Subjectivity after Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein’s embodied and embedded subject and the debate about the death of man

Bax, C.

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Intermezzo I

Ethical arguments against non-Cartesian accounts

On my reading of his philosophy of psychology, Wittgenstein aims to provide an account of subjectivity that captures the nature or being of human being more adequately than Cartesianism is able to do. According to the analysis laid out in the previous chapter, Cartesianism not only unduly focuses on just one element or feature of the human subject – to wit, its being endowed with mind – but moreover gives an explanation thereof that should be said to be wanting, no matter how well equipped Cartesianism may seem for shedding light on the nature of the mental. Describing psychological phenomena as literally inner entities fails to account for thoughts and feelings as we know them from our everyday practices, and a model that does not exclude everything remotely suggesting that mental matters are not utterly and completely private - such as the expression of sensation and the socio-cultural background thereof - also leads to a less one-sided perspective on the kind of beings we are. In Wittgenstein’s book, psychological phenomena are aspects of the human being rather than inner objects or processes. Far from taking them to be subsidiary characteristics that might just as well be explained away, Wittgenstein shows that the subject’s materiality and sociality pertain to its very essence.

However, in spite of the fact that Wittgenstein can be said to try and save Cartesianism from itself, so to speak, he has been accused of effectively undermining each and every notion of subjectivity. His situating mental matters on the outside rather than the inside of the subject has led commentators to claim that Wittgenstein does away with psychological life in its entirety. His more precisely explaining this outer in terms of an interspace between a community of subjects has led critics to state that the subject is, on Wittgenstein’s view, a mere cog or bolt in a larger social machinery and accordingly has no existence in its own right. But it is not only Wittgensteinian subjectivity about which such things have been said: similar observations or accusations have been made with regard to other rethinkers.
of Cartesianism. What is more, as I explained in the introductory chapter, critics take this to mean that the post-Cartesian perspective is both ethically and politically inadequate, if not outright irresponsible. Given that this dissertation wants to contribute to the subjectivity debate, not only by making one of the voices therein more explicit, but also by evaluating the backlash that the dismantling of the Cartesian Ego has received, let me have a closer look at these criticisms. In this intermezzo, I will discuss the arguments as to the ethical deficit of post-Cartesianism.

While the twentieth century attempt to remove or reinvent the Cartesian Ego has been highly influential, it has met with much disapproval too. Thinkers critical of the anti-Cartesian turn that the debate on subjectivity took, maintain that the postmodernists (to once more use this label as a shorthand for positions that are in fact not entirely equivalent) may be correct in some of their arguments against Cartesianism but have taken their anti-Cartesianism much too far. The critics of post-Cartesianism for instance contend that the rethinkers of the subject end up jeopardizing the very idea of a human being to whom thoughts and feelings, from the most mundane to the most profound ones, can be ascribed. Manfred Frank brings this to attention by pointing to particular psychological phenomena that post- or anti-Cartesianism seems to rule out. He observes that Heidegger’s *Dasein* has an “incapacity for sorrow” and argues that the “dead subject emits no more cries of pain.” Iris Murdoch straightforwardly claims that the twentieth century rethinkers of the subject discard “private coherent mental activity [and] mental reality” in its entirety. She unreservedly attributes this position to Wittgenstein as well. Though Murdoch feels that the postmodernists overturned Cartesian interiority “with greater panache,” she maintains that Wittgenstein no less undermined “the whole multifarious mixed-up business of our inner [...] experiences.” Frank, in turn, holds that Wittgenstein made “an unusually valuable contribution to the proper understanding of subjectivity” but ultimately sides with Murdoch’s appraisal of the Wittgensteinian enterprise, claiming that it only facilitated the construction of the myth that self-consciousness is not a pre-linguistic phenomenon in its own right.

According to commentators such as Frank and Murdoch, this mythology is not something to be applauded, and they give several reasons as to why the Wittgensteinian and/or postmodern subversion of subjectivity should be criticized. Murdoch for instance holds that the upsetting of the Cartesian inner-outer model

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1 In the remainder of this intermezzo as well as in the second intermezzo, I will discuss the arguments that have been levelled against Wittgenstein and post-Cartesianism in more detail.

2 Frank 1989, p. 5.

3 Idem, p. 10.


5 Ibidem.

6 Idem, p. 279.

7 Frank 1995, p. 32.
fails to do justice to our everyday experience of both our own and other minds, prompting her to ask (rhetorically, no doubt): “Can this be a full philosophical account of human life?” Frank furthermore points out that when critics of Cartesianism discuss the pain and suffering possibly resulting from the community’s rule over the individual, they show themselves to be wholly inconsistent. If there is no pre-linguistic or pre-existing subject, he remarks in response to Deleuze and Guattari’s writings, there is also no one to “suffer under the coercion of language” or to “perceive the theft of its freedom by ‘grammar’ as a loss.”

For both Murdoch and Frank, however, it is neither phenomenological considerations nor observations as to the consistency of postmodernism that form the main impetus behind their rejection. At the end of the day, these critics hold that the Wittgensteinian and/or postmodern perspective should be condemned on ethical grounds. The fact that the rethinkers of Cartesianism can no longer speak of a suffering subject not only makes their writings contradictory in places, Frank maintains: this lack of a locus for compassion and engagement makes their entire project into a cynical and amoral enterprise. Murdoch similarly feels that the subversion of Cartesian subjectivity undermines the very basis of morality. What disturbs her most about Wittgenstein and the postmodernists is that their denial of the inner life leaves no more room for matters such as moral sensibility and malicious thoughts, thereby undercutting “the common sense conception of the individual self as a moral centre or substance.”

Hence, according to their critics, those responsible for the demise of the Cartesian Ego undermine the very possibility of ethics. This is no small objection, to say the least, and in what follows, I will investigate to what extent commentators are justified in making this claim. As I already explained in the introduction to this dissertation, I strongly doubt whether it makes for a valid counterargument. Even apart from the fact that the reading of post-Cartesianism on which it is based may not be entirely correct, it can be debated whether ethics really requires that we do not follow through with the critique of Cartesianism completely. For if there is a conflict between our moral practices and a renewed perspective on the subject, is there any principled reason that we should retain (part of) the traditional notion of subjectivity rather than rethink these practices as well? And is the anti- or post-Cartesian perspective truly at odds with each and every conception of ethics in the first place? The opposite could also be argued and has been argued, perhaps most emphatically by Emmanuel Levinas. He contends that it is only through the self conceived of as always already exposed to and interrogated by the other “that there

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8 Idem, p. 273.
10 Cf. Frank 1989, p. 10; Frank 1995, pp. 30-31. The critique of anti-Cartesianism is often formulated in political terms as well, and Frank’s arguments already point in that direction. I will come back to this in the second intermezzo.
can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple “After you, sir.”” ¹² Far from insisting that we must hold on to the Cartesian model, Levinas claims that we can only begin to understand what ethics is when this schema is overturned.

However, I have not quoted the words of Levinas because I think that he has the sole correct position in the debate as to whether ethics requires that the Cartesian Ego is rejected or retained. Rather than intervening in this discussion about the conditions of possibility of ethics, I want to reflect on the fact that many of the arguments in the subjectivity debate are put in ethical terms to begin with - and, as the example of Levinas makes clear, this holds for arguments for as well as against the rethinking of Cartesianism. Even so, and as I already explained in the introduction to this thesis, I will suspend commenting on the ethico-political nature of much of the debate until the concluding chapter. First, I will investigate the exegetical validity of the objections to the critique of Cartesianism. While I do not think that my reading of Wittgenstein in the previous chapter supports the claim that he jeopardizes the idea of the thinking and feeling human being, I do want to take the fact that the critique of Cartesianism gives rise to such diverging appraisals as an incentive to have a closer look his account.

For as my brief rehearsal of the arguments pro and contra non-Cartesian subjectivity makes clear, this topic is unmistakeably interwoven with many other, highly important issues, yet its exact ramifications are far from self-evident. Even if the undertakings of Wittgenstein and the postmodernists can be described as a rethinking rather than an unthinking of the subject, their project might still affect numerous assumptions we repeatedly make about human being - including those underlying existing conceptions of the ethical – and the extent to which it overturns and/or retains such all-too common assumptions is not yet given with the assurance that post-Cartesianism does not make all talk of self and subjectivity entirely obsolete. So while one might doubt the claim that ethics does not survive the turn that the debate on subjectivity took, one can grant critics like Frank and Murdoch that it is not in all respects clear what it means to embrace the post-Cartesian perspective. I will in any case not let the fact that I question whether ethical considerations always override observations as to the accuracy of an account of the nature of man, prevent me from looking into the interpretational validity of the objections to post-Cartesianism, and investigate some of the implications of this particular take on subjectivity.

Indeed, this will not only enable me to assess the backlash to anti- or post-Cartesianism in more detail in the end, it also enables me to make Wittgenstein’s contribution to the subjectivity debate more fully explicit. In the next chapter, I will return to Wittgenstein as one of the main representatives of the post-Cartesian development in order to examine whether commentators are justified in stating that the rethinkers of subjectivity, by turning the Cartesian Ego upside-down and

¹² Levinas 1981, p. 117.
inside-out, leave one without a locus for our inmost thoughts and feelings. I will investigate whether “the density and real existence of ‘inner life’”13 is truly up for grabs in non-Cartesian accounts of the subject, or at least in Wittgenstein’s non-Cartesian account.

Yet in order to do so, it does not suffice to go over the findings of the previous chapter again, since it is precisely these findings that have to be put to the test. There is however another part of Wittgenstein’s Nachlass that can be consulted for this very purpose, namely, his remarks on religious belief. This topic was not only of the utmost importance to Wittgenstein throughout his life, his philosophy of religion14 also forms a very instructive point of contrast with his philosophy of psychology. This contrast – lest there be any misunderstanding – does not lie in Wittgenstein’s religious writings offering hope of morality where his psychological writings fail to do so. While the words “ethics” and “religion” certainly seem to be equivalent in a Wittgensteinian context, I do not consult this part of his oeuvre in order to see whether it makes up for the (alleged) ethical deficit of his philosophy of psychology. As stated, I want to leave discussions about the (im)morality of post-Cartesianism aside and merely take the fact that the implications of this outlook are up for debate as an incentive to have a closer look at it. Wittgenstein’s writings on religion are instructive in that respect because the latter, in contrast to his psychological writings, basically disregard the way this phenomenon finds expression in collective patterns and observable doing and sayings.

Judging by his scattered yet recurring contemplations on religious belief,15 Wittgenstein subscribes to the view that religion is ultimately a matter between the believer and God only. In Culture and Value he for instance suggests that being religious cannot amount to merely reiterating established doctrines or phrases: “A theology which insists on the use of certain particular words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer.”16 Wittgenstein also holds that the performance of rituals does not form an essential part of belief, even going so far as to state: “Everything ritualistic (everything that, as it were, smacks of the high priest) must be strictly avoided, because it immediately turns rotten.”17

Now the view that true religiosity does not reside in such externalities does not make for a Wittgensteinian idiosyncrasy: it is endorsed by others as well, perhaps

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14 The term “philosophy of religion” should be used with some caution when it comes to Wittgenstein. Apart from the fact that none of his philosophy takes a very traditional form, his thoughts on the topic of religion seem to be of a less systematic and perhaps more personal nature than his thoughts on, say, language and meaning, which makes it (even) harder to ascribe him a clear and distinct outlook on this issue. I will however use the term “philosophy of religion” as shorthand for his writings on religion nonetheless.
15 Wittgenstein’s writings on religion include TLP, NB, LF, RFGB, LRB and CV. I will introduce these works or collections of remarks in more detail in the next chapter.
16 CV 85d.
17 CV 8a.
most famously by protestant thinkers. What however makes it noteworthy in Wittgenstein’s case is that his philosophy of psychology does not allow him to subsequently explain belief as a literally inner process, which after all seems to be a plausible corollary to this conception of religious belief. Yet as another Culture and Value remark describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer, the former may “look the same” as the latter in all outward respects, “the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different.” This suggests that Wittgenstein situates belief inside the subject and thus falls back on the Cartesian inner-outer model when it comes to religious belief.

A commentator could draw on this remark to argue that Wittgenstein’s religious writings contradict or undermine his own undermining of Cartesianism, more or less along the lines of Frank, who observes an internal inconsistency in the project of postmodernism. Apparently, one could argue, his upsetting of the Cartesian Ego goes too far even for Wittgenstein himself. I however think that it is more instructive to take a different route. For in so far as his psychological writings leave one wondering what Wittgenstein makes of our inmost thoughts and feelings, his writings on religion clearly indicate that his locating psychological phenomena in the interspace between a community of subjects did not bring him to deny the possibility of this pre-eminently personal matter or present it as a purely external and conventional affair. Hence, Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion provides an excellent opportunity for putting his embodied and embedded account of the subject to the test, precisely because of the apparent inconsistency with his philosophy of psychology. By investigating to what extent his religious views are compatible with his psychological findings, his claim that the subject’s materiality and sociality are essential to it can be further explored, thereby (also) determining the exegetical validity of the ethical counterarguments to post-Cartesianism - at least when it comes to the Wittgensteinian variety.

So, rather than jumping to the conclusion that Wittgenstein’s account of the psyche stands in an outright contradiction to his take on a topic that was perhaps even closer to his heart, the next chapter will discuss both convergences and divergences between Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion and his philosophy of psychology. Assuming that Wittgenstein was not suddenly oblivious of his psychological insights when contemplating religious belief, and assuming that there are also non-Cartesian ways of explaining how religiosity does not reside in

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18 The protestant thinker Kierkegaard seems to have been an important source of inspiration for Wittgenstein’s views on religion. He mentions Kierkegaard several times in CV; see CV 31d, CV 32a, CV 38a, CV 53e. Drury 1981a (see pp. 102-104) also recounts Wittgenstein’s admiration of Kierkegaard. See Cregan 1989 and Schönbaumsfeld 2007 for comparisons of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard that also address their respective philosophies of religion.

19 Let me emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that all thinkers who subscribe to this view necessarily fall back on the Cartesian inner-outer model in their ontology of religious belief.

20 CV 33a; cf. Schönbaumsfeld 2007, pp. 141-142. Schönbaumsfeld claims that Wittgenstein (as well as Kierkegaard) relegate ethics and religion to the inner.
externalities or superficialities, I will set out to see if Wittgenstein’s describing the
difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of a process within
can perhaps be seen as a slip of the tongue or a figure of speech. Let me however
emphasize that this is not with the aim of saving Wittgenstein from each and every
inconsistency. Quite the contrary; it will turn out that his philosophy of psychology
and philosophy of religion can indeed not be said to be wholly compatible - albeit
not because Wittgenstein explains religiosity as a literally inner process. Rather than
showing that Wittgenstein can never be caught contradicting himself, the aim of the
next chapter is to remove, if not all the worries of post-Cartesianism’s critics, then
least some of the unclarities surrounding this development.