

Transcendental Intersubjectivity and the Objects of the Human Sciences

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ABSTRACT: In this essay I show that Structuralism, in order to combat the impression that it is "untenable and outmoded," needs to be attached to a phenomenology of transcendental intersubjectivity. My argument for this conclusion is: 1) that Peter Caws is right in arguing that Structuralism needs a notion of the transcendental subject because its objects, qua intentional, presuppose such a subject; 2) the objects with which Structuralism is concerned are objects in the sense that Husserl speaks of objects of the spiritual world; and, 3) the spiritual world, indeed the world in general, is constituted intersubjectively. Therefore, Structuralism needs a notion of transcendental intersubjectivity.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans cet essai, je démontre que le structuralisme doit être rattaché à une phénoménologie de l'intersubjectivité transcendantale afin d'éviter l'impression qu'il donne d'être «intenable et démodé». J'appuie cette conclusion à l'aide des arguments suivants: 1) Peter Caws a raison d'arguer que le structuralisme a besoin d'une notion de sujet transcendantal parce que ses objets, en tant qu'intentionnels, présupposent un tel sujet; 2) les objets dont s'occupe le structuralisme sont des objets au sens où Husserl parle d'objets du monde spirituel; et 3) le monde spirituel, en fait le monde en général, est constitué de façon intersubjective. Ainsi, le structuralisme requiert une notion d'intersubjectivité transcendantale.

Structuralism and Subjectivity

One of the central components of Structuralism is the decentering of the subject within structural analysis. This displacing of the subject places Structuralism into direct conflict with the egocentric approach of German phenomenology. Despite the fact that French thinkers of the late twentieth century seem to epitomize the philosophical opposition to the "philosophy of the subject," David Carr claims, in his recent book *The Paradox of Subjectivity*, this anti-subjectivity can be found in paradigmatic form in the

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work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's critique is "broader and deeper" than is that of the Marxists, psychoanalysts and structuralists who dominated French thought in the 1950s through the 1980s, Carr says, not in the least because it moves that critique beyond the being of the subject to "being as such¹."

That Heidegger should be taken as the paradigm of the critique of the philosophy of the subject should not be too surprising. "It is Heidegger who provides an account of just what the metaphysics of the subject is and how the philosophers of the modern period, from Descartes to Husserl, fit into it²." This Heideggerian account of the history of modern philosophy colors the views of those thinkers who fall under the rubrics of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Structuralism. But while Heidegger might be taken as *the* example of an anti-subjectivity, his teacher and mentor Edmund Husserl is surely the chief representative of the German phenomenology against which Structuralism's decentering of the subject is contrasted. It is Husserl who in founding phenomenology declared it an egocentric philosophy saying "transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense" and "there is only one *radical* self-investigation, and it is phenomenological³." This egocentric philosophy of the subject, phenomenology, was, to a great extent, introduced to France through the critical screen of Heidegger. For instance, Emmanuel Lévinas' dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, was one of the first books in France to address phenomenology and it was through this work that many French thinkers became aware of Husserl's work. And, Lévinas quite openly admits that his reading is strongly influenced by the work of Heidegger⁴.

Given the Heideggerian gloss on much of French thought in the latter half of the twentieth century, we should not be at all surprised by Structuralism's easy decentering of the subject. But this move against subjectivity should not just be seen as a particular cultural phenomenon brought on by rampant Heideggerianism. The structuralists had their own reasons for decentering the subject from its phenomenological priority. Jacques Lacan borrowed Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the split between signifier and signified and transposed that line into the subject. Claude Lévi-Strauss dropped the subject when he came to see that it need not be taken into account when describing the structures of myth and kinship. Louis Althusser urged that we free ourselves from "Hegelian presuppositions" such as subjectivity in order to be able to see that it is because a process has a structure that it can be explained⁵. And Michel Foucault prophesized the eraser of man "like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea⁶."

But in the wake of the death of the subject some odd things happen. Peter Caws has rightly pointed out that Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that structures have a sort of agency of their own is terribly unfortunate⁷. It seems that

without a transcendental subject in the picture, myths think, cultural structures create themselves, texts write themselves, and so on. But if I took a myth to dinner, would it pick up the check? These unfortunate references to a nonexistent agency serve to show that something is missing from such an account. Michel Foucault falls victim to this misplacing of agency in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* where he contends that "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective." He says "there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives," this is the intentionality of power, but "this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject⁸." If one needs to make reference to agency, why not make reference to an agent?

Caws sees the problematic relationship of the subject and Structuralism as a cause of the belief that Structuralism is "untenable and outmoded." But, any attempt to return a notion of the subject to Structuralism is bound to be met with skepticism given the structuralists' attacks on subjectivity and the ever present confusion of the transcendental subject of phenomenology with the ego of Cartesianism⁹. Still, if Structuralism is to be seen as a viable philosophy through which one can speak philosophically about the human sciences, then it seems that transcendental subjectivity needs to be returned to it.

Part of the problem in bringing about this return, is the confusion of the transcendental subject with the psyche. The psyche is the ego in the world and as such it is the ego from which Descartes sought to deduce the whole of his metaphysics. But this psyche, or Cartesian subject, is just that subjectivity against which the structuralist critique has its effect. So, in confusing these two notions of the subject, one believes that the structuralist critique must push aside the transcendental subject as well as the Cartesian subject. But this is not the case.

Caws' argument for the transcendental subject is, not too surprisingly, transcendental. We know that this subject is because certain things about the world lead us to conclude that it must be. Oddly enough those things which point to the subject are the very objects of structuralist analysis and of the human sciences. It is because the objects of the human sciences are intentional objects that we can reason via a transcendental argument that there must be "intenders" of those objects. If there are objects whose existence is purely intentional, then there must be intending subjects who intend and sustain them. As Caws says, "it is not so easy – nor perhaps so wise – to get rid of the subject, since it plays an essential role¹⁰." While certain structuralists have argued against the subject in the world, they have been arguing in the wrong place. For, it is not in the world, but over against the world, intending the world, that one finds the subject.

It is by realizing that the very objects which structuralist analysis treats are

intentional objects in need of intending subjects that leads us to conclude that Structuralism is in a sense completed by a treatment of the transcendental subject. But it is also this point which leads to an interesting suggestion concerning the further relationship between Structuralism and phenomenology. This relationship lies in the identification of the objects of the human sciences with the objects of the spiritual world.

Intentional Objects as Spiritual Objects

In thinking of the intentional objects that are the objects of the human sciences Husserl's notion of objects of the spiritual world may readily come to mind. The parallels between these two sorts of objects (their intentional nature, the distinction between them and the objects of the natural sciences and the natural world, etc.) lead to the suggestion that the objects of the human sciences are objects of the spiritual world. But this point can be seen as more than simple conjecture based upon some common characteristics, an examination of the two types of objects shows that they are in fact identical.

Husserl apparently sees the objects of the spiritual world and the objects of the human sciences as identical. In setting out to discuss the distinction between soul and spirit in *Ideas II* he writes: "On it [this distinction] obviously are dependent the oppositions between *nature* and the *world of the spirit*, between the natural sciences and the human sciences, the sciences of the spirit¹¹." In this passage Husserl seems to identify the human sciences with "the sciences of the spirit" and he opposes these to the natural sciences. The distinction between these sciences is based upon the distinction between the natural and the spiritual worlds. These worlds and their relationship need to be explored before the full identification of the objects of the human sciences and the objects of the spiritual world can be demonstrated.

Despite David Carr's claims about Heidegger's paradigmatic anti-subjectivity, we might find the Heideggerian distinction between the *Welt* and the *Umwelt* helpful in analyzing this relationship. Borrowing this distinction, we might say that all animals have an environment or surrounding world, an *Umwelt*, but only human animals also have a world, a *Welt*. The *Umwelt* is the locus not of the law of gravity, but of gravity as such. It is where snow falls in an avalanche, where mud slides shear off mountainsides, where old hollowed out trees fall in the forest. It is where all animals – human as well as non-human – live and breathe, hunt and gather, eat, reproduce, and die. But human animals, at least, are also capable of having a *Welt*. In fact we humans cannot escape having a *Welt* as well as an *Umwelt*. It is in this *Welt* that the law of gravity is, where the Pythagorean theorem is, it is the locus of texts, of this essay and these thoughts. What makes the *Welt* a world rather than an environment is, I suggest, the addition of spirit, of *Geist*. In this sense then we

can see that the natural world and its objects correspond to the *Umwelt*, whereas the spiritual world and its objects correspond to the *Welt*.

What the relationship between the natural world and the spiritual world shows us is that the sorts of objects that go into making up the spiritual world are just those sorts of objects that comprise the objects of the human sciences. These objects of the human sciences are intentional, as are the objects of the spiritual world. It is the case that the objects of both the human sciences and the spiritual world require intending subjects to cause and sustain their existence. The objects of the natural sciences, by contrast, require no such intentionality on the part of subjects in order to come to be and to continue to be. It is their status as intentional that identifies the objects of the human sciences and the spiritual world.

"We are living," Caws writes, "in a world sustained by sheer intentionality," that is to say we live in the human world, in the spiritual world. But, he goes on to claim each of us lives "in his or her own world¹²." This point would seem to follow from the contention that Structuralism needs the transcendental subject. Each subject intends the world individually; the world is, after all, my world. My intentions are *my* intentions. But this suggestion that each of us has "his or her own world" sounds as though each subject is *solus ipse*¹³. But is this really the most accurate description of the world? Is it not the case that while my world is my world, it is also our world?

Transcendental Subjectivity as Transcendental Intersubjectivity

Transcendental subjectivity leads necessarily to transcendental intersubjectivity. The connection between the subjective and the intersubjective can be made in two ways: first, an examination of Husserl's notion of the constitution of objects (spiritual and natural) shows that the meaningfulness of the world presupposes the co-intending of the object by others and, second, Husserl's *reductio* of the sphere of ownness shows the impossibility of having a world that is wholly my own.

Caws' account of Structuralism includes reference to the importance of a notion relevant to our topic that he labels "instruction." Instruction "is what accounts for the replication of structures from mind to mind¹⁴." It is divided into two principle types: endosomatic, or instruction via "interior" or genetic means, and exosomatic, or instruction via "exterior" means. It is this latter form of instruction that is relevant to our discussion of intersubjectivity. Through exosomatic instruction an individual subject takes in mental structures from other individual subjects. In this way the cultural objects of the given subject's society are instilled in him or her. Once a subject has been instructed in this way, we may safely surmise that he or she can get about the task of co-intending those same cultural objects. Because exosomatic instruction is

dependent upon the existence, and presence, of others, it is an intersubjective activity, i.e., it is an activity that is taking place among two or more individual subjects.

At this juncture it might be important to distinguish the intersubjective from the intrasubjective. Lucien Goldmann, in his "Structure: Human Reality and Methodological Concept," seeks to isolate the structures of human experience. "Between the two extremes of individual problems concerning particular events and the most general categories of the human mind," he says, "... are situated all structures and structuralist analysis¹⁵." Given this, the appropriate question that must be asked concerning any "human phenomenon" is "who is the subject¹⁶?" Goldmann's answer is that the subject is a transpersonal or collective subject. His example is of John and James lifting a table. The subject, taken as agent, who lifts the table is neither John nor James, nor even John and James, but "John-and-James." Any communication taking place between John and James is intrasubjective, within the new singular subject John-and-James. Goldmann claims that only at the intrasubjective level can one take another as a subject and not simply as an object. While this notion of the intrasubjective, transpersonal subject deserves more attention than I can give it here, I want to suggest that one possible objection to it is that under this scenario the whole notion of subjectivity is threatened. How is a collective subject any different from no subject at all¹⁷? As a point of distinction between intersubjective and intrasubjective activity, we need only consider that no claim to a new, transpersonal subject is made when one looks to the intersubjective.

Husserl's view of intersubjectivity is "more fundamental" than is the account of instruction, in that he is not just concerned with the subject's "being confronted with intersubjective meaning, understood as meaning-formations (such as social institutions, cultural products etc.), which have their origin in community and tradition, and which therefore refer me to my fellowmen and ancestors¹⁸." Husserl's account of intersubjectivity is principally concerned with how the world is constituted. Phenomenological constitution is the bringing to light, articulation, or actualization of an object¹⁹. What is "more fundamental" about Husserl's account is that he claims that even "my perceptual experience is an experience of intersubjectively accessible being, that is being which does not exist for me only, but for everybody²⁰." For Husserl my very experience of the world involves the intersubjective constitution of it, not just my own subjective constitution of it.

In regards to the "'intersubjective constitution' of the world," Husserl means "the total system of manners of givenness, however hidden, and also of modes of validity for egos²¹." It is through the intersubjective constitution of the world that "the world as it is for us becomes understandable as a

structure of meaning formed out of elementary intentionalities... And meaning is never anything but meaning in modes of validity, that is, as related to intending ego-subjects²²." So, for Husserl the world is constituted intersubjectively and this constitution is what makes the world meaningful for us as intending subjects. The very ability for the world to be meaningful arises from its intersubjective constitution by us. An exploration of the "intentional origins" of the world would, Husserl says, "leave no meaningful question unanswered²³."

We can now recall that the objects of the human sciences, the objects with which Structuralism is ultimately concerned are themselves intentional objects. These objects are also the locus of meaning in our world; they are "signiferous" in Caws' phrasing²⁴. As such, under Husserl's understanding, these objects could only be constituted as objects by means of an intersubjective constitution that invests them with meaning. This intersubjective constitution is, in essence, a cointending of the meaningful structures of the world, and the world as a whole, by a multiplicity of subjects. This identification of intersubjectivity and cointentionality rests upon Husserl's recognition that we cannot help but "see the purely subjective in its own self-enclosed pure context as intentionality²⁵." If subjectivity is intentionality, then intersubjectivity is inter-intentionality, or cointentionality.

A slightly more problematic account of how transcendental subjectivity leads to transcendental intersubjectivity is Husserl's "reduction to the sphere of ownness" in the *Cartesian Meditations*. Husserl gives this account in order to clarify the problem of my experience of others via empathy. This problem, he says, involves "the founding of a *transcendental theory of the Objective world*²⁶." Included in the objective world is not only nature, but also "Objects with 'spiritual' predicates," so the problem of my experience of others also involves my experience of the spiritual world. Referring back to the constitution of spiritual objects, he says "these Objects, in respect of their origin and sense, refer us to subjects, usually other subjects, and their actively constituting intentionality²⁷." Thus it is the case that here again Husserl states that the objects of the spiritual world are constituted intersubjectively. This is true of all "cultural" objects among which he cites "books, tools, [and] works of any kind." These objects all possess a "thereness-for-everyone" which, he says, is "cointended wherever we speak of Objective actuality²⁸."

Given that all of this rides upon the problem of my experience of others, Husserl sets about to ground that experience apodictically. This is the purpose of the so-called reduction to the sphere of ownness. This is a "so-called" reduction in the sense that one should not confuse it with the phenomenological reduction upon which so much of Husserl's phenomenology is based. The movement to the sphere of ownness is in fact an "abstraction from everything that transcendental constitution gives me as

Other²⁹." This abstraction begins with the natural, given world in which I find "myself and others." I can immediately abstract from the others in order to be left "alone." But, this is not enough; I must keep at the abstraction until I remove everything that is not "non-alien" to me. Once I have reached this level of ownness it becomes obvious that whatever it is that I constitute there belongs to me as "a component of [my] own concrete essence"³⁰. I eventually find that inherent in "my own concrete essence" is, in some sense, a "transcendental world," that is the objective world³¹. But, as stated above, objectivity implies the cointending of a thereness-for-everyone, and a thereness-for-everyone entails an "everyone." So, inherent in my "own concrete essence" is a sense of everyone, of other subjects. Even in the reduction to the sphere of ownness one cannot escape the intersubjective nature of the world.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that Structuralism, in order to combat the impression that it is "untenable and outmoded," needs to be attached to a phenomenology of transcendental intersubjectivity. My argument for this conclusion is that Peter Caws is right in arguing that Structuralism needs a notion of the transcendental subject because its objects, qua intentional, presuppose such a subject. Additionally, the objects with which Structuralism is concerned are objects in the sense that Husserl speaks of objects of the spiritual world. The spiritual world, indeed the world in general, is constituted intersubjectively. Therefore, Structuralism needs a notion of transcendental intersubjectivity.

The effects of bringing such a notion to bare on structural analysis can be demonstrated by returning to the passage from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* quoted above. As already noted, Foucault claims "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective"³². Husserl's identification of intentionality and subjectivity already makes this claim problematic; how can something be both intentional and nonsubjective when to say one is to say the other? Intentionality is the domain of subjectivity in that as all consciousness is consciousness of something (i.e., intentional) so too is all consciousness someone's consciousness³³. It is because consciousness belongs to some subject that intentionality belongs to that subject.

Even beyond this problem, we can see more if we consider the passage at length:

If in fact they [power relations] are intelligible, this is not because they are the effect of another instance that "explains" them, but rather because they are imbued,

through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function); the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power), tactics which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems: the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them ...³⁴.

The passage is replete with references to misplaced agency. Power relations are "imbued" with "calculation," yet Foucault insists there is no "calculator." There is no such power that does not have "aims and objectives," but there is no one to "take aim," no one to "set objectives." Surely Foucault is right in claiming that these aims and objectives, this calculation, does not result from the choices and decision of an "individual subject." Who could be so naïve as to think that it does, or could? But this does not mean that there is no subject for the calculations, aims, and objectives. Once again, if one needs to make reference to agency, why not make reference to an agent?

What Foucault has described in this passage on power relations is an intentional object that is constituted intersubjectively. No one subject is responsible for the entirety of the object, it seems implausible to suggest that any one subject could even know the object in its entirety. Still, it is the intersubjective cointentionality of the object that allows it to be created and which sustains it. When we recognize that correlative to an intentional object is transcendental intersubjectivity, we see that such things as power relations cannot be accurately described as "intentional and nonsubjective," but should rather be described as intentional and intersubjective³⁵.

Notes

- 1 Carr, David, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 4-6.
- 2 Ibid., 6. For a similar claim see, Ferry, Luc and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary Schnackenberg Cattani, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990. See also, Heidegger, Martin, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 239-76.
- 3 Husserl, Edmund, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, p. 84, p. 153.
- 4 Lévinas, Emmanuel, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995, p. lv.
- 5 Althusser, Louis, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York, Verso, 1996, p. 215.
- 6 Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 387.
- 7 Caws, Peter, *Structuralism: A Philosophy for the Human Sciences*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press, 1997, p. xvii.
- 8 Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, p. 94-95.
- 9 Caws, *Structuralism*, p. xvii.
- 10 Ibid., p. 239.
- 11 Husserl, Edmund, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, p. 181.
- 12 Caws, *Structuralism*, p. 247.
- 13 Caws does not here put forward a defense of solipsism, but the contention that each has his or her own world could be taken as leading to such a view.
- 14 Caws, *Structuralism*, p. 215.
- 15 Goldmann, Lucien, "Structure: Human Reality and Methodological Concept," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1972, p. 99.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 I thank Peter Caws for bringing this objection to my attention.
- 18 Zahavi, Dan, "Husserl's Intersubjective Transformation of Transcendental Philosophy," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* vol. 27, no. 3 (1996), p. 228.
- 19 Sokolowski, Robert, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 92.
- 20 Zahavi, "Intersubjective Transformation," p. 228.
- 21 Husserl, Edmund, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 168.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Caws, *Structuralism*, p. 1.
- 25 Husserl, *Crisis*, p. 169.
- 26 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p. 92.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., p. 93. This passage leads me to the conclusion that implicit in the sphere of ownness *reductio* is a rejection of the Cartesian method as demonstrated by Descartes. The description of what one does in this reduction mimics Descartes' own description of his method, yet the result shows that Descartes could not possibly have ended his "radical doubting" at the level of an *ego cogito* as *solus ipse*.
- 30 Ibid., p. 100.
- 31 Ibid., p. 104-5.
- 32 Foucault, *History*, p. 94.
- 33 Caws, Peter, *Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 293.
- 34 Foucault, *History*, p. 94-95.
- 35 I want to thank Peter Caws, Mark Nowacki, and the anonymous reviewer from *Symposium* for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.