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## UNCONSCIOUS SUBJECTIVITY

A Review of *Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Modern Philosophy and Psychoanalysis: A Study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas* by Roger Frie. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. 227 pp.

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**W**HAT CONSTITUTES HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY? This is a current philosophical as well as psychoanalytic preoccupation. Modern philosophy has largely sought to account for subjectivity by positing an a priori ground that makes consciousness possible, whereas the postmodern position goes so far as to displace subjectivity altogether: The self is a social construction determined by language. In contrast, analytic philosophy is largely a materialistic enterprise that makes human consciousness and the intricacies of intersubjectivity mere brain states. Both of these philosophical perspectives hold dogmatic ontological assertions that lend themselves to highly reductive accounts of subjectivity. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory seems perilously close to adopting the postmodern position. The peril in opting for nominalism over essentialism, and in attributing human change and growth solely to the power of the narrative, is that the notion of the self can be eclipsed by a social-linguistic determinism.

In his book, Roger Frie seizes this perilous issue head-on by the horns. Frie provides a philosophical critique of the ontology of subjectivity and its relation to interpersonal accounts of psychic structure. He presents a concise, well-articulated historical overview of modern and postmodern theories of consciousness, and spells out their implications for psychoanalysis. The book's central concern is to understand the nature of self-consciousness, its dependence on language, and its place in the intersubjective domain of human relatedness. Psychoanalysts are too often sheltered from philosophical discourse. If there is one work any philosophically inclined analyst should read this year, Frie's excellent scholarly book is it.

Frie begins by examining the modern platform within Western philosophy that informs our understanding of consciousness. He then turns to Sartre. Sartre's model of subjectivity emphasizes the nature of prereflective or nonpositional consciousness, that is, a state of consciousness

prior to positing or representing an object for reflection. For both Sartre and Lacan, consciousness itself takes the form of *lack*. Whereas Lacan (1977) refers to a "lack of being" throughout his *Écrits*, Sartre (1943) is more specific when he tells us that "human reality . . . exists first as lack. . . . In its coming into existence, human reality grasps itself as an incomplete being" (p. 89). Human subjectivity is desirously compelled to fill the lack through projection of a future transcendence, hence a "being-for-itself." Desire, however, is largely constituted through discourse with the *Other*. The subject must engage in dialectical battle with others over needs for dominance, control, and attachment. Sartre stipulates a fissure between the subject and the object that hinders any genuine interdependent relatedness. His treatment of the prereflective *cogito*, however, situates subjectivity and self-consciousness within a free agent. Lacan, on the other hand, enslaves subjectivity to language and the causal juxtaposition of the Other.

Frie very carefully sets the context for his discussion within Heidegger's existential ontology and Ludwig Binswanger's existential anthropology. Both, in contrast to Sartre and Lacan, place great ontic significance on the primacy of relation. Binswanger is often underrecognized, but his insights are particularly germane. In line with Hegel's theory of self-consciousness, Binswanger emphasizes the burgeoning subject's pursuit of mutual recognition. Elevated over individualist accounts of consciousness, intersubjectivity accounts for the interdependence of reciprocal love. In line with Martin Buber, Binswanger provides a sound description of the phenomenology of love and shows that the contingency of self-realization is based on the existential, dialogical encounter with the other.

Binswanger, like Sartre, accounts for aspects of consciousness and inner reality that speech and language cannot capture. Frie explicates this subject with precision. Both Sartre and Binswanger insist that subjectivity is not entirely dependent upon language. Lacan and Habermas insist human subjectivity and intersubjectivity are completely constituted through linguistic and symbolic interactions. For these post-structuralists, the self is *entirely* the result of linguistically mediated causal attributions that are socially constructed and determined: the subject *is* language. Into the fray steps Frie. He cogently demonstrates that there are aspects of subjectivity that language simply cannot account for, such as preverbal, nonverbal, extralinguistic, affective, and aesthetic experience. For Frie, Derrida overemphasizes the text, Lacan boils everything down to

the realm of the symbolic, and Habermas chains the emergence of subjectivity to linguistically mediated interaction. Frie's main objection to this linguistic turn is that it denies an inner world of prereflective self-consciousness that accounts for a self-relation no theory of language can adequately explain.

Frie compellingly argues that language is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for human subjectivity. Post-structural linguistic accounts of human nature and constructivist approaches to subjectivity are insufficient. This point also extends to materialist conceptions of mind. Biological facticity hardly explains prelinguistic and extralinguistic existential realities. Frie convincingly demonstrates on both phenomenological and ontological levels that the human being is much more complex and dynamically constituted than is the postmodern rendition of the human subject. Put laconically, we are more than the sum of our linguistic-biological determinants. This is the core of Frie's thesis: postmodern and materialist accounts of psychic structure fail to capture a dynamic and holistic understanding of human subjectivity.

There is a disappointment to reading this book: Frie does not address the unconscious. If subjective and intersubjective (hence relational) processes constitute psychic reality, then consciousness must emanate from a preconditioned existent ground. Despite offering a cornucopia of theories that have their rudiments in German Idealism, Frie does not examine the problem of original ground. This omission in no way affects the potency and value of his project, yet an ontological account of unconscious subjectivity seems to me to be at the very heart of the issue.

Frie aligns his argument with theoretical perspectives that posit the existence of prereflective, prelinguistic, or nonpropositional self-consciousness. Sartre does this; so do contemporaries such as Manfred Frank (1991) and Dieter Henrich (1966). Such theories derive not only from modern philosophy, but ultimately from a tradition that dates back to neo-Platonism and theosophic-mystical accounts of the soul. In this tradition, the father of German Idealism, J. G. Fichte, asserted that the prelinguistic subject originally generates and constitutes its own being; that is, the self freely posits or asserts itself absolutely. In his *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), Fichte states that "*The self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence*" (p. 99). For Fichte, what ultimately characterizes the ground of human subjectivity is pure "activity as such." Before there is consciousness proper, thought lives underground as an "intellectual intuition" of itself—that is to say, prereflective, nonrepresentational

self-consciousness. Frie does not make this point directly, but implicitly in his analysis of subjectivity this original prereflective self-consciousness is in fact *unconscious*. Such unconscious self-consciousness is the pre-familiarity the self has with itself before achieving conscious self-reflective awareness.

In the Idealist tradition, F. W. J. von Schelling made the unconscious the *sine qua non* of psychic life. Schelling's revision of Kant's and Fichte's transcendental idealism, together with his own philosophy of identity (*Identitätsphilosophie*) and philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*), led to one of the first systematic conceptualizations of the unconscious. For Schelling (1811–1815), "all consciousness has what is unconscious as ground, and, just in coming to be conscious, this unconscious is posited as past by that which becomes conscious of itself" (p. 150). Freud (1923) echoes this sentiment: "The repressed [past] is the prototype of the unconscious. . . . We can come to know even the *Ucs.* only by making it conscious" (pp. 15, 17). Schelling, like Freud, was deeply engaged with the problem of *Beginning*, that is, original ground (*Grund*). Hegel (1830) referred to this primordial ground as a "nightlike" or "unconscious abyss . . . within which a world of infinitely numerous images and presentations is preserved without being in consciousness" (p. 153). This is what he had earlier labeled in the *Phenomenology* (1807) as the realm of "*unconscious Spirit*" (p. 278).

Frie criticizes Hegel for his reflection model of self-consciousness, wherein desire ensues the intersubjective relation to another. In Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic, self-consciousness is contingent upon the *Other*, for self-recognition depends upon a relation in which the subject is first opposed to an object and, through that opposition, comes to recognize itself as a subject. For Frie, this appears conceptually problematic because, following Fichte, consciousness must have some prior familiarity with itself in order for it to recognize itself in the mirror reflection of the other. Without such a prereflective, prefamiliar self-determining agency, consciousness cannot reflectively come to recognize or know itself. Self-recognition necessarily requires a rudimentary form of self-knowledge.

Inasmuch as Hegel's account of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* does rely on a reflection model, Frie's reproach is justified. But given Hegel's account of unconscious *Geist* that first emerges from its "inwardness" only to take its first form through the "intuition" of itself as a "feeling soul," Frie's criticism of Hegel needs to be rethought. Hegel's

epigenetic theory of subjectivity, like Freud's account of the soul (*Seele*), makes Spirit a developmental achievement.

More than anyone, Lacan (1977) is guilty of externalizing subjectivity. The *Other* is always the cause of the subject. Language, the symbolic, constitutes a subjectivity that is always beyond the individual. Self-recognition is always a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), for there is no ego, only an illusory mirage of autonomy defensively maintained through the imaginary register. Desire is always "out there,"—fragmentary, chaotic, hostile—it *cuts*. Even Lacan's notion of the real (*réel*), which has no formal text, is that area of psychic space which is *beyond*, presumably unconscious, always floating outside of the subject, ineffable, indescribable—the "impossible."

In all modern philosophies of the will, an unconscious ground—an *Ungrund*—precedes consciousness. The primacy of the *Ungrund* was first made sensible by the seventeenth-century philosopher, mystic, and theosophist, Jacob Boehme, to whom Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel owe much. The *Abyss* (*Abgrund*) or *Ungrund* is the "ground without a ground," a subject who "seeks," "longs," "lusts," and "finds." This conceptualization of unconscious activity bears comparison to a standard neo-Platonic idea: Proclus, Erigenia, and Plotinus conceived of the *Ungrund* as the *ens manifestativum sui*, "the being whose essence is to reveal itself" (see Koyré, 1929; Mills, 1996; von der Luft, 1994; Walsh, 1994; Weeks, 1991).

The nature of original ground is extremely pertinent to Frie's thesis. Because subjectivity is originally unconscious psychic activity, subjectivity precedes the intersubjectivity that is a necessary condition for psychic maturity. Without the other, there can be no self. Yet likewise, without the self, there can be no other, no opposition, no antithesis. Frie, as I understand him, ultimately places the intersubjective nature of relatedness, and in particular love, at the pinnacle of human consciousness. But he does so without abandoning archaic ground and its primordial unconscious subjectivity. Frie avoids the ontologically reductive move that has become so much the vogue in postmodern and materialist theories. He does not collapse the human being into language practices and physiological processes, thus decentering the self. Frie philosophically accounts both for the centrality of individual subjectivity and for the interdependence of interpersonal relatedness, which together constitute the human condition.

Intersubjectivity is something of a new wave in psychoanalysis. An old

idea, it has come along through the German Idealist tradition to Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. Postmodern theorists such as Lacan, Foucault, Levinas, Habermas, Judith Butler, and Ian Hacking want to use it to claim that human subjectivity is merely a social construction. In my opinion, Roger Frie proves them wrong.

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