The Other Subject

Introduction

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"The other subject" was the title of a conference in Aarhus, Denmark, taking place in October 2012, organized by Brian Benjamin Hansen and Rasmus Ugilt from the Department of Culture and Society at Aarhus University. On the poster of the conference, it was announced that international scholars would gather to discuss "*"the other subject" or "the other for the subject" or "the other in the subject" – in short the decentered, alienated, post-modern form of subjectivity.*" During two days of talks and discussions, scholars would address a number of different questions that all related to the title and theme of the conference. The event was open for students and created a number of engaged exchanges. Most of the talks from the conference have been rewritten as the papers of this volume, and one more has been added.

To introduce this issue, I would like to unfold a little bit the somewhat condensed quotation from the conference poster about "the other subject" and the "postmodern form of subjectivity". The expression "the other subject" does indeed open various paths of association, which are being addressed in the papers, and I think it makes sense to roughly divide these associations in three parts, as the quotation does. "The other subject" might be understood, in the right context, as simply "the other theme": not that which you thought, you were going to read about, but the other subject, the unfamiliar one, thus indicating the somewhat marginal cases that are examined in some of the papers, let alone the curious case of Lacanian theory itself, which is playing a role in most of the papers. Although Lacanian psychoanalysis has received a kind of intellectual surge within philosophy and cultural studies in recent years, especially because of the work of Slavoj Žižek, it is still a peculiar oppositional phenomenon in most universities. The expression "the other subject" could, however, also be construed as "the other for the subject", i.e. the other which is there as other for the subject – a significant other, as it is called. This could be the other, who is him- or herself another subject like you, your friend, enemy, partner, mother, father, child, or the other in a more general sense as the ethical figure par excellence: the neighbour, no one in particular, but humanity in any other person, you might meet. It could also mean the Other in a psychoanalytical sense, as the field of language or the symbolic; the Other as an almost godlike omnipresence of that outside me, which is always there. Finally, the other subject could also mean the subject itself in its otherness. In this sense, the subject could be seen as that which can be "besides itself", which can be "not really itself", or which is even fundamentally opaque, even to itself, which is the fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis. The

subject as such, one could claim, *is* the other subject, because the subject in the psychoanalytic tradition is precisely not the ego, but on the contrary that which questions the ego, pops up, intervenes, and causes slips and repetitions. The subject is that which remains inaccessible, barred, opaque, while the ego talks, believes, connects, and simply is.

When the conference poster concluded that we are thus dealing with the "decentered, alienated, post-modern form of subjectivity", this could be understood as the subject, which is fundamentally marked by a lack or an incompleteness that simultaneously exposes it to an other subject, or to otherness in general. Psychoanalytically speaking, because I lack something, because I am not self-sufficient or transparent to myself, I am constantly seeking approval, recognition, meaning and enjoyment in the field of the other. Indeed, that which I myself *am*, that which I speak, believe, think, is in an almost uncanny way already depending on the other. When children learn to speak, for example, they obviously mime the expressions and the meanings that their parents or siblings or other others are already using. One learns what a cat and a tree and a car is, how one behaves towards others, what one's emotions mean, how one should relate to them, by seeing and being taught by others. Therefore, when a little human being requires its own voice, when it starts to speak and express its own desires, it is simultaneously, in a non-trivial way, also the other that speaks through it. There is always a moment of ventriloquism involved in saying something, which is why one can, even as an adult, suddenly feel strangely alienated towards one's own speech – a well known phenomenon, for example, to many teachers, who can suddenly hear themselves speaking, as if the material was coming from elsewhere or "by itself".

If this is a "postmodern" point, as the poster would have it, it relates to a conception of the modern subject as precisely the autonomous, self-transparent, capable subject that contemplates, describes and manipulates the world on the basis of a set of principles and capabilities that put it in control and makes possible its progress and prosperity. If one identifies the onset of the "postmodern" as the work of Nietzsche and Freud, it is precisely the attack on the modern, Enlightenment conception of the subject that marks the idea of a postmodern conception of subjectivity. The concept of the unconscious that Freud made an essential part of the intellectual history of the 20th century is the name of this conception of the subject: No longer its own sovereign, but always already barred, exposed, manipulated,

subdued and subjectivized by forces to a smaller or larger degree inaccessible to itself. There is a "dialectic of the Enlightenment" as Adorno and Horkheimer's called it, which precisely consists in the simultaneous existence of some unconscious undercurrent to the (self)image of a rational, autonomous subject: the dark forces of power, enjoyment and anxiety working beneath the surface, creating blind spots and delusions that ultimately can bring the subject into conditions and actions that seem completely alien to its alleged rationality and moral responsibility. In the crude picture of the somewhat apocalyptic tenet of Adorno and Horkheimer's work, Enlightenment thus in fact culminated in the horrors of the Third Reich. Outrageous as this postulate may seem, there is a relatively straightforward point to be made from it, which can be translated into the distinction between modernity and postmodernity. American philosopher Susan Neiman has identified the period of the modern as beginning with the assertion of human subjectivity as autonomous, moral and responsible, which became acutely important after the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755. Here, it became clear that mere pious references to God's will and the inscrutable moral meanings of natural events could no longer be justified, when a natural disaster demanded political action and acute measures to contain the damage and prevent panic. "Come, ye philosophers, who cry that all is well, and contemplate this ruin of a world", as Voltaire famously wrote in his poem about the earthquake. Instead, humans had to take responsibility themselves and make nature safer, create some kind of moral order, and decide for themselves what is wrong and what is right. One could no longer just pray and trust the moral foresight at work in nature. If a moral imperative to take action and decide for oneself instead of relying on divine foresight was the notion that governed modernity, what became clear with Auschwitz, on this narrative, was that the human being *itself* was no longer to be trusted unconditionally. If Lisbon created an alienation towards the moral meaning of nature, Auschwitz created an alienation towards the moral meaning of man himself. If Lisbon demanded that we take responsibility for our relation to nature, Auschwitz demanded that we take responsibility for our relation to ourselves.

What runs through the papers of this issue is in many ways the double task of trying to grasp, understand and analyse this "postmodern condition", while also suggesting ways of dealing with it: finding pathways, techniques, options, openings for a contemporary strategy of subjects that are not self-transparent, autonomous, etc. in the classical, modern sense. Some

directly take their point of departure from psychoanalysis, while others seek inspiration from literature and philosophy. In any case, the two tasks of analysing and promoting a freer or less pathological mode of existence are usually closely connected, and one rarely finds, in the traditions that inform these papers, a conclusive set of principles or values that can be put forward as the manifesto of some moral or political movement. Rather, it is the analysis itself that opens the imagination for new ways of seeing oneself. On a strictly psychoanalytic reading, identifying the structure and genuine concerns of the subject is in an important sense already the cure. When the analysand can tell you who he is, the analysis is over, as Lacan said. Saying what the (other) subject is, therefore, is what most of the papers here are contributing to, albeit in very different ways.

In "**The Object of the Subject: Apples, Breasts, Burgers and Freedom in Psychoanalysis",** Brian Benjamin Hansen addresses some of the fundamental characteristics of the (postmodern) subject just described, by explicitly examining the Lacanian, psychoanalytical take on subjectivity and the accompanying problems of enjoyment and freedom. Rasmus Glud Madsen goes on to elaborate in detail on the relation between, the subject, language and the unconscious, which are the main topics of his article "**Did you get many spankings as a child? A Lacanian Investigation of the Integration of the Alien**". Madsen investigates what it means to "live with the unconscious", and how it nonetheless reveals itself, intrudes and causes problems, e.g. in concrete cases of slips of the tongue. Kirsten Hyldgaard investigates a case in which this "integration of the alien" could be said to have gone completely wrong. In "**Is there an Other for the Psychopath? Confessions of a Banal Murderer**" she applies the psychoanalytic concept of the Other to a particular murder case, investigating the relation between the murderer's acts and the role, which the Other seems to have played to him. In "**A-cogito: The Ontological Proof of Stupidity**", Ales Bunta in a way goes a step further. Not only are certain pathological conditions the offspring of a general uneasiness of the human subject, if you will, but there is an even more upsetting point: stupidity is logically prior to reason itself. Bunta makes his case through a careful, comparative reading of René Descartes and Erasmus of Rotterdam. In "**To Whom It May Concern**", Henrik Jøker Bjerre takes on the problem of the addressee in philosophy: To whom does one ultimately write? This involves a reading of classical takes on subjectivity, as well as an updated version of the community of human subjects that share some "surplus" that enables them to aspire for more than their

immediate existence. This surplus could also be said to be at stake in Rasmus Ugilt's "**Taking Heed of Abraham: Kierkegaard versus the Metaphysics of Finitude**". In his reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Ugilt shows how there is nothing "fundamentalist" or "terrorist" in Kierkegaard's appraisal of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, as it is more and more frequently claimed. On the contrary, there is a concept of faith in Kierkegaard that is very much called for in the contemporary political climate that seems to have locked itself in a condition, where normality itself has become a form of permanent transgression. In his reading of Franz Kafka, "**Kafka and the Irreversible**", Tadej Troha also focuses on the stability or instability of a (social, political) system. This is done through a careful analysis of especially *The Metamorphosis* and the general problem of the irreversible: at which points do we identify points of no return – in Kafka's writings, as well as in his own becoming Kafka? Finally, Alfie Bown discusses the relation between psychoanalysis and politics in a more explicit and overall manner than some of the earlier papers. Besides analyzing the "human condition", does psychoanalysis nonetheless also point towards certain political acts that would improve this condition? This is investigated in "**The Revolutionary Politics of Psychoanalysis**".

Literature:

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