that has elapsed as the condition of the present time, which is then represented as real only in connection with a possible experience and not in itself." Thus the question of whether the problematic presumption is, or is not, operative in Kant's philosophy may be further debated; but given the limited scope of this paper, I cannot even begin to address this rather complicated issue. Instead, I shall simply accept as valid the more commonly held interpretation of Kant on this point, namely, that Kant did indeed presume that the subject's activity in knowing is constrained by that which somehow exists prior to, or independently of, the subject's own activity in coming to know.

subject's activity in knowing is constrained and finite must exist prior to, and independently of, the subject's own activity in coming to know them.¹⁹ And because such objects must pre-exist the finite subject's activity in coming to know them, they cannot be known by the subject as they are in their *pre-given* state; that is to say, they cannot be known as they are *in themselves*. After all, according to Kant's own critique of immediacy, the given can be known *as* given at all, only to the extent that it is taken up into the subject's own activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. But the pre-existing objects that are said to guarantee the finitude of the subject's activity in knowing are supposed to exist apart from all such activity on the part of the subject. And thus, they are supposedly known to exist *apart* from the very conditions of the possibility of their playing any epistemic role at all in the subject's knowing. And so, precisely because such objects supposedly pre-exist the subject's activity in knowing them, they must also be unknowable things-in-themselves.

Now a common criticism of Kant is that his account of knowing ultimately cannot explain how we know "the real"—or things as they are in themselves—as opposed to mere appearances. This criticism may be accurate, but in the present epistemological context it is not radical enough (i.e., it does not get to the "root" of the problem). More to the point, this common criticism of Kant is ultimately question-begging, since it presupposes the correctness of realism, i.e., the position that there is something "real" apart from our knowing that can be *known* to constrain our activity in knowing. One of the chief aims of Kant's critical philosophy is precisely to adjudicate between competing epistemological claims regarding the ground or source of the constraint that renders human knowing finite. Thus to claim that Kant's account fails simply because it is not sufficiently realistic is to beg the very question at issue.

Both Lonergan and Fichte accept Kant's critique of immediacy, but they also seek to offer a more radical and less question-begging criticism of what is wrong with Kant's position. They do so—first of all—by drawing attention to what they take to be Kant's failure to live up to his own critique of immediacy. For Lonergan and Fichte, if Kant were fully true to his own critique of immediacy, he would have acknowledged that supposedly pre-existing objects, merely insofar as they pre-exist the subject's activity in knowing them, could not play the limiting or constraining role that Kant says they do *for the subject* that comes to know them. For according to the critique of immediacy, pre-existing objects can play a limiting or constraining role *for the subject that comes to know them* only insofar as they are taken up into that subject's very own activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. Apart from such activity, they can play no limiting or constraining role *for that subject*. To the extent that Kant sought to explain the

¹⁹In discussing objects that are said to "pre-exist" or "exist prior to" the subject's own activity in knowing, I aim to denote nothing more than objects that are said to "exist independently of" the subject's own activity in knowing. Thus I use the term "pre-exist" as a strict synonym for the clumsier phrase, "exist independently of." Accordingly, my use of the term "pre-exist" here should not be taken as necessarily implying anything about temporal priority (or temporal ordering of any kind).

constrained and finite character of human knowing by reference to objects that supposedly pre-exist the subject and serve as a constraint on the subject apart from the mediation of the subject's own intellectual activities, he backtracked on his own critique of immediacy. Along these lines, Lonergan insists that the real problem with Kant was not that he underplayed the role of intuition (or the given) in knowing, but rather that he made too much of it.²⁰ In a similar vein, Fichte argues that it is fundamentally contradictory to be a "critical" philosopher (in Kant's sense of the term) while still maintaining that an unmediated, given presence—such as a thing-in-itself—can play an epistemic role *for the subject* whose knowing is allegedly limited by such a presence.²¹

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it is important here to remind ourselves that the context within which we are examining the issue of constraint in human knowing is an *epistemological* context. The issue, then, is not so much the issue of how it is that our activity in knowing is, as a matter of fact, constrained or limited (for a metaphysician or empirical scientist can give a plausible answer to that question). The issue, rather, is an *epistemological* one, and the fundamental question is: How is it that *I know* that my own activity in knowing is constrained, given the Kantian critique of immediacy and its corresponding emphasis on the activity of the knower? In the context of Kant's epistemological task and his critique of immediacy, I cannot simply begin by assuming that there are independently existing (or pre-existing) objects that place constraints or limits on my activity as a knower. In other words, the Kantian, epistemological perspective is necessarily a perspective that must begin with what is "internal" to consciousness; the epistemologist must begin with how things are *for me*, the subject whose activity in knowing I am seeking to explain.

Of course, from an external, bird's-eye, non-epistemological perspective—that is, from a point of view that has the privilege of "looking down," so to speak, on both the finite subject and the pre-existing objects that may eventually play some role in that subject's knowing—one may imagine that those pre-existing objects do, indeed, limit or constrain the finite subject's activity in knowing, when and if that subject does eventually come to know them. But to presume to have such an external, bird's-eye perspective on one's *own* subjectivity is to beg the (epistemological) question at hand. For the question here is not a question of how I might come to regard two items *outside* of myself (in this case, the imagined subject and

²⁰See UB 179. See also Lonergan, "Metaphysics as Horizon," in *Collection*, vol. 4, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988) pp. 192–97.

²¹For Fichte, any critical philosopher who seeks to maintain that the given alone can serve as the source of constraint in human knowing is engaging in "a reckless juxtaposition of the crudest dogmatism [an acceptance of what we have been calling the myth of the given] with the most inveterate idealism." See SK I, 483 (Second Introduction to the *Science of Knowledge*). For Fichte, the only consistent and intellectually satisfying system is one that whole-heartedly rejects the myth of the given and holds that no mere presence can play any epistemic role whatsoever for a knowing subject, except insofar as that presence is mediated by the subject's own free and spontaneous activity in questioning and thinking—in which case it is not the mere presence alone that is doing the epistemologically significant "work" for that subject. See, for example, SK I, 488–89 (Second Introduction to the *Science of Knowledge*).

the imagined pre-existing object) as finite and mutually limited alongside one another. The question at hand is the question of how—given the Kantian critique of immediacy—I can come to regard my *own* spontaneous activity in knowing as limited and constrained by what is *not* a product of my own spontaneous activity. The problem, of course, is that I have no perspective other than the “internal” perspective of my own spontaneous, conscious activity in coming to know what I take to be other than myself. Within an epistemological context, I cannot simply assume—as if from an external point of view—that the mere presence of independently existing objects is the sufficient ground of *my knowing* that such objects place constraints or limits on my activity in knowing such objects.

Stated differently, the problem here is that no given, determinate content can count as a given, determinate content *for the subject* that knows it, unless that content is taken up into—mediated by—that subject’s own activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. If I seek to account for the constraint that characterizes my own acts of knowing by appealing to the alleged fact that there is some pre-existing reality that is simply given, prior to and independent of my own activity in knowing, then I am only begging the question at hand, and implicitly falling into the myth of the given. For—in the present, epistemological context—to say at the outset that there is some pre-existing reality prior to and independent of my own activity in knowing, is to say that *I know* there is some pre-existing reality prior to and independent of my own activity in knowing. But according to the critique of immediacy, that which is given can be known as given only to the extent that it is taken up into my own activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. So even if there really is some pre-existing reality prior to and independent of my own activity in knowing and on the basis of which my own activity in knowing is limited and constrained, it is simply question-begging, given the task of epistemology in the face of the critique of immediacy, to claim that this pre-existing reality itself is the sufficient ground of *my knowing* that there is such a reality.²²

III. AMBIGUITIES IN LONERGAN’S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

According to the critique of immediacy as discussed above, the subject does not know what it knows—and thus does not know *itself* to be constrained or delimited by what it knows—simply because it confronts, or is affected by some bare presence outside of it. But if this is the case, then there arises a further question, namely:

²²This difficulty in Kant was certainly not overlooked by his contemporaries and immediate successors. As Jacobi observed, Kant’s critical system starts out with the seemingly innocent assumption that the constrained or finite character of our knowing is to be explained by the simple fact that objects exist prior to, and independent of, our activity in knowing them. But once one understands the implications of the critical system and its critique of immediacy, it is no longer possible to see how such objects—as allegedly given prior to and independent of the subject’s activity in knowing—can play any epistemic role at all *for that subject*. To quote Jacobi’s own famous words on the matter: “I need the assumption of things-in-themselves to enter into the Kantian system; but with this assumption, it is not possible for me to remain inside it.” See F. H. Jacobi, “Beylage” to *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus, ein Gespräch* in *Werke*, 6 vols., ed. F. H. Jacobi and F. Köppen (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812) vol. 2, p. 304. See also Jacobi’s *Werke*, 6 vols. (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1815) vol. 3, p. 304.

How is it possible to account adequately for the fact that the subject knows that its activity in knowing is finite and constrained by that which is genuinely other than it (and not merely a product of its own activity as a knower), yet without appealing to a mere presence or givenness as the source of the subject's knowledge that it is thus constrained in its knowing?

In section two above, we saw how Kant might be criticized (e.g., by Lonergan and Fichte) for having backtracked on his own critique of immediacy or rejection of the myth of the given. In this section, I shall consider Lonergan's account of "the given" and the role it may play in explaining the constrained or finite character of human knowing. More specifically, I seek to show that Lonergan—in spite of his own better intentions—sometimes speaks in a way that introduces at least some degree of ambiguity into his own critique of immediacy. To the extent that Lonergan himself is not always entirely clear about the meaning and implications of his critique of immediacy, it might be possible (as I shall later show) to gain some clarity by contrasting Lonergan's account with that of Kant and Fichte. But before seeking such clarification, let us turn to Lonergan himself.

We can begin with the following questions: For Lonergan, what role do data or presentations, as merely given, play in the intellectual process of verification or judgment? Is the determinate "whatness" of the data available to me insofar as I encounter or confront it on the level of sensitive presentations alone? Or is it rather the case that even the "whatness" or specific determinacy of the data—including the data's fitness to serve as the fulfilling conditions of a particular judgment—is available to me not merely on the basis of its sensory givenness, but only as mediated by my intellectual activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging? Lonergan's answer to this set of questions is not always entirely clear. At times, he seems to hold that the determinate "whatness" of the given is available to the knowing subject as merely given, apart from any mediating activity of the intellect; thus he seems to accept at least some version of the myth of the given.²³ But at other times, he seems to argue quite strenuously against the myth of the given in all of its possible forms.²⁴

My aim here is not to evaluate or even identify Lonergan's final or complete position on the matter—for that would take me well beyond the scope of the present essay.²⁵ My aim, rather, is simply to show that—in cases where Lonergan does not

²³For a rather egregious example of this tendency in Lonergan, see the Halifax lectures, where Lonergan states that the determinate "whatness" of the data as given (i.e., the data's being identifiable *as* a measuring rod or a needle on a dial) is available to the human knower on the basis of a mere look (UB 134–35).

²⁴For just some of Lonergan's many diatribes against the paradigm of knowing as a species of "looking," see *Insight*, pp. 253, 320, 321, 372, 406, 412–16, 425, 496, 581–83, 634–35, 646.

²⁵However, I tend to think that Lonergan's actual position on the matter best coheres with a position that would whole-heartedly reject the myth of the given. My reading of Lonergan on this score receives some confirmation from Giovanni Sala, who holds that Lonergan's considered position on knowing excludes the proposition that the "whatness" of the data can be available to us simply on the level of looking. As Sala writes, "[E]xperience itself is knowledge neither of the 'what' nor of the 'is'; it is simply presentation. To know 'what' is presented and whether this 'what' really 'is' belongs to the intelligent and rational phases which follow the sensible phase." Giovanni Sala, "The *Apriori* in Human Knowledge" in *Lonergan and Kant: Five Essays on Human Knowledge*, trans. Joseph Spoerl, ed. Robert M. Doran (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1994) p. 5.

clearly express his critique of immediacy or rejection of the myth of the given—his writings lend themselves to an interpretation that would retain at least some degree of pre-critical or naïve realism. Thus if Lonergan’s account is to escape the epistemological problems that would accompany such a pre-critical position, at least some degree of clarification is in order.

Let us consider one of the more famous passages from *Insight*, Lonergan’s *magnum opus*. In the pivotal chapter on “Reflective Understanding,” Lonergan gives us an example of a man returning home from work:

Suppose a man to return from work to his tidy home and to find the windows smashed, smoke in the air, and water on the floor. Suppose him to make the extremely restrained judgment of fact: Something happened. The question is, not whether he was right, but how he reached his affirmation.

The conditioned will be the judgment that something happened.

The fulfilling conditions will be two sets of data: the remembered data of his home as he left it in the morning; the present data of his home as he finds it in the evening. Observe that the fulfilling conditions are found on the level of presentations. They are not judgments, as is the minor premise of syllogisms. They involve no questions for intelligence nor insights nor concepts. They lie simply on the level of past and present experience, of the occurrence of acts of seeing and smelling.²⁶

Now according to what Lonergan tells us here, the two sets of data are simply given on the level of presentations, without any mediation by questions, insights, interpretations, or judgments. More specifically, Lonergan implies that the “pastness” of one set of data (i.e., its character of being *remembered*) and the “presentness” of another set of data are simply given and incorrigible on the level of presentations. It would then follow that such pastness and presentness—as given—are not subject to any further questions or alternative interpretations, precisely because they are not determinations that are *arrived at* through any questions, interpretations, or judgments. But how does one know that one set of data refers to a past state of affairs (i.e., is *remembered*) and that the other set of data refers to a present state of affairs? The distinction between past and present cannot be made simply on the basis of the liveliness or intensity that seems to attach to one set of data and not to the other. After all, it is quite possible for a person to have very intense presentations that nevertheless refer to past states of affairs, or to have very weak presentations that nevertheless refer to present states of affairs.

If not simply on the basis of the data’s empirical intensity or liveliness—or any other sensible feature of the data—then how does one succeed in referring one set of data to a past state of affairs and the other set to a present state of affairs? This question should at least begin to make clear that—according to the critique of immediacy and contrary to what Lonergan implies—it is not so obvious that the distinction between the “pastness” and “presentness” of data is really *given* through

²⁶Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 281–82.

some feature of the data alone. And if this is so, then the determination that one set of data refers to a past state of affairs, and the other refers to a present state of affairs, is indeed subject to further questions and alternative interpretations. And precisely because alternative interpretations are possible, any actual determination that one set of data refers to the “past” and that the other refers to the “present” is not based on the given data alone, but is a *conclusion drawn* as a result of some minimal activity of questioning, understanding, interpreting, and/or judging.

Based on the preceding critical reflections, we can see that one would be wrong to hold that the “pastness” of one set of data and the “presentness” of the other set of data are simply “given” on the level of sense presentations. But this is not all that is at stake here, for the seemingly obvious fact that there are *two* sets of data—rather than one—is itself not immediately *given* on the level of sense. That is to say, the apparently obvious determination that there are two sets of temporally-ordered data (one referring to the “past” and one referring to the “present”) is not given on the level of presentations alone, but is already the *result* of some minimal activity of interpretation. This becomes clear if one considers the fact that—strictly speaking—it is never the case that the knowing subject is simply (and simultaneously!) presented with *two* sets of temporally-ordered data, one referring to the past and the other referring to the present. One’s awareness is always *in* the present, so to speak. That is to say, on the level of mere presentations, the data are given *all at once* and *in the present*. Thus any distinction *within* the data presented—for example, a distinction between “pastness” and “presentness,” i.e., between being-remembered and not being-remembered—is not *given* on the level of the data themselves, but is rather based on some interpretation or inference.

Of course, it is a rather natural assumption to think that one’s mere *having* a presentation of type *A* (let us call it *pA*) prior to his *having* a presentation of type *B* (*pB*) is sufficient for him to *know*—on the basis of such presentations alone—that the *A*-like state of affairs to which *pA* refers is prior to the *B*-like state of affairs to which *pB* refers. But even if it is the case that I actually did experience presentation *pA* before I experienced presentation *pB*, what is present to me at the time of my having *pB* is not *two* sets of data at all, but rather a *single* representational state within which both *A*-like and *B*-like presentations are present. And this *single* representational state at the time of *pB* containing both *A*-like and *B*-like presentations can be interpreted in at least one of two different ways: (1) as my having a *present* experience of *pB* along with the *memory* of a prior experience of *pA*, or (2) as my having a present experience of both *pB* and *pA*. The important point here is that nothing empirically given in the presentations themselves (not even their degree of clarity or intensity) automatically determines for the knower which presentation is being presently *experienced* and which one is being presently *remembered*, for all the presentations within one’s awareness are given all at once in a *single* representational state. The distinction between “pastness” and “presentness” within a single representational state is always a matter of interpretation. Thus, if Lonergan wants to be consistent and rigorous in rejecting all forms of the myth of the given, then he cannot really hold that the temporal ordering of the two sets of data is given simply on the level of empirical presentations.

It is significant to note that the preceding, critical reflections on the epistemological grounds of our distinguishing between “past” and “present” sensations are essentially Kantian in inspiration. Kant had argued that the temporal ordering of the different kinds of presentations that are present within a single representational state is never given on the level of the presentations themselves, for every representational state—as simply given—is given as a *unity* “all at once” and thus contains no temporal diversity within it. As Kant put it, “Every intuition contains a manifold in itself, which however would not be represented as such if the mind did not distinguish the time in the succession of impressions on one another; for as contained in one moment no representation can ever be anything other than an absolute unity” (CPR A99). Since the temporal ordering of our presentations is not simply given on the level of presentations themselves, Kant goes on to argue, such a temporal ordering can be established only if the knower thinks of the presentations within his given representational state in relation to a sequence of states of affairs in the world—more specifically, in relation to an *irreversible* sequence of states of affairs in the world, a sequence that is governed by the principle of *causality*.²⁷ For Kant, then, the temporal ordering of presentations is not simply “given” through the presentations themselves but must be *thought* on the basis of the subject’s own application of the concept of causality.

We need not delve further into Kant’s very interesting and complicated account of causality, in order to make the following, important observation. The question just raised concerning the ground of our distinguishing between “past” and “present” sensations is also (from a Lonerganian perspective) indirectly a question concerning the ground of our knowledge of the constrained or limited character of our activity in knowing. This is because when I (following Lonergan) claim to know that presentations are temporally distinct and ordered (e.g., in terms of past and present), I am also implicitly claiming to know that there really is or was some (prior) occurrence outside of, or external to, my *current* state of awareness, a current state of awareness that contains all the presentations of which I am now aware (including apparent memories). In other words, from a Lonerganian perspective, the claim to know that my presentations are temporally distinct and ordered is also implicitly a claim to know that my current state of awareness that is now present to me all at once (complete with apparent memories) is not the totality of all that is or might be, but is limited and constrained by a world of occurrences that are (temporally) outside of it. It is implicitly a claim to know that there is some genuine “otherness” beyond my own current (or present) state of awareness, an otherness that counts for me as an external limitation or constraint on my present state of awareness.²⁸

²⁷For this analysis of Kant and of the issues regarding the temporal ordering of presentations, I am heavily indebted to the work of Paul Guyer. See Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987) chap. 10, but esp. pp. 255–57.

²⁸This observation applies to the Lonerganian epistemological framework, but not necessarily to the Kantian one. This is because Kant is a transcendental idealist, for whom space and time are *a priori* forms of intuition, and not attributes of things in themselves. Thus for Kant, the temporal distinctness of my present state of awareness from a past state of awareness does not necessarily imply that there is anything that I can know to exist (or to have existed) independently of my present state of awareness. For according to Kant, such temporal distinctness is possible in the first place, only if the two temporally distinct (empirical) states are represented as moments *within* the *one* time that is the *a priori* (subjective) form of all (inner) intuition.

It follows from this that if Lonergan really held that the temporal ordering of empirical presentations were simply given through the presentations themselves, he would also be committed (implicitly) to the pre-critical position that the knowing subject could know—simply on the basis of the givenness of the given—that its own activity in knowing is limited and constrained by what is other than it. As we have seen, Lonergan faulted Kant for not having fully overcome the myth of the given, or the pre-critical assumption that knowing is a species of looking. But now conversely, it is Kant's critical philosophy that helps give us some insight into what Lonergan may have meant—and what he could not have meant—in his account of the temporal ordering of empirical presentations. If Kant's account of the constraint that characterizes human knowing did not entirely free itself from the myth of the given, and if Lonergan's account did not entirely free itself from the language of the myth of the given, we might next turn to Fichte, for a slightly different approach to the critique of immediacy and the epistemology of constraint in human knowing.

IV. FICHTE'S RADICALIZATION OF THE CRITIQUE OF IMMEDIACY, IN THE SERVICE OF REALISM²⁹

According to Fichte, the only way to account adequately for the constrained and finite character of human knowing, yet without falling back into some form of the myth of the given, is to radicalize the critique of immediacy itself. Thus Fichte does not *begin*, as Kant did, by simply assuming (without epistemologically sound justification) that our activity in knowing is somehow constrained by what is other than it. Rather, Fichte begins with nothing other than the subject's seemingly unconstrained activity of being aware of itself as free or—what amounts to the same thing—its activity of being aware that no content, as merely given, is necessarily determinative for it as the self-conscious, questioning self that it is. For Fichte, as we shall see, the knowing subject that fully liberates itself from the myth of the given in this way will nevertheless be compelled to conclude that its activity in knowing is constrained and finite. And it will be led to this conclusion, not because there is some allegedly pure, given, incorrigible datum that is somehow known by the subject (or imposes itself on the subject) without the involvement of the subject's own intellectual activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. Rather, the subject's acknowledgment that its own activity in knowing must be finite and constrained will arise—paradoxically—out of what is implicit in the subject's own seemingly unconstrained activity in being aware that no datum or content, as given, is necessarily determinative for its thinking or knowing.

²⁹Readers who are puzzled by the implication that Fichte is a realist should refer to Daniel Breazeale's excellent article, "Fichte's Abstract Realism" in *The Emergence of German Idealism*, eds. Michael Baur and Daniel Dahlstrom (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1999) pp. 95-115. In the remainder of this paper, I seek to show how Fichte can accept the critique of immediacy in its full force, but also—without begging the crucial epistemological questions at issue—account for the sense of constraint that characterizes our acts of knowing insofar as they are finite and delimited by what is other than them. Thus I—like Breazeale—take Fichte to be a realist in at least this minimal sense of the term.

Before delving further into Fichte's account, a brief terminological point is in order. In accordance with the general spirit of Kant's critique of immediacy, Fichte holds that nothing of epistemic significance is simply *given* to the knowing subject without mediation by the subject's own spontaneous, intellectual activity in knowing. Furthermore, Fichte insists that even the subject's own self-consciousness, or awareness of itself as the self-conscious, questioning self that it is, is to be understood in terms of activity. Thus, contrary to what might be implied by our ordinary use of certain terms, the meaning of "self-awareness" or "self-consciousness" in Fichte denotes a kind of *activity*, an activity that Fichte also discusses in terms of "being-for-self" or "self-positing." A lack of sensitivity to Fichte's unique use of terms here can easily lead to serious misunderstandings.

Now Fichte fundamentally accepts the Kantian critique of immediacy, according to which no datum is "what" it is for a human knower by virtue of its givenness alone. The given is not self-interpreting, and thus—as merely given—does not necessitate or cause any particular understanding, interpretation, or judgment in the knowing subject. But this is just to say that no given content or datum is necessarily determinative of the subject's thinking or knowing. Furthermore, for Fichte, to be aware that no given content is necessarily determinative for the self's thinking is to be aware that the self's thinking is not determined by any external necessity, but is *radically free*. To say that we are radically free in our thinking can mean various things in various contexts, but Fichte's minimal claim at this stage is simply that no given datum or content necessarily imposes itself on us and forces or causes us as knowers to accept it as true.

If being aware that no given content is necessarily determinative for one's thinking amounts to being aware of oneself as radically free, how then does Fichte understand and define the self that is thus self-aware and free? If one takes the critique of immediacy seriously, one will realize that any attempted definition of the self as self-consciously free cannot be based on or derived from any content as merely present or given. After all, the self's radical freedom and ability to question extends even to any proposed definition of the self that is based on, or derived from, some allegedly unmediated given content. In defining the self, one must exercise extreme epistemological restraint and must refrain entirely from relying on any given content, idea, representation, or set of fixed terms.

This epistemological restraint, however, does not make it impossible to define the self-consciously free self. Indeed, for Fichte, it is this very restraint that provides the first, preliminary elements needed in order to define the self without recourse to any given content. For Fichte, the self must be understood—at least according to a preliminary, working definition—as nothing other than the activity of being aware of itself as radically free, undetermined by any given content. If we are to reject every form of the myth of the given, Fichte holds, we *must* define the self in this way. Any suggestion that the self might be more adequately defined by reference to something *other* than its own activity implicitly involves the problematic claim that there is some datum or content, as merely given, that is necessarily determinative for the self's activity in knowing.

The awareness of oneself as radically free, an awareness that constitutes the self's very being, is necessarily a *non-imagistic, non-representational* kind of awareness. Any given image or representation inevitably belongs to that sphere of given contents to which one may not appeal in defining the self. Once again, the term "awareness" must be used here with caution, for this awareness is nothing like any empirical awareness of a given, determinate content (derived either from internal or external sense). The kind of awareness that constitutes the self's being does not refer to or depend on any given content or fact (*Tatsache*) whatsoever, but is simply an activity (*Tathandlung*), namely, the activity of being aware, in a non-representational way, of oneself as free and undetermined by any content as merely given.³⁰

This preliminary, working definition of Fichtean selfhood is what is implied by the first principle of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, the pure *Ich = Ich* (SK I, 91–101). This activity of being a self is alternatively described by Fichte as the activity of self-positing or the activity of simple "being *for* self." The "content" of the first principle of the *Grundlage* is thus nothing other than the activity of self-positing, or being *for* oneself in a completely non-imagistic, non-representational way. It is important to see here that the act of self-awareness and the content of the act fully coincide; all that the self *is*, is simply its own act of being for self, and all that *is* for the self, is simply its own selfhood as the act of being for self. As Fichte explains it, "*To posit oneself and to be* are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical" (SK I, 98).

In accordance with this preliminary definition, one must refrain from thinking of the Fichtean self as any kind of substance or thing at all. The self for Fichte is not a thing that also happens to think (a *res cogitans*); it is nothing but the activity of thinking. As Fichte says, the self "is an *act*, and absolutely nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something [*ein Thätiges*]" (SK I, 440, First Introduction). The self is nothing other than the "pure activity" of non-representational, non-substantialist self-awareness. To think of the self as an active thing or an active substance, where the thing-like or substance-like character of the self somehow *underlies* or *pre-exists* its simple activity of being *for* itself is to fall unwittingly into the myth of the given. For to think in this way is to presume to know that there is some thing-like or substance-like "substrate" to the self (and we are always talking here about one's *own* self) that is somehow "given" apart from the self's own activity of being for itself. In short, the Fichtean self's own *activity of being for itself* fully exhausts what the self *is*—at least according to Fichte's preliminary definition as we have examined it thus far.

Now, if the self is simply the pure, non-representational, undetermined, free activity of being for itself, might it not then be possible that that self could (in its present moment of self-awareness or being-for-self) be the totality of all that is? And is it possible that all contents and presentations that appear to be given without any involvement of the self's activity are merely projections or modes of the

³⁰For more on Fichte's crucial distinction between activity (*Tathandlung*) and mere fact (*Tatsache*), see his "Review of *Aenesidemus*" in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) p. 64.

self's own activity? This possibility has not been excluded by anything that we have seen thus far in Fichte's preliminary definition of the self; however, it will be excluded, once the fuller, richer implications of Fichtean selfhood are explored.³¹

For Fichte, to be a self (as preliminarily defined) is simply to be for oneself in the non-representational manner we have been describing. To be a self is to be for oneself, and to be for oneself is to be given to oneself and thus passive with respect to oneself. Now the self could not be passive with respect to itself (or in any respect at all), if the self were a pure, unconstrained, infinite activity. Conversely, a pure, unconstrained, infinite activity—if it really were unconstrained and infinite—would never have the occasion to reflect *back* on itself or to be *for* itself (as a self by definition is), but would extend its activity without restriction or constraint into infinity—in which case it would be a blind, unreflected activity, and would not be an activity that is aware of itself, or for itself. Thus the very definition of the self as an activity that is purely for itself also implies some element of passivity and otherness. In order to be a self at all, the self needs a non-empirically given other in relation to which the self is the being-for-self that it is. In other words, the self-positing self simply cannot be the totality of all that is, and there must be some *other* to the self, or a not-self (*Nicht-Ich*). With this, we have arrived at the second principle of Fichte's *Grundlage* (SK I, 101–04).

The necessity of the not-self for the self can be explained with reference to a theme that is prominent in Lonergan's philosophy, namely, the theme of question-asking. Now the self's awareness that no given content is necessarily determinative for it is bound up with its capacity to question everything or to put every determinate content into question. Furthermore, all questioning presupposes some sense of otherness. As long as any question is not yet answered, there is some other to the self or (what amounts to the same thing) some other to the self's awareness of itself as a self. Insofar as there is some otherness to the self-conscious self, the self is not the totality of all that is, and there must be a not-self. Of course, one might challenge this conclusion by suggesting that the sense of otherness contained in the activity of questioning does not pertain to any real otherness, but only to an illusory otherness. But even this suggestion confirms the necessity of the not-self for the self. If the otherness implied by the self's questioning referred to an entirely illusory otherness, then the self's being (its activity of being self-aware in a non-representational way) would already be the totality of all that is; but in that case, the self would already know that much, for it would already know everything about everything by virtue of being self-aware. If that were the case, the self could not even *begin* to wonder whether an otherness were real or illusory. It would already know. Thus even the *appearance* of a *possible* otherness (in the form of any type of question) is necessarily a *real* otherness for a self-positing self whose being (as we have seen) consists in the bare activity of self-awareness or being for self.

³¹Thus Fichte's account of knowing, like Lonergan's, is dynamic and must be understood as unfolding on the basis of a moving viewpoint (see *Insight*, p. xxiii). The preliminary meanings of terms become enriched, deepened, and transformed as one moves along. As Lonergan tells his reader, "earlier statements are to be qualified and interpreted in terms of later statements" (*Insight*, p. xxv).

Stated differently, an entity whose being—in accordance with Fichte’s preliminary definition—is exhausted by its mere act of being self-aware and that is capable of wondering whether there is any otherness beyond its own act of being self-aware has—by that very act of wondering—performatively provided dispositive evidence showing that there is, indeed, something other than its own being, i.e., something other than its own act of being self-aware. If there were no such otherness, then this entity whose being is exhausted by its mere act of being self-aware would already know everything about everything simply by being aware of itself alone.

This Fichtean account of the necessity of the not-self has significant implications for the critique of immediacy and the epistemology of epistemic constraint, as we have been analyzing these issues thus far. I know that I am not the totality of all that is, and that there is some otherness for me. But I know this, not because I judge myself to be non-active or passive in relation to something that is simply given to me without the involvement of my own intellectual activity (for as we have learned from the critique of immediacy, any determinate content that at first might seem to be given to me without the involvement of my own activity can always conceivably be interpreted to be just a projection or a product of my own activity). Rather, I know this *precisely because of my activity*, and in particular because of my spontaneous, self-conscious activity of being aware that I can ask questions and thus am not (as the self-conscious self that I am) the totality of all that is.

With this, Fichte offers what is meant to be a transcendental, *a priori*, and unrevisable account of the ground of our knowledge of the constraint or limitedness that attaches to all our acts of knowing. For his account is not based on any questionable, empirical, revisable claim regarding the allegedly sheer “givenness” of some empirical content for the self. After all, as we have seen, it is always possible that some seemingly “given” empirical content might be interpreted as—or later shown to be a projection of—the self’s own activity. Instead, Fichte’s account of the constraint or limitedness that attaches to the self’s acts of knowing is grounded simply on the self’s own *activity* of being aware that it can ask questions and thus is *not* the totality of all that is. Any attempt to raise doubts about this ground only (performatively) confirms the adequacy of it.

Now, according to Fichte, the self—in order to give an account of its own selfhood and knowing—must simultaneously think of itself as radically free, yet also as necessarily constrained by a not-self that conditions its being as radically free. But furthermore, in order to think these two thoughts simultaneously together—for self and not-self are never really separate but rather always present together at the same time—the self must think of both self and not-self as mutually delimited by one another, and thus as *interdetermining* one another (SK I, 104–22). In other words, the self’s “pure” activity of being for itself—once it is properly understood—is never really a “pure” activity, after all, but rather an activity of oscillation (*Schweben*) that always involves some relation to otherness as well. Thus for Fichte, any particular instance of human awareness or knowing is always already a result of such an interdetermination or equilibrium achieved between self and not-self. That is, the finite self—to the extent that it is a self at all—is always already present

to itself (or *for itself*) but also always already has some otherness present to it as well. The self's being for itself and the other's being for it—while two conceptually distinct moments in this unity—are never actually separable from each other. There simply is no “pure self” that is entirely unrelated cognitively to something that is other than it, and there is no “pure other” that can play an epistemically significant role for the self, apart from, or independent of, the self's own activity in relation to it.³²

Now Fichte's account of the self, not-self, and process of interdetermination between the two also implies a form of realism that does not depend in any way on a questionable “bridge” from what is “inside” me to what is “outside” me. For as we have seen, the very nature of the self—to the extent that it is a self at all—is to be for itself only in relation to what is not itself. Since there simply is no self that can consciously, freely, inquiringly be for itself apart from some otherness or not-self, the possibility of a solipsistic idealism or a frictionless coherentism is systematically excluded on Fichte's account. And most importantly, it is not excluded through some dubious appeal to immediacy or the myth of the given. Rather, it is excluded on the basis of the self's own activity of being-for-self, a being-for-self that *needs* an other (a not-self), in order to be for itself at all.³³ The self-positing self never knows itself, and thus never *is* itself, apart from its knowing of some otherness in relation to itself. And conversely, this otherness in relation to the self does not play any epistemic role *for the self*, without the involvement of the self's own activity in knowing it. “As strange as this may seem,” Fichte writes, “the object is both the immediate object of my consciousness, and it is inferred.”³⁴

The Fichtean point is a subtle one, but it is also a crucial one, since it has deeply significant epistemological consequences. Simply put, Fichte's underlying claim has been that any attempt to explain the finite and constrained character of our knowing merely by reference to the passivity that we experience on the level of sense presentations is doomed to fail. For everything on the level of sensory

³²This is, of course, Fichte's articulation of what is essentially a Kantian position: there is no transcendental consciousness (no being-for-self) without empirical consciousness (otherness for the self), and *vice versa*. Also, to say that there is no self-for-itself without a not-self, and no not-self without a self, is to echo what Lonergan seems to say when he argues that the activities of having presentations (being appeared to by a not-self) and asking questions (being a self-conscious free self) are implicitly defined in relation to one another (see, for example, *Insight*, pp. 332–336 and UB 45–48). I would say that Fichte and Lonergan are in fundamental agreement here, provided that Lonergan is not construed as saying that there can be presentations *for* a human self entirely apart from the involvement of the self's own intellectual activity.

³³As Fichte says, “The pure I is a mere Idea, whereas the I obtains actuality—i.e., intuitability, or being—only in connection with or in relationship to the Not-I.” See Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo (1796/99))*, p. 165.

³⁴Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) p. 56. Thus Fichte can reject the myth of the given, while at the same time acknowledging that there is a sense in which direct realism is correct. For an account (partly inspired by Lonergan) that seeks to show how “direct realism” is compatible with the realization that human knowing involves mediation, see Vincent Potter, *On Understanding Understanding: A Philosophy of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1994) esp. pp. 52–57.

presentations counts as “what” it is—and thus counts *as a limit or constraint* on the subject’s activity in knowing—only to the extent that the subject’s own intellectual activities are also already involved in making that determination (i.e., the determination that the given counts *as* what it does). In other words, no datum is “what” it is by virtue of its givenness alone; no datum tells the subject that it must be understood and interpreted in exactly *this* way and no other. But if this is so, then no datum—by virtue of its givenness alone—can ever serve *as* a constraint on the subject’s activity in knowing. That is to say, no datum is self-interpreting. A datum counts as “what” it is for the subject, and thus counts for the subject as a constraint on the subject’s activity in knowing, only to the extent that the subject’s own intellectual activity is involved in making that determination.

One might be tempted to try avoiding the Fichtean conclusion by distinguishing between the “whatness” and the “thatness” of the data, and then arguing that—even if the “whatness” is not given for the subject without the involvement of the subject’s intellectual activity—the “thatness” nevertheless *is* given without the involvement of the subject’s intellectual activity. But this counter-argument ultimately fails. For even the subject’s determination that there is some sort of “thatness” given to it—a “thatness” that appears to be given without the involvement of its own activity—is itself the result of an *interpretation*. This is shown by the fact that the “thatness” can also conceivably be interpreted as a projection or product of the subject’s own activity, and hence not a “thatness” in the sense required by the counter-argument. As long as the very “thatness” of the data can *conceivably* be interpreted to be a projection or product of the subject’s own activity (and thus not really a constraint or a limit on that activity), it follows that any actual determination or belief by the subject that the data’s “thatness” is *not* a projection or product of its own activity is necessarily the result of some interpretation. And thus even the “thatness” of the data is not incorrigible or simply given on the level of presentations, but is rather a determination arrived at as a result of the subject’s own activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging.

From a Fichtean perspective, then, my knowledge that my own activity in knowing is finite and constrained by what is other than it is not grounded on the fact that I happen to have sensations that are given to me prior to and independent of my own activity in questioning, understanding, interpreting, and judging. For according to the critique of immediacy, all such sensations—to the extent that they are identifiable as sensations at all—are given to me only insofar as they are always already mediated by my own intellectual activity. But because of this, it is erroneous to say that I know my own activity in knowing to be finite and constrained by what is other than it just “because” it seems to depend on sensible data or presentations that are simply given to me. *Rather, the order of the explanation must be the other way around: I draw the conclusion that my own activity in knowing depends on sensible data (even though I never have unmediated “access” to sensible data as they would be for me without the involvement of my own intellectual activity), only because I know—in an a priori, certain, and indubitable manner—that my own activity in knowing must be finite and constrained by what is other than it. And I know this—not because of the external causal force or efficacy of some*

datum outside of me—but rather because of the *activity* that constitutes my own being as a self-conscious questioner. If my activity were a pure activity and infinite—if my activity in knowing were the totality of all that is—I would already know this about my own knowing, in which case I could not even wonder whether my own activity in knowing might be the totality of all that is. And therefore, it is my own activity—and not my passivity vis-à-vis data or presentations that are allegedly given to me without the involvement of my own activity—that ultimately grounds my ability to know that my own activity in knowing is constrained and finite.³⁵

Of course, this Fichtean account does not ultimately answer the question of what it is specifically that I know when I know what is other than me. But it does address the central question with which we began. More specifically, this account does show how it might be possible—from within a post-Cartesian epistemological paradigm—to give an account of the constraint that attaches to all acts of human knowing, yet without falling prey to the myth of the given. Or conversely, it shows how it might be possible to accept the Kantian critique of immediacy in its full force and implications, yet without having to accept a solipsistic idealism or frictionless coherentism of one's own concepts.

³⁵Interestingly, Kant himself may have come close to expressing this sort of position, even if rather late in his career. See Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, trans. Eckart Förster and Michael Rosen, ed. Eckart Förster (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993) p. 176: “The material element—the thing in itself—is = X, the mere representation of one's own activity.”