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## WHO IS THE SUBJECT? WHAT IS SUBJECTIVITY?

**Abstract:** This article challenges the notion of subjectivity as a timeless, universal category by tracing the complex and radically changing meanings of „subject” and „subjectivity” throughout the history of philosophy. It argues that the modern concept emerged from a crucial medieval synthesis, reconciling Aristotle’s passive *hypokeimenon* (a substratum that „receives something”) with Augustine’s model of the soul’s immediate self-presence. Contrary to the Heideggerian narrative that locates the origin of modern subjectivity in Descartes, this analysis identifies Kant’s transcendental turn as the pivotal moment, defining subjectivity as the active yet empty structure of experience rather than a substance. The article further demonstrates how this modern, active subject has been persistently challenged by a counter-tradition—the „humiliated cogito” or „anti-cogito”—that emphasizes the passivity, impersonality, and constituted nature of thought, from Lichtenberg and Nietzsche to structuralism and psychoanalysis. Finally, it examines the parallel critique within the Anglo-American analytic tradition, which initially rejected subjectivity as a source of error but later engaged with it through the problem of consciousness. The article concludes that Thomas Metzinger’s recent claim—that pure consciousness may not be a subjective phenomenon—is not entirely a novel discovery but the latest iteration of this ancient debate, favoring the original, passive meaning. The history of subjectivity is thus presented as an unresolved tension between the subject as an active foundation and as a passive product.

**Keywords:** subject, subjectivity, de Libera, Kant, continental philosophy, analytical philosophy, person, individual

This research originally began as an effort to more deeply understand Thomas Metzinger’s recent claim in *The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness* that „consciousness may not be a subjective phenomenon at all”<sup>2</sup>. What could be subjectivity, which in some cases we

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<sup>2</sup> Metzinger, T., *The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy, Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports*, MIT Press, London–Cambridge (MA), 2024, p. XIII.

might have to speak of in this way, in a negative way? What is it that we should consider subjective? Who is the subject at all? To address this, the project undertook a critical reconstruction of the complex, radically changing meanings of „subject” and „subjectivity” throughout the history of philosophy. The goal was to combine philological detail with conceptual rigor to achieve a deeper understanding of these concepts. This approach is necessary to understand why and how we continue to speak of subjectivity, whether affirmatively or negatively, in our contemporary discourse. While this critical reconstruction is necessarily broad and somewhat crude, it is precisely this comprehensive scope that is required to truly grasp the meanings of subjectivity. This reconstruction owes much to Alain de Libera, Étienne Balibar and others, but it significantly broadens and puts previous research into a new perspective.

While terms like „subjectivity” (“subject”, „subjective”, etc.) are part of our everyday language, their conceptual history remains largely obscured. Their meaning appears so obvious that we tend to overlook the subtle complexities of their semantics, which have evolved significantly over time. Indeed, subjectivity in the modern sense, especially subjective certainty, can rightly be considered a modern invention, but a critical analysis is needed to understand this. Paul Ricoeur, in his essay *The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology*<sup>3</sup>, sought to outline a complex philosophical history of subjectivity, stretching from the Socratic *cogito* to the Fichtean „I” and the Husserlian ego. He also masterfully incorporated phenomenology, structuralism, and psychoanalysis to nuance the meanings of subjectivity and outlined his own hermeneutics of „I exist.” Yet, despite its inspiring approach, Ricoeur’s essay presents this history in an overly simplistic manner, assuming a semantic continuity where it is completely absent (for example, projecting the concept of *cogito* onto the Socratic soul leads to serious misunderstandings). A more subtle approach is therefore required.

## 1. FROM THE ARISTOTELIAN *HYPOKEIMENON* TO THE MEDIÉVAL SYNTHESIS

To fully grasp the meaning of subjectivity, we must look back to the period before the word even existed. This era, lacking the word „subject,” was nonetheless home to semantic inventions that were decisive in the concept’s

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, P., „La question du sujet : le défi de la sémiologie.”, In *Le Conflit des interprétations: Essais d’herméneutique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, pp. 233-262.

later history. The conceptual origin of the subject can be first of all traced to Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον), a term with several meanings: it is the logical subject of a proposition, and it is also the physical substratum that underlies and remains amidst all changes regarding accidents. In this sense, it is that which serves as a foundation, that which lies beneath. While the Greek language had no single word for „subject,” the later Latin *subjectum* emerged primarily as a direct translation of Aristotle's *hypokeimenon*. Accordingly, in medieval philosophy, the subject was primarily understood as the substratum—or the underlying support—for essential or accidental properties, from grammar to metaphysics. Although a separate psychological theory of the soul (*mens*) existed, it was not specifically connected to this Aristotelian concept of the subject. The question of who or what is the subject of thought first emerged in the context of the translation of Averroes's „Great Commentary on Book III of *De Anima*.” Within this conceptual framework, thinking as intelligible knowledge in action has two subjects: on the one hand, the *phantasiae* (mental images or particular intentions), and on the other, the intellect, which, in Averroes's specific sense, is a universal, eternal substance separated from the body and soul. This also implies a conclusion that is profoundly counter-intuitive from a modern perspective: man himself is not the subject of thought. As the *European Vocabulary of Philosophies* states, „the theory of the two subjects of intellection does not allow us to say that man—or rather individual man (‘this man’)—thinks, but only that his images are thought by the separate intellect”<sup>4</sup>. For medieval Averroists, this meant that thinking does not need man to be its subject, but rather to provide the phantasms that might serve as starting points for thoughts.

In contrast to the Aristotelian-Averroist tradition, which held that we know the world by first perceiving individual objects and then our intellect extracts general categories (like ‘dogness’ or ‘treeness’) from them, several medieval theories asserted that the self or ego can know itself through a direct, immediate intuition. This represented a significant break, suggesting a unique and special nature of self-knowledge distinct from the way the soul knows other things. These theories relied much on Augustine's seminal insight from *De Trinitate* X, 3, 5, that „the mind, therefore, does not know itself through a mirror, but through itself.” In doing so, they developed a psychological discourse of self-knowledge based on its self-present immediacy and reflexivity. Critically, however, these theories did not originally use the

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<sup>4</sup> Balibar, É., Cassin, B., de Libera, A., „Sujet.”, In *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (sous la direction de Barbara Cassin), Paris, Éditions du Seuil / Le Robert, Paris, 2004, p. 1237.

Aristotelian concept of the subject and its Latin translation to articulate this direct knowledge of the self. Augustine is also very important for another reason, namely, his Trinitarian theology occupies a pivotal position in the genealogy of subjectivity. His doctrine of *perichoresis*—the mutual and immanent indwelling of the persons of the Trinity—fundamentally ruled out the Aristotelian conception of these persons as subjects bearing accidental properties. For Augustine, divine attributes are not contingent qualifications but essential determinations: for example, God does not merely possess goodness, but is goodness itself. In this model, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist as distinct persons (hypostases) sharing one indivisible essence, their unity-in-difference precluding any composition of substance and accidents. This Trinitarian structure finds its anthropological counterpart in Augustine's understanding of the human soul. Just as the divine persons exist in perfect coinherence, the soul achieves self-presence through immediate, non-mediated knowledge. The psychological analogy developed in *De Trinitate* (particularly the triad of memory, understanding and will) reveals a structure where self-awareness constitutes the soul's very being rather than representing an accidental property. The Holy Spirit's role as bond of love thus parallels how self-love consolidates the soul's unity with itself. Crucially, this framework rejects the Aristotelian-Averroist paradigm where thoughts inhere in the soul as accidents in a passive subject (*hypokeimenon*), instead positing an intrinsic, dynamic relation between the soul and its acts. The emergence of modern subjectivity required a synthetic resolution of these competing paradigms. To put it differently, the Aristotelian vocabulary of subjecthood, with its categorical distinctions between what lies beneath and accident, needed reconciliation with the Augustinian account of immediate and infallible self-certainty. This synthesis was pioneered by late medieval thinkers like Peter John Olivi, who preserved Augustine's emphasis on direct self-knowledge while rearticulating the ego as the intuitive subject of its mental acts. Olivi's epistemology – treating self-awareness as an experiential given rather than an inferential conclusion – bridged the Augustinian and Aristotelian frameworks. Thus, this conceptual negotiation represented not merely a philosophical compromise, but the essential precondition for subjectivity in the modern sense. Humans gradually became „thinking subjects,“ which is unusual from the perspective of the original Aristotelian concept, according to which the subject is passive receptivity. According to the old paradigm, the subject is not active (*subiectum dicitur illud quod aliquied recipit*, „that is called a subject which

receives something”, according to a 1680 *Compendium metaphysicae*<sup>5</sup>), but according to the newer conceptual and terminological strategy, thinking as an activity is inherent to subjectivity. It is also worth mentioning Thomas Aquinas, who introduced the principle *actiones sunt suppositorum*, arguing that Christ acts through his divine and human natures, thereby establishing the crucial idea that agency is linked to personhood. This means that all actions, regardless of the nature they come from, belong to the unified person, not to the separate natures themselves.

This medieval synthesis is a crucial, often-overlooked pivot in our history. It represents the moment the *hypokeimenon*—the passive substratum—was gradually fused with the Augustinian soul capable of immediate self-presence. The result was a new hybrid: a thinking substance, an entity that could be both the underlying *subjectum* and the active agent of its own thoughts. This conceptual revolution created the idea of the very entity—the active, self-certain subject—that later philosophers would either defend, deconstruct, or attempt to eliminate.

## 2. THE KANTIAN REVOLUTION

The Heideggerian narrative, which posits Descartes as the singular originator of the modern concepts of the *subiectum* and ego<sup>6</sup>, represents a historically untenable interpretation. The conceptual groundwork for modern subjectivity was, in fact, meticulously laid within medieval philosophy through a sustained synthesis of Aristotelian metaphysics and Christian theological inquiry. Furthermore, the decisive transformation toward the modern conception of subjectivity is more profoundly indebted to Kant’s critical philosophy than to any putative „Cartesian subjectivity.” Descartes’s ego is more accurately understood not as the discovery of a substantive thing, but as an epistemological event. It emerges as a point of apodictic certainty generated through a performative, self-referential act of thinking (*cogito me cogitare*). This stands in stark contrast to the ontologically robust „I” (*Selbst*) it would later become within German idealism, where it was reified into a transcendental subject—the foundational ground of consciousness and the very condition for the constitution of a world. This nuanced historical perspective

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Libera, A. de., *Archéologie du sujet II: La quête de l’identité*, Vrin, Paris, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, M., *Nietzsche: Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst* [GA 6.2], Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 395.

is precisely what informs Alain de Libera's archaeological project on subjectivity, leading him to assert that „the' *cogito*, 'the' 'Cartesian' subject... did not exist before post-Cartesian philosophers introduced it in Descartes"<sup>7</sup>. De Libera further specifies that „Leibniz and Locke did more for 'the' subject"<sup>8</sup>. Namely, Leibniz, engaging creatively with ancient and medieval traditions, conceived of individual substances as *suppôts des actes* (supposits of act). He emphasized that the subject is not just a thinking entity but fundamentally an agent, a metaphysical center responsible for its actions which it causes mentally. He saw thinking itself as an activity by which the monad—a simple, indivisible, mind-like substance—supports its own actions and mental states. Locke, conversely, played a pivotal role by relocating the foundation of personal identity from an immaterial soul or substance to consciousness and memory. His approach instigated a crucial shift in emphasis from the metaphysical question of *what* the subject is to the phenomenological question of *who* it is. Locke's theory, effectively secularized and grounded in an incipient empirical psychology, anchors the self in its own reflexivity—in the fact that consciousness accompanies thought and perceives itself as persisting diachronically. In doing so, he also contributed immensely to the burgeoning conception of the subject as an autonomous moral agent. With his „revolutionary thesis"<sup>9</sup> on personal identity, Locke significantly advanced the architecture of modern subjectivity. However, it is crucial to note that, since Locke did not use the term „subject" itself to refer to personal identity and agency, he simultaneously „inaugurated ... a long-term process, referred to ... as *the elision of the subject*... whose effectiveness has been prolonged by so-called 'Anglo-American' philosophy, to the point where the subject has been almost completely assimilated into the person"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, his work embodies the paradoxical dual movement of both constructing and, in a different terminological register, dissolving the modern subject.

If the medieval scholastics built the scaffolding for the modern subject, it was the philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries who moved into the structure and began remodeling it. The narrative that places Descartes as the sole architect of modern subjectivity is, as we have seen, a Heideggerian simplification. The more decisive transformation—one that liberated subjectivity from its metaphysical baggage while simultaneously making it more elusive—came from Immanuel Kant. His conception of subjectivity (*Subjektiv-*

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<sup>7</sup> Libera, A. de., *Archéologie du sujet I: Naissance du sujet*, Vrin, Paris, 2007, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I*, p. 189.

<sup>10</sup> Libera, *Archéologie du sujet II*, p. 63.

*vität*) and the subject (*Subjekt*) operates on multiple levels – logical, transcendental, moral etc. – but fundamentally concerns the structures of first-person experience rather than external objects. Kant makes a profoundly complex claim that while we necessarily conceive ourselves as enduring substances unifying experience, this is merely the phenomenal self as apprehended through inner sense. Accordingly, the noumenal self remains strictly unknowable. This position constitutes a radical departure from traditional metaphysics. Kant argues that the substantial soul is a transcendental illusion, replacing it with the formal unity of apperception – the bare „I think” that accompanies all representations without revealing its nature. In this critical framework, the Aristotelian concept of substance applies only to phenomenal reality, while transcendental subjectivity exists as the non-empirical condition of possibility for experience. Thus Kant inaugurates a distinctive conception of subjectivity: neither as Cartesian *res cogitans* nor as empirical psyche, but as the necessary yet elusive ground of cognition itself. Subjectivity is conceived as the act of synthesis rather than a thing—structuring experience without being itself experienced. Subjectivity is thus to a large extent liberated from its old metaphysical burdens, which entails a significant reinterpretation of the relationship between substantiality and subjectivity. Another example of the terminological and conceptual changes is when Hegel writes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that the absolute is the result of a development in which its true nature is realized, namely, „to be actual, subject, or self-becoming. The Substance is, in its essence, Subject”<sup>11</sup>. Kant’s successors, such as Fichte and Hegel, even went on to suggest that the only thing that can be conceived is that which conceives itself.

Kant’s achievement was to perform a conceptual sleight of hand. He simultaneously made subjectivity the indispensable condition for all experience and evacuated it of any knowable content. This move in principle protected subjectivity from ontological or scientific reductionism by placing it in a transcendental realm, but it also left it vulnerable to a new kind of critique: if the subject is not a thing we can find, perhaps it is not there at all—a possibility that the ensuing traditions of philosophy would explore in depth. But whatever the subsequent developments, thanks to Kant, subjectivity embarked on its genuinely modern trajectory. This is strikingly illustrated in the early works of Charles François Dominique de Villers on Kantian philosophy, where subjectivity emerges in its full modern sense—as seen, for instance, in his remark that physicists are persuaded of „the subjectivity and

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<sup>11</sup> Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 11.

ideality of colors”<sup>12</sup>. Two pivotal moments in the concept’s history deserve emphasis: first, when Maine de Biran, under Kant’s influence, characterized the subject in 1841 as a thinking being that apprehends itself through inner intuition; and second, when Victor Cousin, another central figure in introducing Kantian thought and German idealism to France, asserted that reason in itself cannot be deemed subjective, precisely because „the subject is the self, the personality, freedom, the will”<sup>13</sup>. In modern philosophy, particularly in continental Europe, the discursive figure of subjectivity—conceived not as passivity but as activity—has become increasingly central. This development can be traced through several key thinkers. The neo-Kantian Wilhelm Windelband, for example, defined the „subjective phenomenon” as the core of ideographic sciences, which study unique, unrepeatably experiential events, in contrast to nomothetic sciences, which focus on objective laws. Franz Brentano, who otherwise often debated Kant’s philosophy, wrote that „that something is an object for the mentally active subject, and, as such, is present in some manner in his consciousness”<sup>14</sup>. Likewise, Ernst Bloch reinterpreted Kant through a lens of materialist transcendentalism, and he even authored a monograph on Hegel entitled *Subject-Object*, signaling the crucial role of this concept in his thought. Another important figure is the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, who critically continued the Kantian heritage by speaking of transcendental subjectivity that „bears in itself ... the real universe”<sup>15</sup>. With all its complexity, the phenomenological tradition contains a strong, persistent trend focused on the irreducibility of subjectivity in both experience and life, exemplified by the work of Michel Henry, who developed a phenomenology of absolute subjectivity, and by Dan Zahavi, whose book *Subjectivity and Selfhood* serves as a key text.

### 3. THE TRADITIONS OF SUBJECTIVATION AND ANTI-COGITO

The reconstruction of the concept of subjectivity would not be complete without mentioning one more dimension. The discursive figure of subjec-

<sup>12</sup> Villers, C. F. D. de., *Philosophie de Kant, ou Principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendente*, Colignon, Metz, 1801, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I*, p. 343.

<sup>14</sup> Brentano, F., *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, translated by Antos C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Husserl, E., *Husserliana, Band III/2: Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, edited by Marly Biemel, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1976, p. 590–591.

tivity gradually came to signify activity and freedom, yet its etymological roots point to its opposite. The Latin *subjectus* originally meant, particularly in Roman law, „one who is under the dominion of a sovereign” or „under the rule of a power” This meaning persisted for centuries, as seen in the 17th century when Bossuet declared that „all men are born subjects”<sup>16</sup>, signifying a person’s subordination to authority, and also in the 19th century, for example when John Stuart Mill used the title *The Subjection of Women* to express sexual inequality. As Étienne Balibar suggests, it was only with the influence of Kant and documents like the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* that „subjectivity” began to refer primarily to the citizen as self-determined, free, and responsible agency.<sup>17</sup> This is how, for example, the concept of legal subject (*Rechtssubjekt*) came into being.<sup>18</sup> However, the duality of meaning has largely been preserved in modern thought. Hannah Arendt, for instance, wrote that „somebody began it [his own life story] and it is subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author”<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, Judith Butler writes that „no individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing ‘subjectivation’... The term ‘subjectivation’ carries the paradox in itself”<sup>20</sup>.

In the landscape of Aristotelian philosophy and the traditions that preceded Kant, subjectivity was often conceived fundamentally as passivity—as the underlying substrate or that which is subjected to external forces. With the advent of modernity, however, another powerful counter-current arose that challenged the emerging emphasis on subjectivity as autonomous agency. Instead, this alternative trajectory sought to rearticulate the theme of passivity, though now under profoundly transformed philosophical and historical conditions. A key figure in this development was Lichtenberg, who, in opposition to „Cartesian subjectivity,” argued that we should not say „I think,” but rather that „one should say, it thinks, just as one says: it lightens”<sup>21</sup>. The basis

<sup>16</sup> Bossuet, J.-B., *Politique tirée de des propres paroles de l’Écriture sainte*, edited by Jacques Le Brun, Droz, Geneva, 1967, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Balibar, É., „Citizen Subject.”, In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. E. Cadava, P. Connor, and J.-L. Nancy, Routledge, London, 1991, 33–57. Balibar, É., „Sujet et subjectivation.”, In *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d’anthropologie philosophique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2011, 15–30.

<sup>18</sup> See Zarka, Y. C., L’invention du sujet de droit, *Archives de philosophie* 60 (4) (1997): 531–550.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> Butler, J., *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, p. 11, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Lichtenberg, G. C., *Sudelbücher, Schriften und Briefe*, ed. W. Promies, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1968, p. 412.

of thinking is, therefore, an impersonal process. Similarly, in his Munich lectures, Schelling argued against Descartes' *cogito* that we should instead say, „it thinks in me” (*es denkt in mir*)<sup>22</sup>. Nietzsche later made a similar claim that because of the „seduction of grammar” we tend to believe in the „the soul superstition which, in the form of the subject and ego superstition, has not even yet ceased to do mischief”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, with the rejection or critique of the idea of the subject's „subjectivity,” a tradition began that cannot be called uniform, which, following Alain de Libera, we can rightly call the trend of the humiliated *cogito* and anti-*cogito*, insofar as it, while critically revising thought and experience, emphasizes passivity and impersonality.<sup>24</sup>

The rethinking of subjectivity was a particularly important project in France. For example, for the theoretical anti-humanist and structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, „ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, subjectivity is not a source or a starting point, but rather is created and socially constituted. Similarly, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is not unified and autonomous, but rather decentralized, divided and split between the ego and the unconscious, constituted through language and desire.<sup>26</sup> This critique of the sovereign subject was also a central theme for Michel Foucault, who famously asserted: „I don't think there is actually a sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject that one might find everywhere. I think on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation”<sup>27</sup>. This trend also includes Jacques Derrida, for whom the „speaking or signifying subject could not be present to itself, as speaking or signifying, without the play of linguistic or semiological *différance*”<sup>28</sup>. Although it would be misleading to link these ideas as if they were embodiments of a unified French Theory, they

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, F., *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, In: *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 5, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari, Walter de Gruyter, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Berlin–New York, 1988, p. 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I*, p. 32-33.

<sup>25</sup> Althusser, L., *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> See Fink, B., *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, M., „An Aesthetics of Existence.”, In *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. S. Lotringer, New York, Semiotext(e), New York, 1996, p. 452.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, J., *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 16.

are undoubtedly related in that they encourage the questioning and criticism of the self-sufficient, self-assertive rational subject, drawing attention to the fact that the subject is constituted rather than given. When Jürgen Habermas attacked these theories for committing a performative contradiction, arguing that „since subject-centered reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools”<sup>29</sup>, he himself joined in the criticism of self-reflexive subjectivity, emphasizing intersubjectivity instead.

#### 4. THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND ANALYTIC TRADITIONS

Certain philosophical traditions in continental Europe tended to deconstruct the subject by revealing its constituted, subjugated, or impersonal origins. The Anglo-American and analytical traditions embarked on a parallel project of dismantling, though its methods and motivations were profoundly different. If the former traditions attacked the subject for its hubris and false autonomy, analytic philosophy often sought to eliminate it for the sake of logical clarity and objective truth. It was already mentioned that the internationalization of the meaning of „subject” spread to a more limited extent in Anglo-American philosophy and was rarely characterized by the same dramatic emphasis as in continental Europe. Nevertheless, with careful analysis, we can reconstruct the subtle shifts in the semantics of subjectivity within the analytical tradition, particularly by examining its forerunners and founders. Figures like Bernard Bolzano and Gottlob Frege, for example, championed a stark and uncompromising dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. They were staunchly anti-subjectivist, arguing for a semantic Platonism where logic, truth, and meaning are timeless and immutable entities, completely separate from the individual human mind and private psychological processes. For them, the logical rigor of the analytical method depended on a complete disregard for private, incommunicable subjective intuitions, sensations, and mental associations. As Frege famously argued in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, if we claim that concepts are products of the individual mind, „this conception makes everything subjective, and taken to its logical conclusion, abolishes truth”<sup>30</sup>. For this reason, he insisted on „always to separate sharply the logical from the psychological, the subjective

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<sup>29</sup> Habermas, J., *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1987, p. 197.

<sup>30</sup> Frege, G., *The Frege Reader*, ed. with an introd. by M. Beaney, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 88.

from the objective”<sup>31</sup>. He used the example of colors to illustrate this point: color words can be used in a purely „objective sense” without relying on subjective sensations, even by a color-blind person. Similarly, the other founder of analytical philosophy, Bertrand Russell, though he differed from Frege by rooting logic in our empirical encounter with the world, also maintained that concepts and logical truths don’t originate in individual mental processes. His remarks on his own intellectual journey are particularly revealing. After abandoning both Kant and Hegel, he commented that he „disliked the subjectivity of the [Kantian] ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’”<sup>32</sup>. He also described his rejection of idealism as „a great liberation” because he had „never again shut [himself] up in a subjective prison”<sup>33</sup>. Finally, another key founder, G. E. Moore, reinforced this stance. For example, in *The Nature of Judgment*, he argued that propositions are composed of concepts, not thoughts. A proposition, he wrote, should be „understood, not as anything subjective—an assertion or affirmation of something—but as the combination of concepts which is affirmed”<sup>34</sup>. Moore also approached the concept of subjectivity with a negative connotation in his ethical philosophy. He viewed it as the mistaken belief that statements about the moral correctness of actions refer not to the intrinsic nature of those actions, but instead to an individual’s personal feelings or sentiments. In this way, all these founders of analytical philosophy pushed for a philosophy free from the „subjective prison” of the mind.

The history of analytical philosophy is, of course, very complex, but the motif of the rejection of subjectivism has arisen consistently and frequently. W. V. O. Quine’s work offers an excellent, if symptomatic, example of this motif. As he put it in *Ontological Relativity*, „we seem to be maneuvering ourselves into the absurd position that there is no difference on any terms, interlinguistic or intralinguistic, objective or subjective, between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts or stages”<sup>35</sup>, thus reviving the insights of the founders of analytical philosophy. It is particularly symptomatic, and also reveals something about the communication between traditions, that

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<sup>31</sup> Frege, G., *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, translated by J. L. Austin, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1978, p. X.

<sup>32</sup> Schilpp, P. A. (ed.), *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, The Library of Living Philosophies, Evanston, Illinois, 1946, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, B., *My Philosophical Development*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1959, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Moore, G. E., „The Nature of Judgment.”, In *The Early Essays*, ed. T. Regan, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> Quine, W. V., „Ontological Relativity.”, In *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1969, p. 47-48.

Gilbert Ryle wrote the following in his review of Heidegger's *Being and Time*: „*quâ* First Philosophy Phenomenology is at present heading for bankruptcy and disaster and will end either in self-ruinous Subjectivism or in a windy mysticism”<sup>36</sup>. „Subjectivism” was also a curse word, for example, in Thomas Weldon's *Vocabulary of Politics*. In this respect, considering the hostility towards subjectivity and subjectivism, Christoph Schuring is largely correct when he writes in his critical history of analytical philosophy that in this tradition „subjectivity is not thought of as playing any role, other than as a mechanism for choosing the decomposable parts and ordering them appropriately”<sup>37</sup>. However, it is not entirely accurate to claim that analytic philosophy has always been anti-subjectivist. While its founders initially adopted an anti-subjectivist stance, later developments, particularly within ethics, sometimes embraced subjective perspectives. Logical positivists, for instance, argued that ethical statements merely express subjective feelings or attitudes, and this idea was later refined into more sophisticated versions of moral subjectivism. An even more significant shift occurred when the analytical tradition began to seriously engage with consciousness, experience, and mental states. Analytic philosophers increasingly focused on topics like sensory qualia and awareness as a form of higher-order monitoring. In this context, the purely descriptive meaning of subjectivity became increasingly central. This is evidenced by key texts of the late 20th century. For example, in his classic essay „What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” Thomas Nagel poses a fundamental question about the „subjective character of experience”<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, John Searle, in his seminal work *Intentionality*, defines intentionality as an „*objective* fact... with *subjective* mental states”<sup>39</sup>. These works demonstrate that „subjectivity” and „subjective”, rather than being dismissed as a purely pejorative terms, came to be seen as a legitimate and essential topic for philosophical inquiry within the analytic tradition, and this development was further strengthened by the dialogue with phenomenology. This was confirmed, for example, by David Chalmers' famous article on the hard problem of consciousness, in which he wrote that „there is a whirl of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect”<sup>40</sup>. Finally, it is worth mentioning Uriah Kriegel's seminal work *Subjective Consciousness*,

<sup>36</sup> Ryle, G., *Sein und Zeit* by Martin Heidegger, *Mind* 38 (151) (1929): 370.

<sup>37</sup> Schuringa, C., *Social History of Analytic Philosophy*, Verso, London, 2025, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Nagel, T., *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4) (1974): 436.

<sup>39</sup> Searle, J., *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. IX.

<sup>40</sup> Chalmers, D. J., *Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness*, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (3) (1995): 201. Cf. „subjective experience is not reducible to brain states”.

in which he describes subjectivity as „what makes it the phenomenally conscious state it is”<sup>41</sup>. And when E. J. Lowe writes in *Subjects of Experience* that we, human beings, are „subjects of experience, thought and action”<sup>42</sup>, he is continuing precisely the aforementioned trend that began in medieval traditions.

While there were significant efforts to rehabilitate the concept of subjectivity in the broader analytic tradition and in related currents, another powerful and enduring trend has persisted: one that emphasizes the passivity and impersonality of thought and experience. This perspective, which was already referred to as the humiliated *cogito* or anti-*cogito*, was also linked to the general European trend, since Wittgenstein, Moritz Schlick and P. F. Strawson were influenced by Lichtenberg’s suggestions related to the impersonality of thinking (for example, Schlick wrote that „original experience is ‘without a subject’”<sup>43</sup>). This led to the development of the idea that the self is nothing more than a logical construct, or that there is no single, unified ego that acts as the owner or bearer of experience. This trend, with its complex historical lineage, is often referred to as the „No-Owner” or „No-Self” view (or as nemocentrism, based on the Latin *nemo*, meaning „nobody”). In his work, David Wiggins addressed this tradition, which he saw in the philosophies of Hume, William James, Bertrand Russell, and A. J. Ayer. Wiggins referred to these as „‘no subject’ theories,” noting that „their aim is not so much to reject as to reconstruct the subject, and it comes back into discourse as a complex”<sup>44</sup>. In fact, many thinkers argued for a multifaceted nature of subjectivity or the blurring of its boundaries, often reducing the self to subpersonal or suprapersonal entities. For instance, Derek Parfit challenged the very idea of a unified self and its putative self-awareness, asking: „Are we directly aware of the existence of this separate entity, the subject of experiences? ... Is each of us aware, for example, that he is a Cartesian Ego?”<sup>45</sup>. Parfit’s answer to these questions is that subjectivity can be reduced to its more basic constituent parts. He proposed that the contents of

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Churchland, P., *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 325.

<sup>41</sup> Kriegel, U., *Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Lowe, E. J., *Subjects of Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. XIX.

<sup>43</sup> Schlick, M., Experience and Verification, *The Philosophical Review* 45 (4) (1936): 359.

<sup>44</sup> Wiggins, D., Locke, Butler and the Stream of Consciousness: and Men as a Natural Kind, *Philosophy* 51 (196) (1976): 131.

<sup>45</sup> Parfit, D., *Reasons and Persons*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 223.

our experience can be described in an entirely impersonal way, without any reference to a subject as the owner or bearer of those experiences. In this context, it's also worth mentioning Daniel Dennett, who argues that the self is a theoretical fiction, a simplified illusion created by our brain and fully reducible to complex underlying processes. For example, Dennett claims that „the Cartesian Theater may be a comforting image because it preserves the reality/appearance distinction at the heart of human subjectivity, but as well as being scientifically unmotivated, this is metaphysically dubious, because it creates the bizarre category of the objectively subjective”<sup>46</sup>. And, finally, Thomas Metzinger also clearly belongs to this trend. In his work, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, he argues that the self does not actually exist, but is merely a functional byproduct and useful fiction created by the brain's phenomenal self-model. According to Metzinger, the subjective experience of being a self emerges from a process that is not, in itself, subjective. His position is further clarified by his analysis of pathological cases, where „a rudimentary conscious self appears *without* subjectivity, in the absence of a phenomenal first-person perspective”<sup>47</sup>. From this, it is clear that for Metzinger, subjectivity refers to the representation of the world from a first-person point of view. Metzinger's research into „minimal phenomenal consciousness” (MPE) and pure consciousness—states of experience in which there is no subjectivity—has reinforced his insights. Based on the zero-person perspective states without a subjective owner, he concludes that „all philosophical arguments that consciousness is irreducibly subjective... may fail on the most fundamental level, simply because MPE is not a ‘subjective’ phenomenon at all”<sup>48</sup>. In his claim that there is a primordial state of consciousness devoid of subjectivity—that is, without a personal-level self-representation or cognitive agency—Metzinger, despite the radicality of his position, is consistently working within conceptual and terminological traditions that are centuries old.

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<sup>46</sup> Dennett, D., *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1991, p. 132.

<sup>47</sup> Metzinger, T., *Being No One. The Self Model Theory of Subjectivity*, MIT Press, Cambridge–London, 2004, p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> Metzinger, *The Elephant and the Blind*, p.28.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This critical conceptual history has demonstrated that subjectivity is not a timeless, ahistorical, or universal category. Both the terminology and the concept itself have changed dramatically over time. For instance, it was not always a given that the human being or the individual was the bearer or owner of thought. One of the most significant shifts occurred when the subject was no longer viewed as a passive receiver that merely tolerates change, but as a center of activity and agency. Despite this, the idea that „it thinks [in me]”—the notion that the self’s thinking is actually an impersonal and passive process—has recurred throughout history. Newer generations of thinkers have consistently sought to argue that subjectivity is not sovereign, suggesting that it can be reduced to other processes or is merely a functional byproduct.

The diverse meanings of „subject” and „subjectivity” have deeply infiltrated our everyday lives. These terms often carry negative connotations, implying a lack of impartiality or unreliability (e.g., „that’s just my subjective opinion”). They can also refer to a neutral, technical meaning, such as the „subjective symptoms” a patient reports in medicine. As for science, subjectivity is often contrasted with objectivity—a relationship explored in Lorraine Daston and Peter L. Galison’s book *Objectivity*—or its meaning is devalued, as attested to in B. Allan Wallace’s book *The Taboo of Subjectivity*. In these instances, there is often a need to rehabilitate subjectivity as a valid topic of inquiry. However, the true source of these everyday and scientific meanings lies in the complex semantic and conceptual changes throughout the history of philosophy. While the conceptual history outlined here may seem eclectic, this broad approach is precisely what allows for a deeper understanding of subjectivity. It also reveals surprising connections between traditions that may appear very distant from one another.

Originally, the term „subject” meant that which lies beneath or serves as a passive foundation. However, according to the Aristotelian-Averroesian tradition, however, it is not man or the individual who is the true bearer of thought. The Augustinian tradition also avoided to speak of subjectivity in this because it held that thoughts are not passive accidents residing in the soul. Instead, it argued for an intrinsic and dynamic relationship between the soul, which has direct access to itself, and its actions. The medieval synthesis of these two traditions was a crucial turning point, leading to the insight that subjectivity involves the inherence of thought as an activity in the human soul. This idea was further developed in the early modern period. However, a common misconception—shared by both Heidegger and some analytic

philosophers—is that the „Cartesian ego” is the most important concept in the modern history of subjectivity. This isn’t accurate, not only due to the medieval precursors but also because of the contributions of thinkers like Leibniz. Leibniz conceived of subjectivity more as an agent than as a passive substance. This was complemented by Locke’s idea that personal identity is tied to a continuous self-consciousness associated with our thoughts. Nevertheless, the most significant figure in this evolution is Kant, for whom subjectivity became the very structure of experience. For Kant, subjectivity is separated from substantiality and becomes a transcendental instance, creating a tradition where subjectivity is increasingly viewed as constitutive of both experience and the world.

Simultaneously, however, another, far from uniform, trend persisted: one that emphasized the impersonality and passivity of thought. This trend was also prominent in what is often called „French Theory” (which also retained the sense of „subjectivation” as the subordination of persons). Here, the subject largely appeared as something constituted—and therefore passive—through processes like language, ideology, and desire. Conversely, a similar struggle against the meanings of subjectivity can be observed within the Anglo-American and analytic traditions. While it is true that these traditions often place greater importance on the person and individuality and lack the dramatic emphasis on subjectivity characteristic of continental Europe, it is not entirely accurate to say that the subject is simply „elided” as de Libera suggests. On the contrary, the founders of analytic philosophy (such as Frege, Russell, and Moore) explicitly opposed subjectivity, which they understood as individual limitation in relation to objective truth and logical clarity. This understanding of subjectivity is close to certain everyday meanings (a lack of impartiality, unreliability etc.). Ultimately, analytic philosophy contains two main trends: one that seeks to rehabilitate subjectivity in the context of consciousness and experience, and another that works to question, marginalize, or reduce it. This second trend culminates in a view like that of Thomas Metzinger, who suggests that consciousness may not be a subjective phenomenon at all.

The very meaning of ‘subject’ is a palimpsest of conflicting definitions. This critical reconstruction reveals that subjectivity is not a monolithic, transhistorical essence but a contested and evolving conceptual battlefield. Its history is marked by a fundamental tension between two poles: the *subjectum* as passive substratum (the Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*) and the *subjectus* as subordinate being on one hand, and the active, self-certain epistemic agent (the modern Subject) on the other. The modern concept of subjectivity, inaugurated by Kant’s transcendental turn, was a precarious

synthesis that sought to ground experience in a formal, active subject while stripping it of substantial metaphysical baggage. This synthesis, however, was never stable. Repeatedly, philosophical currents have emerged that attempt to push subjectivity into the background or at least question its sovereign significance in favor of other, impersonal, and passive processes. It is within this context of perpetual critique that Thomas Metzinger's startling claim—that pure consciousness may not be a subjective phenomenon—must be understood. Metzinger is not discovering a new fact about nature so much as he is taking a side in this ancient philosophical conflict. His „no-self” theory is the contemporary, scientifically-informed culmination of the long „humiliated cogito” or „anti-cogito” tradition that runs from Lichtenberg and Nietzsche through Schlick and Parfit. By arguing that minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) lacks a first-person perspective, he vehemently rejects the epistemic subject (the active ‘I’) and reverts to a model that resonates with the oldest meaning of *subjectum*: an impersonal, sub-personal process—a neurological substratum—upon which the illusion of selfhood is borne.

Therefore, the answer to „Who is the subject?” and „What is subjectivity?” is always: It depends on the philosophical framework you adopt. The enduring necessity of speaking about subjectivity, whether affirmatively or negatively, stems from this irreducible tension in our self-understanding. We might also simultaneously be the passive products of impersonal forces and the active agents of our own experience and thought. The history of subjectivity is the history of philosophy attempting, and ultimately failing, to resolve this paradox. Is this a failure, or is it the irreducible condition of human existence that philosophy rightly illuminates?

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## KO JE SUBJEKT? ŠTA JE SUBJEKTIVNOST?

**Sažetak:** Ovaj članak dovodi u pitanje pojam subjektivnosti kao bezvremenske, univerzalne kategorije prateći složena i radikalno promenljiva značenja „subjekta” i „subjektivnosti” kroz istoriju filozofije. Tvrdi se da je moderni koncept nastao iz ključne srednjovekovne sinteze, pomirujući Aristotelov pasivni *hypokeimenon* (supstrat koji „prima nešto”) sa Avgustinovim modelom neposrednog samoprisustva duše. Suprotno Hajdegerovom narativu koji poreklo moderne subjektivnosti locira kod Dekarta, ova analiza identifikuje Kantov transcendentelni zaokret kao ključni trenutak, definišući subjektivnost kao aktivnu, ali praznu strukturu iskustva, a ne kao supstancu. Članak dalje pokazuje kako je ovaj moderni, aktivni subjekat uporno bio izazivan kontratadicijom – „poniženim *cogito-m*” ili „anti-*cogito-m*” – koja naglašava pasivnost, bezličnost i konstituisanu prirodu misli, od Lihtenberga i Ničea do strukturalizma i psihoanalize. Konačno, ispituje se paralelna kritika unutar anglo-američke analitičke tradicije, koja je u početku odbacila subjektivnost kao izvor greške, ali se kasnije njome pozabavila kroz problem svesti. Članak zaključuje da nedavna tvrdnja Tomasa Mecingera – da čista svest možda nije subjektivni fenomen – nije sasvim novo otkriće, već najnovija iteracija ove drevne debate, favorizujući izvorno, pasivno značenje. Istorija subjektivnosti je stoga predstavljena kao nerešena tenzija između subjekta kao aktivne osnove i kao pasivnog proizvoda.

**Ključne reči:** subjekt, subjektivnost, de Libera, Kant, kontinentalna filozofija, analitička filozofija, ličnost, pojedinac

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