

## HEGEL, DERRIDA AND THE SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT: There is a simple story to be told about Derrida's relation to Hegel. He develops his core concepts such as *différance* and trace through an essentially negative relation to the central notions of the idealist tradition. Derrida has been particularly concerned to undermine what he takes to be the heart of the idealist project—the self-present subject. This paper examines the influence of Heidegger on the deconstructive critique of idealist subjectivity and presents Derrida's alternative to the metaphysical subject. It argues that his critique of idealist subjectivity does not accord with Hegel's presentation of subjectivity when one conceives that project as a response to problems in the view of subjectivity developed by Fichte and Kant.

KEYWORDS: Hegel, Derrida, Subjectivity

'There has never been The Subject for anyone.... The Subject is a fable'.<sup>1</sup> Within the works of all the major figures in the history of philosophy Derrida argues there are 'aporias, fictions and fabrications' that present as it were internal disruptions within the texts themselves that 'would have at least the virtue of de-simplifying, of "de-homogenizing" the reference to something like The Subject'.<sup>2</sup> This would appear to make the narrative of the history of western metaphysics portrayed by Heidegger decidedly problematic and ostensibly renders the narrative of presence adopted by Deconstruction as itself not an authoritative depiction of the history of philosophy. But this fable of 'the Subject' is nevertheless powerful and an edifice of concepts and method has (rightly or wrongly) grown around it. It is the discourse of mastery, identity and self-knowledge against which Derrida defined his project, terms that have been most often associated in his writing with Hegel's thought.

Despite Derrida's willingness to see fractures and limits in the great works of the canon of philosophy in figures from Plato to Husserl, one can only understand the development of notions such as trace and *différance* and so on in response to a dominating and uniform tendency within the tradition. Deconstruction requires that myth be powerful and real. How would we interpret his early critique of the Hegelian dialectic in 'From

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1. Jacques Derrida, 'Eating Well' in E. Cadava et al (ed.), *Who Comes After the Subject*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 102.

2. Derrida, 'Eating Well', p. 102.

Restricted to General Economy' as a totalizing machine unless that myth was clearly taken to be representative of the dominant strain of the philosophical tradition? Without granting the force of this dominant strand Derrida's later turning of the critique of presence back upon Heidegger would be an empty criticism.

Derrida asserts that any 'post-deconstructive' re-conception of the subject would have to be 'a non-coincidence with self' and 'the finite experience of non-identity to self'.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued here that such a description of subjectivity is not so clearly opposed to Hegel's conception of subjectivity which Derrida describes as 'absolute origin, pure will, identity to self, or presence to self of consciousness'.<sup>4</sup> When Hegel is stripped of his metaphysics of presence label considerable continuity of concern between Hegel's project and Derrida's. Of course there are substantive differences between these thinkers and their views of subjectivity diverge but the basis of that divergence is not because Hegel is the avatar of the philosopher of presence.

## I. THE SELF-PRESENT SUBJECT

The debate over and strategy for exiting the metaphysics of the subject has its locus in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Derrida's discussion of this issue and many of his contemporaries has consistently reinforced the centrality of Heidegger's approach. In *Being and Time* and the lectures contemporaneous with that period the reflective model of subjectivity is largely equated with and indicative of the metaphysical tradition. This reflective subject is a subject that is self-identical, it is disclosed to itself in its reflection, its identity is self-contained and available to it. Dasein does not have this kind of self-relation; what is distinctive for Dasein is that 'in its very being, that Being is an issue for it'.<sup>5</sup> This relation to Being ensures that Dasein's self-relation cannot be self-identical. Its openness to Being is the fundamental condition of its subjectivity. Dasein's self-relation because it is fundamentally other directed cannot be understood as present to itself, it is not capable of anything like full self-disclosure, as the possibilities of its existence are given to it and it must adopt a relation to them: they do not issue from a world under its control. Whatever the differences between Heidegger and Derrida, and there are many, Derrida adopts his fundamental criticism of the metaphysics of presence. This comes out very clearly in a number of Derrida's early works, for example in *Speech and Phenomena*:

Within the metaphysics of presence, within philosophy as knowledge of the presence of the object, as the being-before-oneself of knowledge in consciousness . . . . The history of being as presence, as self-presence in absolute knowledge, as consciousness of self in the infinity of *parousia*—this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for history has never meant anything but the presentation [*Gegenwärtigung*] of Being, the production and recollection of beings in presence, as

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3. 'Eating Well' p. 102-3.

4. 'Eating Well' p. 102-3.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962, p. 31.

knowledge and mastery.<sup>6</sup>

This metaphysics of presence aspires to master objective being, it claims that being can be understood in Heidegger's terms ontically, and that being is definable and knowable. Being is presented *exclusively* as something perceived, intuited and known, and is thereby reduced to an expression of the perceiving and knowing subject. Nothing epitomizes this movement more than Hegel's *aufhebung*, as we will see shortly.

Central to Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence is a model of subjectivity that grounds the enterprise of modern philosophy. This subject has a privileged place in the interpretation of Being as substance

The motive of this primary orientation toward the subject in modern philosophy is the opinion that this being which we ourselves are is given to the knower first as the only certain thing, that the subject is accessible immediately and with absolute certainty, that is, better known than all objects.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes' seminal move beyond ancient and medieval philosophy was to reformulate their concerns in such a way that rather than truth being disclosed in the world, truth is first to be had in the subject and from there it projects itself out onto the world. In this transition the modern movement is the grounding of meaning in the subject. In this shift of focus being comes to be understood as present-at-hand [*Vorhandensein*], that is available as an object of knowledge to subjectivity. Descartes surmized that such a project was only possible if it was adequately grounded. Heidegger argues that this is not a genuine new beginning just a dogmatic version of ancient philosophy: 'it became a mode of thought, that with the aid of traditional ontological concepts, seeks to gain a positively ontical knowledge of God, the soul and nature'.<sup>8</sup> It appropriates unquestioningly the assumptions of the older metaphysics in its 'turn to the subject' and simply extends this view of the world to the subject itself without even posing 'the question of the being of the subject'.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of this newly grounded subject serves simply to give a better foundation for the project of conceiving all things as objects or potential objects of knowledge. The assumption is that with proper grounding all objects of experience have the potential to be known. The self-present subject understands the mind-world relation as a one-way street of knower to known. There is nothing on this model that is surplus to the objects than the knowledge of them.

Derrida reads the main current of modern philosophy in very similar terms in his reading of Husserl as we saw in the passage of his from *Speech and Phenomena*. In other writings the idea of presence is inflected with a decidedly Hegelian flavour, the notion of *Aufhebung* encapsulates the tendency. The entire motif of presence as mastery, control and containment is explicitly thematized by this notion of *Aufhebung* [sublation].

6. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973 102

7. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 123.

8. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 124.

9. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 124.

As Derrida sees it, *Aufhebung* expresses the idea of presence as the positive method of philosophical inquiry. This is why Hegel forms such a neat point of differentiation with the deconstructive enterprise. With the notion of sublation [*Aufhebung*] Hegel appears to turn everything into *vorhanden*, nothing is lost every aspect of experience becomes available for the examination of the conscious subject; every object can be internalized. This program of mastering meaning and transforming all otherness into a repeatable and available object for thought requires an agent who can maintain that past, otherness and so on. Hegelian self-consciousness on this view embodies the *Aufhebung* and is unthinkable without it. Here self-consciousness masters itself because that self comes to be identified with the whole.<sup>10</sup> It is the ‘unity of concept and consciousness’ in Hegel’s thought that allows the identification of the subject with the world.

Truth is here the presence or presentation of essence as *Gewesenheit*, of *wesen* as having-been. Consciousness is the truth of man to the extent that man appears to himself in consciousness in his being-past, in his to-have-been, in his past surpassed and conserved, retained, interiorized and *relevé* [the French translation of *aufheben*].<sup>11</sup>

All meaning in this movement is tied to Man, all the structures of logic, phenomenology, even nature and spirit are all at the very least adumbrations of man. There is a transition from finite man assured of self-certainty in Descartes to a form of self-relation in Hegel that relates to itself in external the world by seeing the world as subject.

What is difficult to think today is an end of man which would not be organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity, an end which would not be a teleology in the first person plural. The we, which articulates natural and philosophical consciousness with each other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, assures the proximity to itself of the fixed and central being for which this circular reappropriation is produced. The *we* is the unity of absolute knowledge and anthropology, of God and Man, of ontotheology and Humanism.<sup>12</sup>

## II. EXITING THE METAPHYSICS OF SUBJECTIVITY

Derrida’s thought clearly builds on Heidegger’s thought, though he has an ambiguous relation to him, one could also add Levinas and others into the mix here as figures instrumental in the development of the positive project of Deconstruction. In contrast Hegel’s thought has most often had a kind of central negative function in the development of Deconstruction: he represents the pinnacle of the philosophical tradition,

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10. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982 p. 73.

11. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 120-1. *Relevé* is the French translation of *aufheben*. See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 15 for a very similar claim about self-consciousness, though the context there concerns language as enabling the preservation and repetition of the object.

12. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p.121. Referring to Hegel Derrida comments: ‘the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality’, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 12.

the metaphysics of presence. Hegel's thought is not just content with using the core metaphysical oppositions of the philosophical tradition he tries to resolve them, to collapse the contradictions and determinations of meaning into a unified structure. Hegel's thought is read almost exclusively in terms of the model of presence.

Hegelian idealism consists precisely of a *relève* of the binary oppositions of classical idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to *aufheben*, ... while *interning* difference in a self-presence.<sup>13</sup>

*Différance* is explicitly differentiated from Hegelian difference, which is described in the logic as contradiction. The way in which philosophy operates with the binaries of active/passive, real/idea, concept-intuition, heteronomy/autonomy is symbolic of the limitations of the western philosophical tradition. It arranges the world in a way that presents the world as in fact governed by these oppositions. These represent the governing architectonic of meaning.

And that which I am calling schema or image, that which links the concept to intuition, installs the virile figure at the determinative centre of the subject, Authority and autonomy (for even if autonomy is subject to the law, this subjugation is freedom) are through this schema attributed to man (*homo* and *vir*) rather than to woman, and to the woman rather than to the animal. The virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband or brother ... belongs to the scheme that dominate the concept of the subject. This subject does not just want to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh.<sup>14</sup>

The picture that emerges of Derrida's criticisms of the tradition is that of a system which tries to fix reality, which assumes the categories of thought can make present a given reality. Of course he is not saying that this edifice does in fact get reality wrong because there is some alternate reality that is outside of the edifice of language and metaphysics which we can appeal to for the criteria of knowledge and so on. He is not concerned to undermine our basic knowledge of the world for example, as I have heard someone comment, on the know-how that allows us to get from here to the airport. His claim is focused on the philosophical claim to 'have determined the essential nature of reality'.<sup>15</sup> His primary concern is to show the limitations of that system and a central limitation is its failure to capture the instability and fractures that are constitutive of our interpretative schema. Inscripting that instability into philosophy requires a certain destabilizing of the program of the philosophical tradition. *Différance* is more than just pointing out the weaknesses of existing views, and it is more than a matter of collapsing the basis of these binaries. He remarks: 'if there were a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption of the Hegelian *relève* wherever it operates'.<sup>16</sup> Such an interrup-

13. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 43.

14. Derrida, 'Eating Well', p. 114. David Wood argues that Derrida privileges the human over the animal in an unsatisfactory way in this interview. See Wood's *Thinking After Heidegger*, Cambridge, Polity, 2002, especially chapter 9.

15. Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999 p. 307.

16. Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 40-1

tion would prevent the dialectical resolving of contradiction. Deconstruction interrupts the hierarchical resolution. All the basic dualisms of metaphysics presuppose a movement in one way or another of establishing a meaning ‘antecedent to *différance*’, they are concerned to establish something that would govern differences. In contrast to the approach of Hegel, *différance* rather than reconciling dualisms, destabilizes oppositions. *Différance* breaks the economy of negativity. Derrida values the negative but not the economy it serves in Hegel’s system.

Philosophy has most often sought to explain difference by examining the basis for them within a transcendental schema, or it has been concerned with how we know objects to be true, establishing a logical structure that organizes them and so on. Derrida similarly is concerned with ‘the movement according to which language or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted “historically” as a weave of differences’.<sup>17</sup> For Derrida philosophy necessarily inadequately articulates the movement by which these meaning systems are transformed. *Différance* presents his alternative to the metaphysical order. Whatever Derrida means by this notion it is clear that the generative power of *différance*, which is the condition for differences, is nothing stable. The language of production, constitution, creation and so on are for him the traditional lexicon of metaphysics; what these terms cannot capture is the inherent instability that ‘generates’ the various relations constitutive of difference. While *différance* is not straightforwardly equivalent to intersubjectivity, norms, the natural world and so on, neither is it wholly other to the field of determination or the space of reasons that makes up the inhabited world.

We have already seen that *différance* is developed, at least in part, as a counter to Hegelian dialectical thinking. Derrida takes Hegel’s logic as the grandest and last philosophical attempt to conceptually reify the generative and transformative process that creates differences.<sup>18</sup> The dialectic and the *Aufhebung* fail in this attempt to arrange the development of difference. Thought, experience and singularity cannot be contained by such a program. Such theorizations cannot capture the inherent instability that generates differences. Whereas Hegel’s dialectical system involves the constant process of creating and conflating oppositions Derrida employs a terminology that gestures at that instability. The very distinctions that philosophy uses to neatly demarcate its world (active/passive; concept/intuition; nature/culture and so on) are unable to be mapped onto Derrida’s conceptual lexicon.<sup>19</sup>

*Différance* is not animated by these dualisms; it carries within it the sense of both the *active* differentiating that allows any system of meaning determination and the temporal sense of deferring, which is the consequence of this instability. The core distinctions of thought are suspended and delayed because they cannot be equated with or articulate some given world. Since there is no direct access to an originary transcendental domain or to objects themselves our access to the world is always deferred to the interpretative

17. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 12.

18. Trace has a neat negative similarity to *aufhebung*—see wood p. 28.

19. Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 8-9.

economy in which it moves: ‘an element functions and signifies, takes on and conveys meaning, *only by* referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces’ (*Positions* 29). *Différance* is not a new viewpoint from which to examine the world or to correct and realign the core dichotomies of philosophy.

### III. *DIFFÉRANCE* AND THE DIVIDED SELF

Derrida’s focus on the general issues of play, the structure of meaning and of language, his emphasis on writing rather than speech for a long time gave many the impression that Derrida was not concerned with revising the traditional model of the subject but in getting rid of it altogether; ours was a world of text without agents and authors. The subject of course exists for him it is just in need of ‘resituating.’<sup>20</sup> This resituating of the subject is a necessary effect of *différance*. Derrida describes *différance* as the ‘disappearance of any originary presence.’ He goes on to unpack what he means by this, describing *différance* as having a doubled character: ‘*at once* the condition of possibility and the condition of the impossibility of truth.’<sup>21</sup> Derrida illustrates this doubled character with regard to subjectivity in an interview in the 1990’s: ‘It is because I am not one with my myself that I can speak with the other and address the other.’<sup>22</sup> The subject is not able to be one with itself because the interpretative features that makes up its world and that allow its self relation are not expressions of an essential self-identity, at the same time, it is those interpretative features that allow it to both relate to itself and others. What I hope to do here is examine in a bit more detail why Derrida takes this divided quality of *différance* as the model for subjectivity. And as we shall see while Hegel does not describe his subject as divided in this way it shares many of these features with the Derridean self.

In the case of the metaphysical tradition there is a clear role for the subject in thinking the relation of what is other to thought. The self-identical subject of this tradition, as we have already seen in the discussion of the metaphysics of presence, ultimately takes a controlling or appropriative position with regard to what is other to it. In contrast Derrida’s interests have most often been with what is ‘outside’ of the subject. While much of Derrida’s thought has been concerned with the game, and not the subject playing it, the subject does of course have a place within this play, though discerning what that role is can be difficult as it is intimately bound to the canon of deconstructive terms: *différance*, trace, etc. none of which have meanings that can be explained without reference to the deconstructive project as a whole.

His efforts to rethink the role of the subject came late in his career primarily for strategic reasons. Exiting the metaphysics of subjectivity required first that the entire philo-

20. Interview with Derrida in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984 page 125.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 168.

22. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, John D. Caputo (ed.), New York, Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 14.

sophical system of presence be shown its limitations and transformed. In an important interview in the 1970's Derrida begins to articulate the implications of Deconstruction, in particular the notion of *différance*, for the re-interpretation of subjectivity. He remarks that 'The subject is not present nor above all to itself before *différance*, ... the subject is constituted only in being *divided* from itself'.<sup>23</sup> What is at issue in this divided self could be put like this: 'Feeling responsible for a self that never comes simply from oneself is the sort of self-experience which characterizes the finite subject.'<sup>24</sup> The fundamental self-experience is an experience of the loss of self. The disparate sources that make up one's subjectivity are never merely mine, they are delivered to me; they are not caused by me and they cannot reflect some inner essence. At the same time I must express myself in this language, I have to take responsibility for myself even though the language, norms and values that animates my self-relation are not of my own making. The metaphysical tradition tries to resolve and unify this divided self-relation by establishing an absolute subject or an autonomous subject all of which tries to deny the *irreconcilable heteronomy of our self-relation*. There is not a dichotomy of heteronomy and autonomy, of passive and active; subjectivity hovers between these notions.

This characterization of the subject as fundamentally divided is portrayed by numerous figures in modern philosophy Freud (in the fundamental division of conscious and unconscious), though Saussure and Heidegger are the ones that Derrida focuses on as figures who confronted most forcefully that division. Saussure and Heidegger present overlapping characterizations of subjectivity. In Heidegger's case the subject is presented as divided because of ontological difference. In the case of Saussure he says 'language is not a function of the speaking subject'.<sup>25</sup>

Language, and in general every semiotic code—which Saussure defines as 'classifications'—are therefore effects, but their cause is not a subject, a substance, or a being somewhere present and outside the movement of *différance*. ... There is no subject who is agent subject and master of difference ... subjectivity like objectivity is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*.<sup>26</sup>

The subject finds itself in a world that it is not responsible for, it is in Heidegger's language thrown, and the only way in which it can contend with that world and make some place for itself in it is by using the resource of language, a language that the subject is not the cause of but which it must use to understand itself. It is dependent on this system to present itself but it has no independent access to itself other than through that system. There is no given that we can access independent of the interpretative parameters that we are delivered into and at the same time, we (and the world) are not simply identical to semiotic codes and language systems.

What is distinctive about Derrida's approach is that this subject cannot reconcile itself with that world and with the language by which we interpret ourselves and the

23. Derrida, *Positions*, p. 29 my emphasis.

24. Rudolf Bernet, 'The Other in Myself', in Critchley and Peter Dews (eds.), *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, New York, SUNY Press, 1996, p. 177

25. Derrida, *Positions*, p. 29.

26. Derrida, *Positions*, p. 28.

world we inhabit. The subject is constituted in that division and from this it must establish the basis of its self-experience. This dichotomized subject might be seen as the central problem that humans have to overcome: to reconcile their singularity with the whole, but in Derrida's case he is happy to leave that division unreconciled, as for him 'it is out of this *dislocated* affirmation that something like subject, man or whoever it might be takes shape'.<sup>27</sup> This dislocation is the result of the singularity of the who of subjectivity but is also because *différance* is antecedent but co-extensive with the subject; it can never have a unified form. *Différance* defines the determinative field in which the subject is situated, but the subject has an indetermination at its heart:

people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing, this glass for instance, ... but implies a unity within difference. That is the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is difference from itself; the person is different from itself. ... in the case of culture, person, nation, language, identity is a self-differentiating identity, an identity different from itself, having an opening or gap within itself.<sup>28</sup>

'An identity different from itself' means that its claims about itself cannot be equal to itself, as the plethora, movement and openness of determinations of the subject means it cannot be straightforwardly self-identical, it also excludes the possibility of an alternative domain of truth where this subject can have its identity with certainty. The subject is not self-identical, 'is not one with itself'; because of this the subject can use language, speak to another be open to another, take responsibility. The subject is more than itself; it *is* constituted by what exceeds it.

consciousness is the effect of forces whose essence, byways, and modalities are not proper to it ... *différance* is the name we give the active moving direction of different forces, and of different forces, that Nietzsche sets up against the entire system of grammar, wherever this system governs culture, philosophy, and science.<sup>29</sup>

Derrida's divided account of subjectivity mirrors as we have seen Heidegger's thrown—throwing distinction. In the case of Heidegger this division is capable of being overcome, for example by resolute action in *Being and Time*. The general point of Derrida's critique of Heidegger is that the language of *eigen* [own] does not allow an escape from a appropriative teleology.<sup>30</sup> Despite Heidegger's plea for Being to presence itself to man and not man to consider himself the determiner of being, Heidegger's privilege of Dasein as the questioner preserves its responsibility as a matter for the single subject. Where Heidegger privileges *Versammlung*, *gathering*, *collecting and so on* Derrida privileges disassociation.<sup>31</sup>

We are as subjects *in* the division; it is an originary loss because one can never be

27. Derrida, 'Eating well' p. 100.

28. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp. 13-14.

29. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 17-8

30. See Wood, *Thinking After Heidegger*, chapters 5, 8 and 9.

31. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p.14.

that unity rather one exists in a kind of perpetual state of dispossession. The subject is more than just of a divided character, its actual experience of itself is one of loss, it is a failure of self-possession. This loss is originary a 'loss of what one never had'.<sup>32</sup> The very features that allow it to aspire to self-presence, to have knowledge of self, also disallow that self-relation. But in trying to know itself it opens itself to contingency, to the play of *différance* as this is the terrain in which it comes to know itself. Again we see the subject hovering between all the dualisms. The subject in this case 'marks a middle voice between active and passive'.<sup>33</sup> It is not constituted by that division so much as by its desistance, by trying to make itself stable and assert itself on the world but it cannot do that as the resources it draws on to achieve this are unstable. What is critical in understanding why this subject is a loss is again a negative take on reconciliation—the self is not something that will come to be identified with either itself or the whole or tries to create its own world of self-equation by asserting the identity of self and whole. Subjectivity is in the gap between these domains. But we have to give this gap or loss more than just a doubled quality, it is a type of singularity that as with Deleuze is not able to be economized within the negativized and hierarchical conceptual schema.<sup>34</sup> That singularity is not something that we can make available to ourselves as something knowable it is instead instantiated only for example in actions such as taking responsibility.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV. HEGEL'S SUBJECT

To bring together Derrida's and Hegel's thought on the issue of subjectivity is a difficult exercise, particularly because so much of Derrida's iconic reading is built on a Hegel that develops a collection of Heideggerian pre-occupations, we have seen how this takes place. This skewed reading of Hegel in no way undermines the radicality and importance of Derrida's project. What it does demand is a revision of the ground rules

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32. Jacques Derrida, 'Desistance' introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe *Typography; Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk, Harvard University Press. 1989 p. 16 n. 9; see also his 'eating well', p. 106.

33. Derrida, 'Desistance' p. 5.

34. In thinking subjectivity we should assume the model of *différance* where there never is a definable meaning to the self other than the play of *différance*, and the Singular and transcendent character of the subject. Singularity is not thinkable, in the way it is for example in Deleuze, it remains for Derrida quasi-transcendent, it has to be understood as *ineluctable*.

35. 'It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for to this call I can *only* answer,' Derrida, *Eating Well*, p.100). He pursues this issue in his later works such as *Aporias* and the *The Gift of Death*. I take this issue up in detail in 'Dialectic and Différance: The Place of Singularity in Hegel and Derrida' in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 33, no 6, 2007. One of the decisive implications that Derrida draws from this is for the notion of responsibility. Once the self-identical subject is collapsed then its opposition to what is other to it is also dissipated. Because we are always more than ourselves, this means that even within the very structure of our self-relation the other is inscribed. Derrida following both Heidegger and Levinas argue that this then puts the call of the other prior to any notion of subjectivity, as its relations to others is already inscribed in the language with which it confronts itself. Relations to others presuppose the disruption of self-identity, we relate to the other because of the heterogeneity of self-relation.

by which a proper conversation between Derrida and Hegel on the issue of subjectivity can take place. In order for that conversation to begin we need to set out something of what is at stake in Hegel's view of subjectivity.

The examination of Hegelian subjectivity poses significant difficulties, primarily because Hegel's subject is not fixed and defined in the way that for example Descartes', Kant's and Fichte's are. Hegel nowhere gives a clear view of how his subject should be conceived. Even the well-known discussion of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* and its shorter version in the *Encyclopaedia* do not provide a detailed exposition of how we should conceive self-consciousness. Neither do they present an examination of the subject who undergoes the experiences in the *Phenomenology*. Similarly in the *Philosophy of Right* there is no detailed examination of the autonomous subject who underlies and underwrites the moral, economic, social and political spheres that this text examines. Hegel's failure to define his subject is not an oversight. As with many of the core concepts in Hegel's thought it has to be understood socially and historically. That is the subject cannot be defined outside of a determinate socio-historical context because it is something that changes over time; it has no transcendental identity. The character of its self-relation is not something that can be explained outside of the socio-historical conditions in which it is inscribed and those conditions are in constant state of transformation, especially in modernity.

While the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind* outlines the bare bones of the structure of the I, in terms of self-feeling and self-awareness it does not do so to establish a foundational shape of consciousness upon which Hegel's philosophical system is built. The self-feeling, soul and so on that he discusses there are of only anthropological interest, that is, quasi-natural expressions of Spirit. The discussion of consciousness and self-consciousness (which is where we are to understand his vision of subjectivity) takes place in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (and in an abbreviated form in the *Encyclopaedia* discussion of phenomenology). In these discussions the distinctive feature of Hegelian subjectivity is neither natural nor transcendental; the defining character of its self-relation are experiential, social and historical achievements. This means any examination of the subject in Hegel's thought has to look at the general movement of his thought and the nature of his philosophical system as a whole.

The development of Hegel's account of subjectivity is set against the view of subjectivity expressed by Kant and Fichte. Of course other figures are important—particularly Descartes, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Schelling but it is Fichte and Kant that really frame the set of problems that define his philosophical project not just his view of subjectivity. The details of Kant's and Fichte's account of subjectivity are beyond the scope of this essay, my concern here is just to give a very brief account of what Hegel takes to be limited in their respective views and how those limitations influence the development of his thinking on this issue. By looking first at why Hegel describes Kant's categories of experience as subjective and as isolating mind from world we can see why Hegel envisages self-consciousness in the way that he does in the *Phenomenology*. At the same time Hegel finds in Kant's transcendental unity of apperception the resources for re-formulating

Kant's own view of subjectivity such that it cannot be considered to be one-sided. Self-consciousness will show itself in Hegel's hands to be necessarily an expression of the objective world.

Hegel argues that the Kantian categories that are constitutive of human experience (the constitutive categories that allow and form subjective experience of the world) are posited as simply belonging to us, they are subjective. The Kantian categories do not determine the object itself, only its phenomenal appearance. The unity of the object is something posited, a combination of categories posited by the I, but not essential to the object considered in itself. The thing-in-itself, in Hegel's view at least, remains thereby something wholly objective, a beyond to which one can have no access because its 'objecthood' belongs only to thinking and not to the object. However, Hegel argues that:

It does not follow from this that they must therefore be merely something of ours, and not also determinations of objects themselves. But, according to Kant's view, ... the Ego (the knowing subject) furnishes the form and also the material of knowing—the former as *thinking* and the latter as *sensing* subject (EL §42 A3).<sup>36</sup>

The problem for Hegel is that Kant's approach to the categories cannot secure the objectivity of the categories because thought cannot be considered, on these terms, to be self-grounding. Kant's approach to the categories renders thought entirely subjective. The categories in this case could only be understood as 'instruments' with which one attempts to comprehend objects but which remain absolutely distant from their objects. Thought in this case could only have its truth in the object that it is always (and necessarily unsuccessfully) trying to represent. In separating thought from the object Kant renders its explanatory power entirely subjective. On the one hand, the object appears not to have any truth as its unity lies in the thought of it; and on the other, the categories are not true as they are only subjective. The *Phenomenology* demonstrates the inadequacy of thinking in these terms.

Hegel does, however, think Kant's approach can be salvaged by extending the insights of the transcendental unity of apperception.<sup>37</sup> Hegel argues that Kant ignores the potential of the transcendental unity of apperception to connect subject and object. What Hegel sees as revolutionary in the transcendental unity of apperception is not that the categories are validated because they are grounded in the representing activity of any subject, but rather, that apperception is 'a higher principle in which a duality in a unity could be cognized, a cognition therefore of what is required for truth' (SL 594/GW XII 25).<sup>38</sup> Apperception can overcome the opposition of subject and object; it is as one commentator describes it 'supra-oppositional'.<sup>39</sup>

36. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic (1830), with the Zusätze: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. Theodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1991 (henceforth EL).

37. For an extensive discussion of this issue see Robert Pippin's *Hegel's Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

38. G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1997 (henceforth SL) and G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968- (henceforth GW).

39. David Stern, 'Transcendental Apperception and Subjective Logic', in Ardis B. Collins (ed.), *Hegel on the*

In apperception, though not (for Kant) in actuality, the object of intuition and perception is at one with the conceptuality that posits its singularity and 'objecthood.' Yet Kant's account of apperception is limited because the thing-in-itself remains beyond what can be known and thereby invalidates any truth for apperception. Hegel argues that with apperception Kant went beyond this merely 'external relation' of concepts to objects. In apperception categories are not 'used' externally, they are not *applied* by consciousness to an intuited entity. In Hegel's account the object is not separable from its conception. In apperception I make the object present to myself precisely because the truth of the object is inseparable from the thought of it. 'Thought sublates the immediacy with which the object at first confronts us and thus converts the object into a positedness; but this its positedness is its being-in-and-for-self, or its objectivity' (SL 585/GW XII 14). Because an object's determinations are conceptual it can express itself as objective, but only through its determinations *in* thought.

Its objectivity is 'none other than the nature of self-consciousness' (SL 585/GW XII 15-16). This is not to say that the thing is determined by the conceptual whim of consciousness, but simply that the comprehension of the object can only be in terms of the manifold of thought determinations. One could not simply reflect on oneself, as consciousness tries to in the opening of the *Phenomenology* and disclose the determinations of one's own self-consciousness in some singular sense. And this is precisely because the conceptuality that is constitutive of consciousness, and the object world of which it is conscious, is not 'visible' in this sense; its meaningfulness overarches this subject-object relation. Self-knowledge is not available through reflection, as it is commonly considered, which assumes it allows access to the mind in the way that the reflection of the mirror presents one's physical appearance.

Fichte's insight into the limitations of the reflective model of consciousness is generally accepted, but his own account of the character of the immediate self-relation, which he presents as the alternative to the reflective model, was never satisfactorily resolved. Fichte's revised notion of subjectivity develops in response to two key problems in Kant's thought: the dualism of concept and intuition and the thing-in-itself. While critical of the thing-in-itself Fichte nevertheless preserves the idea of an external constraint on the I's self-positing. The details of this are extraordinarily complex, the issue that is relevant for our purposes is that Fichte thought the realization of the critical project could only be achieved by showing that knowledge was not given its content by a passively conceived model of intuition. The subject was *active* in the determination of the intuitive component of knowledge as well. In striving against the constraint of the 'real' reason drives itself to further self-determination, this is a process of self-transformation that is achieved as consciousness confronts the limitations of its inadequate explanations of the objects of experience.<sup>40</sup> What is problematic for Hegel is that this self-positing and self-transforming subject (which only posits and redefines its knowledge in confrontation

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*Modern World*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 170.

40. I discuss his position in 'Fichte's Striving Subject', *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2004, pp. 123-142.

with an indeterminate constraint) presupposes an unreconcilable dualism of I and not-I, and so in effect does not overcome the very mind-world dualism that Fichte sought to close.

Hegel builds on the self-positing subject of Fichte, Kant's Transcendental Unity of Apperception (as well as of course Kantian Autonomy) in his reformulation of subjectivity. We can see why it is important for Hegel to overcome the subject-object dualism that Kant's and Fichte's thought left him. The way Hegel does this is by conceiving self-consciousness such that rather than it confronting an absolutely alien world it can see itself in that alien world. That is Hegel re-conceives self-consciousness so that rather than the object world standing over and against the conscious subject, the content of experience is not separable from the conditions and categories that allow the experience of objects. The truth of objects is the concept of them and those concepts cannot be seen as being purely subjective or as having a transcendental or naturalistic origin. The way Hegel shows this is an extraordinarily complex process that to a large degree is only disclosed through the entire unfolding of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The issue that is of concern here is if that reconceived subject-object relation can be understood as Derrida has described it above as governed by an all consuming *aufhebung* and a self-present subject. The way Derrida describes the nature of Hegelian subjectivity sees it imposing itself on the object world and excluding genuine otherness.

At first glance it might seem as though Derrida's account of Hegelian subjectivity is right, that Hegel resolves the mind-world dualism that Fichte and Kant bestow by creating an expanded version of the subject in which all difference is dissolved. That is the orthodox picture of Hegel's project sounds like fair game for the critique of subjectivity undertaken by Heidegger and Derrida and consequently opens a space for the type of alternative model of subjectivity that Derrida proposes that fractures the hegemony of that subject. The traditional metaphysical picture of Hegel argues that he resolves the problems that we have seen above by reverting to a pre-critical spiritual monism. Hegel on this view was largely seen as resolving the mind-world division by presenting the world as the expression of a cosmic spirit progressively realizing itself in history. There is nothing other than this Spirit's self-expression. What the conscious subject comes to recognize is that its self-consciousness is identical with the whole (determinate Spirit). The progression of the *Phenomenology* coincides with the realization that Spirit determines the world and that self-consciousness is an expression of Spirit, so what it comes to see is that the world which it initially takes to be other is in fact an expression of itself. In effect Spirit is just the subject writ large. Such a metaphysically construed Hegelian subject while it might avoid Kant's and Fichte's problems creates far more problems than it answers and is deserving of the kind of criticism Derrida gives it. There is however a far more plausible view of Hegelian subjectivity than this.

The self-conscious subject of the *Phenomenology* is construed such that effectively the entire work is required to describe it. As has already been commented Hegel says comparatively little about the physiological and anthropological basis for self-consciousness. Hegel does not restrict self-consciousness and human subjectivity to a faculty of mind

nor does he naturalize it. Hegel was critical of the investigation of the subject in Kant for attempting to present the subject antecedent to the inquiry, and this is a problem with all transcendental approaches. In Hegel's case the subject is conceived as a *result*, or as Pippin describes it as something 'historically achieved',<sup>41</sup> not something we can conceive as Hegel is fond of saying prior to the labour of science. But this means that the subject can have no fixed identity since it is something that is transformed over time. Derrida is, at least in part aware of this, which is why he ties his criticisms of Hegelian subjectivity to the dialectical movement of Hegel's thought, so that Hegel's subject is indistinguishable from the 'totalizing' movement of the Concept. But the dialectic and the Concept as Derrida understands them are weightily metaphysical.

The type of subjectivity at issue in Hegel depends to some degree on the text one is looking at. In the *Philosophy of Right*, at least for part of the text, it is a subject that is transformed through differing and progressive attempts at the realization of freedom, in the *Phenomenology* it is self-consciousness that undergoes changes in its self-understanding as it tries to account for the objects of its experience. In both cases the subject cannot be isolated and examined outside of the progressive and determinate unfolding of the texts. The subject expressed in these works is the result of the complex determination of historical and social forces and the character of self-relation reflects those social and historical changes even if the subjects themselves cannot recognize this. Clearly the subject at issue cannot be understood as presenting an isolatable subject. No single subject is free, freedom is necessarily social and this sociality is also the condition of self-consciousness.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins with a conscious subject who from the outset tries to make various claims to truth. Initially that concern seems primarily epistemological. The method as outlined in the introduction focuses largely on the experience of objects and how the various claims to truth undercut themselves in the experience of the object. But the text is equally a self-examination, indeed the natural consciousness, the text's protagonist, in its examination of the object and its own claims to know progressively shows itself to be an inquiry into itself. The movement of the *Phenomenology* is the self-comprehension of Spirit. That movement and self-comprehension is effected through the one enduring feature of the subject—the negative—outlined in some of the most well known passages of the Preface to the *Phenomenology*.<sup>42</sup> The negative is the key feature of this subject and Spirit; it gives them their essential dynamism and capacity for self-transformation.

Since the Concept is the object's own self, which presents itself as the *coming-to-be of the object*, it is not a passive subject inertly supporting the Accidents; it is, on the contrary, the self-moving Concept which takes its determination back into itself (PS ¶ 60/GW IX 45).

If we look at this passage coupled with his famous account of the negative

41. Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 12.

42. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York, Oxford, 1977 (henceforth PS). See for example PS ¶ 32/GW IX 25-6.

the disparity which exists in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul or that which moves them. ... the negative is the self (PS ¶ 37/GW IX 28-9).<sup>43</sup>

This is then followed with the famous passage that ‘substance shows itself to be essentially Subject’ (PS ¶ 37/GW IX 29).

On the face of it Derrida’s account seems right: ‘the movement of lost presence sets in motion the process of re-appropriation’.<sup>44</sup> The negative seems to accord with this assessment, since the dislocating work of an I, which through its examination of the objects of experience, comes to see that the given determinate character of Spirit is in fact identical with itself. All difference, otherness and so on are therefore simply determined moments of the whole. It appears Hegel replaces the self-sufficiency of the Cartesian subject with a self-sufficient Spirit. Derrida responds to this by refusing the model of home and self-sufficiency and so establishes quasi-transcendental conditions for the necessary transcendence of all systems of thought.<sup>45</sup>

However to read the above quoted passages this way would ignore what we have already seen above—that Hegel’s subject and the negativity associated with it have to be understood in light of Hegel’s dissatisfaction with Kant’s mind-world dualism. Hegel retains what he takes to be the positive features in Kant’s subject (autonomy and apperception) and in Fichte’s (the self-positing subject). The movement of the negative is not the attempt to recover an originary loss, but is rather the means by which we come to realize that the way in which the world is meaningful has to be understood as self-determined in the widest possible sense of this term. What needs to be stressed is that the *Phenomenology* tries to show how the basis of judgements, the categories of our experience and the reasons we offer for our judgements and actions are necessarily products of a human world. Moreover as the text unfolds we, and the natural consciousness, come to see ourselves not just as products of these conditions but as collectively *producing* the conditions that underlie our judgements and discursive exchanges.<sup>46</sup>

Descartes is often presented as inaugurating modernity in his attempt to ground thought on his own consciousness, but Hegel’s project is of a different order to the extent that the project of grounding thought is shown to be the capacity for thought to be self-transforming.<sup>47</sup> The details of this self-transforming capacity are outside the scope of this paper other than to say that this self-transforming capacity is only possible because of the negative. The basic concepts and categories of experience have to be understood as social and historical achievements. That is Hegel’s subject cannot be conceived in the language of social ontology as a foundational/transcendental subject or a foundational/transcendental intersubjectivity. What the *Phenomenology* shows is that conceptions of the

43. See also EL §42 A1.

44. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 72.

45. Singularity, for example, is outside the economy of these determinate systems. This singularity is not something I can possess or be at home in, it resists stability and reconciliation.

46. See Pippin’s discussion of this in *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, especially chapter 2.

47. Under the conditions of modernity we achieve a self-consciousness that this is the case.

subject and human intersubjectivity are the result of progressive changes in human self-understanding. The *Phenomenology* charts a succession of inadequate attempts to explain ourselves and the world, those explanations reveal themselves not just as isolated failures of understanding but show themselves (retrospectively) to be determinate features of self-consciousness. There is no fixed and self-certain subject that is identifiable other than by those historically transformed categories.

There are however numerous occasions in the *Phenomenology* in which absolute claims to *individual* self-determination are presented as the exclusive truth of self and world, the most well known of which are the Lord and Bondsman section and the discussion of conscience. Both these expressions of self-consciousness represent extreme claims to self-certainty that ultimately undermine themselves. That is these attempts to ground all meaning on a basic individual self-certainty show themselves to be unviable forms of self-relation and the text in both cases moves to more adequate expressions of self-consciousness. The *Phenomenology* progresses through the successive undermining of claims to know. The motor of this 'undermining' and transforming is the negative, which as we have seen is the thinking work of the subject. This labour of the negative that the conscious subject undertakes does not reveal a fixed and given whole. Instead what the text shows is progressive changes in human self-understanding, progressive changes in what humans collectively authorize as legitimate ways of understanding the world. The natural consciousness does not of course see it that way until the end of the text.

There is a threefold aspect to the texts unfolding. First as has already been discussed the subject's examination shows a progressive transformation of its knowledge of itself and the world. Second these changes in its knowledge of self and world are inscribed in its self-consciousness.<sup>48</sup> Third that it comes to recognize that the categories and condition which frame its experience of the world (that is the sum total of shapes of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*), which provide the interpretative parameters of all its judgments, are the result of collective human self-determination. What we come to recognize in the end of the *Phenomenology* is that Spirit is essentially self-producing; but importantly this self-determination is not the unfolding of some cosmic spirit but represents collective changes in our self-understanding. The dialectical movement of the *Phenomenology* charts these transformations and there is a certain artificiality to the claims to necessity for each transformation. Nevertheless the subject of the *Phenomenology* comes to understand itself in terms of those determinations. In the context of Hegel's dissatisfaction with Kant we can see why Hegel cannot present a world of truth over and against the subject. Instead he takes all the conditions and categories of human meaningfulness as necessarily collectively determined and those conditions are recognized to be the conditions of human self-consciousness. It progressively understands itself in terms of these conditions. In so doing it understands its own essentially self-transcending character. It comes to see the character of its subjectivity not as a singular self-identical subject but in terms of the conditions that are created by the gamut of forces at play in history and

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48. For a detailed discussion of this issue see my 'Absolute Knowing', *The Owl of Minerva: Journal of the Hegel Society of America*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1998, pp. 3-32.

society. It comes to recognize that these conditions are inscribed in the very way it is aware of itself and the world.

The path of the *Phenomenology* is one by which the subject comes to understand the relations that underwrite its own thinking as not merely its own. The relations are not self-coincident but reflect the manifold of norms and reasons at play in any social-historical period. Consequently these conditions are unable to be mapped onto the I in any straightforward sense. The subject cannot be self-identical and self-present in the way Derrida describes the Hegelian subject, precisely because as we have seen the norms, concepts and conditions that mediate my relation to myself and the world are always more than what I can conceptually circumscribe at any point in time. Moreover 'this space of reasons' in which this takes place is always in transition and in advance of what a finite subject could know, even though those 'reasons' mediate our self-relation.

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