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## 6

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### Summary and conclusion

#### Wittgensteinian subjectivity and the debate about the death of man

After arguing in chapter 2 that Wittgenstein need not be considered to be the antidote or antithesis to philosophy, this study set out to examine what positive or constructive account of human subjectivity can be formulated on the basis of his later writings. The general outlines of this account were given in chapter 3, discussing Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology. These writings, I explained, do not merely dismantle the Cartesian take on the nature of man but also develop an alternative way of conceptualizing human being.

Hence, the third chapter described how Wittgenstein simultaneously rethinks the Cartesian inner-outer and the Cartesian self-other schema. In Wittgenstein's book, mind and body are intrinsically connected instead of almost accidentally related, and the self, far from being a self-enclosed and self-sufficient entity, from day one depends upon its fellow men to develop its inner life beyond its basic state. I argued that the specific amalgam of ontology, epistemology and sociology with which Wittgenstein replaces Cartesianism can be captured by means of his concept of aspect perception or seeing-as. For similar to his explanation of a duck perception in the ambiguous duck/rabbit figure, he maintains that we are able to see a person's pain or joy itself when we takes her (contextualized shades of) behaviour to be expressive of mind and place her doings and sayings in the context of a larger communal pattern. On a Wittgensteinian view, therefore, psychological phenomena can be said to be aspects of the human being rather than inner events and entities. In other words, he situates mental matters on the outside rather than the inside of the subject, and in the interspace between a community of subjects, to be precise.

The intermezzo following the third chapter served to remind that this study does not only want to make one of the voices in the subjectivity debate more explicit, but also hopes to add to this debate by examining the criticisms levelled against non-Cartesian accounts of the nature of man. I repeated the observation

made in the introductory chapter that twentieth century attempts to remove or reinvent the Ego have met with much disapproval, and that this disapproval first and foremost concerns the (purported) ethical and political consequences of the post-Cartesian development. In the first intermezzo, I addressed the claim that those responsible for the demise of the Ego undermine the possibility of ethics. According to commentators such as Frank and Murdoch, turning Cartesianism upside-down and inside-out means leaving one without a subject to whom matters like suffering, malicious intentions, and so on can be ascribed, and thus without a moral substance or centre. In short, critics of post-Cartesianism hold that this development is wanting from an ethical perspective and should be dismissed for that very reason.

I remarked that even if it is correct to say that the post-Cartesians “un-think” rather than rethink subjectivity, doing away with Cartesianism does not necessarily spell the end of all possible ethics. In spite of these qualms, however, I proposed to investigate the exegetical validity of this claim first - and to investigate it by consulting Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, to be exact. Wittgenstein’s religious writings, I explained, may appear to contradict his remarks on the psyche: they basically disregard the way religiosity finds expression in recurring patterns of behaviour and at one point even suggest that it should be located inside the believer. I claimed that this part of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre accordingly provides an excellent opportunity, both for assessing the interpretational validity of the ethical objections to post-Cartesianism, and for fleshing out Wittgenstein’s version of the claim that the subject’s materiality and sociality are essential to it. As a next step towards making this dual contribution to the subjectivity debate, I proposed to examine whether Wittgenstein’s describing thoughts and feelings as aspects of the human being is necessarily at odds with his taking religious belief to be a pre-eminently private and personal affair.

Such was the aim of chapter 4. I investigated Wittgenstein’s religious writings with two questions in mind, derived from my conclusions in chapter 3: Does Wittgenstein maintain that religious belief should be located in a person’s fine-grained and contextualized behaviour, and does he moreover hold that these doings and sayings only qualify as manifestations of religiosity against the background of a larger, supra-individual pattern of behaviour? My reading of Wittgenstein’s earlier as well as later remarks on religion made clear that his philosophy of religion should indeed be said to be somewhat out of synch with his philosophy of psychology, albeit not for situating faith inside the believer.

According to Wittgenstein, I argued, religiosity concerns the direction a person gives to her existence. The religious believer distinguishes herself from the non-believer by making her life into a meaningful whole. Hence, Wittgenstein’s take on religion is consistent with his account of the psyche in locating it in the form or shape of a person’s existence rather than in a private inner realm. However, it is also at this point that his explanation of religiosity and his description of the mental

should nonetheless be said to part ways. On Wittgenstein's view, after all, it is the individual believer's existence in which religiosity should be situated, regardless of the way in which others make their lives into a meaningful whole. Wittgenstein may not claim that believers can never be guided by the same pictures or that a third person will never be able to recognize someone else's belief, he does maintain that the choice for a particular direction in life is up to the believer herself and should be made wholly of her own accord.

So, as I concluded the fourth chapter, in so far as one might get the impression (like Murdoch and Frank) that Wittgenstein does away with our inmost thoughts and feelings, his religious writings go to show that this is not due to his overturning the Cartesian inner-outer model. Yet my reading of his philosophy of religion also indicated that the qualms of post-Cartesianism's critics may still be justified when it comes to Wittgenstein's upsetting the Cartesian self-other schema. That is to say, in so far as it is unclear how his individualistic conception of religious belief squares with his taking the subject to be essentially social, it is unclear whether critics may not be correct in claiming that he denies "private coherent mental activity"<sup>88</sup> after all. This can only be disproved in full by showing that there is no contradiction between holding that someone's subjectivity is formed or shaped by her socio-cultural context, and maintaining that in religious affairs, the subject should single-handedly choose a direction in life. Put differently, it needs to be investigated in more detail what Wittgenstein means when he underscores that the self does not come in a monadic or isolated form.

As I then explained in the second systematic intermezzo, this does not only point to an element of Wittgensteinian subjectivity that needs to be explored in more detail: the upsetting of the self-other schema also forms what is perhaps the most severely criticized strand of the post-Cartesian development. Commentators such as Frank and Benhabib take it to mean that rethinkers of the subject are politically irresponsible, and I took a moment to recount the line of argument leading up to this conclusion. Benhabib for instance holds that by presenting the subject as the passive product of the powers that be, those responsible for the demise of the Cartesian Ego risk disintegrating the very locus of agency and autonomy – and thus risk presenting political arrangements as being beyond the reach of intervention, no matter how unjust these might be. According those sceptical of the anti-Cartesian turn, the critique of Cartesianism should not be followed though completely because that would undermine the possibility of politics no less than that of ethics.

Like in the first intermezzo, I remarked that even if it were correct to say that post-Cartesianism describes man as socially constituted through and through, taking issue with the Cartesian account of the self-other relationship does not necessarily imply making the subject politically inert. Even so, and similar to the order suggested in the first intermezzo, I proposed to investigate the

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<sup>88</sup> Murdoch 1992, p. 152.

interpretational validity of this claim first, for as I explained, clarity as to what the sociality of subjectivity implies is not only important when it comes to the debate about the death of man in general - it can also establish how Wittgenstein's highly individualistic conception of religiosity relates to his holding the subject to always already be embedded. I argued that both the validity of the claim that the post-Cartesian self is politically wanting and the tenability of Wittgenstein's account of subjectivity can be examined by exploring the concept of the social that accompanies the contextualization of the Cartesian Ego. And the remarks published as *On Certainty*, I claimed, are the best place to look for a better understanding of Wittgenstein's view on what it means to become and be a member of a community. These writings, namely, make the processes of social inclusion and exclusion more explicit than any other part of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*.

I started my reading of *On Certainty* by remarking that these deliberations may seem to preclude difference and divergence at the level of certainties out of hand – thus suggesting that Wittgenstein takes the subject to be a mere cog or bolt in a larger social machinery - but that Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion as well as his view on philosophy as such indicate that he certainly allows for the possibility of disentangling oneself from the customs and conventions of one's community. With this in mind, I investigated *On Certainty's* account of the processes by means of which the child is initiated into the community, as well as of the kind of unity in which it takes this upbringing to result.

With regard to the former, I pointed out that Wittgenstein may hold a person's ability to doubt and question things to be dependent on the certainties she acquires through a socialization process, but that he makes this process itself conditional upon factors that are of a natural rather than a socio-cultural kind. On his view, it is only on the basis of an instinctive trust that certainties can be conveyed, and this naturalism implies, I argued, both that the child already takes some things for granted itself, and that it need not come to incorporate the exact same certainties as its elders. According to the account offered in *On Certainty*, handing on a world picture is a process of attunement rather than of construction. The claim that the subject is the mere product of its upbringing can accordingly not be attributed to Wittgenstein.

I then argued that this also has consequences for the possibility of divergence or disentanglement when it comes to full-blown members of a community. If no process of initiation ensures that people come to take the very same things for granted, a community's picture world need not have a strictly uniform content, and such variation – in addition to, among other things, the fact that the certainties of one's community may have changed over time - provides opportunities for realizing that things could also be seen differently. For *On Certainty* may claim that admonishment is more appropriate than arguments in the case world views conflict, this does not mean that one can never take a person with a different outlook seriously. It rather means that a confrontation with a different outlook is at

the same time a confrontation with the groundlessness of one's own beliefs. Precisely because it is to some extent arbitrary what frame of reference one subscribes to, the possibility to step back from the certainties one has inherited can never be ruled out.

In other words, as I concluded my reading of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein does not take the subject to be a mere cog or bolt in a larger social machinery or a limb or cell in some supra-individual organism. The relationship between individual and community as it is at work in his later writings is more adequately captured by means of his fibre and thread analogy. In contrast to what critics might think, Wittgenstein does not embed the subject in a static and uniform whole to which all human affairs are ultimately subordinate.

My endeavours in the chapters just recapitulated were not meant to show – lest there be any misunderstanding – that his account of subjectivity is not as morally and politically objectionable as critics suspect the entire post-Cartesian development to be. To be sure, the preceding chapters were not meant to show the opposite either: as I repeatedly underscored, I merely took the fact that the attempt to reinvent the Cartesian Ego has received highly divergent appraisals as an incentive to have a closer look at Wittgenstein's version. Indeed, in line with the two-fold goal of this dissertation, I took up the question as to the interpretational validity of these objections in order to make Wittgenstein's voice in the subjectivity debate more fully explicit, but this study also hopes to show that the line of argument offered by commentators such as Murdoch, Frank and Benhabib may not be wholly warranted in the first place. For as I pointed out in each of this study's systematic sections, a non-Cartesian account of the nature of man is not necessarily at odds with every conception of ethics and politics, and phrasing the debate solely in ethico-political terms, moreover, may do investigations into subjectivity more harm than good. I will shortly – and at long last – expound my ideas on these matters, but let me spell out my conclusions as to the exegetical validity of the objections to post-Cartesianism first.

Even though the chapters further exploring Wittgenstein's account of subjectivity tried to steer clear from the ethico-political nature of much of the debate about the death of man, they did add to the discussion by demonstrating that the interpretation of post-Cartesianism on which the arguments of Frank, Benhabib and others are based, is not the most complete or correct one – or not when it comes to the Wittgensteinian variety, in any case. My reading Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology together with his philosophy of religion made clear that in so far as critics are justified in wondering what Wittgenstein makes of our inmost thoughts and feelings, his overturning the traditional inner-outer model should not be the main cause of their concern. Wittgenstein's situating psychological phenomena on the outside rather than the inside of the subject does not prevent him from explaining religious belief as a pre-eminently personal affair.

Moreover, to the extent that this did not show the objections to Wittgenstein's post-Cartesianism to be unwarranted when it comes to his upsetting the Cartesian self-other schema, my reading of *On Certainty* demonstrated that Wittgenstein's individualistic conception of religious belief does not conflict with his locating mental matters in the interspace between a community of subjects. For according to the interpretation offered in chapter 5, Wittgenstein's claim that the subject is essentially social does not imply that it is predestined to unthinkingly carry on the customs and conventions of its community. He does not place all matters subjective in the service of the supra-individual or communal.

Hence, and regardless of what this means for the ethico-political value of his position, Wittgenstein's embodied and embedded account of subjectivity does not amount to a simple reversal or negation of the Cartesian take on the nature of man, as the critics of post-Cartesianism seem to assume. Their ethico-political arguments therefore do not apply to the account offered by Wittgenstein. My explorations should have illustrated in sufficient detail that a rethinking of Cartesianism need not amount to a complete "un-thinking" of the subject.

However, an important proviso needs to be made as to what this means for the exegetical validity of the objections to the post-Cartesian development as a whole. While Wittgenstein's alternative to Cartesianism in fact preserves several of the things that the Ego represents, this need not hold for other rethinkers of the subject, or need not hold for other rethinkers in exactly the same way. As became clear in the chapter on *On Certainty*, for instance, it is primarily on account of the naturalism at work in Wittgenstein's writings that he cannot be said to present the subject as the mere and utter product of its upbringing - yet such naturalism is not shared by all those trying to remove or reinvent the Ego. Butler for one, as I already mentioned in the second intermezzo, maintains that taking selfhood to be given in such a way precludes all discussions about the supposed neutrality thereof. She first and foremost values the Foucauldian approach because it acknowledges the need to "interrogate what [such a theoretical move] *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes."<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, the Wittgensteinian subject as I have presented it is susceptible to Butler's rather than Benhabib's objections. Benhabib after all argues that feminists can unreservedly embrace the weak version of postmodernism: the version that "*situates* the subject in the context of various social, linguistic, and discursive practices"<sup>90</sup> but refrains from *dissolving* it into this multitude. On my reading, this is precisely what Wittgenstein's embodied and embedded account of human being accomplishes. Yet that does not mean that I think it is somehow obliged to come in this form. Let me get around to discussing the overall validity of the line of reasoning bringing Benhabib and others to make this demand.

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<sup>89</sup> Butler 1995, p. 39

<sup>90</sup> Benhabib 1995, p. 20. (The emphasis is mine.)

And let me start by emphasizing that while I doubt whether the ethico-political objections to post-Cartesianism are warranted, I do not hold that an account of subjectivity may never be probed for its consequences in the ethical and political domain. The point I wish to make, and I sincerely hope to avoid any impression to the contrary, is not that ethical and political discussions can and should be kept completely separate from investigations into the nature of man. As I pointed out in each of this study's systematic sections, the philosophy of subjectivity is inevitably interwoven with many other highly important issues, and examining the implications of the claim that the subject's materiality and sociality are essential to it, is accordingly no mere academic *Spielerei*. By further exploring Wittgenstein's take on the mind-body and the individual-community relationship, I hope to have done my (admittedly humble) part in clarifying what the rethinking of subjectivity may and may not imply.

Yet I have not done so because I think that Murdoch and others have ethics and politics on their side, for it could also be argued that the burden of disproving the ethico-political deficit of their outlook is on these critics themselves. That is to say, as I underscored on several occasions, the rethinking of the subject is often accompanied or even inspired by the idea that it is Cartesianism rather than its overturning that should be said to be morally and politically wanting. Levinas for instance holds that is only through the self conceived of as always already exposed to the other "that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity - [...] even the simple "After you, sir." ”<sup>91</sup> Butler similarly contends that by presenting the subject as "a permanent possibility of [a] resignifying process,"<sup>92</sup> postmodernism shows how resistance and reform are possible in the first place. Hence, ethico-political objections can go both ways.

What is more, even apart from the fact that post-Cartesianism has also been said to be more responsible than its predecessor, should one's judging ethics and politics to be of fundamental importance, in combination with one's conceding that the self does not come in a Cartesian form, not sooner lead to a reconsideration of one's ethico-political conceptions when they are premised on a Cartesian-style take on the nature of man? Or to put it more generally, should the significance of ethics and politics not encourage rather than prevent a continuous thinking and rethinking of how they should be conceptualized? It could be argued that a true commitment to the good and the just shows itself in the willingness to reconsider one's ideas about these matters in the face of indications that other ideas are possible and perhaps even necessary.

However, valid as these observations might be from an ethico-political perspective, I should refrain from phrasing my arguments wholly or solely in such terms, for the point I wish to make precisely is, not that a theory of subjectivity may never be probed for its ethical and political consequences, but that these are not the

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<sup>91</sup> Levinas 1981, p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> Butler 1995, p 47.

only things at stake in such explorations. Even apart from the fact that ethico-political considerations might lead one to preserve as well as reject elements of Cartesianism – which indicates that it is not always already clear what an appeal to ethics and politics implies – why should a (purported) conflict between existing or prevalent conceptions of the ethico-political one the one hand, and ontological or phenomenological considerations about the nature of man on the other, at all times be settled in favour of the former? As I repeatedly claimed, there does not seem to be a principled reason to place restrictions on the post-Cartesian development rather than rethink ethics and politics as well in the case these are at odds with a new perspective on the subject.

That is not to say that ethico-political and phenomenological deliberations can and should always be clearly distinguished, or that considerations about what “is” should invariably be given priority over those about what “ought”. Rather, what I am saying is that if the normative and descriptive are always already interwoven, this does not mean that the normative is all there is. That a case can be made against the fact-value dichotomy does not give one a licence to choose one’s ontology at will – it should bring one to try and combine the normative and descriptive in one’s explorations. For might a theory of ethics or politics that relies on a highly contested take on human being not be just as objectionable as a philosophy of subjectivity that cannot account for matters such as rights and responsibility? Rather than insisting, contra post-Cartesianism’s critics, that the descriptive always already overrules the normative instead of the other way around, I want to argue that a whole conglomerate of considerations needs to be taken into account and that neither one’s ontological nor one’s ethico-political assumptions should be safeguarded from coming up for discussion beforehand. (And note that putting things up for discussion need not lead to a wholesale or even partial rejection thereof.)

Now to be sure, ethical and political considerations are of vital importance and very compelling indeed. After all, who wants to present an account of subjectivity that is morally and/or politically harmful? This brings me to another reason for having reservations about the use of ethico-political arguments, for precisely because invoking the notions of ethics and politics has such a strong impact, an appeal of this kind runs the risk of hampering rather than fostering investigations. Declaring a position to be unethical or apolitical can be a very effective means of discrediting the outlook one is questioning while at the same time ensuring that one’s own perspective becomes the go-to incontestable alternative, even if one is not intentionally pursuing this strategy. For if there is a choice between an outlook that is supposedly detrimental to all things valuable, and a perspective that is not only free from these faults but also manages to bring the dangers of the opposite position to light, the decision does not seem to be a difficult one. Yet as I already argued, an account of subjectivity that does not meet a particular ethico-political standard is not therefore at odds with every conception of ethics and politics.

Examining whether the latter is or is not the case, however, requires putting one's ethico-political assumptions up for discussion or at least temporarily on hold – and that is what branding one's opponent “unethical” or “apolitical” might very well prevent.

Note that I have phrased the preceding observations in fairly general terms. I have not specifically presented them as an analysis of the line of reasoning followed by post-Cartesianism's critics because they are not the only thinkers whose invoking the notions of ethics and politics runs the risk of hampering rather than fostering the debate. Indeed, it is perhaps most notably in the writings of those challenging Cartesianism that labels such as “ethics,” “politics,” and their opposites go on to function in such a manner. When the Ego is criticized, after all - and even apart from the fact that it is only a small step from “Ego” to “egoism” and “egoistic” – there is often not simply talk of the Cartesian subject, but more specifically of the self-absorbed, imperialistic and totalitarian subject.<sup>93</sup> What is more, as I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, in some contexts the word “subject” itself serves to designate an inherently corrupt philosophical figure, with terms such as “fragmentation” and “heterogeneity” having nothing but positive connotations. In so far as the validity of the ethico-political objections to post-Cartesianism voiced by critics such as Murdoch, Frank and Benhabib can be questioned, the thinkers they criticize may be no less guilty of questionable reasoning of this kind.<sup>94</sup>

In the case of those responsible for the death of man, therefore, the same observations may apply. Labelling the position of one's opponent “totalitarian” does not mean that one's own outlook is always already the most responsible one and that one's ethico-political assumptions need never be discussed. (Mis)using the notions of ethics and politics could prevent one from seeing that a non-Cartesian outlook might just as well have unwelcome consequences, in spite of one's attempt to ethically and politically outdo Cartesianism.<sup>95</sup>

But here too, most importantly, I would say that it is not just worries about the ethico-political import of a perspective on the subject but a whole conglomerate of considerations that needs to be taken into account. To be sure, there are dangers to presenting the self as the centre of the universe, so to speak, but that does not mean that the distinct character of the first person perspective is not a factor to be

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<sup>93</sup> See e.g. Lacan, who contends that only when one does not “regard the ego as centred on the perception-consciousness system” one is able to avoid “a consciousness of the other that can be satisfied only by Hegelian murder” (Lacan 1980, p. 6); Levinas, who claims that “hetero-affection” divests “the ego of its imperialism” (Levinas 1981, p. 121); Lyotard, who states that a postmodern “recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language” implies a “renunciation of terror” (Lyotard 1991, p. 89); and Nancy, who argues that the traditional idea of the individual is another “figure or immanence” or “totalitarianism” (Nancy 2001, p. 3).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Benhabib 1992, p. 16. She explains that her qualms about postmodernism precisely result from its light-hearted celebration of values such as diversity and eccentricity.

<sup>95</sup> Badiou for instance argues that after the “disasters of the [twentieth] century” (Badiou 1999, p. 135) the postmodern undermining of notions such as truth and subjectivity must now itself be undermined. (Though, needless to say, in so far as Badiou's labelling his opponents “apolitical” or “unethical” serves to safeguard his own position from being questioned, I do not think his strategy is warranted either.)

taken into account, for instance. Similarly, that reified notions of human coexistence can have devastating consequences does not mean that community should be thought of solely in terms of incompleteness and lack, thereby risking to deflate the embeddedness of the subject again.<sup>96</sup> What holds for the arguments of the critics of post-Cartesianism holds for post-Cartesian explorations too: ethico-political considerations do not automatically overrule ontological or phenomenological ones.

My qualms about the fact that much of the debate about the death of man is of an ethico-political nature, then, boil down to my holding that it deserves a thorough and multi-faceted approach. Neither one's take on the subject nor one's conception of ethics and politics should be prevented from coming up for debate because both might turn out to be not quite satisfactory - whether from an ethical, phenomenological or yet another perspective. And this brings me to conclude that the ethico-political objections to post-Cartesianism are warranted indeed, even though I have continuously questioned their validity in the foregoing. For the arguments I have just offered do not lead to the conclusion that ethical and political objections can never be made. They only imply that such objections should not come in the form of a demand.

My arguments in this section also imply that my explorations in the preceding chapters can only be said to be part of the story. That is to say, I have argued that investigations into the nature of man cannot and need not be separated from ethico-political inquiries, but I have first and foremost focused on giving a Wittgensteinian account of human being myself. To the extent that a thorough and multifaceted approach to this topic requires spelling out what notions of ethics and politics a particular position entails, I have only met this requirement by showing that Wittgenstein's take on the subject is not at odds with what Frank and others take ethics and politics to be. Explaining in more detail what conceptions of the ethico-political Wittgenstein's perspective makes possible and/or excludes, waits to be done on another occasion. Though one proviso can be made beforehand, because what holds for the account of subjectivity I have offered in this study holds for a more fleshed out account of Wittgensteinian ethics and politics too. That it does not necessarily contradict the hopes and desires of post-Cartesianism's critics does not mean that it is beyond each and every objection.

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Nancy, who maintains that a substantive notion of community is just as much a figure of totalitarianism as a substantive notion of subjectivity; on his view, members of a community should be said to have at most "a lack of identity" (Nancy 2001, p. xxxviii) in common. Cf. May, who argues that Nancy cannot do justice to the "phenomenology of community" (May 1997, p. 47) in this way.