

# From Stability to Uncertainty: An Analytical Survey of the Conception of Subject

Ying Jiang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Tangshan Normal University, Tangshan, China

Correspondence: Ying Jiang, School of Foreign Languages, Tangshan Normal University, Tangshan, China.

Received: August 2, 2022

Accepted: September 9, 2022

Online Published: September 28, 2022

doi:10.5539/ells.v12n4p6

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v12n4p6>

## Abstract

Subject used to be a stable concept referring to the actant of an event and it was the opposite of object. Emancipated from being the innate sinners of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance subject is intelligent and powerful and the Renaissance literature is loaded with compliments of human magnificence. Heidegger's Dasein underscores the passivity of the subject as it is inadvertently thrown into this world. Sartre highlights the freedom of the subject and the choices made by the subject are the meanings of its existence. Derrida deconstructs the sematic meaning of the subject since the incessant chain of signification puts it in constant flux. The existential subject is deterritorialized by the postmodern thoughts and rendered fragmentary, frivolous and amoral.

**Keywords:** subject, deconstructed, deterritorialized, fragmented

Western philosophers have been preoccupied with the meaning of the subject. Does it refer to the one that “goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?” (Sophocles, 2020, p. 98). Or does it mean “I AM THAT I AM” (*The Holy Bible*, Exod. 3.14)? What is the essence, if there is any, of the subject? Western literature, likewise, is fraught with characters who are obsessed with discovering their true identities and potentials as human beings or subjects. Oedipus's insistence on tracking down who he is leads to the downfall of his house and the gouging out of his eyes as well as the self-imposed exile. Doctor Faustus's insatiable quest for knowledge results in his eternal damnation. Victor Frankenstein, discontented with the limited functions of a mere normal subject, craves for the role of the creator and actually makes his own Adam, the monster, which in the long run devastates his life. Dr. Jekyll's zeal to experience the “vicarious depravity” (Stevenson, 2002, p. 311) by letting go of his sinister self brings about disastrous consequences too. All the four figures have one thing in common: their quests for the meaning of the subject. The inevitable tragedy incurred by their doomed ontological pursuit underscores the complex nature of the subject. However, it does not intimidate the avid pursuers but stimulates their ever-increasing commitment to it.

## 1. The Cartesian Subject as the Meditative Mind

Descartes's *cogito* has been held as the watershed between the medieval Scholasticism and the burgeoning modern philosophy. With the birth of Renaissance and the spread of humanism, an increasing number of people begin to realize that they are autonomous beings rather than innate wrong-doers whose sole obligation is to repent for their immanent sins and earn God's forgiveness. Renaissance literature is imbued with exuberant celebrations of human strength and power. Miranda is impressed with the presence of more humans on the deserted island and extols their beauty, “How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is!” (*The Tempest*, 5.1.182–83) and Hamlet glorifies the man as “the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.302) Though rigidly territorialized to the tier under the Creator and the angelic beings, people came to realize that their life is meaningful and their potential is enormous. Milton's charismatic Satan is the exemplar of a defiant, anti-authoritarian figure, which to some extent represents the mentality of the people at that time.

The discovery of the New World in 1492 and the Protestant Reformation in 1517 accelerate the decline of Scholasticism. Moreover, the scientific revolutions of Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo and Newton also lead to a growing skepticism regarding Christianity. Is God the creator who knocks the earth and human beings into shape? Are human beings mere products of God's will and thus do not possess any subjectivity? All those haunting questions seem to be resolved by Descartes's absolute certainty. He proposes whenever we meditate on

something, we will know for sure that we have a logical, speculative mind that is functioning. In his argument Descartes accentuates not the physical substance but the spiritual one—the mental power. The “I” in the argument does not refer to the actual philosopher René Descartes but to his mind involved in the contemplation. The existence of his mind does not guarantee the existence of his brain, nor does it mean that his body exists since both of them are physical substances. The complete disregard for the corporeal matter bears striking resemblance to Plato’s Forms/Ideas which are assumed to be the transcendental truth. Whereas Descartes’s *cogito* is within the human mind, Plato’s Forms are divine and have nothing to do with the actual ontological beings.

Descartes’s proposition highlights the cognitive power of human beings and makes it an indispensable constituent of the autonomous subject. Whenever one commences contemplating, his subjectivity is brought into being. However, it also results in an epistemological predicament: what about God and the Christian tenets? Descartes proposes that the idea of God is innate in one’s mind and it is placed there when the mind is created by an infinite and perfect being—the God. The a priori model of God’s being reconciles *Cogito* with the Christian canon and turns Descartes into a metaphysical dualist who insists on the division of the mind and the body. For Descartes and his followers subjectivity lies in the speculative competence of the mind.

The importance Descartes attaches to rational thinking has great impact on the subsequent philosophers and authors. The Age of Reason echoes his foregrounding of the reasoning power of the subject. In *An Essay on Man* (1732–1734) Alexander Pope acknowledges the intellectual powers of the subject:

Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,  
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;  
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,  
Correct old time, and regulate the sun (19–22);

English philosopher John Locke offers an empiricist counterpoint to Descartes by claiming that there can be no innate ideas: all ideas and knowledge come from experience. George Berkeley, the Irish idealist, takes empiricism to the extreme of denying the existence of matter: reality is mental or the product of mind. Although their hypotheses are at variance with Descartes’s proposition, Locke and Berkeley somewhat reaffirm the importance of the subject or the mind as the entity to experience reality. Kant, in contrast with both Descartes and Locke who regard the human mind as a blank slate on which meditations and experience make indelible impressions, contends that human cognition does not passively receive sense experience but actively constructs it. To put it another way, our experience of the world is partly the product of our mind. Kant’s “Copernican Turn” (Carr, 1999, p. 34) inverts the order of knowledge and highlights the active role of the subject in the assimilation and accumulation of knowledge.

The self-consciousness and rationality advocated by Descartes are further contradicted by the Freudian theory of unconsciousness. Freud proposes that the unconscious is the place we store our secretive and unfulfilled desires. If it is not more substantial than the conscious, it is at least as important as the latter. Everyone who has gone through the Oedipal process is “a *split* subject, torn precariously between conscious and unconscious” (Eagleton, 2004, p. 136). The unfathomable nature of the unconsciousness challenges the monolithic Cartesian subject and makes people reconsider the role of the consciousness in the construction of the subject. As a consequence, the “radical *otherness*” (Eagleton, 2004, p. 136) of the unconscious undermines the binary opposition of consciousness/unconsciousness which is ultimately deconstructed by Derrida.

## 2. The Passivity of Heidegger’s Dasein

In contrast with Descartes’s *Cogito*, Heidegger does not hold that the subject is a being inside the physical world. He conceives existence or being as an activity and his seminal term “Dasein” means “Being-there” or “Being-in-the-world”, the latter being a “unitary phenomenon” (Heidegger, 2008, p. 78). Dasein is thrown into this world and its identity is contingent on its involvement with the world rather than on the pure self-consciousness or rationality and “[t]he *essence*’ of Dasein lies in its existence” (Heidegger, 2008, p. 67). This claim earns Heidegger the label of existentialist even though he himself never acknowledges that. In Heidegger’s philosophy schema, Dasein is the “mode of being (*das Seiende*) of human beings, as opposed to the being (*Vorhandensein*, ‘being at hand’ or ‘presence at hand’) of things or entities” (Macey, 2001, p. 82). He propounds that Dasein is a way of getting back to the basic, primordial experience and from an ontic point of view, “Dasein is not only close to us—even that which is closest: we *are* it, each of us, we ourselves” (Heidegger, 2008, p. 36). In this regard, the Heideggerian subject is somewhat devoid of initiatives and whose wholeness is a synthesis of itself and the world alike. The passivity makes it stand out from other subjects which are utterly

active and dynamic.

Influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger, French atheistic existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are free to make choices, for which they should be responsible. By the exercise of choice and free will, human beings live an authentic life. According to Sartre subjectivity is inextricably connected with one's existence and choices. He remarks in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that “[f]reedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 2003, p. 588). The subjectivity of human beings is demonstrated by their willingness to choose their unique way of life, even though it may be eccentric or idiosyncratic. Meursault, the protagonist of Camus's novella *The Outsider* (1942), is a case in point. He is inexplicably indifferent to what happens around him; even the death of his mother cannot move him at all. He says at the very beginning of the novella, “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.... That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday” (Camus, 2000, p. 9). His callous attitude towards his mother's death shocks those at the old people's home, who are then appalled by his not shedding any tears at his mother's funeral. What Meursault does is against rational thought, and he does not reflect on what he has done or what consequences his behavior will bring about. His failure to adhere to the common standards aggravates the animosity that people bear toward him. However, he does not repent for what he has done and actually feels happy for his course of action as he says at the end of the novella, “I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy” (Camus, 2000, p. 117). For Meursault the lived experience is of primal importance. His subjectivity is not based on rationality but on his own choice, even though it may turn out to be irrational or irresponsible. The emphasis on personal responsibility reaches the apex in Samuel Beckett's esoteric play *Waiting for Godot* (1954). The two vagabonds Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for someone named Godot whom they barely know; their choice to wait for the obscure figure whose appearance they cannot be assured of strikes us as preposterous. Nevertheless, the seemingly absurdity of their action demonstrates that they are at liberty to do what they want to do no matter how meaningless or absurd it seems to be. The free will lays bare their subjectivity and reaffirms Sartre's argument that “[t]o be free is to be condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2003, p. 152).

### 3. The Deconstructed Subject of Derrida

No matter what their individual position is, the aforementioned philosophers maintain the autonomy of the subject and posit it as the polar opposite of the object, which is passive and recipient. Being the dynamic actant, the subject is capable of enjoying free will and conducting analytical work; the object, nonetheless, is subordinate and susceptible to the impact of the subject. Thus, the binary opposition of subject/object comes into being. Derrida holds that Western culture grants a hierarchical and mutually exclusive nature to the binary oppositions which are employed to express contrary ideas, such as presence/absence, good/evil, white/black, man/woman and so on. The first term—presence, good, white, and man—is maintained to be the superior and dominant one whereas the second term is inferior and subordinate. Derrida deconstructs the specious hierarchy between the two terms by pointing out that their relative meanings are mutually dependent rather than exclusive. If there is no absence, what is the point of being present? If there is no black, what will white mean? The inherent incompleteness of the first term necessitates the being of the second and makes it its indispensable *supplément*, which means “substitute” as well as “addition”. In *Of Grammatology* (1976) Derrida argues, “It is the strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may always not have taken place. Moreover, literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now” (Derrida, 1997, p. 314). The vaporous nature of the first term deconstructs the binary opposition and sets the two terms on an equal footing. Meanwhile, the autonomy of the Derridean subject is demolished as it is always in the process of construction. Without the presence of the object, the subject may also dissolve since there is nothing for it to be related to. Consequently, the object is no longer the passive foil of the subject but one of its essential traits.

As a grounding principle, Descartes's *cogito*, as well as Heidegger's *Dasein*, can be comprehended as *logos* which is permanent and never evolves. In Western culture, *logos* may refer to a concept of utmost importance, such as God, truth, word, speech, reason and so on (Murfin & Ray, 2009, p. 274). Logocentrism, in Derrida's view, upholds the transparency of the language and the determinability of an ultimate truth. It assumes that there is a transcendental center or origin which dominates all the other things that originate from or revolve around it. This transcendental center, somewhat like Plato's Form, is the purest presence which operates effectively and maintains its purity from being contaminated by the course of signification which is “the relation of *signifier* to *signified* [that] generates the *sign*” (Hawkes, 2003, p. 109). Yet being the center, the *logos* will inevitably be embroiled in the free play of signs; otherwise, it will not be the center at all. The indeterminacy of the language inescapably corrupts the assumed stability of the transcendental signified and hurls it into the incessant chain of signification.

Derrida has evinced that every sign has the traces of other absent signs. In the interview of “Semiology and

Grammatology” conducted by Julia Kristeva, Derrida elucidates, “Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present” (Derrida, 1997, *Positions* 26). As the deferral and differing of a sign is theoretically infinite, the unambiguous meaning of a sign is forever lost in the inexhaustible chain of signification. This is what Derrida means by deferral, during the process of which the definite and specific meaning of a term is irrevocably gone. The deprivation of the unalterable meaning costs the subject its stable identity and it stops being the monolithic entity with an object to which it is closely related. Both the subject and the object have multiple, indeterminable meanings; all the attempts to allot fix meanings to them are self-undermining since they are constantly in the process of construction.

#### 4. The Postmodern Fragmented Subject

If we say that Derrida deconstructs the subject from a linguistic point of view which costs it its fixed and unequivocal meaning, the existential subject is deterritorialized by postmodern thought which makes it fragmented, frivolous and amoral. Lyotard characterizes postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarrative” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv) and the subject can be interpreted as metanarrative with respect to *Cogito* and *Dasein* which are the be-all and end-all. Nonetheless, the verity of the metanarratives of progress, reason and history are challenged and somewhat inverted, so is the subject. The postmodern existential subject is fragmentary, trivial and amoral whose life seems to be aimless and pointless. The theme of many postmodern writings is incredibly trivial and the protagonists are obscure figures who are dramatically different from those of the classical novels. Donald Barthelme’s Snow White is not the innocent, beautiful princess but a “horsewife” who has sex with the seven dwarves in turn in the bathroom. She is not white either but “a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots” (Barthelme, 1996, p. 9). William Lee, the hero of William Burroughs’s novel *The Naked Lunch* (1959), is a drug addict. Oedipa Maas, the heroine of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying Lot of 49* (1966), is a housewife. Those mediocre figures evince that the sublimity of the subject has been shattered and replaced by its mundane attributes. The postmodern subjectivity is constantly in limbo and the ontological pursuit of the meaning of the subject is somewhat pointless since the milieu is obscure and senseless.

With the increasing influence of poststructuralist theories, people come to realize that the subject is not an independent or integral entity, and the involvement of the object in the construction of subjectivity is indispensable. The object is no longer subordinate to the subject and they are actually on equal terms. In other words, the object itself is a subject. They are two sides of the same coin. The constructed subjectivity is contingent on many factors, object being one of them, which may be either present or absent.

#### References

- Barthelme, D. (1996). *Snow White*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Camus, A. (2000). *The Outsider* (Trans. Joseph Laredo). London: Penguin.
- Carr, D. (1999). *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions* (Trans. Alan Bass). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of Grammatology* (Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected ed.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2004). *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Hawkes, T. (2003). *Structuralism and Semiotics* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (2008). *Being and Time* (Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson). New York: Harper Perennial.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Macey, D. (2001). *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin.
- Murfin, R., & Supryia, M. R. (2009). *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (3rd ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- Pope, A. (2006). *An Essay on Man. The Major Works* (Ed. Pat Rogers). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness* (Trans. Hazel E. Barnes). London: Routledge.

- Shakespeare, W. (2001). *The Tempest* (Ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan & Alden T. Vaughan). London: The Arden Shakespeare.
- Shakespeare, W. (2003). *Hamlet* (Annotated by Burton Raffel). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sophocles. (2020). *Oedipus the King* (Trans. David Kovacs). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, R. L. (2002). *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The Complete Stories of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Ed. Barry Menikoff). New York: The Modern Library.
- The Holy Bible* (1989). (Authorized King James Version). Grand Rapids: World Publishing.

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).