

Subjectivity as the Orchestration of Meaning.

In a prose poem by Constantin Cavafy *Waiting for the Barbarians* the people in an ancient town stop doing their daily activities and wait for the arrival of the barbarians that will legislate a new life. The emperor sits outside the palace on his throne awaiting the hungry eyes of the barbarians. By nightfall the barbarians have not come and everyone has become restless and frenzied as the rumor spreads that the barbarians are not there at all. The poem ends with: “What are we going to do now without the barbarians? In a way, those people were a solution.” I see this poem as an illustration of the question of subjectivity as it unfolds in modern philosophy and the idea of a performative subjectivity facing the impending threat of meaninglessness. The barbarians at the gate can be seen as both a threat to the self and as the unconscious center of subjectivity.

This theme also relates to Nietzsche’s *uncanny guest* which is nihilism as loss of a measure for human action and thought. In Andrew Bowie’s book *Subjectivity From Kant to Nietzsche* he says: “[T]he enthusiasm generated by liberation from theological constraints can easily give way to a suspension of the resultant freedom and to the sense that the universe is inherently meaningless, because whatever meaning there is can only be a ‘merely human’ projection.” (3) When the guarantor of truth, either God or the king, becomes questionable how is the subject, from the Latin *sub-iectum*, thrown under, going to *subjectivize* itself?

The diatribe on subjectivity reaches a particular intensity in modern thought. Immanuel Kant thinks the subject is self-legislating and is granted moral (!) freedom by virtue of his innate

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faculties. In Kantian aesthetics this means that the manifold of sensation is processed by the subject’s toolbox, which is comprised of the innate ability to cognize time, space, and causality.

Many have attacked Kant’s aesthetics as being completely based on the subjects’ judgment of the world, what he calls *taste*. Upon closer inspection Kant bases his aesthetic

philosophy on the Aristotelian idea of human being as social animals and says how that sense of pleasure is connected to a feeling of harmony between the subject, other subjects, and the world. In the aesthetic experience the subject enjoys the free play of the faculties and finds pleasure in the world which presents itself as something knowable.

One of the first modern philosophers to challenge this long standing idea of the subject as self-conscious agent is Friedrich Nietzsche. His idea of the subject is not a subject at all in the terms that have been previously established by Enlightenment thought. His views can be seen as inhuman but at the end of the day Nietzsche's philosophical struggle is to overcome the most bitter cynicism and to salvage the subject knowing well that the subject is a fiction for the purpose of the survival of the species; an invention that owes more to humankind's stupidity and narcissism than anything else:

This drive, that rules the highest as well as the basest of human beings – the drive for the preservation of the species – erupts from time to time as reason and passion of mind; it is then surrounded by a resplendent retinue of reasons and tries with all its might to make us forget that fundamentally it is drive, instinct, stupidity, lack of reasons.

Nietzsche speaks of the self as an admixture of forces that are striving to emerge. Each individual harbors drives that are not completely conscious and may erupt or become regressive. The task of self-overcoming and *becoming who you are* is mired in failure because of the interplay of competing forces. The strongest and most vital drives may become consumed by life-denying drives and vice versa the lower drives may morph into life-affirming drives over time. An example of this alchemical transformation is the Christian *will to truth*, initially a life-affirming drive to see *deeper* which later becomes the source of nihilism as the devaluation of the actual world. In a way, ideas and things have a life of their own.

Nietzsche's thought marks a *transvaluation* of what has previously been considered high and low. For example, those who are governed by a will to sleep surround themselves in darkness, let us think of fascism as a colorless political philosophy. German metaphysics is nothing but bad digestion given by the habit of eating potatoes and drinking alcohol, let us think of the drowsiness of Hegel's prose and the weight of the historical world-view. In one of my favorite passages, aphorism 110 in the *Gay Science* Nietzsche says: "How far is truth susceptible of embodiment? - that is the question, that is the experiment."

Although less radical, in my opinion, Freud is viewed as the thinker that most revolutionized the concept of subjectivity. In his text *On Dreams* Freud says how the creation of mythology and that which "provides the dream-work with the material" stems from the working of an unknown part of us, the unconscious. (28) Freud introduces the idea of the split subject. There is something unknown that operates in dream life and surfaces through other means in our waking life: "A whole number of the phenomena of the everyday life of healthy people – such as forgetting, slips of the tongue, bungled actions and a particular class of errors – owe their origin to a physical mechanism analogous to that of dreams.." (24)

Most of these theories of subjectivity, except perhaps for Nietzsche, have an abstract basis insofar as there is something *noumenal* which as part of the self which enables us to operate in the material world as agents (perverted agents in Freud's case). For Marx, on the other hand, it is the material conditions of existence that produce anything that can be viewed as spiritual or ideal. Our world is man-made including our own subjectivity. Everything is produced by a certain working relationship between man and nature: "Labor is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself." (133)

For Marx the contemporary subject is lost, alienated, robbed of its energy and time by the fact that he/she has become a passive agent in a system he longer understands nor can change. This system obviously benefits a portion of the population, the capitalists, which knows how to maintain "the same cycle again

and again.” (256) Exploitation of the workers’ labor power (time and energy) is kept going by the endless circulation and congealment of values to which the worker himself is bound for the purpose of survival. The two main forms of circulation mentioned in *Capital* are (C-M-C) from commodity to money to commodity and (M-C-M) from money to commodity to money. Marx calls money a “radical leveler” to which everything is subsumed:

“Since money does not reveal what has been transformed into it, everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money. Everything becomes saleable and purchasable. Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as money crystal. Nothing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of the saints cannot withstand it.” (229)

In conclusion, the views on subjectivity of Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx offer different vantage points into the mystery of being. As Bowie points out Romantic philosophers and postmodern neo-Nietzscheans seem to reject the Kantian idea of the subject, emphasizing the chaos that articulates subjectivity in the name of the unsayable or unrepresentable. Nonetheless Bowie suggests that this idea of the subject as a conscious agent is still at the core of the issue. Bowie points out how music, for example, could not even be experienced *as music* if some basic subject-based structures were lacking. In the spirit of music and the great Dionysian mystery, perhaps we should consider this issue as an orchestration of meaning, closer in nature to the pre-Socratic idea of the *Logos*, as Heraclitus said: “No matter how many ways you try, you cannot find a boundary to consciousness, so deep in every direction does it extend.” (18)

Works Cited

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