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

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Intermezzo II

Political arguments against non-Cartesian accounts

In the previous chapter I investigated to what extent Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion is compatible with his philosophy of psychology, for this provides a means, as I explained in the earlier intermezzo, both of fleshing out the Wittgensteinian account of subjectivity more fully, and of assessing the exegetical validity of the ethical objections that have been raised against such accounts. The preceding explorations have shown that, even though Wittgenstein at one point describes the difference between the believer and the non-believer in terms of “the interplay of forces within,”¹ his view on religiosity does not stand in an outright contradiction to his view on the psyche. Wittgenstein may take issue with Cartesianism, this does not compel him to deny the possibility of this pre-eminently personal matter or present it as a purely external or superficial affair. Hence, and in so far as the chapter on psychology left one wondering what Wittgenstein makes of our inmost thoughts and feelings, the previous chapter demonstrated that the interpretation of post-Cartesianism on which the arguments of critics like Frank and Murdoch are based, is not the most complete or correct one. The claim that Wittgenstein does away with “private coherent mental activity”² in its entirety, overstates the consequences of his denial that psychological phenomena reside in a literally inner realm – or at least in one respect.

For while the preceding explorations have established that Wittgenstein’s taking the subject to be embodied does not contradict his view on religiosity, they have also shown that it is unclear how his taking the subject to be embedded squares with his explanation of religious belief. Indeed, it is for the very reason that Wittgenstein’s thoughts on religion are compatible with his view on the subject’s embodiedness that they should be said to diverge from his view on the embeddedness thereof: Wittgenstein situates religiosity in the direction of a person’s life rather than inside the believer, but he also maintains that the believer can and should choose the

¹ CV 33a; cf. pp. 99-100 of this study.
pictures to guide her all by herself, regardless of how others make their lives into a meaningful whole. Or to put this more carefully, Wittgenstein does not claim that the truly religious person is prevented from following age-old communal patterns, he is nonetheless adamant that the believer should choose for herself which pattern to follow.

Now one might grant that directions of life are not in the same way prefigured as psychological phenomena. That is to say, when someone’s fine-grained and contextualized behaviour fundamentally deviates from that of his fellow men in similar situations, we would simply not take it to be expressions of the same phenomenon. When a person on the other hand breaks all existential conventions, we might denounce his way of living but cannot for that reason say that he is not making his life into (what he takes to be) a meaningful whole. Even so, Wittgenstein’s individualistic conception of religion raises the question how it can be reconciled with his claim that the subject is essentially social. For how can he argue that it depends on one’s socio-cultural context how one’s subjectivity develops, and at the same time maintain that the subject should choose a direction in life wholly of her own accord?

This does not only point to an element of Wittgensteinian subjectivity that needs to be explored in more detail. As I already mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, post-Cartesianism’s overturning of the self-other model has been as severely criticized as its overturning of the Cartesian take on the way inner and outer (inter)relate. Indeed, and even though rethinking the inner-outer relationship and the self-other relationship go hand in hand, discussions on the death of man seem to centre primarily on the suggestion that the self, far from being a fully self-sufficient entity, owes its existence or identity (for a large part) to the community of which it is part. Let me use this intermezzo to look at the debate sparked by the claim that there is no subjectivity without community. Above all, it concerns the (purported) political consequences of a non-Cartesian view on the nature of man.

When the philosophy of subjectivity took an anti-Cartesian turn, many greeted this as a welcome development. It was argued that by exposing the processes preconditioning subjectivity, the rethinkers of Cartesianism had not only shown that the self does not come in a monadic form, but also made clear that man could be conceptualized like that only at the cost of excluding other forms of selfhood. This appraisal, however, was not universally shared. Thinkers critical of the turn in the subjectivity debate maintained that the liberating potential of post-Cartesianism is not as big as it may seem – far from it. In the previous intermezzo, I already mentioned Frank’s observation to the effect that Deleuze and Guattari’s denial of a pre-existing subject renders their talk of man’s suffering “under the coercion of language” utterly vacuous: if there is no pre-linguistic subject, Frank states, there is also no one to “perceive the theft of its freedom by ‘grammar’ as a loss.”

Yet doubts about the liberating potential of a non-Cartesian account have perhaps most

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3 Frank 1989, p. 338.
pertinently been expressed by feminist theorists. While acknowledging that post-Cartesianism or postmodernism allows other narratives than that of the white male heterosexual subject to be heard, feminist thinkers nonetheless question the value of the postmodern outlook for their emancipatory project.

Seyla Benhabib for instance argues against the possibility of a thoroughgoing alliance between feminism and postmodernism, precisely because of the radical contextualization for which the latter has come to stand. Benhabib maintains that to the extent that postmodernism not merely situates the subject but dissolves it into a multitude of power relations, feminist appropriations thereof “can only lead to self-incoherence.” Once the doer behind or beyond the deed is eliminated, any call for emancipation will necessarily be futile, as the means to act upon it will have been abolished too. If feminism has the slightest validity, traditional notions such as those of selfhood and agency can – pace postmodernism - not be disposed of completely. Many postmodern insights can be wholeheartedly embraced but “we must still argue that we are not merely extensions of our histories, that vis-à-vis our own stories we are in the position of author and character at once.”

According to Benhabib, then, Cartesianism may have its flaws but the outlook that its rethinkers recommend instead might be just as harmful. By explaining the subject as the product of its socio-political context, post-Cartesians risk disintegrating the very locus of agency and autonomy, and thus risk presenting social arrangements as being beyond the reach of intervention, no matter how much they may call for reform. This means that even if anti-Cartesians have a point in claiming that the subject is essentially social, we must not do away with everything that the Ego represents.

As I explained in the introductory chapter, and in line with my remarks about the ethical objections to the overturning of the Cartesian inner, I have my doubts about the arguments Benhabib offers. I do not know if we need to hold on to (elements of) Cartesianism in order for agency and autonomy to be imaginable, and that we must retain part of what the Ego represents. I wonder whether one can counter observations as to what the nature of man might be with the insistence it had better not be so, and I doubt whether (a form of) Cartesianism provides the only means of explaining the possibility of an emancipatory project. The opposite could also be argued and has been argued, by thinkers no less concerned with the feminist cause.

Judith Butler for instance, though reluctant to use the label “postmodern” herself, holds that it is rather Benhabib’s demand for a form of subjectivity prior to power relations that renders feminism powerless. Whereas postmodernism acknowledges the need to “interrogate what [such a theoretical move] authorizes, and what precisely it excludes,” taking selfhood to be given precludes all

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5 Ibidem.
discussions about the supposed universality and neutrality thereof. Moreover, by investigating the processes constituting subjectivity, postmodernists do not dispose of agency - they present the subject as “a permanent possibility of [a] resignifying process.”7 Showing how resistance and reform are possible in the first place, postmodernism should be considered to be feminism’s closest friend rather than its enemy.

Let me stress, at the risk of repeating myself, that I have not mentioned Butler’s defence of postmodernism because I think that her’s is the sole correct perspective on the implications of the twentieth century anti-Cartesian turn. Rather than taking the side of either Butler or Benhabib, I want to leave the discussion about the liberating potential of this development behind at this point - not just because the possibility of feminism is not the main concern of this study, but also because I think that phrasing the subjectivity debate solely in political terms may do it more harm than good, as I will explain in the concluding chapter. However, I do want to take the fact that the overturning of the Cartesian self-other model gives rise to such diverging appraisals as an incentive to have a closer look at it. For as my brief rehearsal of the “feminism and/or postmodernism” dispute makes clear, the rethinking of the subject is not a merely theoretical matter. Benhabib’s qualms about postmodernism go to show that a renewed perspective on human being may affect issues pertaining to the brute reality of many people’s lives. Yet as Butler’s response indicates, the reading of post-Cartesianism informing such qualms is perhaps not quite complete or correct. Stating that the subject is socially constituted need not equal stating it is the passive product of its socio-political context.

Hence, in spite of the fact that I doubt whether it is warranted to claim that only those preserving elements of Cartesianism are politically responsible – as I doubt whether the claim to the contrary is warranted - I will postpone discussing this type of validity and will investigate the exegetical validity of these objections first. This will not merely allow me to assess the backlash to post-Cartesianism more thoroughly in the concluding chapter, it will also enable me to spell out Wittgenstein’s contribution to this development in more detail. For clarity as to what it means that the subject’s sociality is essential to it does not only further the debate about the death of man in general. It can also establish how Wittgenstein’s describing religiosity, if not as something literally inner then still as something highly individualistic, relates to his situating the mental in the interspace between a community of subjects.

These matters can be investigated simultaneously because whether Wittgenstein’s account of religiosity contradicts his account of the psyche and whether embedding the subject implies rendering it inert, both depend on how community and socio-cultural membership are subsequently explained. Both could indeed be said to be the case when the claim that the subject is essentially social is

7 Idem, p 47.
complemented with the claim that community is a static and uniform totality to which all human affairs are ultimately subservient, leaving no room for deviation and dissent. In other words, and to put it more neutrally, both the tenability of Wittgensteinian subjectivity and the validity of the claim that the post-Cartesian subject is inert can be determined by exploring the concept of the social accompanying the contextualization of the Ego. In the next chapter, I will return to Wittgenstein as one of the main representatives of the post-Cartesian development and examine how he explains what it means to become and be a member of a community.

My further exploring Wittgenstein’s take on the relationship between individual and community will lead me, like my further exploring his take on the relationship between inner and outer, to look beyond the writings on the philosophy of psychology. The next chapter will be devoted to Wittgenstein’s (very last) collection of remarks, the writings nowadays known as *On Certainty*. Primarily known for their epistemological considerations, these remarks can also be said to contain the most instructive indications as to Wittgenstein’s social ontology.

This is due to the fact that what Wittgenstein call “certainties” are not purely individual possessions or accomplishments. As I will explain more fully in the introduction to the next chapter, he underscores that a person always already takes certain things for granted, yet this taking for granted is not based on thoroughgoing research on the individual’s part. Rather, what stands fast for someone stems from her upbringing within a given community, and as a result, what one does and does not take to stand fast serves to distinguish those belonging from those not belonging to this particular group. Wittgenstein argues that certainties are acquired on the basis of a socialization process and points out that a person may be unwilling to even take someone who has inherited different certainties seriously.

Hence, his remarks on the psyche suggest that a person can only be said to pretend or hope when she has been initiated into a certain form of life, but the processes of in- and exclusion pertaining to socio-cultural membership are more explicitly addressed in the writings known as *On Certainty*. I will examine its description of both these processes in the chapter to come.

Yet before I turn to yet another part of his oeuvre, let me make clear that while I consult *On Certainty* in order to answer a question Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion all the more pertinently brought to the fore, this is not because I think that religious belief can be filed under the category of certainty, as several of Wittgenstein’s interpreters suggest. To be sure, there are interesting parallels between Wittgenstein’s account of religiosity and the account offered in *On

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8 See e.g. OC 94, OC 144, OC 159, OC 279, OC 472, OC 155, OC 220, OC 252, OC 325, OC 611.

9 This is for instance argued in Kober 1993 and Schönbaumsfeld 2007; see also my earlier comments on Schönbaumsfeld’s equating religious belief and certainty in note 89 on page 130 and in note 101 on page 132 of the preceding chapter.
Certainty. He for instance holds that both when one declares “I know there is a God” and when one states “I know the world exists,” the verb “to know” is not used in its ordinary sense, and explains that in the former as well as in the latter case, the statement is not based on grounds in the way a scientific statement is (or is at least supposed to be). Even so, I do not think that Wittgenstein identifies religious belief and certainty all the way through.

He may for instance distinguish both confessions of faith and certainties from ordinary knowledge claims, but the arguments he offers are not the same in each case. Whereas Wittgenstein claims that certainties cannot be proven right or wrong because they form the preconditions for doubt and knowledge in the first place, he maintains that religious belief does not lend itself to empirical testing because its object matter is not of a factual nature. According to Wittgenstein, religion concerns the direction a person gives his existence. As a result, and in sharp contrast to the certainties one entertains, the pictures that guide the religious believer are very often in the front rather than the back of his mind. Moreover, and as Wittgenstein was all too familiar with himself, even when one has committed oneself to a precept in a way unrivalled by one’s beliefs in seemingly more well-established matters, this does not mean that one’s religious conviction is always already exempt from doubt. The question whether one is truly acting in conformity with it might arise at any point.

It is hard to say exactly where Wittgenstein’s account of religious belief and his account of certainty part ways, but the differences I have just described suggest that he does not take certainties to be responses to the ethico-existential task that is human existence, which forms the very essence of Wittgensteinian religiosity. Wittgenstein, in other words, does not seem to assign religious belief and certainty exactly the same role. Whereas certainties enable a practical coping with the world in which one finds oneself, religious belief constitutes an attempt to take on the duty to lead a meaningful life. To be sure, practical coping and existential coping, so to speak, are no unrelated matters, and the exposition of On Certainty in the next chapter may accordingly not be completely devoid of ethico-existential terms. That, however, does not mean that religious belief can be filed under the category of certainty after all. It rather means that in some cases one’s certainties are part of or can become involved in an attempt to respond to the task that comes with being a human being.

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10 Cf. e.g. LRB 59, LRB 54, LRB 56, LRB 57, OC 84, OC 103, OC 138, OC 205.
11 See CV 73f.
12 See my exposition on page 131-132 of the previous chapter and cf. e.g. OC 105, OC 115, OC 308, OC 509.
13 See my exposition on page of 133-135 the previous chapter and cf. e.g. OC 87, OC 103, OC 147, OC 159.
14 See e.g. CV 26b, CV 56a, CV 57c, CV 86d.
One other remark needs to be made before I embark upon my reading of On Certainty. I consult these writings with the aim of clarifying what Wittgenstein takes the word “community” to mean, yet there are several things for which this term can stand: from neighbourhoods to online networks and nation states or assemblies of states. Let me point out that the next chapter concerns the concept of community in a somewhat more restricted sense. That is to say, in the debate on the sociality of subjectivity, “community” does not so much refer to a group or club a person can choose to join at one point as to the socio-cultural context in which one always already finds oneself. This does not necessarily single out a very clear subclass yet, but it is to communities in this sense of the word that the next chapter is devoted. That is not to say that communities in this sense come in one pure and precise form or never overlap and criss-cross, both with each other and with other “things” we call communities. Indeed, I will conclude that Wittgenstein does not consider community to be a fixed and rigid entity, and I ask the reader to keep this in mind when my phrasing in what follows nonetheless suggests otherwise.