

THE SUBJECT

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Introduction

There is no single conception of the subject in philosophy but a complex array of ‘subjects’ satisfying different descriptions and roles in areas like metaphysics, ethics and epistemology (or theory of knowledge). However, it is possible to give some initial characterisations of the concepts of subjectivity most relevant to Derrida’s approach to philosophy.

One key notion of the subject is that of a centre of psychological life; a ‘self’ which remains numerically identical ‘beneath’ or ‘behind’ one’s actions or experiences. For Descartes, the very act of thinking or experiencing implies the existence of a psychological subject, which he subsequently identifies with an immaterial mind. The act of ‘reflection’ (roughly, the monitoring one’s inner life) thus acquires an epistemic privilege famously exemplified in his foundational assertion that the act of thinking (*cogito*) presupposes the existence of the ‘I’ who thinks.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant claims that this reflective ‘I think’ does not imply the existence of Cartesian mindstuff but is, rather, a ‘transcendental subject’, a condition of possibility for knowledge. For Kant, I can only represent the world as being a certain way if it is possible for me to be conscious of so representing it. The founder of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl – a philosopher who figures extensively in Derrida’s early work – asserts, likewise, that the transcendental subject is not *in* the world (like the psychological subject) but is the framework within which *any* world can be thought or experienced. For Husserl, like Descartes, the founding privilege of subjectivity derives from the subjective immediacy or ‘self-presence’ of mental states. He claims that every experience or thought has an *intentional content* by which it ‘refers’ to some object thought about or experienced. All that is relevant to the content of a thought, however, is

the manner in which its 'intentional object' is presented for the subject rather than the empirical existence or non-existence of that object. This self-presence supposedly affords an *a priori* framework in which philosophical questions about the nature of reality or the metaphysical status of certain kind of entity can be arbitrated independently of the truth or falsity of empirical claims in the natural or social sciences.

As we shall see, Derrida's work seeks to 'deconstruct' the idea of subjectivity as self-presence via two sets of interrelated arguments. The first involve time: Derrida denies that the temporal structure of experience is accessible from a first person point of view, thus throwing doubt on the metaphysical frameworks of Cartesianism and phenomenology. The second involve meaning or content: Derrida argues that signifying items are characterised by relationships or structures which deprive them of the stability or 'self-identity' that would enable them to be grasped by a reflecting subject. His commentator Rodolphe Gasché refers to these structures as 'quasi-transcendentals'. As Gasché's coinage implies, quasi-transcendentals are analogous to 'conditions of possibility' for knowledge or meaning posited in transcendental philosophy. They are also 'conditions of impossibility' because their recalcitrance to reflection deprives them of the privileged role assumed by subjectively accessible conditions.

Quasi-transcendentals such as trace and *différance* are 'phenomenologically-derived' but are not exclusive to the structure of human self-consciousness or awareness. This aspect of Derrida's thought aligns him with modern philosophical naturalists who seek to explicate psychological or epistemic notions in terms which abstract from the supposed data of first-person mental life (The 'functionalist' proposal that psychological terms like 'belief' be defined in terms of causal roles within abstractly defined physical systems being a relevant point of comparison).

However, while Derrida's work deflates the epistemic primacy of the 'first person', it exhibits a concern with the continuity of philosophical concepts that is quite foreign to the spirit of contemporary naturalism. Thus in 'Eating Well' Derrida addresses the anti-subjectivism which has characterised much poststructuralist philosophy and Anglophone 'theory' with characteristic reserve (PTS 256). While conceding that thinkers like Foucault have transformed the role of the subject, he argues that these alterations testify to necessary possibility of its return - though the revenant need no

longer be recognisably 'human' as opposed to 'animal', or 'alive' as opposed to 'non-living' (PTS 268-269). The 'classical' conception of subjectivity deconstructed in Derrida's work conforms to a certain 'metaphysics of presence' or epistemic proximity. It implies a boundary demarcating what is 'proper' and proximate to a subject (its mental states, its body, its meanings, etc.) and what inheres in 'other' subjects or non-subjective things. Deconstruction contributes to a philosophical account of a non-classical subject whose 'phenomenology' is contingent upon and 'open' to historical or technical environments which are also its quasi-transcendental conditions. However, as we shall see below, the classical subject exerts a hold on Derrida's thinking where he qualifies this contingency in the most radical manner: as a relation to an 'other' so transcendent that it resists conceptualisation through rational methods of belief-fixation.

The Phenomenological Subject

Husserlian phenomenology seeks to clarify philosophical concepts by recovering their sources of meaning in intentional experiences. Derrida's early works like *Speech and Phenomena* and *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* generally seize on some purported feature of phenomenological subjectivity to show that it can only fulfil this sense-bestowing function if it exceeds phenomenological reflection in some way. Derrida attempts to show that phenomenology is afflicted by the very insecurity which Husserl hoped to resolve in areas like the foundations of mathematics, because its language is incapable of determining the field to which it applies (SP 10–12).

The insecurity is exhibited most clearly in Husserl's account of time-consciousness. Its starting point is the transcendental assumption that the content of our experience of objective succession depends upon the organisation of subjective time. This would not be possible if each phase of my experience of (say) a melody were a 'temporal atom' intending only the present note. Somehow the *successiveness* of the notes must be given as well. Husserl explains this by analysing experience of the 'now' into three indissociable aspects: 1) an intending of the current phase of the object; 2) a 'retention' or primary remembrance of the previous experience; 3) a 'protention' anticipating the

experience to come. In retention, he claims, I ‘intuit’ the pastness of the past; living through the expired consciousness while the current impression is *continuously modified* by the upsurge of a new ‘now’.

Derrida locates a tension between this continuist model and Husserl’s need to ensure fidelity to phenomenological fact. He claims that Husserl’s account implies two ‘apparently irreconcilable possibilities’: a) that the temporal present is constituted in relation to an ‘non-phenomenologisable’ continuum in which retention just shades into ordinary recollection and b) that ‘the source of [phenomenological] certitude in general is the primordial character of the living now’ – thus distinguishing retention radically from the remembering of times not contiguous with the ‘now point’ in the temporal continuum (SP 67). The first possibility implies – against Husserl’s explicit intent – that the enabling structures of temporality must be phenomenologically inaccessible because the continuum is not a plausible candidate for intuitive consciousness. None of its ‘parts’ exist as a ‘self-identical’ object but each is constituted by relations in continuous flux (SP 65–6). Thus the absence of another now cannot be accounted for in terms of the difference between a determinate ‘now point’ and a similarly self-identical past ‘now’ in retention – phenomenologically, they are equally indeterminable. Derrida proposes, instead, that we should account for the representability of conscious life in terms of the essential repetition implied by the ‘trace’ of a past that inflects each ‘instant’ of consciousness; a ‘bending back’ or fold ‘irreducible in presence or self-presence’ (SP 68, cf. OG 184). Whereas the content of Husserl’s retained past tracks the ‘now’ impression it modifies, the content of the trace – if it is permissible to speak in these terms – is constrained by ‘the movement of repetition’ or by relations within a ‘general text’ or ‘weave’ of traces in which there is no stabilising centre such as Husserl’s notional present.

Scriptural Subjectivity

Any analogy between phenomenological time and the trace structure is thus, for Derrida, both provisional and inadequate (SP 68, M 13). Like all quasi-transcendentals, ‘trace’ is ‘topic neutral’. It does not qualify the structure of retention more than, for example, it

characterises the structure of signification. Thus Derrida also describes the system of traces as a ‘generalised writing’ – a trope drawing on writing’s ambiguous status as an external technical medium which insinuates itself in subjective life by emancipating meaning from local contexts of interpretation. Following Husserl’s lead, Derrida sees the technicization of thought wrought by graphic inscription as a condition of historical conceptions of science as a transcultural search for objectivity or axiomatic completeness (EHG 87). However, *generalised writing* – or the system of traces – is not limited to the empirical activity of writing but is ‘the essence and the content of these activities themselves’ (OG 9).

Derrida holds that linguistic signs exemplify the trace-structure because their meaning depends on contrastive relationships within linguistic systems (a position he derives initially from Saussurean linguistics but which is arguably developed with greater logical resource in the work of Quine and Davidson). However, he importantly qualifies this ‘holism’, claiming that this interdependence deprives systems of any closure or finality. There is no referent or ‘transcendental signified’ which removes the dependence of signs upon other signs, or, as Husserl would say, ‘fulfils’ a signifying intention in the thing or state of affairs intended. The experience of a thing, for Derrida, is thus already a ‘sign’ or text or a ‘grapheme’ (in the generalised sense) in so far as its content depends upon a temporal, cognitive and linguistic context that is ‘always on the move’ (OG 49).

The subject of thought, experience and intentionality is, accordingly, an ‘effect’ of a mobile network of signifying states structurally open to modification or recontextualisation. *Différance* captures this essential openness by capitalising on the homonymy between the French verbs for differing and deferring. The identity or stability of the system of traces is differed-deferred because ‘vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element’ (M 13–17). This bares comparison, once again, with Husserl’s concept of protention, but it is not a subjective anticipation or synthesis.

Materialism and Naturalism

The affiliation between deconstruction and a philosophical naturalism inspired by work in contemporary biology, artificial intelligence and cognitive science is acknowledged in

Derrida's frequent discussions of 'cybernetics', computing, and technologies whereby experience is 'archived' in scriptural or digital media (See OG 9, 47, WD 228, AF). This 'materialist' tendency in Derridean thought is exemplified early on in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' where the phenomenologically-derived notion of 'trace' is applied to a reading of Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*.

In the *Project* Freud sought to apply late nineteenth century discoveries concerning the structure and function of nervous tissue to a model of the physical realisation of mental functions. The explanatory 'atom' of Freud's model is the 'neurone', a nerve cell that can transmit or receive quantities of excitation (Qn). Freud's account of psychological function confronts the problem of how a system composed of interconnected populations of neurones can be receptive to novel stimulations (perceptions) and retain the influence of past excitations – that is, exercise the function of memory. Memory is accounted for by what is now referred to as the 'Hebb rule' in theories of neural networks. Freud proposed that the resistance exhibited by pathways through a special system of 'psychic' or □ neurones would be *reduced* by the passage of Qn (□ neurones resist because they are protected by a sheath of perceptual neurones, thus receiving lower doses of stimulation). The 'memory' of past stimulations is represented by the lower resistances associated with frequently stimulated pathways.

For Derrida, the significance of Freud's account of memory lies less in its neurological plausibility than in the way it both applies and 'displaces' a model of mental representation as a kind of 'brain writing' whose inscriptions are unproblematically present or absent like marks on a white sheet. The scriptural metaphor is warranted in so far as memory is 'incised' by the 'breaching' of paths through the □ system. However, as Derrida points out, it is impossible to identify the memory trace with a particular pathway or passage since memory *just is* differences: 'an equality of resistance to breaching, or an equivalence of the breaching forces, would eliminate any preference in the choice of itinerary. Memory would be paralysed. It is the difference between breaches which is the true origin of memory, and thus of psyche' (WD 201). In the first instance, then, memory is not represented by absolute quantities in the neural system but – as with the Saussurean sign – by a differential text.

As before, these differences are *deferred* rather than constituting a closed system. The memory trace cannot correspond to a particular ensemble of such differences because its function requires a re-breaching and thus a change in both absolute and relative resistance. Thus there is no original mnemonic-inscription that could be stored and self-identically repeated in recollection: '[Repetition] does not happen to an original impression; its possibility is already there, in the resistance offered *the first time* by the psychical neurones. Resistance itself is possible only if the opposition of forces lasts and is repeated at the beginning. It is the very idea of a first time which becomes enigmatic' (WD 202). Thus as Daniel Dennett has recently suggested with regard to the neural correlates of conscious experience, it is always an 'open question' what the psycho-neural trace 'signifies'; its essence or content depends on how it is subsequently deployed within the system.

Technics

Derrida's use of scriptural idioms to displace the subject does not disavow the need for mental or extra-mental agencies to implement the functions of the psyche. However, by emphasising the non-local, differential character of the trace, Derrida allows us to think of these 'writing machines' as distributed and inter-connected in a manner irreducible to the time of phenomenology: 'The "subject" of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between strata: . . . the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found' (WD 226-7).

Accordingly, we can no longer think of public media of expression as expressing (more or less inadequately) an inner life whose intrinsic character would be unaffected by social texts. The trace is intrinsically extrinsic: a function of the way in which it is repeated or re-deployed. The importance of repetition is brought out in Derrida's reading of J L Austin's *How to do Things with Words*, where he argues that for a sign to function in normal or 'serious' contexts it must be transferable or 'iterable' into 'deviant' contexts, altering its semantic or performative value (LI 12). Iteration is not the repetition of some self-identical attribute, however, because there is nothing to a sign *beyond* rules

determining that some mark is a token of a given (semantic, syntactic or performative) type. However a sign being iterable means that its deviant occurrences (the ones that ‘break’ the rules) are essential to its ‘proper’ or serious uses. There can thus be no pure form or meaning corresponding to the essence of the sign – a principle that Derrida extends to all contentful states such as pictorial inscriptions or experiences (LI 10).

The principle of iterability can be seen as undermining the very possibility of the subject as conceived in modern epistemology or ethical theory. However, Derrida re-conceptualises the subject as an ‘assemblage’ of texts/agencies with no principled boundary. For example, Derrida argues that a distinctly modern form of subjectivity – the authorship and experience of ‘literature’ – is predicated on technologies and practices which, as in the Freudian psyche, both ‘censor’ and enable the dissemination of texts. Thus while Kafka’s parable ‘Before the Law’ is typographically identical to a passage in the penultimate chapter of *The Trial*, the former is a distinct ‘work’ with a kind of legal personhood: ‘If someone were to change one word or alter a single sentence, a judge could always declare him or her to have infringed upon, violated, or disfigured the text’ (AL 211). The ‘singularity’ of the work is regulated by conventions *which constitute our experience of a unique literary object*. These might be thought of as mere adjuncts to the work – much as Kant regarded *parerga* such as picture frames or the draperies on statues. However, the ‘literariness’ of the work is constituted by its legal status. The border of the *ergon* (work) depends on its ‘outside’ (*parergon*). By the same token, framing always involves the disposition and control of iterable marks or ‘traits’ which can be iterated in ways that transform the framing/forming of works: ‘The frame is essentially constructed and therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame. If it had any’ (TP 73, cf. AF 25–28). New scriptural technologies such as the Internet may subvert the modern institution of copyright – introduced, after all, to regulate printed matter – by allowing unregulated distribution and re-grafting of texts. Since the character and content of experience is determined by its modes of repetition, storage or framing, ‘what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way’ (AF 18).

For Derrida experience is technically modifiable through its modes of reproduction because it *already* has the iterative structure of generalised writing. This position has the virtue of removing certain obstacles to thinking about the subject

naturalistically. By distributing and externalising the functions of the subject, it implies that subjectivity is too dependent on the world to be the constitutive ‘origin’ of it (as in Husserl) and thus is more easily seen as amenable to causal-scientific explanation. In this sense, at least, the quasi-transcendental must be rigorously distinguished from the transcendental. However, while Derrida is deflationary in this regard, he has consistently affiliated himself with thinkers who – like Levinas and Heidegger – seek to address conditions of thought or experience that are radically indescribable within *any* ontology or scientific metaphysics. *Différance* and the other quasi-transcendentals are sometimes viewed as ‘pre-ontological’ in this sense.

Alterity or Otherwise?

In his recent work, Derrida has been especially concerned to show that there are pre-ontological conditions of thought that are ‘ethical’, testifying to an encounter with an ‘other’ whose nature is indeterminable in principle. This ‘alterity’ can be seen as consequent upon the lack of any final context within which competing principles of judgement can be arbitrated. Iterability implies, as we have seen, that the text is *both* context-bound *and* transcends any *given* context, supposing ‘both that there are only contexts, that nothing exists outside context . . . but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of nonclosure. The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside’ (LI 152). Thinking, acting, judging, etc., are thus always and essentially ‘precipitate’ or ahead of themselves – not because there are no rules but because rules have no existence beyond their instances in which they are applied and the contexts regulating these applications (See ‘Force of Law’ in DPJ and AR). Any application of a rule – is thus potentially also an act of reinterpretation or invention: ‘Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely’ (AR 251).

There is a deliberate conflation of the normative and the descriptive in this ‘can or ought’. One cannot *not* be precipitate but here – where the case of legal decision is being considered – one *should* in acting, modify or re-institute the context or ‘frame’. For

Derrida the principle underlying this ‘ought’ is not, as in Kant, determinable by reason and thus replaces the principle of autonomy – according to which the responsible subject must be the sole author of its action – with a principle of ‘heteronomy’. Responsibility is ‘excessive’ and thus undermines the subject as ‘a principle of calculability’ – even if, Derrida cautions, calculation is *also* an absolute moral and political necessity (PTS 272, cf. OCF).

In these ethical ruminations Derrida consistently leans on Levinas’ conception of subjectivity as a kind of ‘hostage’ persecuted by an alterity which – as in the logic of the trace – always precedes any act of consciousness or identification. This occasionally leads to the inflation of indeterminability to the status of a quasi-mystical transcendence. But it should not be forgotten that Derrida has criticised the Levinasian notion that the other should also be seen as transcending our epistemological capacities (WD 126, see ‘LEVINAS’). Here it is important to bear in mind that a language of absolute ‘alterity’ or otherness finds its place within the framework of transcendental philosophy where the subject, or some equivalent notion like ‘Language’ or Heidegger’s *Dasein* (which Derrida describes as analogous to a transcendental subject [PTS 273]) still operates as an organising principle. It is, arguably, only within the ‘super-context’ of some such constitutive framework that we can intelligibly speak of an ‘other’ which transcends it. Thus it remains unclear whether the core arguments developed in Derrida’s work on language, mental representation or transcendental subjectivity can ever licence the rhetoric of ‘radical transcendence’.

Major Texts on the Subject

Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry, 1978 (EHG)

Speech and Phenomena, 1973 (SP)

Following the prospectus of Husserl’s late essay ‘The Origin of Geometry’, EHG argues that phenomenology cannot restrict itself to a ‘static’ description of intentional experiences but must also consider the role of language and technology in constituting ideal meanings. SP problematises Husserl’s attempt to isolate a pure subjective sphere of

expression untainted by any involvement with the pragmatic or associative dimensions of language.

Related material:

“‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology’

‘Form and Meaning’

Writing and Difference (Inc. ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’, ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology’), 1978 (WD).

‘Cogito’ criticises Foucault’s history of the Enlightenment exclusion and medicalisation of madness. Derrida argues that Foucault’s invocation of madness as the ‘other’ of reason take insufficient account of reason’s capacity to transcend historical structures – as exemplified in Descartes’ use of ‘hyperbolic’ doubt in *Meditation I*.

Of Grammatology, 1976 (OG).

Margins of Philosophy (inc. ‘Différance’, ‘Signature Event Context’, ‘The Ends of Man’, ‘White Mythology’, ‘Form and Meaning’), 1982 (M).

‘Différance’ is a synoptic piece exploring the interweaving of *différance* in a range of subjectivist and anti-subjectivist philosophies. ‘Signature’ articulates Derrida’s single best idea – ‘iterability’ – and is crucial for understanding the interplay between subjectivity, writing, social practices and institutions addressed in later work.

The Truth in Painting (inc. ‘Parergon’), 1987 (TP).

‘Parergon’ explores the peculiar logic of the frame or ‘parergonality’ in a reading of Kant’s ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’. As suggested above, we can think of framing practices

and technologies as, in various ways, externalising the formative function of the imagination.

Related material:

‘The Purveyor of Truth’

‘Before the Law’

The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, (inc. *Le facteur de la vérité*, [The Purveyor of Truth], ‘To Speculate - on “Freud”’), 1987 (PC).

‘Purveyor’ is a critical reading of Lacan’s seminar on Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’.

Derrida criticizes Lacan for reading the letter in Poe’s story as signifying the ‘truth’ of female sexuality as castration. ‘To Speculate’ develops some themes of ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’, notably the way the structural delay at the origin of the secondary process accounts for the functional non-specificity of ‘pleasure’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It also examines the role of autobiographical speech acts in inaugurating the ‘scientificity’ of psychoanalysis.

Related Material:

‘Otobiographies’ in *The Ear of the Other*, 1985 (EO).

‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’

EHG

Of Spirit, 1987 (OP)

Among the broader themes covered here are Heidegger’s discussion of the animal and later claims that the hermeneutics of Being requires a pre-ontological ‘event’ of affirmation or ‘pledging’.

Related Material:

‘Ulysses Gramophone’

‘Eating Well’
‘Force of Law’

Limited Inc, (inc. ‘Signature Event Context’, ‘Limited Inc a b c . . .’, ‘Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion’), LI (1988).

Points: interviews 1974-1994 (inc. ‘Eating Well: or the calculation of the subject’), 1995 (PTS)

‘Eating Well’ provides useful and largely accessible introduction to Derrida’s views on the subject.

Acts of Literature (inc. ‘Before the Law’, ‘Ulysses Gramophone: Here Say Yes in Joyce’, ‘The Law of Genre’), 1992 (AL).

‘Before the Law’ is a reading of Kafka’s parable ‘Before the Law’. It lucidly addresses the constitutive effects of framing and the function of authorship. Worth comparing to Foucault’s ‘What is an Author?’.

Acts of Religion (inc. ‘Force of Law’, ‘Hostipitality’), 2002 (AR).

Archive Fever, 1995 (AF).

This book takes up the themes of archiving, inscription and the technically mediated character of subjectivity and links them to the notion of messianic time.

Related Material:

‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’

‘To Speculate - on “Freud”’

Spectres of Marx

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