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On The Bodily Life of Subjectivity
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Nothing has unified the diverse strands of Continental philosophy as much as the critique of something, or someone, called the subject. The subject has been attacked from so many perspectives, and for so many reasons, that today it is by far not clear what exactly the target of this critique is supposed to be. One could nonetheless distinguish between two types of such critiques. There is a modest critique of the subject and there is a radically sweeping critique. The modest critique largely identifies its target of criticism with the Cartesian notion of the subject. When it comes to the sweeping critique of the subject, the figure of Typhon, the most deadly monster in Greek mythology, is an apt metaphor to use. For this critique, the subject, just as Typhon, is a monster with a hundred heads: the subject, supposedly, is a highly hybrid figure which embraces Descartes' *res cogitans*, Leibniz's monadology, Kant's transcendental subject, Hegel's Absolute and finally Husserl's intentional consciousness. Clearly, these two types of critiques identify the object of their critiques differently.

Yet these two types of critiques differ from each other not only in terms of their subject matter, but also in terms of their goals. On the one hand, the modest critique has never aimed to proclaim the death of subjectivity, but rather to reevaluate subjectivity. On the other hand, the task of the radically sweeping critique has for the most part been that of reaching a point at which one could proclaim that the battle against the subject has been fought and won and that the opponent is vanquished for good.

Where does Nietzsche stand in this conflict of interpretations? It is quite curious that Nietzsche has been the source of inspiration for those engaged in a radically sweeping critique of the subject. This circumstance has led to a startling conjecture that, supposedly, Nietzsche's own critique of the subject has also been a radically sweeping one in the sense that Nietzsche, supposedly, had also aimed to replace the subject with an non-subjective conceptual framework. Yet do Nietzsche's writings themselves justify such a view? Is it really the case that for Nietzsche, too, the subject is nothing more than a figure drawn on sand that is already being washed away by the sea?

Let us ask: What is the subject for Nietzsche? In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche answers: "The 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is" (*WP*, 267). Yet compare this answer to the one given in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "At the bottom of us, really 'deep down,' there is...some granite

of spiritual *fatum*" (BGE, 231). Nietzsche affirms such a view when in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* he claims that "behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a mighty lord, an unknown sage—it is called self" (Z, 59). But compare this position to the one defended in the *Will to Power*: "'The subject' is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the 'similarity' of these states" (WP, 269). The list of contradictory assertions can be almost indefinitely prolonged. We seem to be facing a prime example that illustrates Kurt Tucholsky's famous claim: "Tell me what you need and I will supply you with a Nietzschean citation...for Germany and against Germany, for peace and against peace, for literature and against literature—whatever you want."¹

Yet if one takes this ambiguity seriously, one cannot escape the conclusion that Nietzsche's task has not been that of abandoning the problematic of subjectivity in favor of an alternative conceptual framework. Rather, Nietzsche has consistently aimed, from his earliest works to his latest, to replace an illegitimate conception of the subject with a new sense of subjectivity. Yet how exactly is one to understand Nietzschean subjectivity? Before addressing this question directly, one first needs to focus on Nietzsche's critique of the subject. To this I now turn.

Nietzsche's Critique of the Subject

Nietzsche's critique of the subject largely falls into the context of Nietzsche's repudiation of the figure of the identical. With a consistency spanning his earliest and latest works, Nietzsche rigorously takes apart the semblance of the identical in the moral, aesthetic, religious, scientific and philosophical domains.² Any search for rudimentary atom-like identities in Nietzsche is futile, be they of metaphysical, religious, scientific, or individual nature. The identical is always a latecomer, built upon and suppressing more fundamental differences.

There are two different ways in which Nietzsche speaks of the subject as a figure of the identical. That is, there are two central figures of the subject that Nietzsche's narrative consistently aims to reject. On the one hand, there is the figure of the *epistemological subject*. On the other hand, there is the figure of the *ethico-religious subject*. Let me begin with the first of these figures.

When it comes to the epistemological subject, the target of Nietzsche's critique is the deep-seated habit to isolate a particular figure of identity as the fundamental ground of all existence and all intelligibility. Within the Arabic-Judeo-Christian tradition(s), we have grown accustomed to identify such a source of being and knowing with the monotheistic God. Within the more or less openly atheistic modernity, the common strategy has been that of equating the ground of intelligibility with the subject, conceived as the pole of unity that recurs across time as the source and foundation of the reality that unfolds about it. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche mocks the multifaceted victory of the identical when he claims that the Greek Gods have died from laughter upon hearing the monotheistic God claim to be the sole God. So similarly, the philosophical identification of the subject as the sole ground of intelligibility also generates an overwhelming laughter of instincts and drives, which underlie the possibility of the cogito. In this regard, the critique of the subject is already implied in

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God; in fact, both themes are paradigmatic instances of Nietzsche's repudiation of the identical.

Yet how exactly does the subject become a privileged identity within the explanatory frameworks that address the sources of meaning and intelligibility? First and foremost, the belief in the subject derives from *linguistic habits*. As Nietzsche makes clear in his critique of the Cartesian ego, the philosophical subject is a philological mistake that stems from "grammatical customs":

"There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks": this is the upshot of all Descartes' argument.... When there is thought there has to be something "that thinks" is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom. (*WP*, 268)

Behind this "grammatical custom," Nietzsche discovers "only fear for the unfamiliar and the attempt to discover something familiar" (*WP*, 551). Language masks difference, multiplicity, non-identity by reducing them to the familiar, to the identical.

Nietzsche's claim that the belief in the subject is built upon linguistic habits entails a further specification: the belief in the subject is intricately tied to the belief in *causality*. This belief in causality is already etymologically inscribed in the notion of the subject: the word *subjectum* precisely means that which holds itself underneath. The ego, conceived as the underlying substance of thought, is meant to provide unity to all experience. Yet Nietzsche insists that such an explanatory framework is an unnecessary fiction.³

As we know from Hume, causality is never given in experience. Thus at best, the concept of cause could be a matter of interpretation. To this Nietzsche adds: "Interpretation by causality is a deception" (*WP*, 551). More particularly, it is a deception that is derived from the belief in the ego: "we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that we are causes" (*WP*, 551). On the basis of what I have argued above, we can see why Nietzsche would claim that a causal explanation is deceptive: being built upon the concept of the subject, causality relies upon our instinct for the familiar (*WP*, 551); it is an expression of our inability to come to terms with difference.

As I have already mentioned, Nietzsche's critique of the subject is not only directed against the epistemological subject but also against the ethico-religious notion of the subject. This critique is most forcefully expressed in the *Genealogy*. While addressing the morality of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche insists that this morality "needs to believe in a neutral independent 'subject'" (*GM*, 46). How are we to understand such a need?

The answer lies in what follows: The reversal of values that the slave morality introduces is only possible if one separates the "doer" from the deed. Only if one conceptually separates strength from the expression of strength, only if one projects a substratum behind each and every doing, effecting, and becoming, only then can one place a demand that each and every "doer" follow the precepts of what Nietzsche calls the slave morality. The "need to believe in a neutral independent 'subject,'" under the pretext of providing this subject with freedom, in fact imposes upon subjectivity a demand to follow a particular kind of morality, viz., the morality of *ressentiment*. So as to

render the subject responsible and accountable for his or her actions, it proves necessary to “free” strength from the expression of strength, to “free” the “doer” from his deed. But accountable according to what criteria? We know the answer: according to the precepts of slave morality.

At this point, let us say: *The belief in the epistemological and the ethico-religious subject, being built on linguistic habits, is the belief in the categories of unity, immortality, substance, and cause and effect. This belief gives rise to an abstract world order, which, while repressing fundamental plurality and difference, is antithetical to life.*

Nietzschean Subjectivity

Yet the subject occupies an exceptional place among those identities that are broken by Nietzsche’s narrative. Consider in this regard *Beyond Good and Evil*. After arguing that the Christian belief in the soul is nothing other than a form of atomism, Nietzsche goes on to say: “Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to get rid of ‘the soul’” (*BGE*, 20). Even more significantly, Nietzsche goes on to mock the “clumsy naturalists, who can hardly touch on ‘the soul’ without immediately losing it” (*ibid*). Nietzsche goes on to say that “the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis.” He lists such conceptions as ‘mortal soul,’ ‘soul as subjective multiplicity,’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects,’ as examples of such refinements.

Clearly, *Beyond Good and Evil* is not the only the text in which we find such a defense of subjectivity. For instance, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes: “*My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity*” (*WP*, 490). Let these references suffice as a sufficient testimony to the fact that *Nietzsche’s task has never been that of abandoning the problematic of subjectivity but rather that of reevaluating it.*

Just as Nietzsche’s critique of identity is aimed at discovering the irreducible plurality of being, so his critique of the subject is aimed at discovering the subject as multiplicity. Hence, to renounce the subject does not mean to renounce the self in any imaginable sense, but rather to renounce the abstract universality and assert the individuality of the ego. Nietzsche’s alternatives are not those between the explanatory significance or explanatory insignificance of the subject, but rather between the abstractly universal and the concretely particular self.

Nietzsche’s persistent struggle against the subject-unity and the emphasis he lays on experience and experimentation of and with the self brings us to *two crucial traits of Nietzschean subjectivity: (1) to be a self is to be a body, and (2) to be a self is to be a multiplicity.* These two features are intricately bound to each other because by multiplicity Nietzsche means the multiplicity of drives, forces and needs, i.e., precisely those elements whose interplay constitutes our bodies.⁴ It thus comes as no surprise that, in the context of identifying the self with the body, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra proclaims: “the body is a big sagacity, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a flock and a shepherd” (*Z*, 59).

By insisting that “body am I entirely and nothing more” (*Z*, 59), Nietzsche distances himself from those philosophies that search for the purity and innocence of the ego in its “pre-natal” state of being. Identifying the notion of the ego with soul, spirit

and conditions of experience, and reserving the notion of the self for the bodily subjectivity, Zarathustra proclaims: “your self laughs at your ego, and its proud prancings.... The self is the leading-string of the ego, and the prompter of its notions” (Z, 60). That is, for Nietzsche the subject is not the condition of experience, of language, and of thought. Rather, subjectivity in Nietzsche is always already a speaking, thinking, and experiencing subjectivity.

But what does it mean to discover that the ego is a body and a multiplicity? In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes: “Our body is but a social structure composed of many souls” (BGE, 19). This, certainly, is not an accidental remark. It is coupled with a number of similar comments, as, for instance, Nietzsche’s insistence in his unpublished note: “the ego is a plurality of forces—each one like a person.” According to Nietzsche, the other is, or more precisely, the others actively are “inside” the subject even before the self encounters other selves. One can thus suggest that the interplay between the self and others gives birth to Nietzschean subjectivity.

But what are those elements, or those souls, which constitute the plurality of the self? Nietzsche explodes false identities by discovering a more fundamental plurality beneath them, but *he never pretends to lift the last veil, to reveal the final secret*. The self is irreducibly non-transparent to itself: *the actual elements that constitute the subject will forever remain veiled from us*. We simply lack an organ for this kind of self-knowledge. For Nietzsche, any claim to the knowledge of the final elements that compose the subject is only a pretense—an unjustified reduction of the plurality of forces to the imaginary fiction of the self.

Yet even though one can never spell out all the elements that compose the subject as multiplicity, one can nonetheless discover the *style* of the subject’s being: *the ego is a plurality of forces, arranged in the form of subjugation*. The style of the subject’s being is that of the will to power: to be is to subjugate, to overpower. Yet taking into account the inner plurality of the bodily subjectivity, one also needs to add the contrary thesis: to be is to be the subjugated, the overpowered. The very fact that the subject’s being is essentially plurivocal means that subjects both subjugate and are the subjugated ones. To be a subject is to be both rich and poor, controlled and in control; or as Nietzsche has it, “the most important thing, however, is: that we understand that the ruler and his subjects are of the same kind, all feeling, willing, thinking” (WP, 492).

Yet does it really suffice to affirm the inner “chaos,” no matter what the multiplicity in question might entail? If one answers affirmatively, then one inevitably ends up knocking at the doors of *nihilism* and *relativism*. Clearly, such a suggestion would be far removed from Nietzsche’s style of thought, for it is precisely the question of value and the value of values that lies at the center of his attention. We thus need to see that Nietzsche affirms difference, but not chaos; he affirms plurality, but he rejects relativism.

Obviously, the mere fact that Nietzsche rejects the identical does not by itself mean that he affirms all pluralities and multiplicities. He steps beyond this either/or by claiming that there are at least three ways to understand difference: one can understand it as (1) an inner anarchical antagonism, or as (2) a juxtaposition without antagonism or collaboration, or as (3) an aristocratic order of rank (WP, 778). Nietzsche is critical of the first two options and he embraces the third one. He rejects the first option when he writes: “the antagonism of the passions; two, three, a multiplicity of “souls in one

breast”; very unhealthy, inner ruin, disintegration, betraying and increasing and inner conflict and anarchism” (*WP*, 778). Nietzsche privileges the second possibility over the first one—“the most interesting men, the chameleons, belong here”—but he sees a weakness in this interpretation of difference also, for even though the chameleons “are happy and secure, they do not develop.... They change, they do not become” (*WP*, 778). There is, however, yet another weakness that pertains equally to the first and second alternative: both of them remain blind to the style of subjectivity’s being, which Nietzsche qualifies in terms of the will to power. Hence, the third option—that of “the supremest form of health.” We can understand an inner-plurality with “one passion at last becoming master.” Nietzsche goes as far as to suggest, “this is almost the definition of health!” (*WP*, 778)

Inner plurality, *when situated in the order of rank*, takes one beyond the dead-ends of relativism and nihilism. The victory of the supreme passion, drive, or need liberates the subject from the anarchical chaos and from the chameleonic pluralism. One thus sees that Nietzsche’s central distinction is not that between the suppression of difference and the affirmation of difference, but rather between the suppression of differences and the power to restrain inner-plurality. In contrast to the philosophic, religious, or scientific suppression of difference, Nietzsche argues for a ruling over difference.

Yet at this point one is left wondering: how is it that Nietzsche can in one and the same breath affirm the ruling of the supreme instinct and drive when at the same time insisting that the actual elements that compose subjectivity forever remain veiled from us? With this question in mind, let me briefly turn to *Nietzsche’s critique of immortality*.⁵ First and foremost, this critique indicates that no matter whether the ruling drives are known or remain unknown, they cannot be said to rule forever. Even in the aristocracy of selfhood, the conflict between different drives, forces, and passions can never be said to have come to its end. And the head of the state now and again is overthrown, which means that we can never be sure that we understand ourselves adequately. To be a self, therefore, does not only mean to affirm the ruling drive. It also means to affirm the style of our being—*becoming*.

This double affirmation, as the affirmation of the ruling drive and of inner becoming, indicates subjectivity’s own distance to itself. It is the *distance of interpretation*. On the one hand, because the elements that compose us are unknown to us, the dominating passion can be misidentified. It is always a limited truth, or a relative lie, that links us to ourselves.⁶ On the other hand, because the ruling drive does not rule forever, the self is always ahead of itself, always requiring more interpretation. Thus Nietzsche introduces his “fundamental thought: we must consider the future as decisive for all our evaluations—and not seek the laws of our actions *behind* us” (*WP*, 1000).

I would like to suggest that such a notion of subjectivity, conceived in terms of the distance of interpretation, sheds some interesting light on the *pathos of distance*, of which Nietzsche speaks in a number of his works. In most of his analyses, and most notoriously in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche interprets the pathos of distance as a distance that separates the others from the self. Yet the problematic of subjectivity compels one to insist that this distance just as much qualifies the subject’s relation to itself. Moreover, while in most of his analysis, Nietzsche speaks of the pathos of distance in terms of a characteristic by which those in power designate themselves, here the pathos of

distance precisely turns against the ruling drive: it is a pathos inscribed in subjectivity's openness to the future which in its own turn indicates subjectivity's interpretive ability to distance itself from itself.

How exactly are we to understand such a self-distantiation? The third metamorphosis of which Nietzsche speaks in the opening pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* proves helpful in this context. As Nietzsche has it, the spirit, after taking on the burden no one else can carry, becomes a camel; after it provides itself with the freedom for new creation, it becomes the lion; yet only after obtaining innocence and forgetfulness, does the spirit become a child: "Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first moment, a holy Yes" (Z, 53). This "innocence of the child," this "forgetfulness," and this emphasis on the ever "new beginning" relies upon subjectivity's *pathos of distance* that separates it from itself.

Such, then, is Nietzsche's ambiguous stance in regard to subjectivity and selfhood. On the one hand, Nietzsche's polysemic genealogy destroys traditional identities and traditional conceptualization by unmasking those metaphysical idols on which our understanding of subjectivity rests. On the other hand, the overcoming of metaphysical idols can be achieved only by subjectivity that assumes a certain stance in regard to his or her existence. Maybe we would be dealing with fewer ambiguities had Nietzsche not used the terms "subject," "self," "ego," and "I," interchangeably. But the very fact that he so easily and elegantly substitutes one term for the other is telling, for it shows that Nietzsche is not willing to replace any of these concepts with a non-subjective or post-egoic explanatory frameworks. What Nietzsche opposes is the philosophical, scientific, and religious notions of the subject, conceived in terms of atomistic identity from which all meaning springs. What he is denying is the no less widespread than peculiar interpretation of thinking as activity supposedly undertaken by the "logical-metaphysical postulate" we call the subject. In contrast to this understanding of the self, what Nietzsche affirms is a notion of subjectivity conceived as a bodily multiplicity of forces, drives, and needs. The endorsed subjectivity turns out to be a never-ending self-searching and self-creating narrative. This interpretive distance "between the I and the me" clarifies the use of the term "self" in the Nietzschean universe, characterized by the lack of permanence, order, fixed laws, rationality, and truth.

Notes

¹ Tucholsky, *Gesammelte Werke*. Also cited in Jurist, 2000, p. 211.

² Already in *Daybreak* Nietzsche mounts an attack on the naïve trust in the identities generated by our *feelings, intellect, and language*. The identities established by feelings suppress their historical becoming which encapsulates a more rudimentary difference: “To trust one’s feelings – means to give more obedience to one’s grandfather and grandmother and their grandparents than to the gods which are in us: our reason and our experience” (*D*, 35). In a similar vein, Nietzsche rejects the original character of all identities that are generated by the *intellect* when he claims, “our intellect is only the blind instrument of another drive which is the rival of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us” (*D*, 109). Nietzsche also speaks of the fictive character of all identities that are generated in *language*. Language only names the extreme states, while it is “the milder, middle degrees, not to speak of the lower degrees...which weave the web of our character and our destiny” (*D*, 115).

³ As William McNeill puts it, “the ground of what Nietzsche calls Descartes’ ‘very strong belief’ in the truth of the cogito, far from being an immediately intuitable certainty, proves to be a historical product, or by-product, of thought itself: another belief, the belief in the a priori truth of substance, of an underlying substratum or *hupokeimenon* behind or beyond appearances” (McNeill, 2004, 289).

⁴ Although closely connected, multiplicity and the body are not identical in Nietzsche. Multiplicity is a more general term, which encompasses not only the body (which itself is never unitary) but also the detached consciousness (which Nietzsche calls “the little sagacity” [Z, 59]), which provides the multiplicity with a justified or unjustified unity.

⁵ See, for instance, the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

⁶ “The relative ignorance in which the regent is kept concerning individual activities and even disturbances within the communality is among the conditions under which rule can be exercised” (*WP*, 492).

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