Subjectivity After Wittgenstein

The Post-Cartesian Subject and the "Death of Man"

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Subjectivity after Wittgenstein
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### Abbreviated References

| BB | The Blue and the Brown Books  
| BF | Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker  
| CV | Culture and Value  
| LE | ‘A Lecture on Ethics’  
| LRB | ‘Lectures on Religious Belief’  
| LWi | Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I  
| LWii | Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume II  
| NB | Notebooks 1914–1916  
| OC | On Certainty  
| PG | Philosophical Grammar  
| PI | Philosophical Investigations  
| PR | Philosophical Remarks  
Abbreviated References

RF  ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*

RPPi  *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*

RPPii  *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume II*

TLP  *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

References to LWi, OC, PI, RPPi, RPPii and TLP are to paragraphs (unless otherwise stated). References to NB are to notebook entries. References to BB, BF, CV, LE, LRB, LWii, PG, PI II, PR and RF are to page numbers.
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Chapter 1
Subjectivity, Wittgenstein and the Debate about the ‘Death of Man’

Although the current study has one clear focal point, it in fact has a twofold goal. This book not only aims to give a thorough analysis of Wittgenstein’s view on human subjectivity, it also wants to evaluate the ethico-political arguments that often take centre stage in the debate for and against the rethinking of the subject. In this introductory chapter, I will lay out my reasons for devoting a study to these combined topics, but before I can explain this in full detail, the meaning of the main terms I use needs to be clarified. ‘Subjectivity’ is neither an uncontested nor an unequivocal term and ‘Wittgenstein’ is, in a similar vein, not the label for one clearly definable and universally recognized philosophical position. Let me therefore start by describing what both the word ‘subjectivity’ and the name ‘Wittgenstein’ are taken to mean in the current context. This explanation will then evolve into an exposition of the rationale behind this study and of my plan of work.

1.1. The Many Meanings of the Term ‘Subjectivity’: From Cartesianism to the ‘Death of Man’ and Back Again

With regard to my use of the term ‘subjectivity’ – but to already hint at my use of the name ‘Wittgenstein’ as well – it should first of all be noted that this word does not exactly abound in everyday language. When a situation does give rise to the employment of a term like ‘subjectivity’ or ‘subjective’, such terms are typically used to indicate, say, the partiality or relativity of a certain point of view, or of points of view in general. Yet while the relativity of viewpoints is certainly a topic of philosophical interest, this is not what philosophers by and large refer to when they use this word. And while Wittgenstein famously vowed to ‘bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (PI 116), the relativity of viewpoints is not the topic of the following investigations either. One could say that this study explores ‘subjectivity’ in the philosophical rather than the ordinary sense of the word.

That is not to say that there is one clear issue for which ‘subjectivity’ in all philosophical discussions stands.¹ A treatise on subjectivity may concern several
topics that, though not entirely unconnected, do not completely coincide either: topics such as consciousness and self-consciousness, the phenomenality of experience, intentionality, personal identity, the relationship between mind and body or between mind and brain and the so-called problem of other minds. In either of these guises, subjectivity has been a topic of philosophical concern for ages and has occupied thinkers on both sides of what has become known as the analytic-continental divide. In the course of the previous century, however, philosophical debate on subjectivity took a quite specific turn, primarily on account of thinkers who can be labelled ‘continental’. This development has already been told and retold to the point of having become a philosophical myth of sorts, but it nonetheless needs to be recounted here, too, in order to delineate more clearly what ‘subjectivity’ in the context of the current study means.

Though the emergence of anti-Cartesianism undoubtedly has its roots in philosophical as well as non-philosophical developments dating from before that period, somewhere during the twentieth century many scholars came to think that the philosophical tradition – at least but especially since the time of Descartes – had succeeded in misunderstanding the nature of man in all possible ways and thus needed to be amended or even broken down in its entirety. If one would be pressed to give a more specific date to indicate the beginning of what has itself become a philosophical tradition, one could with sufficient right name the year Heidegger’s *Being and Time* appeared. It has been pointed out that Heidegger’s account of Western thought was not in all respects the most accurate, to say the least, but his claim that the history of philosophy up until then was a history of the forgetfulness of being and, not unimportantly, of the being of human being, has nonetheless struck many as being all too true. Heidegger argued that by speaking of ‘the ego cogito [. . .], the subject, the “I”’ (Heidegger 2000, p. 44), his predecessors inevitably yet incorrectly presented human being as just an object among others. He proposed to analyse the nature or being of human being in terms of *Dasein* instead.

Following Heidegger’s example, terms such as ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ came to be used almost exclusively to refer to the worldless, Cartesian-style Ego: to the idea that man can, on final analysis, be understood as a thinking substance whose inhabiting a (social) world and a body accordingly do not pertain to its essence. Following Heidegger’s example, moreover, other attempts were made to show, not just that human being does not come in the form of an ethereal and monadic self, but that its embodiedness and embeddedness had been explained away at great, great cost. Not seldom, Heidegger himself was criticized for insufficiently breaking with traditional conceptualizations (with the later Heidegger, of course, among those questioning the satisfactoriness of his earlier analysis).

At this point, the story of the subject’s vicissitudes can be relocated to another part of the continent, for the philosophers who most ardently appeared to want to finish what Heidegger had started, did not hail from German soil. Those who
are in any case considered to have delivered the final blow to the Cartesian Ego are French thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault. By deconstructing the concept of subjectivity, writing it off as one grand narrative among others or presenting the subject as a contingent product of power relations, each contributed to or even explicitly predicted the so-called death of man. With these thinkers – often collectively though not entirely correctly placed under the banner ‘postmodern’ – the critique of subjectivity gained new momentum and became the indisputable starting point for much theorizing, both in- and outside philosophy. (And, it could be added, both in- and outside the continent, for postmodernism also found firm footing among American academics.)

None of these developments, however, has so far made the philosophical use of terms like ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ rare or even anachronistic. As soon as there was any talk of man being dead and buried, critics retorted that deconstructionism’s, postmodernism’s and/or post-structuralism’s anti-humanism might even be more objectionable than the position it was meant to undermine. It was argued that the Cartesian Ego, for all its faults and dangers, at least still offers a site for agency and autonomy as well as a bearer of rights and responsibility – I will come back to these criticisms shortly. Yet even apart from the voices contending that at least some concept of subjectivity should be preserved, the thinkers labelled ‘postmodern’ arguably never made all talk of self and subject entirely obsolete.

That is to say, on my understanding of the anti-Cartesian turn in philosophy, those responsible for the demise of the traditional subject did not set out to eradicate each and every notion of human being. They rather tried to move away from a particular way of explaining – to put it in traditional terms – the nature of man. And to be sure, conceptualized differently human being may not look anything like the Cartesian Ego, but that does not mean that its critics leave one wholly empty handed. Their undertakings can accordingly be described as a rethinking rather than an ‘un-thinking’ of human being. This is also reflected in the idiom of more recent contributions to the critique of Cartesianism. Terms such as ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ are increasingly used, not exclusively as a label for the self in its treacherous Cartesian guise, but also to more generally refer to that specific type of being we call ‘human being’, no matter how it is conceptualized.

It is in the latter sense, to bring the first part of this terminological exposition to a close, that the current study concerns subjectivity as well. In what follows, ‘subjectivity’ is used less as shorthand for an outdated or detrimental philosophical figure than as a label for attempts, from the most one-sided to the most nuanced, to answer what Kant described as the philosophical question: ‘What is man?’ (Kant 1992, p. 538). I will speak of anti-, non- or post-Cartesian subjectivity to distinguish the accounts that emerged during the previous century from the more traditional ones. I realize that one might already conceive of this as a concession – and a fatal one at that – to Cartesian-style explanations of what it means to be a human being, but here I take a Wittgensteinian stance. For while
Wittgenstein was, no less than Heidegger, aware that one should be careful not to be misled by the words one uses, he did not conclude that one should therefore ‘aim to refine or complete [. . .] the use of our words in unheard-of ways’ (PI 133). On his view, what matters is not so much what concepts one employs as how one employs them. Or to put it in the words of Culture and Value, assuming that what holds for religious concepts holds for a term like ‘subjectivity’ as well: ‘Actually I should like to say that in this case too the words you utter [. . .] are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life’ (CV 85d).

1.2. The Many Meanings of the Name ‘Wittgenstein’: Dissolving and Adding to Philosophical Discussions

This brings me to the fact that this study does not concern subjectivity tout court but takes subjectivity according to or after Wittgenstein as the topic of its investigation (and according to the later Wittgenstein, to be exact). Although Wittgenstein is not typically counted among the philosophers of a continental bend, he is frequently mentioned as one of the thinkers responsible for the anti-Cartesian turn that the debate on subjectivity took. This is not without right, for in spite of the fact that he never explicitly took part in the debate about the subject, many of Wittgenstein’s remarks can be said to address the problems or puzzles surrounding subjectivity. In addition to demonstrating that meaning cannot be considered to be a mental object and that normativity is always already a public and practical affair, much of his writings – circa-as well as post-Investigations – consider what it means that we take thoughts and feelings to be inner, for instance, and explore the socio-linguistic preconditions for being able to talk about matters mental. What is more, Lyotard explicitly draws on Wittgenstein’s notion of a language game in order to unmask the grand narratives such as those of modern subjectivity.

However, while Wittgenstein can thus for several reasons be held co-responsible for the demise of the Cartesian Ego, a detailed account of his take on the nature or being of human being has so far not been at philosophy’s disposal. To be sure, the anti-Cartesian character of his explorations has been extensively discussed, his insights have been compared to and combined with those of other rethinkers of the subject, but no book aimed at drawing out Wittgenstein’s own alternative conception, consulting not only his anti-Cartesian remarks but other parts of his oeuvre as well, has as of yet appeared. The current study sets out to fill this gap. It first of all wants to contribute to the debate about the death of man by making Wittgenstein’s account of the subject more fully explicit.

Simply mentioning the later oeuvre of this thinker, however, does not suffice to explain what it means that the following study is on subjectivity à la Wittgenstein. I have to be somewhat more specific about my use of the name ‘Wittgenstein’ because to the extent that he is considered to contribute to
philosophical discussions – be they about subjectivity or any other topic – he is often taken to add to such debates only by bringing out their nonsensicality. According to a widespread picture of Wittgenstein’s method, he took questions about the nature of things to solely arise when our actual use of language is being ignored or distorted and accordingly maintained that philosophical problems can literally be dissolved by reminding thinkers how words such as ‘mind’ and ‘meaning’ are ordinarily used – or, as the remark quoted earlier has it, by bringing such terms ‘back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (PI 116). There is no consensus among his commentators as to the exact aim and nature of the Wittgensteinian approach but it is generally assumed that Wittgenstein offers a kind of therapy that should make all philosophical theory formation redundant, rather than providing philosophical theories himself.

While this may in fact go some way toward explaining the unavailability of a Wittgensteinian account of subjectivity, I feel that his contribution to philosophy consists in much more (or even essentially consists in something else) than the exposition of other philosophers’ mistakes and the consequent dismantling of their discussions. My somewhat deviant understanding of Wittgenstein’s involvement with philosophy is reflected in the way I use terms such as ‘Wittgenstein’ and ‘Wittgensteinian’. That the current study is on subjectivity after Wittgenstein does not mean that I will take his remarks as a starting point for showing where thinkers of the subject go wrong in trying to understand what kind of beings we are. It means – lest there be any misunderstanding – that I will investigate what positive account of subjectivity can be extracted from Wittgenstein’s later work.

1.3. A Twofold Goal: Explicating Wittgenstein and Evaluating the Debate

As I underscored at the beginning of this introduction, the following explorations do not only hope to improve the subjectivity debate by making one of the voices contributing thereto more fully explicit. This book also tries to assess some of the most important arguments offered in the debate about the so-called death of man. Now that I have covered the terminological part of this introduction, let me explain the twofold goal of this study in more detail.

As I already mentioned in my description of the subject’s vicissitudes, while the post-Cartesian perspective developed by Wittgenstein and the thinkers labelled ‘postmodern’ has been highly influential, their outlook has received severe criticism too. The severity here is not so much a matter of the number and variety of thinkers that have rallied against the anti-Cartesians (even though critique has come from various corners) as of the nature of the objections that have been made against them. Their outlook is first and foremost rejected on ethical and political grounds.
Those critical of the anti-Cartesian turn in philosophy for instance argue that the rejection of the notion that man is in essence a thinking substance – no matter how flawed that notion might be – amounts to a rejection of the very idea of a thinking and feeling human being to whom matters such as rights, responsibilities, malicious intentions and moral sensibility can be ascribed. This, critics maintain, is an intolerable result, for it means that Wittgenstein and the postmodernists leave one without a centre or focal point for ethics.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, those challenging the demise of the Cartesian Ego maintain that with the rejection of the idea that man is a self-same and self-sufficient being – even if that idea is not entirely accurate – the reconceptualization of subjectivity becomes politically irrelevant or even outright harmful. By arguing that the subject is the product of its socio-political context, critics claim, Wittgenstein and the postmodernists disintegrate each and every locus of agency and autonomy and consequently place even the most unjust political constellations beyond the reach of intervention.\textsuperscript{19}

The accusations levelled against the rethinkers of Cartesianism are not exactly minor, then, and no discussion of one of the alternatives to traditional subjectivity can accordingly afford to ignore them. I will also consider the criticisms that the critics of Cartesianism in turn received, even though I have my doubts as to the validity of these arguments. For if Wittgenstein and the postmodernists have a point in claiming that subjectivity does not come in the form of a monadic and ethereal self, and if this is truly at odds with existing or prevalent conceptions of ethics and politics, is there any principled reason that one should refrain from developing a wholly different take on subjectivity rather than rethink one’s ethico-political assumptions as well? Could it not just as well be argued that the significance of ethics and politics requires that one rethinks one’s ethico-political assumptions over and over again? And to what extent do ethics and politics really allow one to make demands on a theory of subjectivity? Hence, I will discuss the objections raised against anti-Cartesianism only to point out that these arguments may not be as compelling as they seem. In this way, I hope to contribute to the subjectivity debate, not just by offering a detailed description of Wittgenstein’s account of human being, but also by assessing the backlash that accounts such as these have received.

Let me however stress that this is not informed by my holding that the post-Cartesian development cannot be criticized. Indeed, rather than safeguarding all things post-Cartesian from criticism, I will point out that ethical and political arguments are used by the rethinkers of subjectivity as well, albeit to support the opposite cause. When the Ego is criticized, after all, it is often not simply the Cartesian subject that is under scrutiny but more precisely the self-absorbed, imperialistic and/or totalitarian subject;\textsuperscript{20} an outlook that is accordingly argued to be faulty not just for, say, ontological or phenomenological reasons, but also or even primarily for ethico-political reasons. This means that in so far as the validity of the ethico-political objections to post-Cartesianism can be questioned, the post-Cartesians themselves may be no less guilty of debatable reasoning of
this kind. Even though I will first and foremost focus on the validity of the accusations levelled against the overturning of traditional subjectivity, I want to question the legitimacy of ethico-political arguments for as well as against the rethinking of Cartesianism.21 For that such claims are made back and forth without reflecting upon their desirability is perhaps more harmful to the subjectivity debate than the fact that Wittgenstein’s contribution thereto has not yet been made fully explicit.

That my assessment of the backlash to post-Cartesianism in fact goes beyond the arguments of critics such as Murdoch, Frank and Benhabib will however only be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of the book, and this has got to do with the fact that there is more than one side to the validity of these counterclaims. As was already indicated by my having to make certain provisos in formulating my doubts about the soundness of the arguments against Wittgenstein and others, whether these claims have true force depends not only on whether they really outweigh the contentions of Descartes’ critics; it also depends on whether they flow from a correct representation of the anti- or non-Cartesian outlook.22 For even if ethical and political considerations always already override considerations as to the accuracy of an account of the nature of man, and ethics and politics indeed require that the critique of Cartesianism is not followed through completely, the objections to post-Cartesianism might still be declared null and void when those responsible for the demise of the Cartesian Ego do not or do not quite support the claims on which those objections are based. I will accordingly look at the exegetical validity of the backlash to post-Cartesianism as well.

What is more, I will look at this type of validity first of all, for although I doubt whether the objections mentioned make for proper counterarguments, I take them to point to an issue that is valid and interesting enough. They indicate that the consequences of the claim that the subject is always already embodied and embedded are not always already clear. Taking this claim seriously undoubtedly affects numerous assumptions we repeatedly make about human being – including those underlying our conceptions of the ethical and political – but the exact extent of this impact is not so easily determined. Does challenging the Cartesian inner-outer and self-other model for instance inevitably mean giving up each and every notion of privacy and of individuality? And if it does not necessarily have these consequences – as stated, Wittgenstein and others can be said to rethink rather than unthink subjectivity – what are the precise reasons that it does not result in a simple negation of the Cartesian take on the nature of man? Knowing that the declaration of the death of man need not be taken so literally does not automatically entail an insight into how it should be taken instead.

Hence, even though one might doubt the validity of the claim that (elements of) Cartesianism must be preserved in order for ethics and politics to be possible, one can grant those questioning post-Cartesianism that it is not self-evident what it means to embrace the latter position, while embracing it may
have consequences beyond the theory of subjectivity. As a result, I will not brush the arguments against the rethinkers of the subject aside but will take them as an incentive to have a closer look at the alternative offered by Wittgenstein. I will outline his version of the claim that the subject’s materiality and sociality are essential to it only to probe his reorientation of the relationship between mind and body and the relationship between individual and community in more detail. The two objectives of this study thus go hand in hand. Investigating the interpretational as well as the overall validity of some of the main arguments in the debate about the death of man also enables a fuller understanding of the Wittgensteinian variety of post-Cartesianism.

This combination of exegetical and systematic considerations will be reflected in the way the explorations that follow are set up. That is to say, the main chapters of this book are of an exegetical nature, examining various parts of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre in order to make his take on subjectivity fully explicit, but I will alternate these chapters with shorter intermezzos in which the larger systematic relevance of these exegetical efforts is brought to the fore. Let me lay out my precise plan of work.

1.4. Overview of the Main Argument and Structure

Chapter 2: A constructive reading of Wittgenstein’s method

Given that the later Wittgenstein is more famous for debunking than defending philosophical positions, I will start by explaining why he need not be considered to form the antidote or antithesis to philosophy. While Wittgenstein’s reputation has not stopped interpreters from presenting his insights as substantive contributions to philosophical debates – including, as I pointed out, the debate about subjectivity, to some extent – this does not alter the fact that his later writings contain some vehemently anti-philosophical statements with which any scholar hoping to use Wittgenstein positively or constructively needs to come to terms. Such is my aim in the chapter following this introduction.

Chapter 2 presents a close reading of what can be considered to be the *Investigations*’ ‘discourse on method’: §§ 89–133. These remarks are often taken to reject philosophy inherently mistaken, but I will argue that they identify a tension rather than a mistake inherent in theory formation, namely, that between philosophy’s craving for generality and the multifariousness that is of the essence of the phenomena it describes. This tension may explain why and how philosophical theory can go awry – when the focus is on generality and univocality at the cost of particularity and ambiguity – but it does not bring Wittgenstein to conclude that philosophy must be brought to a stop. After arguing that this is not altered by the fact that Wittgenstein dubs his contemplations ‘grammatical’ rather than traditionally philosophical, Chapter 2 ends by explaining how Wittgenstein incorporates the tension inherent in
philosophical theory formation into the way he himself contributes to such undertakings. Placing the particular in a larger framework and inscribing the general with particularities at one and the same time, Wittgenstein makes his qualms about philosophical theory into the driving force behind his distinctive philosophical method.

Chapter 3: Wittgenstein’s post-Cartesian subject

Hoping to have established the possibility of a constructive Wittgensteinian account of subjectivity, I will then consult his so-called philosophy of psychology in order to sketch the outlines of Wittgenstein’s version of post-Cartesianism. Chapter 3 discusses Wittgenstein’s main arguments against the idea that psychological phenomena constitute objects and processes occurring in a literally inner realm, but the lion’s share of the third chapter is devoted to describing his alternative to the Cartesian view on the relationship between mind and body, as well as to its accompanying take on the way self and other relate. According to Wittgenstein, as I will gradually make clear, the outer can be said to be the locus of the inner and can more specifically be said to be the locus of the inner against the background of the community of which someone is part. I will explain how this outlook neither amounts to a form of physicalism nor to a form of behaviourism and will introduce the notion of psychological patterns. Under this heading, I will also discuss the role of both nature and nurture in Wittgenstein’s account and reflect upon the meaning of the term ‘fellow (human) being’ when it comes to the sociality of Wittgensteinian subjectivity.

The final sections of the third chapter will bring these insights together by pointing to the similarities between Wittgenstein’s ruminations on the psyche and his remarks on aspect perception or seeing-as. I will argue that the latter concept can be used to capture the reality of psychological phenomena if they cannot be understood as objects or processes in a private interior realm. For similar to his analysis of perceptions like that of the duck-rabbit, Wittgenstein holds that seeing a person grieving or rejoicing is neither a matter of coolly observing behavioural characteristics nor of hypothesizing about a principally inaccessible state. On his view, one is able to see a person’s pain or joy itself when one takes this person’s (fine shades of) behaviour to be expressive of mind and places his or her doings and sayings in the context of a larger communal pattern. According to Wittgenstein, in short, psychological phenomena are aspects of the human being.

Intermezzo 1: The ethical (in)adequacy of post-Cartesian subjectivity

If the latter formulation of Wittgenstein’s outlook sounds somewhat elusive, this is not merely due to its being presented here out of the context of my exegetical endeavours. As was explained above, I will give an outline of