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Interpreting References to the Subject in Philosophical Writings

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Abstract

In this thesis I will develop and test an interpretive framework for the Subject based on the understanding that an entity can be identified as a Subject if it is the necessary referent for an attribution. This understanding provides a template for approaching different Subjects, for considering the validity of their being identified as Subjects, and for reorienting the general discourse of the Subject away from an investigation of particular entities to one concerned with the contexts which support such identifications.
Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that
thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us, by way of
literature as well as perhaps by other paths, to the outside in which the speaking
subject disappears.

Michel Foucault. *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the
p. 13
In this Thesis I will present a treatment of the concept of the Subject. While references to the idea of a Subject appear in many forms in every period of the Western philosophical tradition, from the metaphysical theories of the ancient Greeks to the modern Continental discourse, few of them address the general understanding of what it means for an entity to be a Subject. Most of the discussions in the Western tradition refer, rather, to specific forms of the Subject. Writing in the 1991 collection *Who Comes after the Subject?*, Vincent Descombes asserts that the debate in modern Continental philosophy regarding the existence of a Subject properly refers to the theory of a human Subject originating in the works of René Descartes and refined by Immanuel Kant. Faced with this, he observes that the general critique of the Subject, which the Continental debate purports to be, “… remains as yet entirely undone, at least in philosophy of the French language.”

As the first step towards a general theory of the Subject, my project in this Thesis will be to develop and test an interpretive framework capable of addressing different characterisations of the Subject within a single theoretical structure. At the heart of this framework lies an understanding of what it means for an entity to be identified as a Subject. In the opening chapter, based on a reading of Aristotle’s logical works, I will characterise this understanding in terms of the basic condition that an entity can be identified as a Subject if and only if it is the necessary referent of an attribution. In practical terms, the exact nature of a Subject will reflect the form of the instantiation of this condition in which it is encountered.

In the remainder of the Thesis I will test the framework developed in the opening chapter by demonstrating its applicability to cases in which different entities have been identified as Subjects and by considering its implications for the general discourse of the Subject. To accomplish the former demonstration, I will, in the next four chapters, consider examples drawn from the writings of French philosophers from the 1930s until the 1970s to show that, despite differing in form and context, each example supports the identification of a particular entity as being a Subject on the basis of its participation in an instantiation of the aforementioned condition. The
examples I have chosen consist of Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenological writings of the 1930s and 1940s culminating in *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*), Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ethnological theories as they are expressed in his mature writings from the early 1940s to the 1970s, Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive investigations from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, and Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*). In the sixth and final chapter I will consider the implications that the interpretive framework has for the general discourse of the Subject. As part of this last discussion I will briefly consider a possible reorientation of the critique of the Subject as it appears in Twentieth-century French philosophy. While my results will not in themselves establish the proposed framework as a general theory of the Subject, they will open the way for others to consider its wider validity.

As with any work of this nature, this presentation is the product of many influences. To that end, I would like to acknowledge those at the University of Auckland through whose teaching I first encountered the idea of the Subject. I would also like to thank those who have read and commented on earlier drafts of this Thesis, in particular Associate Professor Robert Wicks of the Department of Philosophy and the examiners assigned by the University. Without their observations this would have been a lesser work.
A Note on References

In this Thesis I will adopt the following conventions with respect to references in text:

- All references – either explicit or implicit – will be accompanied by a note providing the appropriate publication details of each source.
- When explicitly introducing a source in the text I will provide the title of the work and, when that title is in a language other than English, a translation of the title. I will also provide details, where possible, of the published translation in the accompanying note.
- When referring to a non-English source in text, I will provide the details of the location in both the original language version and in the existing translation in the accompanying note.
- When a passage originating in a language other than English is explicitly presented in the text, the translation will be my own unless otherwise stated in the accompanying note.
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Introduction

Identifying Entities as Subjects

As a prelude to the development of a framework capable of interpreting the identification of different entities as being Subjects, it is useful to consider examples of such identifications both in ordinary language and philosophy.

0.1 The Subject in Ordinary Language

The definition of the noun “Subject” presented in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that it is possible to identify eighteen different applications of the term divided between four categories: the category defined by those cases in which “Subject” refers to a substance, the category in which it refers to the reference of a larger process, the category in which “Subject” designates those entities which are foci for acts of power, and the category defined by those cases where the term “Subject” is used to grammatically qualify the labels of entities which might otherwise have been called “Subjects” in the preceding senses.¹

The first category of usage for the term “Subject” reflects its derivation from the Latin *subjicius* and, through that, from Aristotle’s treatment of the concept of *hupokeimenon*.² In his treatment, Aristotle uses the term “*hupokeimenon*” – which carries a literal sense of something positioned beneath – to refer to the necessary underpinning of the manifestation of properties. Reflecting this, Subjects of the first category of modern ordinary language usage embody the idea of being such underpinnings. In particular, further mirroring Aristotle’s treatment, they are typically identified as being a substance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the identification of the Subject with human consciousness – a common practice in philosophy – represents an example of this category of usage deriving from the observation that consciousness provides the substance of a human being’s knowledge of the world.

The second category of usage of the term “Subject” indicated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is perhaps the most general. In this case a Subject is an entity which acts as the basis for a reference. This reference can take many forms. It is possible, for example, to find Subjects of this category which are acted upon, studied,
or which are represented: a doctor, for example, performs a medical procedure upon a Subject, an academic specialty focuses upon a Subject, and a work of art refers, in its representation, to a Subject.

The third category indicated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* corresponds to one of the oldest English usages of the term “Subject.” Since approximately the middle of the fourteenth century, the term “Subject” has been used to refer to those entities that exist under the authority of or in obligation to another. Examples of such Subjects include those entities who are Subjects of the authority – or “majesty” – of a monarch and those who owe fealty to a feudal lord. The authority exercised upon this form of the Subject does not have to originate in a person. It is also possible to identify the source of authority with social structures such as the system of laws which govern a society. In the modern usage of the term, the idea of authority is replaced by the more general concept of power.

Before considering examples of the different characterisations of the Subject encountered in philosophy, it is worth noting that second and third categories indicated by definition of the term “Subject” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* display a degree of congruity with the first. In the case of the second category, the Subject clearly represents an underpinning in the Aristotelian sense due to the fact that any reference requires a Subject to refer to. The Subject, as such, lies beneath the reference. Subjects of the third category – the Subjects which exist under authority or obligation – can similarly be interpreted as being the underpinning of the exercise of that authority or the realisation of the obligation by providing something for the instantiation of power to act upon.

**0.2 The Subject in Western Philosophy**

Turning to the different characterisations of the Subject identified in Western philosophical theories, it is possible to divide these characterisations into categories paralleling the divisions discussed in the previous section.

The first category of philosophical Subjects consists of those entities which act as a substance. Beyond the basic logical sense in which a Subject is the substance of a predicate, this mode is most often associated, as it was in the corresponding ordinary language category, with human beings. A human Subject provides the substance for the conduct of his or her life. While it is possible to characterise human life, and
hence the Subject which provides its substance, in many different ways, one of the forms most often encountered in philosophical discussions presents that life in terms of the realisation of knowledge. The paradigmatic example of this form, according to Descombes, appears in Descartes’s *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (*Meditations on First Philosophy*).\(^4\) Descartes argues that the Subject represents the substance of its knowledge and corresponds to the human mind existing in the human body.\(^5\)

While philosophical treatments of knowledge and the requirements for its realisation have become more complex between Descartes in the Seventeenth century and the modern age, the tradition of identifying a human being with the substance of his or her knowledge has persisted. An important feature of this tradition is that it has given rise to many of the most influential thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition including not only Descartes, but also Kant, British empiricists such as John Locke and David Hume, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his intellectual descendants, Henri Bergson, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Partly as a corollary of this, it has become common practice to refer to a human being as a Subject even when it is not immediately associated with the realisation of knowledge. As Gérard Granel notes, this association – while possibly incorrect – validates questions such as “Who Comes after the Subject?”\(^6\)

A second category of Subject encountered in philosophy consists, in a manner analogous to the ordinary usage of the term, of the entities which exist as the focus of a reference. One category of reference of particular interest to philosophers consists of those associated with representations. A representation entails one form or structure standing in place of – or representing – another. In philosophical treatments of representation it is possible to encounter the Subject characterised in two ways, namely, as the Subject who creates the representation and as the Subject which is represented. Both of these examples appear in considerations of languages and language-like systems. Languages are typically presented as consisting of structures known as linguistic signs, each of which consists of an apprehendable aspect referred to as the “signifier” of the sign and a meaning-bearing aspect referred to as the sign’s “signified.” With respect to signs, a language-user is a Subject of the first form who creates a sign to, typically, express his or her intention through its signified aspect. The second form of Subject then takes the form of the signified aspect of a sign, the meaning that is conveyed by the sign and which is represented by the apprehendable aspect. In the late Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries new approaches to language
have arisen in which the role of the first Subject, the language-user responsible for the constitution of a linguistic sign, is less clear. The most extreme case of this appears in the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure who dispenses with the language-user altogether.

The final class of Subject I will consider here are those associated with the exercise of power. While there are many conceptions of power, each typically entails the application of force for the purpose of affecting the nature of the entities – the Subjects of the power – to whom the force is applied. The paradigmatic treatments of such Subjects appear in the philosophy of Michel Foucault. Writing two years before his death in 1984, Foucault characterised his entire project as an investigation of the processes by which human beings are constituted as Subjects through the application of force.\(^7\) His 1975 work, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (*Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*), for example, considers the subjectification resulting from the application of power within a carceral framework.\(^8\) In the case of the later volumes of the *L’histoire de sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*), *L’usage des plaisirs* (*The Use of Pleasure*) and *Le souci de soi* (*The Care of the Self*), the forces in question originate in the Subject itself and are embodied in the practices by which a human being turns itself into a sexual Subject.\(^9\)

### 0.3 Encounters with the Subject in Philosophy

Beyond the different categories discussed in the last section, it is also possible to consider characterisations of the philosophical Subject in terms of how they are treated in philosophical writings. As with the characterisations themselves, it is also possible to divide these treatments into categories, the two most prominent of which consist of investigations in which only one characterisation of Subject is referred to in the course of the investigation and of investigations which make mention more than one.

Considering the first of these categories – the category consisting of investigations referring to only one characterisation of Subject – further subdivisions are possible based upon the role that the characterisation of the Subject plays in each investigation. On the one hand, and most obviously, it is possible to identify investigations in which the characterisation is the primary focus of the investigation. In *System der Wissenschaft. Erster Theil, die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of
Spirit), for example, Hegel characterises the human Subject in terms of its progression – through the attainment of different forms of knowledge – towards a state of fully integrated social consciousness.\(^\text{10}\) In contrast to such cases, it is also possible to find investigations where the characterisation is referred to only insofar as it relates to the investigations true focus. An example of such an inquiry appears in Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*).\(^\text{11}\) In this work Kant’s principle concern is with the forms of human knowledge of objects in the world. Given this, the Subject is addressed to the extent it is capable of realising that knowledge.

In contrast to those investigations which refer to only one characterisation of the Subject, investigations which refer to two or more characterisations typically occur at that point in a philosophical discourse when one theoretical framework is being replaced by another. At such points an older characterisation of the Subject is presented in opposition to the one that will replace it. In the history of Western philosophy after the Renaissance and prior to the twentieth century these replacements proceeded at a slow pace from Descartes, through the British empiricists, to Kant and Hegel. In the twentieth-century continental-philosophical discourse, however, the pace of change sped up significantly. In French philosophy from the 1920s to the 1970s, in particular, it is possible to find several different characterisations – often resonating with those of the earlier, slower, period – referred to by philosophers. To provide a contextualisation of the examples that I will consider in the later chapters, I will spend the remainder of this section discussing the procession of characterisations of the Subject in the French milieu.

In the earlier part of the century, French philosophers generally approached the Subject as an autonomous human being who acts as the substance of his or her knowledge. Although this treatment derives from the works of Descartes, it is more often associated with the theories of Hegel and Marx. The exact source of French philosophy’s relationship with Hegel has been a matter of some debate.\(^\text{12}\) The popular explanation of this relationship – noted, for example, by Judith Butler – credits Alexandre Kojève’s Marxist reading delivered in a lecture series at the *L’École pratique des hautes études* between 1933 and 1939, as a major source of Hegel’s influence.\(^\text{13}\) Bruce Baugh, by contrast, explains French Hegelianism in terms of Jean Wahl’s earlier work, *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (*The Unhappy Consciousness in the Philosophy of Hegel*).\(^\text{14}\)
By the 1960s, the attitude of philosophers had shifted to one in which, if it appeared in their theories at all, a Subject did not take the form of a human being acting as a substance. This theme had appeared almost two centuries earlier in the works of Immanuel Kant, amongst others. In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, for example, Kant argues that the Subject is not the substance of the knowledge he is attempting to explain. Rather, it is the structure responsible for the generation of the components of that knowledge. This argument is reflected in, amongst other places, the assertion “I think” which accompanies all representations. A different approach to the idea of a non-substantial Subject appears in the works of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger – whose theories are often used to characterise this period – argues that a human being’s knowledge of the world does not refer to that being as its substance, but to the relation between the human being and the world.

Another approach associated with this treatment of the Subject is structuralism. Following the linguistic models of Saussure, structuralists present an understanding of various phenomena as being the representations of social structures. By treating these representations as analogues of linguistic signs, Saussure’s theories provide structuralists with a way to explain their observations without reference to the entity traditionally identified as being the Subject in such cases – the entity who creates the phenomena and who acts as its substance. Because of the connection between the idea of a Subject and an idea of the human being arising out of the earlier tradition, approaches such as the structuralists are often associated with the “Death of Man.” This characterisation derives from Michel Foucault’s 1966 work, *Les mots et les choses, une archéologie des sciences humaines* (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*), which argues that the concept of a human being as the Subject capable of generating representations has been replaced in the modern *episteme* by a human being as an object of study.

The fact that many of the phenomena examined by the structuralists are social phenomena, and hence involve human beings in some form or another, motivated a third phase of the debate regarding the Subject. In the theories originating in this third period, a human being is treated as a Subject, but not, as it was in the first phase of the debate, due to it serving as a substance. This approach gained prominence in theories which treat the human Subject as the focus for the execution of power in a social framework. Such theories represent examples of a theme which Jacques Derrida
characterises as a restoration of the Subject, while others as a return of the Subject from those systems in which the Subject plays no part.  

While it is not the aim of this Thesis to consider the nuances of this debate, I will return to the above presentation in the final chapter. There I will argue that the debate can be re-characterised in light of the interpretive framework which I will now develop. In the new approach, the debate will be presented not in terms of different characterisations of the Subject, but in terms of the different situations in which those characterisations are encountered.