Recent as well as traditional discussions of Fichte’s view of mental acts have been mostly devoted to his doctrine of intellectual intuition. This is understandable because it occupies a central position in Fichte’s theory. However, a proper understanding of Fichte’s notion of abstraction is equally indispensable for grasping the full extent and import of his theory not only because it contrasts sharply with intellectual intuition but also because it reveals an important set of beliefs that underlie Fichte’s theory. These beliefs concern none other than a precise understanding of the particular role played by abstraction within the context of Fichte’s system of the I, and this is absolutely necessary for conducting a philosophical inquiry into the nature of the I properly. Further, despite the obvious dissimilarities, there are some remarkable “symbiotic” relations between abstraction and intellectual intuition.

In this chapter, I develop Fichte’s view of abstraction and critically discuss the role it plays in Fichte’s overall system. In particular, I focus on the following: What is Fichte’s conception of abstraction, and how is this related to intellectual intuition? Schelling once called intuition the “organ” of speculative thinking. I do not contest this, but I would like to add that abstraction in Fichte is the “engine” of speculative thinking. In the process, I also claim that in his ontology Fichte advocates particularism, the view that everything that exists in the world is determinate in all aspects of its being and thus concrete and that there are no abstract general entities.

**Fichte on abstracting the I: a historical sketch**

As is well known, Fichte’s conception of the I is unique, to say the least. There is no question he came up with his understanding of the I against
the broad intellectual milieu initially started by Descartes, but Fichte's actual view is dramatically different from that of Descartes or the latter's followers. The I for Fichte is clearly self-conscious – I am aware of the I. What is more, the I is absolutely active. As such, it is elevated above everything sensible. In this respect, it seems to be a direct descendent of Kant's transcendental apperception. Yet Fichte goes further. In being aware of itself, the I is also aware of what is not an-I. In addition, the I that Fichte speaks of here is true not only of me or you but also of all conscious subjects. The activities of the I have all-inclusive implications. Thus, the “I” here seems to be universal and general in its scope.

In numerous passages of his major works, Fichte strongly suggests that all these important results would not have been achieved without the work of abstraction. But despite being all-comprehensive, the absolute I in Fichte is not a pure abstraction distanced from concrete reality. In particular, this awareness of the I is not an abstract mental act completely isolated from the rest of our overall mental life. In this respect, Fichte suggests that the dynamic nature of the I is to be intuited rather than abstracted. These conflicting messages we get from the Fichtean corpus makes it necessary to examine the notion of abstraction in his theory. Thus we now need to consider what exactly Fichte means by the term “abstraction.”

As for the employment of “abstraction,” Fichte conceives abstraction simply as an act of separation consistent with his immediate predecessor; that is, Kant. For the latter holds that abstraction is “the separation [Absonderung] of everything else by which given representations differ.” This means that Fichte’s conception can be traced not only back to Port Royal logic in the modern period but also to a venerable tradition that stretches all the way to Aquinas and Aristotle.

Aristotle famously holds that the mind abstracts by stripping an object of its sensible qualities. For him, then, all knowledge is based on an abstraction from what is given in the senses. The mind is capable of focusing on one of the sensible qualities of an object to the exclusion of others and on more general qualities to the exclusion of more particular qualities. Just as the mathematician abstracts the notion of pure quantity and dimension from the sensible objects, a philosopher can abstract the notion of being from the sensible objects. Thus, even though all knowledge is ultimately based on senses and all existents are particulars, universals can be obtained by means of abstraction. The more abstract a thing is, the farther it is from the senses.

This Aristotelian doctrine of abstraction reaches its pinnacle in scholasticism; especially in Aquinas. Our senses let in phantasms of sensible