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The Subject

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THE SUBJECT

étienne balibar

NIETZSCHE AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSLATION

The category of the subject is more central to philosophy now than ever before, especially for those trends reformulated in the twentieth century. At the heart of the problem is a more or less explicit "play of words" found in the Latin etymology of the term: on the one hand, we have the neutral term *subjectum* that philosophers since scholasticism have considered as the translation of the Greek *hupokeimenon* (substratum or support); on the other hand, we have the masculine term *subjectus*, which is understood to be equivalent to the medieval *subditus* (subordinate). The former gave rise to a line of logico-grammatical and ontologico-transcendental meanings; the latter to a juristic, political, and theological semantic tradition. Far from remaining distinct, since Kant, the two traditions have overdetermined one another around the problematics of "subjectivity" and "subjectivation." This relationship of mutual determination, however, is alternately emphasized or repressed depending on whether or not it is in the philosopher's interest to bring the concept of the subject up to date by *working* on it.

As an introduction to these problems in modern philosophy, we will reread an amazing passage from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Philosophers tend to talk about the will as if it were the most familiar thing in the world...A person who *wills* —, commands something inside himself that obeys, or that he believes to obey [*commande en lui-même à quelque chose qui obéit ou dont il se croit obéi; befiehlt einem Etwas in sich, das gehorcht oder von dem er glaubt, dass es gehorcht*]. But now we notice the strangest thing about the will — about this multifarious thing that people have only one word for. On the one hand, we are, under the circumstances, both the one who commands *and* the one who obeys [*à la fois celui qui commande et celui qui obéit; zugleich die Befehlenden und Gehorchenden*], and as the obedient one [*en tant que sujet obéissant; als Gehorchende*] we are familiar with the feelings of compulsion, force, pressure, resistance, and motion that generally start right after the act of willing. On the other hand, however, we are in the habit of ignoring and deceiving ourselves about this

duality by means of the synthetic concept of the “I” [*nous duper nous-mêmes en escamotant cette dualité grâce au concept synthétique du “moi”; uns über diese Zweiheit vermöge des synthetischen Begriffs “ich” hinwegzusetzen, hinwegzutäuschen*]...“Freedom of the will” — that is the word for the multi-faceted state of pleasure of one who commands and, at the same time, identifies himself with the accomplished act of willing [*le mot qui désigne ce complexe état d’euphorie du sujet voulant, qui commande et s’identifie à la fois avec l’exécuteur de l’action; das Wort für jenen vielfachen Lust-Zustand des Wollenden, der befiehlt und sich zugleich mit dem Ausführenden als Eins setzt*]...Accordingly, the one who wills takes his feeling of pleasure as the commander, and adds to it the feelings of pleasure from the successful instruments that carry out the task [*le sujet voulant ajoute ainsi les sentiments de plaisir issus des instruments d’exécution; Der Wollende nimmt dergestalt die Lustgefühle der ausführenden, erfolgreichen Werkzeuge*], as well as from the useful “under-wills” or under-souls [*sous-volontés” ou sous-âmes; “Unterwillen” oder Unterseelen*] — our body is, after all, only a society constructed out of many souls [*un édifice d’âmes multiples; ein Gesellschaftsbau vieler Seelen*]. *L’effet c’est moi* [in French in the original text]: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy community: the ruling class identifies itself with the successes of the community [*la classe dirigeante s’identifie au succès de la collectivité; dass die regierende Klasse sich mit den Erfolgen des Gemeinwesens identifizieren*].¹

My point is not to challenge the French translation but to call attention to the problems it reveals. We have to attribute a particular significance to the fact that Nietzsche’s text itself contains a reflection on translation as a process of deception that is endowed with a fundamental anthropological significance. Considering the inherent illusions of the unity of the will, it is not unexpected that the invocation of the political metaphor (if such a thing exists) is accompanied by a *French* phrase (thus something “untranslatable”) that parodies Louis XIV’s “*L’État, c’est moi*,” the famous allegory of absolute monarchy.

By systematically introducing the word “*sujet*” (*sujet obéissant, sujet voulant*), the translation posits an *etwas* that would be identical in both the act of commanding and the effect of obeying, and thereby also circumvents the critique that Nietzsche’s text directs at the illusion of the “I.” On the other hand, in playing with the connotations of the French word “*sujet*” not conveyed by the strict German equivalent “*das Subjekt*,” the translation uses a generic term to express the ambivalences of the real or imaginary relations of subordination (*arkhein* and *arkhesthai*) between the “parts of the soul” that, for Nietzsche, constitute the essence of the “will”: the “obedient subject” appears to be a tautology and the “willing subject,” a quasi-contradiction. Or is it the other way around?

This text throws us right in the middle of the linguistic tensions that characterize the construction and use of the concept of the “subject.” These tensions are defined by the tendency toward two separate paradigms of interpretation of the subject: one peculiar to neo-Latin languages (especially French), the other peculiar to German. In the first case, the simultaneously

logico-ontological and juridico-political connotation of the subject (sustained by a certain “historical play of words” between the meanings of *subjectum* and *subjectus*) is exploited in a systematic investigation of the modalities of the “subjectivation of the subject.” In the other case — where the political dimension is obscured by language, or rather, is relegated to the latent system of translations — the relation between the mode of existence of the subject and the register of law or power is located exclusively on the side of an ontology of freedom that opposes it to nature. These two paradigms, of course, are not developed independently of each other: they share all their classical references, and the more or less simultaneous translation of the works of European metaphysics is one of the main sources of their history. In this respect, it is apparent how revealing the divergent readings of Nietzsche’s work prove to be here.

THE “CARTESIAN” SUBJECT: A KANTIAN INVENTION

The expressions “Cartesian subject” and “Cartesian subjectivity” are so common and so often function to situate Cartesian thought in historical or comparative schemes that it is worth the trouble to expose the conditions of its invention, which is also a *quid pro quo* of translation. This *quid pro quo*, however, is a testimony to an extraordinary conceptual work in the midst of language itself (which started with the syntactical charts of Latin, French, and German). It is sufficiently powerful and suggestive to induce a retroactive understanding of Descartes’ text and the stakes of his philosophy from which we cannot extract ourselves. Coming after Kant’s reading of Descartes, we can at most read in the latter an anticipated resistance to the transcendental problematic, but cannot rescue him from the language of subjectivity. In this sense, the effects of Kant’s intervention are irreversible.

Subjektivität — that is, the field and quality of the phenomena within the thinking, perceiving, and sentient individual that are not the effects of exterior objects affecting it but of its own dispositions (what Locke and Malebranche called “secondary qualities”) — is already an important term in Baumgarten’s *Aesthetics*. Joachim Ritter is right in reminding us of this fact, although his use of *subjectum* — or rather of the German “*Subjekt*” — is subsequent and not prior to this abstract conceptual formation. In reality, it is only after the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the *Subjekt* becomes the key concept of a philosophy of subjectivity (according to its different qualifications: the logical subject, the empirical subject, the rational subject, the transcendental subject, the moral subject). On the one hand, Kant’s philosophy *invents* the problematic of a thought for which its access to the objectivity of the laws of nature, as well as to the universality of ethical and aesthetic values, reside in its own constitution. On the other hand, that philosophy *names* as the “subject” (that is to say, the other of the object) the general individuality immanent to the play of the faculties of consciousness which, for all finite souls, constitutes the world and confers meaning on action within it. Even if one takes into consideration the rather extraordinary

anticipations of the concept (like that identified by Alain de Libera in the thirteenth-century Franciscan “spiritualist” Pierre-Jean Olieu) — of which it remains to be seen how they could have been known by Kant — the only intrinsic link between this Kantian creation of the *Subjekt* and the scholastic notion of *subjectum* or *suppositum* is precisely the one indicated by the idea of the Copernican revolution: after this revolution the categories of predication are no longer of the order of being, but rather are rules internal to thinking. They are not categories of being but categories of the subject, constitutive of the object (and in this sense of experience in general, transcendentals).

Why was it necessary for Kant to project this discovery retrospectively onto Descartes, giving credence to the idea of the Cartesian invention of the subject and inciting even the greatest to search for the traces of a semantic mutation of terms practically never used by Descartes himself? The answer resides in Kant’s text. Let me juxtapose three passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that are, one has to confess, not always easy to translate:

- 1) Das: *Ich denke*, muss alle meine Vorstellungen begleiten können; denn sonst würde etwas in mir vorgestellt werden, was garnicht gedacht werden könnte...Also hat alles Mannigfaltige der Anschauung eine notwendige Beziehung auf das: *Ich denke*, in demselben Subjekt, darin dieses Mannigfaltige angetroffen wird. Diese Vorstellung aber ist ein Aktus der Spontaneität, sie kann nicht als zur Sinnlichkeit gehörig angesehen werden. Ich nenne sie die reine Apperzeption...weil sie dasjenige Selbstbewusstsein ist, was, indem es die Vorstellung *Ich denke* hervorbringt, die alle anderen muss begleiten können, und in allem Bewusstsein ein und dasselbe ist...von keiner weiter begleitet werden kann.

The *I think* must be *capable* of accompanying all my presentations. For otherwise something would be presented to me that could not be thought at all....Hence everything manifold in intuition has a necessary reference to the *I think* in the same subject in whom this manifold is found. But this presentation [i.e., the *I think*] is an act of spontaneity; i.e., it cannot be regarded as belonging to sensibility. I call it *pure apperception*....for it is the self-consciousness which, because it produces the presentation *I think* that must be capable of accompanying all other presentations[,] and [because it] is one and the same in all consciousness, cannot be accompanied by any further presentation.²

- 2) *Ich*, als denkend, bin ein Gegenstand des inneren Sinnes, und heisse Seele....Demnach bedeutet der Ausdruck: Ich, als ein denkend Wesen, schon den Gegenstand der Psychologie....Ich denke, ist also der alleinige Text der rationalen Psychologie, aus welchem sie ihre ganze Weisheit auswickeln soll. Man sieht leicht, dass dieser Gedanke, wenn er auf einen Gegenstand (mich selbst) bezogen werden soll, nichts anderes, als transzendente Prädikate desselben, enthalten könne....Zum Grunde derselben können wir aber nichts anderes legen, als die einfache und für sich selbst an Inhalt gänzlich leere Vorstellung: *Ich*; von der man nicht einmal sagen kann, dass sie ein Begriff sei, sondern ein blosses Bewusstsein, das alle Begriffe begleitet. Durch dieses Ich, oder Er, oder Es

(das Ding), welches denkt, wird nun nichts weiter, als ein transzendentes Subjekt der Gedanken vorgestellt = x, welches nur durch die Gedanken, die seine Prädikate sind, erkannt wird.

I, as thinking, am an object of inner sense and am called soul....Thus the expression, I, as a thinking being, already means the object of psychology....Hence *I think* is rational psychology's sole text, from which it is to unfold its entire wisdom. We readily see that if this thought is to be referred to an object (myself), then it can contain nothing but transcendental predicates of this object....Yet we can lay at the basis of this science [rational psychology] nothing but the simple, and by itself quite empty, presentation *I*, of which we cannot even say that it is a concept, but only that it is a mere consciousness accompanying all concepts. Now through this *I* or *he* or *it* (the thing) that thinks, nothing more is presented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = x. This subject is cognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates. (383-385)

- 3) Der Satz: *Ich denke*, wird aber hierbei nur problematisch genommen; nicht sofern er eine Wahrnehmung von einem Dasein enthalten mag, (das Cartesianische *cogito, ergo sum*), sondern seiner blossen Möglichkeit nach, um zu sehen, welche Eigenschaften aus diesem so einfachen Satze auf das Subjekt desselben (es mag dergleichen nun existieren oder nicht) fließen mögen. Läge unserer reinen Vernunftserkenntnis von denkenden Wesen überhaupt mehr, als das *cogito* zum Grunde...so würde eine empirische Psychologie entspringen.

But in this process the proposition *I think* is taken only problematically. I.e., it is not taken insofar as it may contain a perception of an existent (the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*); the proposition is taken, rather, in terms of its mere possibility, in order to see what properties may from so simple a proposition flow to its subject (whether or not such a subject exists). If our pure rational cognition of thinking beings as such were based on more than the *cogito*...then there would arise an empirical psychology. (386)

Leaving aside the remarkable selection of pronouns (*Ich, Er, Es*), one can see that Kant performs one operation in the guise of another. He attributes to Descartes a normalization of the statement "*cogito*" or "I think" in order to make it into the name of an auto-referential operation by which thought takes itself for its own object, the complete formula of which would be: "I am cognizant of the fact that I think that I think." He designates as "subject" (*subjectum* translated by him as *Subjekt*), in the classical metaphysical sense, the "something" or the "being" that exists simultaneously as that which is aiming and aimed at by thought (as the pole or support of the attribution of predicates). Thus Kant suggests to his successors (Fichte and Hegel) that the only conceivable subject (*hupokeimenon*) is one that thinks itself and its own predicates, which are its thoughts. From a Cartesian point of view, these two operations are contradictory, as will be clear if one rereads the *Meditations*. Strictly speaking, the nominalization of the simple phrase "*cogito*" cannot be found in Descartes, even if it is anticipated by the way he reflects on the properties of his own statement. On the other hand, the move toward the metaphysical subject is, properly speaking, incompatible with the *cogito*, which in the *Meditations* is reduced to the existential

proposition, “I am, I exist.” The *cogito* is inseparable from a first-person enunciation (*ego*) to which Descartes opposes the “He” (*Il, Ille*) of God and the “this” (*ceci, hoc*) of the body. “I think” is equivalent to “I am,” which is developed as “I am what I am,” that is to say, I am my soul (*mens*), not Him (God), or this (my body). Clearly, we are faced with a misinterpretation with rather serious consequences, since the whole of transcendental philosophy up to Husserl and Heidegger read Descartes through Kant’s eyes and thus ceaselessly reproached Descartes for having “substantialized the subject” at the very moment of its discovery.

This misinterpretation, however, is fundamentally a result of the difficulty encountered by Kant in trying to situate a revolutionary idea in which all the originality of his “transcendental dialectics” is concentrated, an idea that is as different from the “subjectivity” of Aristotelian metaphysics as it is from the “ipseity” of the Cartesian “thinking thing” (*ego ipse a me percipior*): the idea of the truth of perceptive appearance inherent to thought. For Kant, we are not capable of thinking without our inner sense being affected by thinking itself and, consequently, without the emergence of an illusion of an “inner reality” (itself an object of thought). Hence, the thinking “I” recognizes itself in its logical function precisely to the degree that it cannot help but misrecognize itself by believing that it is knowable as a phenomenon, taken literally as “that which appears” in the scene of representation (*erscheint*). The substance, for Kant, is no longer of the order of being or of “the thing in itself,” but rather it is only the concept of that which remains permanent in phenomena. The subject, as a power or faculty of logic, is not substantial since it is not phenomenal; however, inasmuch as it thinks (itself), it *appears* in the modality of a substance. In the “Transcendental Deduction,” Kant writes, “Accordingly I have no *cognition* of myself as I am but merely cognition of how I appear to myself (*wie ich mich selbst erscheine*)” (196). The “I” — which is only given in the form of an inseparable statement “I think” that also functions as its proper, that is to say, generic, “name” — is only capable of apprehending itself (and thereby also “affecting” itself) in an illusory manner. But this illusion or transcendental appearance (*Schein*) is the only one to deliver an original verity: it is the only possible form of a foundation. In a certain sense, it is truth itself. “Subject” is the word that henceforth denotes this amazing unity of contraries and Kant attributes to Descartes this metaphysical illusion of which he claims to have freed himself. By making this “mistake,” Descartes bears witness to the fact that truth lies at the heart of illusion.

In all this — in which the syntactic forms of enunciation and translations or transpositions play a crucial role — it seems that we have to deal exclusively with epistemological propositions and experiences of thought. The *a fortiori* “practical,” political dimension of the question of the subject is never addressed explicitly. Nevertheless, the certainty of this observation might be questioned if one pays attention to two features of the argument that I want to focus on here. The first complication is that the Kantian subject (that is, the *Ich* or, better still, the *Ich denke*) is

fundamentally given in a relation of *reflection*. This provides for the subject — that is to say, the subject attributes to itself — a representation that is at the same time truth and error, recognition and misrecognition. The second observation is that this circle of apperception opens onto an *injunction* which the subject is not only tempted but also required to approach through the form of the categorical imperative itself: the injunction of liberating its own representation from “phenomenalism” (or from substantialism, which amounts to the same thing) in order to attach it to the idea of a “pure” activity of thought. Such an idea has no meaning within the horizon of nature; it can only take on meaning as the correlate of liberty. It is at this point that the way the argument of the “Paralogism of Pure Reason” proceeds — by way of identifying the transcendental “subject” (or the reflexive identity of the “I” [*Selbst*]) with the moral personality (*Persönlichkeit*), which renders the human being “capable of being the citizen of a better world than he thinks” — acquires its full significance.

Historically speaking, we would like to be able to relate this substratum of Kantian thought to the “becoming subject” of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary citizen and, notably, to the constitution of the category of the “subject of right” (*Rechtssubjekt*). In a recent study, Yves-Charles Zarka — opposing a version of justice and equality that demands that each subject place itself in the place of all others — identifies Leibniz as the source of the emergence of the expression *subjectum juris*, referring to a universalizing “moral quality” of its bearer.³ But we also know that even though Kant, like Hegel, might seem to be the closest to defining the divisions of right, he himself never used the expression “subject of right,” for which, it appears, one would have to turn to the historical school of right (Savigny, Hugo, Puchta). These subjects (*Subjekte*), in relation to which one thinks of “obligation,” have nothing to do with political “subjects” (*Untertan*, Kant’s equivalent of the Latin *subditus*) obeying a *sovereign* (which could be the people itself in the form of a state). The encounter with the themes of sovereignty and law, which implicitly invoke the ideas of the liberation of the subject and of the subject as that “which liberates itself,” thus remains repressed.

***SUBJECTUS/SUBJECTUM*: THE HISTORICAL PLAY OF WORDS**

Since they refer to this double etymology, the French *su(b)jet*, the English *subject*, the Spanish *sujeto*, and the Italian *soggetto* make immediately apparent what the German word *Subjekt*, because of its difference from *Untertan*, is not capable of evoking: on the one hand, they refer to *subjectum*, meaning the agent of individual properties; on the other hand, they also refer to *subjectus*, meaning subjugated to law or power. In other words, we are dealing with the problems of presupposition and subjection: the negotiation of the gap between the term aimed at by the question “who?” and that aimed at by the question “what?” We maintain that this linguistic

difference played a crucial role in the formation of Western philosophy, and thus spoke of this subject (parodying certain French translations of Heidegger) as a historical play of words, the effects of which could be traced from Hobbes to Foucault (by way of Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Bataille).

“Subject” was not originally one of the “words of opposing meaning” that so fascinated Freud, but it did become one, in the sense that liberty and constraint now appear as two sides of the same coin. The origins of this overdetermination cannot be found in Greek, even when one makes an analogy with the construction of the terms *hupokeimenon* (the substratum or the support), *hypostasis* (the foundation or substance, before becoming the technical term designating the persons of the Trinity), and *hypèkoos* (“he who obeys to the speech”: the servant, the disciple, the vassal paying a tribute). We have to turn instead to Latin — that is, to imperial and Christian Rome — and then to the history of theologico-politics and moral anthropology centered around obedience as the road to salvation.

The development of *subjectus* as a juristic figure extends over seventeen centuries, from Roman Law to absolute monarchy. The first question that emerges is: how do you move from the enumeration of individuals subjugated to the power of another to the representation of the human race as a community of “subjects”? The distinction between independent and dependent persons was the foundation of Roman Law. Suffice it to recall a text by Gaius: “Next comes another division in the law of persons. For some persons are *sui iuris* (independent) and others are *alieni iuris* (dependent on another). Again, of those *alieni iuris* some are in *potestas* [in power], others in *manus* [in hand, under the jurisdiction of another], and others in *mancipium* [enslaved]. Let us consider first persons *alieni iuris*; for, knowing these, we shall at the same time know who are *sui iuris*.”⁴ As we can see, it is by the dialectical division of the forms of subjection (*assujettissement*) that one obtains the definition of the free man, the master; however, for this division to create a link between subjects, the notions of *potestas*, *manus*, and *mancipium* are not sufficient. What is needed is an *imperium* (absolute authority). An idea of universal subjection only appears with the empire, in relation to the person of the emperor to whom the citizens and many of the non-citizens owe “service,” *officium*. This condition, however, is still not sufficient: it is necessary that the Romans could be submitted to *imperium* in the *same manner* (if that was ever a possibility) as the conquered populations, the so-called “subjects of the Roman people” — a confusion that, contradictorily, points toward the horizon of the generalized Roman citizenship as personal status within the empire. And above all, it is necessary that the *imperium* be founded theologically as a Christian *imperium*, a spiritual power issuing from God and conserved by him, reigning not only over the body but over (and in) the soul as well.

The subject taken in this sense (the “subject of law” or *sujet du droit*) is the absolute opposite of what was later called the “subject of right” (*sujet de droit*, *Rechtssubjekt*). Its major characteristic is that it is a *subditus* (subordinate) but not a *servus* (slave). Calling the subject *subditus* means that it enters a relation of obedience. Obedience is not established only between a ruler who has the right to constrain and those submitted to this power, but also between a *sublimis* (one “elected” to command) and the *subditi* or *subjecti* (those who turn to him to receive the law). The power to constrain is distributed along a hierarchy of powers. Obedience is the principle that makes the obedient into members of the same body. Obedience itself, concentrated at the top in the figure of a *principium/princeps*, fundamentally still comes from below; as *subditi*, the subjects *want* their own proper obedience to be inscribed into the economy of creation and salvation. Thus, knowing that all power comes from God, the *faithful one who happens to be a subject* [*fidèle sujet*] is also necessarily a *faithful subject* [*sujet fidèle*].

With its unity of principle and its numberless forms, such an obedience implies a notion of the soul that was unknown to antiquity, or at least was not used in the same way to think a political relation. For an ancient Greek, it is not the soul that obeys. Obedience is a contingent situation in which one finds oneself in relation to a commander (*arkhon*), but this relation also provides (at least in a democratic *politeia*) that one can become a commander oneself, which is the Aristotelian definition of the citizen. This notion of obedience, then, is a natural dependence of the domestic type. From this perspective, the concept of “free obedience” is a contradiction in terms. It is quite significant that the idea that a slave could *also* be free only comes later (with Stoicism): on a *different* level (in a “cosmic” city, a city of “souls”) those who are slaves here may be masters (of themselves, of their passions), and they can also be citizens tied to others by a reciprocal link (*philia*). There is nothing here that would even approximate an idea of liberty residing in obedience and that would be a result of this obedience itself. In order to conceive of that, the idea of obedience has to be transferred to the side of the soul and must no longer be thought of as natural: it has to name a supernatural part of the individual that understands the divinity of order.

The *subditus-subjectus* was constantly distinguished from the slave, in the same way that the sovereignty of the prince, the *sublimes*, was distinguished from despotism, which is literally the authority of a master of slaves. But this fundamental distinction was elaborated in different ways. Within the theological tradition, the subject is a believer, a Christian, which could mean that since it is his soul that obeys, he will never be a “thing” owned by the sovereign; his obedience corresponds to the responsibility or duty of the prince. This manner of thinking the liberty of the subject, however, is in practice extraordinarily ambivalent: the subject can either understand itself as an affirmation and active contribution of its will to obedience (just as the Christian, by

his works, “cooperates in his salvation”), or as an annihilation of the will — this is why the mystics try to annihilate themselves in the contemplation of God, the only absolute sovereign. Autonomy dwells with nothingness, “propriety” with “de-propritation.”

It is nevertheless evident that when the return of the “citizen” gets underway in medieval and renaissance villages, it does not allow itself to be reduced to *zōion politikon*: Thomas Aquinas, who translates the expression as “social animal,” distinguishes man’s *christianitas* (a supernatural quality) from his *humanitas* (something natural), that is, he distinguishes “believer” from “citizen.” So what happens to the “subject” here? In a certain sense, it is more autonomous insofar as its subjection is the effect of a political order that integrates “civility” and “politics,” and inscribes itself into nature. But it becomes ever more difficult to conceive of it as *subditus*: the concept of its essential obedience is threatened. This contradiction erupts in the absolute monarchy that takes the mysterious unity of the “two bodies” of the temporal and the spiritual sovereign to its final extreme. The same goes for the liberty of the subject. There is only one prince whose will is law, who is “father of his subjects,” and has absolute authority over them: “*L’État, c’est moi*,” as Louis XIV said. Yet the absolute monarchy is precisely a power of *the State*, that is to say, a power that institutes and exercises itself by law and administration. Thus, its subjects are, if not “subjects of right,” at least subjects “in right,” members of a republic (what Hobbes called the Commonwealth). *The subjects are the citizens*. Or, as Jean Bodin explains, “[w]e can say then that every citizen is a subject since his liberty is limited by the sovereign power to which he owes obedience. We cannot say that every subject is a citizen. This is clear from the case of slaves.”⁵ Under the given circumstances, however, this does not render untenable the condition of the citizen as the “free subject who is dependent on the sovereignty of another.”⁶ Boethius, by a reversal of terms, opposes to these theories the definition of the power of the One as a “voluntary servitude” on which the reason of the State does not confer any meaning of supernatural liberty. The controversy over the (non-)difference between absolutism and despotism accompanies the whole history of absolute monarchy. And from the point of view of the new citizen and its revolution (which will also be an essential source of its own idealization), the condition of the subject will be retrospectively identified with that of the slave, the subjection into slavery.

SUBJECTIVITY *à la française*

Now it is possible to interpret how contemporary philosophy — especially that written in French — understands the question of subjectivity: not as a question of essence, relating being to truth and appearance, or to the opposition between nature and liberty as in the metaphysical tradition, but *as a political question*, as a becoming or relation of forces themselves “internal” to their conflicts.

From the point of view of the history of ideas and words, it would be helpful to have at our disposal a certain number of intermediary links that we will mention only in passing here. First and foremost, there are the two faces of Rousseau's oeuvre and the corresponding *tours d'écriture* that left an omnipresent trace. Think of the way the *Social Contract* presents the citizen (which is a part of the sovereignty, that is, author of the law) and the subject (which finds its liberty in absolute obedience to the same law) as strict correlatives due to the "total alienation" of individual wills that functions as the source of a general will. This general will in turn constitutes a "communal I" reflected by all the individual consciousnesses, as Hegel wrote in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (implicitly referring to Rousseau): "an I that is a we and a we that is an I." Keep in mind, however, the way his autobiographical writings associate the theme of the authenticity of the "I" with that of subjectivation: "There is not a day when I do not remember with joy and tenderness this unique and brief time of my life, when I was fully myself, without mixture and without obstacle, and when I can truly say I lived...I could not endure subjection [*assujettissement*]; I was perfectly free, and more than free, because, subjected by my attachment alone, I only did what I wished to do."⁷

Furthermore, one would have to take into consideration the effects of the revolutionary break that cannot be restricted merely to the "sublation" of the subject (*subjectus, subditus*) by the citizen (entitled to political rights), since it also carries out a becoming subject (*subjectum*) of the citizen. This process involves a naturalization of his or her humanity, which inscribes all anthropological differences (age, sex, culture, health, capabilities, morality, and so on) into an "individual character" that determines its social recognition and with which it (more or less) identifies itself in the course of its education. This shift forms the historical and political conditions of possibility of the subversion of the relation between sovereignty and subjectivity. Such would be (at least according to our hypothesis) the genealogy of the identification of the *problem of subjectivity* and the *problem of subjection* that completely transforms the meaning of the question of the subject in philosophy (and at the same time our perception of its history).

As a final note, let's look at two thinkers who bring the question of the subject up to the present moment. It is Lacan and Foucault who, although in very different ways, employ the specter of subjectivity in the most systematic manner as the process of subjection. Lacan recollects this distant heritage by reference to two paradoxical but absolutely idiomatic French phrases: "the I is detestable" ("*le moi est haïssable*" — Pascal) and "I am an other" ("*Je est un autre*" — Rimbaud). What is the subject for him? Nothing but the succession of effects of a living individual's alienation from the "law of the signifier": if it has to be taken as irreducible, the subject is never originary, but always already "dependent." It only exists as a returning effect of the speech that constitutes it (and names it in the first place) in a symbolic universe of discourses and institutions that are, by definition, impossible to master. Lacan interprets the "lack of knowledge"

constitutive of the unconscious precisely in these terms. Because it is submitted to the signifier that irreparably separates it from itself, the subject infinitely oscillates between the illusion of identity (the narcissistic beliefs of an “imaginary captation” summarized by the figure of the “I”) and the unknown element involved in the conflict (the recognition of a question coming from the *other* [primarily the other sex] as that which is nevertheless most properly its own). This is, no doubt, the choice that constitutes the subject: “if desire is an effect in the subject of the condition that is imposed on him by the existence of the discourse, to make his need pass through the defiles of the signifier...the subject has to find the constituting structure of his desire in the same gap opened up by the effect of the signifiers in those who come to represent the Other for him, in so far as his demand is subjected to them.”⁸ At best, analysis reverses the course of the constitution of desire that leads the subject back to the enunciation of its “lack in being”; as Lacan points out, “[d]esire merely subjects what analysis makes subjective.”⁹

Foucault, in turn, found the model of the relationship between subjectivity, appearance, and truth in the methods of obtaining and providing confessions (passed on from religion and inquisition to psychology and psychiatry). Furthermore, in Bentham’s panopticism, he found the ideal diagram of all “fictitious relations,” materialized in the play of the institutions of social normalization, from which a “real subjection is born mechanically.”¹⁰ Starting from here, he created the program of an investigation of the modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects and, most notably, of power relations. But there is no power, neither over the self nor over others, that does not proceed by way of the constitution of a certain knowledge. Therefore, this knowledge is not simply a theoretical activity, but a social practice, a production of objectivity. The questions of the subject and of the object — understood as a double process of subjectivation and objectivation, the subjectivation of the individual by rules and the construction of the “relation of self to self” according to different practical modalities — are not opposed to one another, but are two sides of the same reality. “Still within the framework of the same general project, Michel Foucault has now attempted to study the constitution of the subject as object for itself: the formation of the procedures by which the subject is driven to observe, analyze, decipher, and recognize itself as a domain of possible knowledge. In short, he is dealing with the history of ‘subjectivity’ — if one understands by this word the manner in which the subject experiences itself in a game of truth where it has a relation to itself.”¹¹ The very words of the “transcendental dialectics” turned against their original meaning! We can identify here a circle of presuppositions: the subject is the aggregate of the apparatuses of subjection or subjectivation that act objectively upon the “subjectivity” of the individual; that is to say, they presuppose the “liberty” of the subject or a capacity to resist in order to turn this subjectivity against itself. In other words, we are dealing with a differential of power that simultaneously opens up the possibility of a politics (attempting to liberate the individual from certain modes of

discipline and from certain types of individuality) and of an ethics (inventing new relations of power and “practices of liberty” that are modes of access rather than of self-consciousness).

These propositions, in their conflicting dispersion, transform our reading of European history. By conferring the light of evidence on the associations and metaphors that underlie Nietzsche’s text, they make possible another use of the subjectivity defined by the *Critique of Pure Reason*. If the subject (*subjectum*, *Subjekt*, but also *subjectus*) had not been placed in an internal relation with personal subjection and therefore with political, juristic, and theological power (of which that subject is the effect and inverse image), we would not be able to recognize in the paradoxical conjunction of truth and transcendental appearances discussed in the “Paralogisms of Pure Reason” the sign of an originary difference (or *différance*) that redirects us to the ethics of internal obedience and ascetism rather than to the metaphysics of spirit and the psychology of “self-consciousness.” In the end, these propositions reopen the question of the active finitude that defines the Cartesian subject (or non-subject): but not so much as “nature” or thinking “substance,” that is to say, as *representation*, but as a *revindication* (as Canguilhem would say) of a power to say “I,” “between the infinite and nothing,” or between God and the body.

Translated by Roland Végső



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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18-20. [Balibar cites the following French edition of Nietzsche’s text: *Par delà bien et mal* in *Œuvres philosophiques complètes*, vol. 7, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, trans. C. Heim, I. Hildenbrandt, and J. Gratién (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). I quote from the latest English edition and provide this French translation and the original German text in brackets where necessary. Trans.]
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 177; brackets in the original. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text. For the German text, see Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956).
3. See Yves-Charles Zarka, “L’invention du sujet de droit,” in *Archives de philosophie* 60 (1997): 531-550.
4. Gaius, *The Institutes of Gaius. Part I*, trans. Francis de Zulueta (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 17.
5. Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, trans. M. J. Tooley (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 19.
6. Ibid.
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary*, trans. John Gould Fletcher (New York: Brentano, 1927), 194-195.
8. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 264.
9. Ibid., 260.
10. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 202.
11. Foucault, “Foucault,” in *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), 4:633. [Editor’s translation.]

