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The Challenge of the Subject in the Face of the Real*

ABSTRACT: *In one of her recent interviews, Catherine Malabou pointed out a problem which I deem to be pivotal in considering the question of the real with all its implications: speculative realists are indifferent to the subject. In this paper, I will present my position that in contemporary philosophy it is precisely the problem of the subject that becomes an actual challenge when raising the question “What kind of reality are we talking about?”; “What is real?” In light of treating the problem of the subject as a theoretical challenge in regard to the question of reality, two positions, that of Catherine Malabou (*The New Wounded, Before Tomorrow*) and Giorgio Agamben (*Infanzia e storia*), will be analysed and attempted to be compared. I will endeavour to discuss the problem how is the notion of the subject, the question of its identities, its transformations, being human-non-human, correlated to the question of reality.*

KEYWORDS: *Subject, Transcendental, Transformation, Reality, Experience, Privativity.*

In one of her recent interviews, Catherine Malabou pointed out a problem which I deem to be pivotal in considering the question of the real with all its implications: speculative realists are indifferent to the subject.¹ In this paper, I will present my position that in contemporary philosophy it is precisely the problem of the subject that becomes an actual challenge when raising the question “What kind of reality are we talking about?”; “What is real?”.

As it was already mentioned, the direction of this discussion is largely inspired by the position of the so-called speculative as well as new realisms. In light of their indifference to the subject on the one hand and their ontological orientation being directed exclusively towards the object – the object separated from any sort of subjectivity – on the other, the whole wave of new realism could somewhat ironically be called OOO – object-oriented ontology (of course, to risk angering the true OOO author Graham Harman). Thus, new realisms, including the

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¹ Malabou 2021, 206-222.

speculative, direct themselves to the human independent “object-like” reality, at the same time ignoring the question of the subject or claiming to have “solved” it by virtue of their approach.

However, *can* one practice philosophy when circumventing the question of the subject, and if so, *how*? Besides, can the access to reality be claimed by only negating or ignoring the very instance from which the very access to reality was unfolding? Is it possible to philosophically legitimize a reality without subjectivity?

In her attempt to actualize the question of the subject in philosophy, Malabou appeals not to the traditional ontological context, but rather to that, for which there was never a reserved place in philosophy. She speaks of new beings and their accidental emergence. These are: Alzheimer patients, individuals traumatized by the horrors of war, those, who have suffered brain injuries or simply those suffering from senility.

“We must all of us recognize that we might, one day, become someone else, an absolute other, someone who will never be this form of us without redemption or atonement, without last wishes, this damned form, outside of time”² – Malabou writes.

Yet, as it is known, such “selves” that have survived the loss of their self and experienced themselves as “others,” were taken up by all kinds of psychological therapies and psychiatry. Differently put, this “becoming other” was almost always treated either as a pathology or at least as an illusory and unreal condition, and such a treatment was not without the influence of Western philosophy and its substantialist assumption.

In her work, it is precisely this “accidental” becoming “other” that Malabou links with the *subject*, as rethought or as what demands a rethinking. In *The New Wounded*, in reference to the position of the psychiatrist and researcher Marcel Gauchet, she introduces the concept of *the subject of the accident* as an answer to the question: “Who, today, is this modifiable and metamorphosable subject, the site of conflict between the two plasticities – constructive and destructive – that entwine and menace its life?”³ By employing not only Gauchet, but also Michel Foucault, Malabou relates this new accidental subjectivity first and foremost to the sphere of the “psyche” and the “brain”. She argues that “the brain would emerge as the contemporary form of subjectivity”⁴. And that is the case, as Malabou reminds us citing Foucault, “because relations of power had established it as a possible object”⁵.

Malabou’s “shift” to the “accidental” subject was significantly influenced by Sigmund Freud’s position on plasticity as well as Derrida’s deconstruction. Is it possible to be “beyond the pleasure principle”? No, according to Freud. Malabou believes that only a detailed rethinking of Freud’s psychoanalytic position – destruction, death, and negativity – can open up a new perspective on the

2 Malabou 1912, 2-3.

3 Malabou 2012, 203.

4 Malabou 2012, 204.

5 Foucault 1978, 98.

“pleasure principle” and plasticity. Malabou discerns the limit of Freud’s position in the separation of psychoanalytic and neurological causality and the devaluation of negative plasticity stemming from it⁶.

Freud does not take destructive plasticity into account – that is, the possibility that new identities are formed in the wake of psychic destruction. The life drives and the death drives, which seem at first to correspond to two incompatible plastic instances – constructive plasticity and annihilating plasticity – never really interfere with the work of a positive and self-regulated originary plasticity

– Malabou claims⁷. And “what exceeds plastic equilibrium is not plastic. There seems to be no middle term between the plasticity of good form and elasticity as the mortiferous effacement of all form. *There is, in Freud no form to be negation of form*”⁸ – she reproaches Freud.

Hence, Malabou first of all calls upon Foucault’s conception of the “disappearing” and “evanescent” subject, which she sees as a possible foundation of the “accidental”, “becoming other” subject. In her view, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* allows to argue that the subject beyond the pleasure principle⁹ (Freud) coincides with the disappearing subject, which Foucault ascertains in the figure of the writer, the author or in his concept of the non-disciplined body.

The issue here is such a vulnerable psyche which in being wounded can endure transformations that obliterate any trace of itself. That is, Foucault thinks about a “subject who becomes the very form of its death, who, through the interruption of his affects, figures his own disappearance, is to discover, within the revelations of today’s neurology, the *material image* of disappearance of the author”¹⁰.

By not taking into account destructive plasticity, not even distinguishing it, psychoanalysis is unable to achieve what neurology attempts to do – to explain the influence of traumatic events that result in the total transformation of identity. But neurology as it is cannot properly achieve it either: neurology, according to Malabou, recognizes the phenomena themselves, but not the laws. Hence, this question requires philosophical reflection. Malabou reminds us that in his text “Psychoanalysis Searches the State of Its Soul,” Derrida called for psychoanalytic thinkers to respond to the question of cruelty today. Thus Malabou, extending Derrida’s theoretical concern for the emotional indifference today, finally asks: “Might neurology and psychoanalysis someday work together to rewrite *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with an entirely new conclusion?” Hence, the first question that has emerged in the context of these considerations of Malabou: where should philosophy today seek for the solution – the exit beyond the pleasure principle? Or – how do we justify the

6 See: Malabou 2012, 165.

7 Malabou, 2012, 166.

8 Malabou, 2012, 166.

9 See: Freud 1961.

10 Malabou 2012, 205.

coming of the “accidental subject”? Differently put, not only by deeming the question of the subject to be important, but also by considering the problem of the erosion of the philosophical subject, its end, and the perspective of its possible transformation, Malabou both erases old and draws new lines of philosophical thinking.

For the sake of illustration but also to “prove” the legitimacy of the coming of her “accidental” subject, Malabou points to a long quotation from Foucault’s, in her words, excellent essay “What Is an Author?”, where Foucault analyses the figure of the author as evanescent. According to Malabou, “He recalls Beckett’s words – ‘What does it matter who is speaking’, someone said, ‘What does it matter who is speaking?’ and then comments – In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing”¹¹.

Whereas Malabou’s question is: “Is the indifference of the subject of writing akin to the emotional indifference of the traumatized subject who has gone beyond the pleasure principle?”¹²

This question, formulated by employing Foucault’s framework, is not rhetorical. The answer is given by Foucault himself, addressing the being of the author, the writer: it is “linked to sacrifice, even to sacrifice of life”. Therefore, Malabou, in referring to Foucault, can reformulate the thesis “There is no one when I write” into “there is no one when I live”¹³. This is a statement that circumscribes the being of the new wounded, the perspective of the disappearance of the subject, while at the same signaling the founding of the contemporary “cerebral” accidental subjectivity or at least the urgency of such a foundation

Yet is it truly the time when philosophy, in deconstructing subjectivity, at the same time discovers the “cerebral *psyche*” to be its subject? Isn’t this “cerebral” subject only a “victim” testifying to the disappearance and death of the philosophical subject?¹⁴ Evidently, to legitimize a “new”, transformed subjectivity, a subjectivity that emerges in the form of the victim (by sacrificing the philosophical subject) is not an easy task. It is not easy, because such subjectivity is “accidental”.

However, we can already note that Malabou will not be satisfied with the philosophical deconstruction of the subject and its replacement with the cerebral subject. She will also raise the question of subjectivity on a different level, inscribing it into the consideration of what is the transcendental, relating transcendental subjectivity to the problem of the identity of continental philosophy as such. To slightly anticipate myself, I would claim that it is precisely in the rethinking of transcendental as such, or more specifically, in the rethinking of transcendental subjectivity that one should look for Malabou’s answer to the question of the legitimization of “accidental” subjectivity.

11 Malabou 2012, 206.

12 Malabou, 2012, 206.

13 Malabou 2012, 206.

14 See: Malabou 2012, 204.

The author, who in Malabou's oeuvre connects the two mentioned problematic themes, transcendental subjectivity (Kant) and "accidental" subjectivity and builds a bridge between at least two of her texts – *The New Wounded* and *Ontology of the Accident* – is without any doubt Foucault.

Here it would be useful to return to the endeavor of Foucault himself and remember that his so-called project of archaeology – from its very beginning all the way to its realization – was related to a profound critique of the transcendental, both in its Kantian and general guise. Critique here, however, is to be understood in the Kantian sense, that is, as a rethinking. And this rethinking is ambiguous and leads to somewhat contradictory, twofold and equivocal results. As it is known, one is dealing here with the making sense/founding of the concrete level of experience in regard to the general conception of experience, and this touches upon the content of the instance that is transcendental. On the other hand, one ought not to forget that the problem of the transcendental persisted throughout Foucault's career and, as many have pointed out, it would be wrong to associate his rethinking and critique of the transcendental with any of its specific strains: Kantian, Husserlian, etc. One thing is certain, he considered the question of the transcendental in tandem to his reassessed sphere of subjectivity. Foucault opposed his archaeological method to that of the transcendental for the reduced role of the actual level of experience in the latter. This, as we will see, is nothing other than a critique of *transcendental* subjectivity. Yet what do we gain from in following Foucault's archaeological "logic", his method? Foucault locates subjectivity in the level of experience he calls *anonymous* – it is neither the phenomenological instance of the *ego*, nor *man* conceived anthropologically. It could be claimed that with the founding of an "anonymous" instance of experience, one likewise accomplishes a negative gesture that secures a place for subjectivity: it does not simply state the non-existence of the subject, but rather pronounces its "end," its "death", and thus achieves something akin to what Hegel conceptualized as *Aufhebung*. In this case, by way of the privative (nihilistic) form of the lack, subjectivity is preserved as a demand of/for certain instance. Of course, Foucault does this for the sake of his own theoretical concerns, that is, to maximally historicize the conditions of experience, to leave no space for the transcendental, and not to constitute the "anonymous" instance as an *Aufhebung* based on negativity. However, the fact that this essentially Nietzschean nihilistic "logic" is not only not alien to Foucault, but is even practiced by him, can be ascertained from his early texts, in particular his dissertation on Nietzsche. There, commenting on the "death of God" pronounced by Nietzsche, Foucault calls it a double murder: not only of God, but of man as well, meaning that with the death of God, man's "anthropological" death occurred too. Therefore, man as an anthropological instance cannot substitute the transcendental subject, that is, to "return" in one way or another to the locus of the "lost" subject as a concrete human being. But by seeing the anthropological death, that is, the death of man as the subject, in the "death of God", the very act of the annulment of man manages to preserve subjectivity in a privative form.

Yet does this suffice to reject the transcendental and its method in the name of the archaeological method? What is precisely being rejected and what is preserved here?

Here one ought to recall that Foucault's critique is related to his peculiar orientation towards the "present". This aim is fruitfully expressed in a concept he introduces, a concept now widely employed: "actuality". Notwithstanding certain contextual differences, it is a concept that came to signify the German (Kantian) *Wirklichkeit* – a reality as something effected (by the subject?), something performative, and not *Realität* – a reality as something neutral/indifferent in respect to "human" activity and performativity. When we want to say *Wirklichkeit* in English, we say *Actuality* or *Effectuality*, but not *Reality*. It is not necessary to prove that this term employed by Foucault is of Kantian origin. What would need to be proven is rather that the introduction of the instance of *Actuality* as *Wirklichkeit* is correlated to subjectivity as the need to preserve this instance. And to raise the question, whether Foucault's critique of Kant is not confronted with an ambiguity with regard to transcendental subjectivity? That is to say, whether the subject "conserved" in a privative form can relinquish (or transform) the transcendental? This excursus through Foucault might help us also to better grasp Malabou's position.

Thus, does the perspective of the legitimization Malabou's "accidental" subject, a subject entering the philosophical arena to relieve the sacrificed "pure" philosophical subject, developed earlier become clearer by recalling the author Malabou herself, I would risk claiming, deems to be crucial? In the light of the just discussed archaeological project of Foucault and his critique of the transcendental subject that revealed a relation between subjectivity and a specific conception of reality as *Actuality*, a possible answer to the previously raised question of the legitimization of the "accidental" subject begins to echo in this thesis of Malabou, when she speaks of Franz Kafka, Maurice Blanchot and Marguerite Duras: "Experience. True: here the accident is the experiential dimension of ontology"¹⁵.

It is precisely these authors that "touch" or "grasp" the metamorphic moment of *experience* that could be called the *accident*. Malabou discovers the key to such a perspective grounded upon *experience*, one that at the same time presents experience in a new ontological light, in Derrida's deconstruction and its annihilating power, by considering the *beyond* – that philosophical *trans*-movement and its limits. According to Malabou, Derrida speaks of such a "beyond", where anything can happen, everything that is impossible, beyond conventions and all the possible theatrically staged scenes. It is an event in the form of an impossibility, an event of *experience*, that occurs/is experienced in the form of the *beyond*. Derridean deconstruction allows one to rethink the very concept of the *beyond*. And Malabou first and foremost emphasizes it is an annihilating power, that entered Derrida's deconstruction also through his consideration of Freud's "beyond the pleasure principle." Thus, psychoanalysis and deconstruction not only permit one to claim that all miraculous happenings can, in fact, happen. Both psychoanalysis and

15 Malabou 1912, 59.

deconstruction point to the insight that the very experience of such an impossible, miraculous, and accidental event opens up the possibility to rethink and reassess the irreducible realm of experience within subjectivity itself.

Therefore, judging Malabou's endeavor from a Hegelian standpoint, we could say that deconstruction, destructive plasticity functions as the annihilating *power* of form *par excellence*, which em-powers the (experiential) accidentality (of the subject), thereby reinforcing its ontological status.

Yet this new definition of experience, its ontologically unusual placement in the space of accidentality and, I would add, situativity, points anew to the problem of the relation between the subject and experience, between the subject and reality, or differently put – forces us to settle accounts with Kant and rethink what is the transcendental.

And this is precisely what Malabou does in one of her most recent books *Before Tomorrow* and the excellent lecture *On the Future of Continental Philosophy*, which introduces, or rather accompanies the study. Yet her aim returns me to another author and another text, which is not at all recent, written long before the emergence of the wave of new realisms. What I have in mind is Giorgio Agamben's *Infanzia e storia. Distruzione dell'esperienza e origine della storia*, first published in 1978 and republished many times since. Kant enters the sight of both thinkers. Malabou's general aim could be said to be the rethinking of *the transcendental* by way of raising the question *Can We Relinquish the Transcendental*, whereas Agamben's aim in the aforementioned book is the search for the relation between *language/linguaggio* and *experience/esperienza*. What is addressed in both cases, however, is Kant's foundation of the transcendental.

Before we begin comparing these positions in regard to the founding of a new form of subjectivity and the relation between the subject and reality, it would be useful to recall the textbook Kantian position regarding transcendental subjectivity. As we know, Kant is the one, whose "Copernican revolution" places the subject at the center of his system of cognition, thus forcing all "objects" to adhere to a status determined by *a priori* forms (of sensibility, such as space and time, and the 12 categories of understanding). In this way from the individual as subject ("man") there emerges the transcendental subject, *the pure I think*, which taken formally can easily be confused with the Cartesian *ego cogito*. However, Kant's transcendental subject, this *I think*, does not possess the substantial metaphysical status of the Cartesian *cogito*, since it is no longer rooted in individuality, but rather is a pure form of thinking, prior to any kind of empirical "subjectivity" and attributable to any empirical "subject" whatsoever. In such a textbook view of the Kantian transcendental subjectivity it would be difficult to bring out, let alone problematize, the controversial theoretical aspects of transcendental subjectivity. Therefore, let us return to Malabou and Agamben, where these aspects are revealed from a peculiar angle. Nevertheless, we can already note one aspect of Kant's endeavour, fairly recognizable even to strangers in philosophy: experience (*Erfahrung*) and its foundation upon the transcendental subjectivity, i.e., when the "living", "empirical" subject is sacrificed, but the grounding of the sphere of experience is nonetheless being pursued, by discovering its specific status.

Hence, in Malabou's *Before Tomorrow*, I would distinguish chapter 9 "Irreducible Foucault". Foucault, like Kant, raised the question *What Is Enlightenment? – Was ist Aufklärung?* Many scholars have pointed to this rhetorical question of Kant repeated by Foucault. What does Malabou emphasize in this repetition? She claims that Foucault, "displaces the *a priori* by deliberately opening the structure of the transcendental to transformation. <...> in a line of continuity with Kant and never against him, Foucault asserts that there is an *experimental* modifiability of the transcendental structure"¹⁶. And Malabou perceives this modifiability of what is transcendental in the *historicity of the transcendental*.

On the one hand, it could be said that this interconnection of the transcendental and historicity is nothing but the already discussed aim of Foucault to discover a way to root transcendental subjectivity in *Actuality*. On the other, it corresponds to Malabou's own aims in interpreting Kant, that is, to her attempt to re-establish the agreement between the categories and objects, to refresh "system of the epigenesis of pure reason"¹⁷.

Malabou holds Foucault's novel reading of Kant to be one of the most profound. It would seem that this oxymoronic figure formulated by Foucault – *historicity of the transcendental* – was influential to Malabou's thinking. She reminds us of Foucault's stance, that he linked the question of the transcendental with the theme of the "present". What is especially important to him is: "a contextuality of the transcendental, which is linked not only to the factuality of its emergence here and now but also to the form that thought gives this factuality"¹⁸. For Malabou, another name for this contextual formation is categorial epigenesis.

Malabou will time and again refer to Foucault, reminding us that Foucault himself time and again referred to Kant, in search of confirmation of his position: "Foucault demonstrates that in the 1784 text Kant himself asserts the possibility of linking the question of the agreement between categories and objects to the question of the transformation of a natural subject, a subject "as he is,"¹⁹ as a subject of truth", hence, it is evident to Malabou that "the relation of the subject to objects is possible only on the basis of this transformation"²⁰.

And finally translating this Foucauldian modification of Kant into her own terms and aims, she writes:

"The modification of the subject which can be called its epigenesis – occurs at the foundation of this "critical ontology of ourselves"²¹ that Foucault suggests is another name for Kantian philosophy. The transcendental structures of rationality thus coincide with the rules for the constitution of the subject, its relation to objects, and thus, in a sense, to objects themselves"²².

16 Malabou 2014, 100.

17 Malabou 2014, 100.

18 Malabou 2014, 101.

19 Foucault 2006, 15.

20 Malabou 2014, 101.

21 Foucault 1984, 50.

22 Malabou 2014, 101.

In Malabou's weighty and profound analysis of Foucault's critique of the Kantian transcendental there are many important points highlighting the legitimization of the historical transcendental. For instance, the interpretation of the two *a priori*.

But perhaps the most important point is the very aim and the attempt "not to leave" subjectivity as transcendental, but to anticipate the possibility of relinquishing it, by discovering its modifiability in history, while at the same time performing an *Aufhebung* of the pole of the subject, that is, carrying out the negative preservation of subjectivity, its privative consolidation as the irreducible condition of the relation between the subject and the "present," the subject and *Actuality*, and thus, between the subject and "objects themselves".

The historical transcendental as this negative and nihilistic condition necessary for the new legitimization of subjectivity is confirmed by the very question Malabou raises and then answers using Foucault's arguments:

"What do we call irreducible? Who could ever answer? And what exactly is irreducible since Foucault says, moreover, that any formal structure is subject to different modes of historical and experimental transformation? We'll never know. The residuum has no reason"²³.

To return to the promised comparison of Malabou and Agamben, let us note that Agamben begins not from a rethinking of Kant, but from the deconstruction of the very emergence of subjectivity in Western thought, in the attempt to originally ground the level of experience, eventually arriving at Kant's intentions.

In *Infancy and History*, Agamben notes that:

"The idea of experience as separate from knowledge has become so alien to us that we have forgotten that until the birth of modern science experience and science each had their own place"²⁴.

But what does this mean to the interpretation of the subject? According to Agamben, this meant more than we could have guessed:

"What is more, they were even connected to different subjects". The subject of experience and the subject of science.

The subject of experience and was common sense, something existing in every individual (Aristotle's 'judging principle' and the *vis aestimativa* of medieval psychology, neither of them quite what we mean by good sense), while the subject of science is the noits or the active intellect, which is separate from experience, 'impassive' and 'divine' (though, to be precise, knowledge did not even have a subject in the modern sense of an ego, but rather the single individual was the sub-jectum in which the active, unique and separate intellect actuated knowledge).²⁵

In Antiquity there was no problem of the subject and object. It emerged only when the subject of experience began to hide or even vanished into the subject of

23 Malabou 2014, 109-110.

24 Agamben 1993, 18.

25 Agamben 1993, 18.

understanding and reason. Agamben finds the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* to be such an experience swallowing subjectivity and relates it to the emergence of modern science and of modern thinking as such:

“In its search for certainty, modern science abolishes this separation and makes experience the locus – the ‘method’; that is, the pathway – of knowledge. But to do this it must begin to recast experience and rethink intelligence, first of all expropriating their different subjects and replacing them with a single new subject”²⁶.

It is of no surprise then that Agamben, just like Foucault and Malabou, addresses Kant and discovers that:

“The Critique of Pure Reason is the last place where the question of experience within Western metaphysics is accessible in its pure form – that is, without its contradictions being hidden. Original sin, with which post-Kantian thought begins, is the reunification of the transcendental subject and empirical consciousness in a single absolute subject”²⁷.

Notwithstanding this turn to Kant and the reevaluation of his contribution, in regard to the grounding of experience and the rethinking of transcendental subjectivity, Agamben’s conclusion differs from the aforementioned authors, Foucault and Malabou. Kant comes to be likened to Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as someone who cannot find a proper place for experience in the reformulated subjectivity and thus contributing to the creation of a new absolute subject.

Nevertheless, despite of the obvious differences in the approach and certain conclusions of the said authors – of Malabou and Agamben – I would like draw attention to how Agamben presents his own position regarding the grounding of experience. The so-called *experimentum language* and the conception of *Infanzia*, the appeal to experience, is the deconstruction of the classical concepts of experience, or more specifically, the archaeological search for the relation between experience and language in the classical conceptions of experience and subjectivity grounding it. Lacking the means to discuss this position in more detail, and finally to completely present my own idea, I will limit myself to noting that Agamben, in his search for a new subject and a new foundation of experience, appeals to language as such, to the voice, the (f)act of speaking, and not to its content – to language that is precisely understood as the real of the irreducible subjectivity, that experiential residual situative and performative level. Unfortunately, the demonstration of the privative character of this endeavor, that is, its dependence on the negativity of the *Aufhebung*, which would thereby open up the possibility to relate this endeavor to the transformation of Kant’s transcendental subjectivity, achieved by Foucault and legitimated by Malabou, remains a task for future research.

26 Agamben 1993, 19.

27 Agamben 1993, 32.

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