

Rereading the History of Subjectivity

DAVID CARR, *Emory University*

Nothing has unified the diverse strands of Continental philosophy so much in recent decades as the rejection of something (or someone) called "the Subject." Though most commonly associated with French structuralism and poststructuralism, this rejection is equally important in German philosophy. The French attack can be traced in part to the work of the middle and late Heidegger, and through him to Nietzsche. Habermas, though he disagrees with the French views on humanism and rationality, and is no friend of Heidegger's, joins them in their opposition to the philosophy of the subject. An anthology by a group of French writers bears the title *Who Comes after the Subject?*, suggesting that the battle against the Subject has been fought and won, the opponent vanquished for good.¹ The question they ask is: Where do we go from here?

In addressing a question like this it is usually equally important to look backward as forward. To know where we go from here we need to know how we got where we are. Perhaps it is time to reflect historically and critically on the rejection of the subject. This sort of reflection began in France in the work of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut.² Somewhat in the spirit of their work, but on my own terms, I wish to sketch in this paper the outlines of a possible historical-critical reflection on the topic of subjectivism and antisubjectivism.

People outside the Continental tradition, such as those trained in analytic philosophy, may wonder what all the shooting was about. They may have been unaware of the extreme forms of subjectivism that Europeans embraced in the heyday of mid-century phenomenology and existentialism. This was the period of what one contemporary writer called the triumph of subjectivity,³ when Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant in his last years, spoke of transcendental subjectivity as the origin of the world,⁴ and when Sartre characterized consciousness as the radically free, absolute source of all meaning and value.⁵ It was this that brought forth the reaction of the 1960s and '70s. Here an analytic philosopher might ask: Is existentialism worth all that ink and paper? We disposed of the subject long ago. After all, Descartes's "ghost in the machine" was successfully exorcized by Wittgenstein and Ryle.

To this Continental philosophers can make important replies. First, they have been concerned not with the Cartesian soul but with the Kantian/Husserlian/Sartrean transcendental consciousness, a very different and much more elusive target. Second, they can maintain, following Heidegger and Foucault, that the transcendental subject is as much present in the positivist and post-positivist tradition, in spite of or because of being hidden, as it is in phenomenology and existentialism. The claim is that the objectivism of

the sciences and of science-oriented philosophy is merely the reverse side of subjectivism. Testimony to this may be the recent emergence, out of the analytic tradition itself, of such themes as intentionality and the transcendental status of the subject. I am thinking of the work of Searle and Nagel.⁶ There may be good reasons for thinking that some of these writers are just now arriving at the place European philosophy reached forty or even eighty years ago.

How, then, can we best understand the shift that occurred, first in Heidegger's work of the 1940s and '50s, then in France in the '60s and '70s, then in Germany again in the '80s, when the philosophy of the subject was rejected? Three possibilities suggest themselves: first, one can look at the change of views as if it were the result of a debate or conversation among rational participants, with its own logic of questions and answers, arguments and responses; second, one can consider the influence on philosophy of developments outside it, both in other disciplines (linguistics and psychoanalysis are the obvious candidates) and in the larger social, political, and historical world; third, one can consider patterns and motives beneath the surface, such as the desire of one generation of thinkers to liberate itself from its predecessors, symbolically "killing the father" in the Freudian-Oedipal sense.

These are familiar and quite standard approaches to developments in the "history of ideas." But it is easy to see that we have a special problem here: each of these approaches reflects a different view of the very topic at issue, which is the human subject. Is the subject an absolute source of rational choices or a product of social or unconscious forces?

A choice of one of these options also corresponds to an important division in the ranks of the antisubjectivists. Habermas, for example, may think that "subject-metaphysics" is overcome by argument, that there are good reasons for rejecting it. But others may accuse him of thereby presupposing the very thing they are questioning: the autonomy of the free rational subject. Habermas in turn accuses the postmoderns, and Heidegger before them, of blindly standing subject-metaphysics on its head rather than genuinely surpassing it.⁷ Each side thus accuses the other of not having sufficiently liberated itself from their common adversary.

Let us first consider Habermas's argumentative approach. He argues against the philosophy of the subject by assimilating it to the notion of instrumental reason, following his predecessors Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. The modern conception of consciousness portrays the world as objects to be represented by the subject, and the modern theory of action complements this by conceiving of subjects as producing and manipulating such objects. "The subject relates to objects either to represent them as they are or to produce them as they should be." The two functions are intertwined

since knowledge is "structurally related to the possibility of intervention in the world."⁸ Habermas takes note of the irony that this critique of reason is "shockingly close" to that of the archenemy of critical theory, Heidegger, which in turn points back to Nietzsche and forward to Foucault on the relation between knowledge and power.

That puts Habermas in substantial agreement with these thinkers on their critique of subjectivity and its relation to instrumental reason. But they all go wrong, he thinks, when they identify instrumental reason with reason *tout court*. Adorno was right to think of *reconciliation* as the alternative to instrumental reason. But he failed to see that reconciliation has its own rationality embodied in communicative action. The paradigm of subjectivity must be replaced by that of intersubjectivity and dialogue, in which the only force is that of the better argument and which is aimed at reaching agreement (*Verständigung*). Instead, the critics of instrumental reason reject reason itself in favor of various romantic, mystical, and irrationalist excesses, which are reflected in the idiosyncrasy and obscurity of their writings. But this is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This approach provides no alternative to the exercise of power, so in the end its own discourse is merely another player in the power-game of social relations.

What is wrong with Habermas's position, according to his critics, is best seen in a reference by Adorno to Eichendorff's "beautiful alien" which Habermas quotes with approval: "the state of reconciliation would not annex what is unfamiliar or alien with philosophical imperialism; instead, it would find its happiness in the fact that the latter ... remains something distant and different."⁹ But what is Habermas's communicative reason, with its *Drang nach Verständigung*, if not philosophical imperialism, the reduction of the different to the same, the philosophy of identity after all?

So much for the portrayal of antisubjectivism as a series of arguments against the philosophy of the subject. For a very different approach to the shift from subjectivism to antisubjectivism we might turn to Richard Rorty's version of the history of ideas. Borrowing heavily from Wittgenstein, Kuhn, and Davidson, and somewhat less obviously from Foucault, Rorty proposes that, like science, philosophy periodically reaches a Kuhnian "normal" stage when it has a widely accepted "vocabulary" and rules like a Wittgensteinian "language game," together with an agreed upon set of problems to be solved, and the like. He remarks that analytic philosophy reached this stage "when my generation was young," in the early 1950s. Rorty wistfully evokes a "simple, brighter, vanished world," in which eager young graduate students like himself assaulted the problem of the counterfactual conditional, say, or the nature of analyticity, much as earlier generations joined the Lincoln Brigade in Spain, or starved for their art in Parisian exile.¹⁰

It was at about the same time in Continental philosophy, when the great

works of phenomenology and existentialism had been written and digested, when people spoke of the transcendental ego and the structures of the for-itself, and asked whether there could be an existentialist ethics or a phenomenology of religion.

At this point, following Rorty's scenario, voices began to be heard which just did not fit in. This is because they are speaking in "metaphors" (in Rorty's broad, Davidsonian sense of that term). Metaphors do not have, as many have thought, a special sort of meaning. "To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game," and these utterances have no such place. They have no meaning at all, in this sense, and are thus neither true nor false. All this talk of signifier and signified, of *différance* and deconstruction, of "economies" of this and that, is simply incommensurable with the existing language game and its vocabulary. Gradually, of course, it is forming its own game with its own rules, and we have reached the moment of paradigm-shift. When it occurs, it is not as if "the world" or "reality" were better understood than before. The history of ideas is just "new forms of life [i.e., language games] constantly killing off old forms—not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly." The model here is not Freud's Oedipal patricide so much as Darwin's theory of natural selection. This is what Rorty means by the "contingency of language": intellectual history is the history of the rise and fall of metaphors, and these are things "which just happened."¹¹

The shift that interests us can be described as one in which a well developed and entrenched philosophical language game centered on the Subject is eventually abandoned in favor of another, or perhaps several other, such games in which the Subject no longer has its honored place. It makes no sense to ask whether this was justified or correct. Rorty classes intellectual innovators in all fields with the poets. All we can say is that, thanks to them, a new way of talking has been inaugurated. This account may leave some uneasy: the major shift that interests us seems arbitrary. One of our goals was to reflect critically on it, but how can we be critical of something that "just happened"?

Let us look more closely at Rorty's account. One feature of the shift from subjectivism to antisubjectivism that is not captured by this account is the degree to which the new "paradigm" is preoccupied with the old. It may be a new way of talking, but one of the main things it talks about is its predecessor. This is quite obvious in the later Heidegger, in Derrida, and in Foucault. Rorty as well, as a self-proclaimed "postmodern" and intellectual innovator in his own right, spends much of his time talking about the very philosophy he wants to surpass. What is the nature of this talk?

Our first response is the one we already explored: to think that the antisubjectivists were presenting "arguments" designed to show why subjectivism is "wrong." But on Rorty's account, arguments are possible only *within*

language games among people who share the same assumptions and rules. The various "attacks" and "rejections" of the metaphysics of the subject may look like arguments designed to persuade their readers of something; their proponents may even think they are presenting arguments. But Rorty knows better, and is perfectly consistent in his own approach. "Conforming to my own precepts," says Rorty, "I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace." Instead, he is proposing that we "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions."¹² What is Rorty doing when he spends so much time talking about traditional philosophy, and what are anti-subjectivists doing when they go on at such length about the "philosophy of the subject," if they are not arguing against it?

Perhaps just describing it, so as to bring out the contrast between the old and the new. If this is so it might give us a chance to move from the historical to the critical part of our investigation. This appeal to description might seem somewhat disingenuous. In describing the philosophy of the subject, its opponents might be engaging in the time-honored rhetorical practice of constructing a straw man. What this means, of course, is that they are not describing it at all, but misdescribing it. Or, to be more charitable, they may be describing the thing as it appears within their "paradigm," which is understandable. But then we may want to ask whether their description of the metaphysics of the subject corresponds to the way it really is.

But now we hear a polite chuckle from Rorty and the other postmoderns. We have fallen into the old habit, it seems, of supposing that the role of language is to mirror reality, to "represent" something "out there"—in this case the metaphysics of the subject—that exists independent of our description of it. Only this tired old metaphysical assumption would justify speaking of misrepresentation or caricature, of appearance as opposed to reality. How can we ask about the metaphysical tradition "as it really is"? Surely this, if anything, is what we make of it. Language, including postphilosophical or metaphilosophical language, is not a mirror of anything; it is just a tool for coping, for getting on or getting around. This is true of Rorty's version of the tradition, just as it is true of Heidegger's version of the history of being, or Derrida's of the metaphysics of presence. Only the pedantic or positivistic "historian of philosophy" would ask whether these versions "correspond with the facts."

I do not wish to get into any of the sillier attempts to rebut this sort of relativism in a general way, such as: "Does this mean we can say any old thing? Can we describe Leibniz as an empiricist or Kant as a hedonist if it suits our purposes?" I want to get away from these very general problems and stick to our topic. What if we simply do not like the version of the

metaphysics of the subject that has been so instrumental in the emergence of antisubjectivism? Suppose we find there is something about it that does not suit *our* purposes. Suppose we were to propose an alternative: what would or could it be?

We have seen that an important feature of antisubjectivism is its rejection of "totalization" or the "philosophy of identity." Modernity subsumes all difference under certain "grand narratives," in Lyotard's celebrated phrase. But is the rejection of the philosophy of the subject not an instance of just such a totalizing narrative? Centuries of intellectual and social turmoil, struggle, and debate are now lumped together under such headings as "modernity," the "philosophy of the subject," or the "metaphysics of presence." Is this what we should expect from philosophers who insist that we respect difference, particularity, and diversity? Suppose we were to offer an alternative reading of the modern tradition that would bring out important *differences* in the role of the subject. In the space remaining I would like to propose such an alternative reading, though obviously I can only sketch its outlines.

First, how is the modern metaphysics of subjectivity standardly portrayed by those who reject it? Heidegger, for one, describes a trajectory that begins with Descartes's *res cogitans*, passes through Leibniz's monadology and Kant's transcendental subject, and culminates in Hegel's Absolute, which is described as "not so much *substance* as *subject*." This absolutization of the subject, together with its Nietzschean inversion, is the culmination or end of philosophy or metaphysics (for Heidegger these terms are equivalent). In the late essay, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" (1972), Husserl is linked with Hegel as another version of the absolutization of the subject. These figures represent the culmination not only of modern philosophy but of all philosophy, since they have allegedly put the subject in the place previously occupied by the concept of substance. This is philosophy's answer to the question of being: to be is to be a subject or an object (*Gegenstand*), i.e., something that stands over against or is present to a subject. The metaphysics of the subject is at the same time the metaphysics of presence. Enter Derrida.

In the face of this account of the metaphysics of the subject I would like to recall a fact that is often forgotten in these discussions: Kant saw himself as a *critic*, not a proponent, of the metaphysics of the subject. The same can be said of Husserl. What is more, these thinkers opposed the metaphysics of the subject not in order to replace it with some other sort of metaphysics, but in order to substitute for metaphysics in general a completely different sort of philosophical project, which they both called transcendental philosophy. Both thinkers would have been aghast to see themselves lumped together with Descartes, Leibniz, and Hegel, as if they

had merely produced their versions of the same thing these other philosophers were doing.

Let us recall some of the details, beginning with Kant. The Paralogisms of Pure Reason, in his first Critique, attack precisely those philosophers who treat the epistemological subject as substance and try to build a metaphysics upon it. Kant holds that they have failed to distinguish between the self as it turns up *within* experience, i.e., as an object of experience, as the bearer of psychological properties, and the "I think" that functions as condition of the possibility of that very experience.

If anything is clear in the notoriously difficult Transcendental Deduction, it is that the "I think" may *not* be treated as a substance in the metaphysical sense. While Kant speaks of the transcendental unity of apperception or self-consciousness, he does not mean that the "I" is conscious of itself as an object. Indeed, one of the great puzzles of the Transcendental Deduction, one that practically scandalized Kant's contemporaries (especially Fichte), is that the self-awareness which constitutes the supreme condition of the possibility of experience cannot be considered self-knowledge. This denies precisely what is most important about Descartes's *cogito*. How, Fichte asked, could the principle of all knowledge not itself be known? It did not occur to him that Kant was not seeking in the self the same sort of *fundamentum inconcussum* sought by other modern philosophers, that Kant was not really a foundationalist in this sense at all.

In Kant, the relation of the "I think" to its objects cannot be considered a relation between a thing and its properties, or even a relation, in Leibniz's sense, between a subject and its representations. To construe it this way seems to attribute to Kant precisely the view of experience he was most at pains to deny. The essence of *Erfahrung*, as Kant understands it, is that through representations we are related to objects. The "I think" expresses not a real relation or a subject-predicate relation, but an intentional relation. To think is to think about something or that something is the case. Experience in Kant's sense, of course, is a special kind of thinking, the sort embodied in our knowledge of the sensible world. This knowledge requires that our knowledge be linked with sense-representations or intuitions. But these representations are not the *objects* of experience; they are not what our experience is *about*.

This is what decisively separates Kant from his predecessors in the modern tradition. He rejects the so-called "way of ideas" defined by Locke when he said that the word "idea" "serves best to stand for whatsoever is the *object* of the understanding when a man thinks."¹³ Kant uses the term *Vorstellung*, indeed, usually translated as "representation," in a way that corresponds to the term "idea." He even uses the Humean variation "impressions." But these representations are "a mere determination of the

mind." Our knowledge of the sensible world is not about the mind or its contents or determinations; it is precisely about the sensible world, or rather about objects in the sensible world. All experience "contain[s], in addition to the intuition of the senses through which something is given, a *concept* of an object as being thereby given, that is to say, as appearing."¹⁴ Experience requires that a manifold of intuition be united, not in the subject that has or receives them, but rather in an object, i.e., something whose very concept is that of being *other* than and independent of this particular subject.

The supreme condition of the possibility of experience, then, transcendental apperception, is a self-consciousness, but not of the subject as a metaphysical substance conversant only with its own ideas. This would be the Leibnizian monad or the Berkeleyan soul. It would also perhaps be the Kantian empirical ego, a thing in the world with its psychological properties, an object for empirical self-consciousness. The transcendental subject, by contrast, transcends itself toward its objects and toward the world.

But it is also, in another sense, limited by the world. Though the understanding determines what counts as an object of knowledge, it does not create its objects, but must wait for them to be given.¹⁵ It is in this way that the subject is finite. Its finitude is expressed in the doctrine of transcendental idealism, according to which the world may be more than, or other than, it appears to us under the conditions laid down by the understanding. To be sure, this distinction between the world as it appears and the world as it is in itself is so difficult and troubling that it was rejected from the start, and is rejected to this day, even by some of Kant's strongest supporters. But Kant insists on it. Its deepest sense is that of the finitude of the subject.

To place Kant among the proponents of the metaphysics of the subject is to ignore the essential finitude of the transcendental subject. For Kant, the subject may seem, in its cognitive guise, to legislate to nature, just as, in its moral guise, it may seem to legislate to itself. But in fact both its cognitive spontaneity and its moral freedom can never be known to be anything other than necessary assumptions under which it can think and act. The transcendental unity of apperception is, in the cognitive sphere, the self-consciousness in which this assumption is made. This is far removed from indubitable self-presence or self-knowledge. When the self becomes an object of knowledge to itself, the apperception is no longer transcendental and becomes empirical. The "I" loses its transcendental status and becomes an item in the phenomenal world. For Kant, the transcendental subject is clearly not a thing in the world, but rather a condition of the possibility of the world's appearance. But even less is it a substance which reduces the rest of the world to a part of itself. Instead, it is a kind of pure relation to a world that transcends it.

Turning now to Husserl, we can see that the same sort of considerations

govern his use of the term "transcendental." Of course, this is a term he takes over from Kant. His definition of it is different from Kant's, but it seems to me to be a good expression of Kant's deepest intentions. In the *Cartesian Meditations* he introduces the "concept of the transcendental and its correlate, the concept of the transcendent," in the following way:

Just as the reduced Ego is not a piece of the world, so, conversely, neither the world nor any worldly Object is a piece of my Ego, to be found in my conscious life as a really inherent part, as a complex of data of sensation or a complex of acts. This '*transcendence*' is part of the intrinsic sense of anything worldly.... The Ego ... necessarily presupposed by this sense, is legitimately called *transcendental*, in the phenomenological sense. Accordingly the philosophical problems arising from this correlation are called transcendental-philosophical.¹⁶

What this passage reveals is that the very notion of transcendental philosophy derives from the transcendence of the world, its non-reducibility to consciousness. It confirms an aspect of Husserl's phenomenology which goes back to the *Logical Investigations* and the attack on psychologism. Broadly speaking, this attack is directed against the tendency of empiricism to collapse into subjective idealism by reducing objective structures to contents of the mind. What we might call the opening move of phenomenology is a realist move, and it is preserved throughout in the notion of intentionality. Consciousness is consciousness *of* something, and the *of*-ness of that relation, or quasi-relation, is irreducible and not explainable in terms of anything else. In being *of* something, consciousness (to paraphrase a remark of Hegel's) distinguishes itself from something to which it at the same time relates itself.

From the beginning, the purpose of the concept of intentionality is to counter all attempts to reduce the object of consciousness to a part of consciousness or a property of consciousness. In this sense the term "reduction" is misleading. Transcendence, that is, irreducibility to consciousness, belongs to the intrinsic sense of the objective or the worldly, according to Husserl. The purpose of the phenomenological "reduction" is precisely to understand that intrinsic irreducibility, not to reverse it or undo it. But the realism of phenomenology's opening move does not remain naive; it is not content simply to assert the transcendence of the world, but wants to know what it means to assert it and believe it. Understanding this sense will prevent its being transformed into something else by a philosophical theory such as empiricism.

Husserl's term for the naive and unreflected belief in the transcendence of the world is, of course, the natural attitude. In the *Crisis* he calls it the

world-life of consciousness whose always pregiven horizon is what he calls the lifeworld. The phenomenological reduction suspends the natural attitude, puts it out of play. But its sole purpose is to understand the very naivete it has supposedly left behind. In fact, there is an important sense in which the natural attitude is never left behind at all in phenomenology. If the purpose of the reduction is to understand the natural attitude, then this attitude is the source of phenomenological descriptions. All the sciences, including the *Geisteswissenschaften*, are based on the natural attitude, or as Husserl says in his later work, arise on the basis of the pregiven lifeworld. The phenomenological clarification of the sciences involves understanding how the natural standpoint gets narrowed into the naturalistic attitude of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the personalistic attitude of the human sciences, on the other. To understand and analyze all this, the phenomenologist must in some sense continue to live in the natural attitude while observing it from the phenomenological standpoint. Husserl sometimes speaks of a "zig-zag" alternation between the two.

Thus, phenomenology, which attempts to satisfy the demands of philosophy by suspending the natural attitude, can never really forget its origins in the natural attitude; nor should it, since by doing so it would be deprived of content. In phenomenology consciousness turns back on itself, but what it finds there, and attempts to describe and understand, is a consciousness immersed naively in the world. Phenomenology is forever poised on the line between the natural and transcendental attitudes. The distinction between them corresponds to the distinction between transcendental and empirical subjectivity.

Again this is an idea taken over from Kant and given a somewhat different interpretation by Husserl. In the *Crisis* he calls this the paradox of subjectivity: I am somehow both an object in the world and subject *for* the world. As in Kant, this distinction corresponds to that between two different modes of self-consciousness or apperception; Husserl speaks of the difference between natural and transcendental reflection. In the one case I take myself and the events of my mental life, intentional and non-intentional, simply to coexist with all the other things and events in the world. Here the relation between consciousness and the world, whatever else it may be, is essentially a part-whole relation. To be a subject for the world, by contrast, in the full transcendental sense, means that the events of my mental life relate to other events and things—whether physical, mental, or ideal—in a purely intentional manner. That is, the latter figure solely as objects for me in the sense that they have meaning or sense for me. Here I relate to the world not as part to whole but as consciousness to its horizon of possible intentional objects.

Husserl's transcendental idealism, like Kant's, must be sharply disting-

uished from the subjective idealism of Berkeley or the absolute idealism of Hegel. It does not attempt to triumph over the otherness of the world by incorporating it into the subject. The transcendental subject is not a substance in which everything else inheres.

If we read Kant and Husserl in the manner I have suggested, we arrive at an interpretation of their transcendental philosophy that differs importantly from that advanced by the later Heidegger and other opponents of the "metaphysics of the subject." The latter have tried to assimilate transcendental philosophy to the absolute idealism which followed Kant historically and drew on many of his ideas. The same reading has been applied to Husserl, transforming his thought into a version of Fichte's. To reinforce the alternative interpretation I am urging, I will now try to summarize its main points. In doing so, I will be arguing for the coherence of a tradition of transcendental philosophy which must be distinguished from modern metaphysics.

Two features of the transcendental approach, which are neglected by the standard interpretation, stand out and must be stressed. The first is the transcendence of the world. This may seem surprising since it seems to conflict with the basic insight that inaugurates the transcendental tradition. Kant's great innovation, after all, is the idea that the mind does not passively mirror the world, but is active and productive. It is world-structuring, even world-engendering, at least if we think of "world" as Kant thought of nature, namely as the order and connection of appearances. Husserl has a similar conception of the mind as active, of course. His term is constitution. Both speak of consciousness as synthesis.

But synthesis and constitution must not be confused with creation. It is true that both these philosophers avail themselves of a metaphor that seems to echo the traditional notion of divine creation. Kant speaks of sensation as the raw material to be shaped and fashioned by the understanding, and the early Husserl employs the notion of hyletic data brought to life by an animating intention. But we must bear in mind that what is "created" by this active process is not existence but meaning. The primary meaning which is generated in this process is precisely that of the objectivity and transcendence of the world. Furthermore, the meaning generated by subjectivity is itself finite in the sense that it does not exhaust all the possibilities of being. This is clearly the sense of Kant's transcendental idealism: there is more to the world than is captured in our conceptual net. This is the reason Husserl's phenomenological reduction does not overcome or replace, but only neutralizes and then thematizes, the natural attitude.

The second aspect of the transcendental tradition that must be stressed concerns the peculiar ontological status of the transcendental subject. As we have seen, Heidegger interprets it not only as substance but as the

fundamental substance on which all other existence is metaphysically dependent. But is this interpretation plausible? When we look closely at what Kant and Husserl have to say on this topic, we may begin to wonder whether one can speak of ontological status at all. As we have noted, for Kant the transcendental subject cannot really be known at all. In what sense can it be said to exist? Kant says several things on this point, not all of which are easily reconciled. He says that in transcendental apperception I am conscious *that* I am, that in the "I think" "existence is already given thereby." But on the other hand he says that "this representation is a *thought* not an *intuition*."¹⁷ Knowledge of existence would require intuition, but the only intuition of self is that of inner sense. This intuition yields knowledge of the empirical self, which is an item in the world, but not of the transcendental subject as the condition for knowledge of the world. The chief characteristic of the transcendental subject is spontaneity, but spontaneity cannot be intuited, and thus cannot be known to exist. It seems that the supreme condition of the possibility of empirical knowledge is that I take myself to be a spontaneous subject; yet I cannot *know* myself to be such. The transcendental subject thus acquires something of the *als ob* status of the moral subject. As Henry Allison puts it, "Just as we can act only under the idea of freedom, so we can think only under the idea of spontaneity."¹⁸ This expresses not only the parallel between moral agent and knowing subject, but also the somewhat tentative character of both.

In order to raise the question of the ontological status of the transcendental subject in Husserl, one must first recognize that this subject only comes into view within the scope of the phenomenological reduction, that is, as an object of transcendental reflection. In this sense the transcendental subject is a kind of theoretical entity, the result of a highly sophisticated method, just as the mathematical magnitudes of modern physics, of which Husserl speaks in the *Crisis*, can be seen as theoretical constructs. Husserl himself stresses the "unnaturalness," even the "artificiality" of the phenomenological stance; it is, after all, a suspension of the "natural" attitude.¹⁹ This is not to say, of course, that the transcendental subject is something invented or constructed rather than discovered. But its discovery depends on the simultaneous discovery of the phenomenological attitude as a whole. This attitude is not something arbitrary, but is presented by Husserl as a permanent possibility for thought, which has always been waiting to be discovered. But it does not make much sense to speak of the "transcendental ego" as if it existed independently of this theoretical framework.

It is true that for Husserl, unlike Kant, the transcendental subject can be intuited; but Husserl's concept of intuition is very different from Kant's, and any form of intuition presupposes a general framework corresponding to a

particular attitude. Only when that attitude is adopted—in this case thanks to the phenomenological reduction—can its possibilities be filled in with intuitions. The alternation between the natural and the phenomenological attitudes, as we have seen, is never definitively overcome or somehow resolved in favor of one side rather than the other. To the extent that we return again and again to the natural attitude, as Husserl says, the paradox of subjectivity remains. In the end, to view myself as transcendental subject is one way, but not the only way, of understanding myself.

These considerations, it seems to me, raise serious doubts about treating Kant and Husserl, and transcendental philosophy generally, simply as variations on the "metaphysics of the subject," as Heidegger and others suggest. What I propose is an alternative reading of these thinkers and of their role in the history of modern philosophy. The reading I propose is able to take seriously the manner in which these philosophers regard themselves as critics of that very metaphysics. Of course, philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida, who write about Kant and Husserl as key figures in the metaphysics of the subject, are quite aware of these disclaimers. Their point is that Kant and Husserl were metaphysicians of subjectivity in spite of what they say to the contrary. They want to show the underlying kinship of their work with the metaphysical project at a deeper level than they were able to see. It is thus a question of understanding them better than they understood themselves (Kant claimed such an understanding of Plato), of reading the unthought between their lines, of deconstructing rather than reconstructing what they thought.

But this way of reading philosophy cannot claim, as we have seen, to be getting at the "reality" behind the "appearance," and is left with only the plausibility of its reading to recommend it. My own reading, likewise, makes no claim to have arrived at the "reality" of transcendental philosophy, whatever that would be. It simply offers itself as a more likely story.

dcarr@emory.edu

Notes

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