

REPLY TO PROFESSOR RODERICK CHISHOLM AND COMMENTS

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Looking from a different viewpoint from that of Professor Roderick Chisholm, we can connect the problems of the Subject with the philosophy of Descartes as well as with a long line of thought whose chief exponents are Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche.

1. Starting-point of the comparison: the Cartesian Subject, the *Cogito*. In the light of European rationalism, the “*Cogito ergo sum*” appears as existence inseparable from an essence, as unity of being and thought, of ontology and the theory of knowledge, of substance and act. Thus is defined the constituent thesis of modern philosophy: the I and the Me, indistinguishable, are situated in the perfect transparency of an initial and final intuition.

This is an untenable position. Indeed it is a commonplace of critical analyses of Cartesianism that this thesis or hypothesis of the absolute Subject binds existence to essence and substance to the act of the subject only by dissociating it from the object. The “*res extensa*” and the “*res cogitans*” can come together by the mediation of the infinite, be it will or thought.

2. It follows that those who try three centuries later to maintain this Cartesian conception of the Subject are depriving it of the power of mediation which it had in Descartes’ thought. In the philosophical part of Jean-Paul Sartre’s work, for instance, the subject is defined by anguish rather than by knowledge; it has existence without any power except that of “projecting” an essence; reduced as it is to this static existential activity, it is negative rather than positive; essence is inaccessible or hypothetical. In spite of these precautions, the separation of the Subject and the Object presents difficulties and the object becomes no more than the elusive Other. Consequently, the Subject as act loses all actual transparency. The Subject can be maintained (in philosophical reflection) only at this price.

3. Critique of the Cartesian Subject begins with Kant; it is hardly necessary to insist on this point. Kant asserts the inverse principle: no

subject without an object, no object without a subject. While remaining on the same ground, he thus profoundly modifies the thesis. No consciousness without the formation and functioning of categories, without the "matter" and the "contents" of these categories, the phenomenal world. Moreover, empirical consciousness, unable to grasp the whole of its conditions and pre-suppositions, refers itself to the Noumenal, to the transcendency of the intelligible. When relativized, the subject has only an ethical and practical link, if one may say so, with the absolute, through the mediation of the will, whereas it becomes active as knowing. The rift between the subject and the object disappears as such, but reappears in the interior of the subject as a separation between the immanent and the transcendent.

4. If it is possible to say in a certain sense that the critique of the Subject starts with Kant, the *crisis of the Subject* dates back to Hegel. Indeed, Hegel is not content simply to relativize the subject, to thematize the relation of the subject with the object, to render the relation of the subject with himself problematical. By "historicizing" these relations, he tries to overcome the antinomy: knowledge and/or ontology.

For him, there is first of all, that is, at the beginning, at the moment of any emergence and any appearance, the *hic et nunc*, immediacy in its purest state: perceiving (this or that), feeling and wanting (this or that, but here and now). This immediacy is necessary but not sufficient: there is this or that, this and that, only by and for the subject. But he cannot stop at this or that: he conceives them and conceives this only in relation to that and *vice versa*. Everything is in a *hic et nunc*, except the concepts of space and time. The necessity of the *hic* and of the *nunc* falls into a contingency, that of sensing and feeling, while the contingency of representation is elevated to the degree of a superior necessity, that of conceptual thought. The subject cannot avoid the *hic* and the *nunc*. He is always linked to a present which is not self and makes him present for himself, but he can exist for himself only by rising to a higher plane, that of reflection. He thinks the *hic* and the *nunc* by situating them in time and space by the mediation of the concept being born and reborn, always reflecting. Then the *hic* and the *nunc* transcend themselves, have a meaning or rather acquire and receive it; they have "value" for the subject, or rather for a subject which apprehends himself as such only in the objectivity of the concept and the development of reason. The *hic* and the *nunc* then become part of coherent speech and language, and never disappear nor allow their irreducibility to dissolve.

It is hardly necessary to add that the lines above translate Hegelian thought into modern language. The idea of coherent speech giving perceptible data to language and concepts, establishing itself at a higher

degree in relation to the degree called first or neutral (zero), cannot be, strictly speaking, found in Hegel. Yet it is there insofar as Hegel has shaped contemporary thought and as "pure" philosophical speech remains Hegelian to this very day.

What becomes of the subject in Hegel's dialectical rationalism? Tearing objects away from themselves, being torn away from himself by objects, the subject is developed in front of and by thought which reflects and constitutes at the same time. *The Phenomenology of Mind* and *the Science of Logic* formulate this development. Each "layer," each degree of philosophical speech envelops the lower degree: perceptible naturalness (the *hic* and the *nunc*), the figures of consciousness, the moments of the concept and the Idea.

But what becomes of the Subject at the end of this development? For Hegel indeed there is an end. The *hic* and the *nunc* being the "terminus a quo," the development aims at a "terminus ad quem." It bears a name, it has an existence (perceptible, practical). It rests in a "hic et nunc," although it is the supreme end of the Subject which has passed through figures and moments. It is the *State*. It envelops, it raises to its own level, that of philosophico-political speech, it builds together all the subjects and all the objects: individuals, groups and social bodies, partial states (families, corporations, cities, etc.), objective sub-systems, needs, juridical rules and the law, ethical rules, etc. The supreme Subject, transcendent and immanent, is not God. It is the State, deified, deputizing for the absolute Lord. It is not individual consciousness, but the historical and social, collective and generic, Individual, composed of parts inseparable in their distinctions and differences. The supreme Subject, superior to all subjects, incarnates the Idea by giving it its earthly seat.

5. Now let us examine Marx's thought. He accepts the principle resulting from the philosophical reflection taken in its integrality: "no subject without an object, no object without a subject"; but such are the consequences that he draws from it, that the formula and its constituent elements (the philosophical concepts of the subject and the object) split up. *No subject without an object*: man is a being with needs and desires. Considered in his biological, practical, historical and social context, man as individual cannot be separated from generic man (the human species always given by and in particularities and singularities). The individual needs the group. He cannot survive an instant without *the other*: the other human being, the other natural or social being, the object of his lack of or his capacity for action, the object of need, the instrument, etc. Inversely, there can be no determined object without a subject (individual and social). Any determined object has been made, that is, it is a product or creation; it is the result of an activity composed of many

elements: language, concepts (outlined or detailed), work (divided up and organized), different and usually unequal social functions.

The existence of the object outside the subject (before him, without him) and the mode of existence of qualities and properties, are no longer a problem. It is here that we meet an illusory "problematics," that of "materialism," a philosophical illusion kept alive by the partisans and adversaries of Marxist thought. That the hardness or the smoothness of this stone "is" or "is not" within me or outside me is an interesting but speculative question from Marx's point of view. What is important is that this stone is no longer a shapeless block, a part of nature — that it has been extracted by social work, carried here, cut or polished, that it is thus a product or creation, intended for a house or a monument, and therefore already inscribed in a social context. Immersed in nature, in the heart of the quarry and the earth from which it was extracted, it existed before men and without them, no doubt. But it was not an object. It had no outline, no name. It dwelt and stagnated in the unnameable and the unnamed: "pure" nature, or, if one prefers, the in-itself. Such a discourse has no importance.

It follows that philosophical concepts properly speaking, such as "subject" and "object," when necessary at the outset, are not however sufficient to analyze activities and their products (or their creations, a creation being unique and the product repetitive). Even more, these concepts in their speculative usage turn into representations and ideologies. They stop the analysis of social practice; they bar the way to it; they limit the view. If they subsist in thought, it is only through their transcendence and as transcended. They are not thereby abolished. Knowledge (political, historical, economic, etc.) and more generally the analysis of social practice and the account of the connections between its elements, gave a content to these concepts of philosophical origin. They are now transformed and become concrete instead of abstract. If knowledge demands the use of those concepts and thus revives them or finds in them its birthplace, thought also develops, springing from this fertile ground. One might say, to translate Marx's thought into "modern," that is contemporary, language, that from his point of view, knowledge is developed in a specific time or temporality, which is neither the time of history in general, nor that of philosophy and its history in particular. In and through knowledge, philosophy and its concepts continue to exist as references. But practical knowledge and action (especially revolutionary action) acquire existence and meaning only by rising *above* this ground, by discovering a horizon which is no longer that of philosophy and which philosophers as such cannot discover. Philosophy (and its concepts) do not disappear but become absorbed and resorbed on one hand in the

analysis of "real" social practice and on the other hand in revolutionary practice, which discovers the horizon because it *makes* it (thus going beyond and transcending at the same time the product and the creation).

The philosopher loses the privilege of being the Subject *par excellence*, hidden beneath the System or the State whose servant and apologist he becomes. What Subject? In the Marxist orientation, there is a multiplicity of "subjects" which are born, appear, and disappear: *society* (that is, a mode of production, always implying particularities and singularities, for instance the capitalist mode of production with French or American particularities and the singularities of the events of the year 1968!), the social class or classes, the State, etc. The State is a Subject, but with no privilege. On the contrary, as supreme Subject, the State is doomed to disappear. Revolutionary practice in Marx's sense stands up against it. It threatens it; it breaks it up and leads it to decay and death. If there is a "Subject" at a higher level, he will be found in society. Social practice, language and concepts, is a degree higher than philosophico-political speech of which it carries the truth while outclassing it, fighting it and aiming to eliminate it. Between these degrees there is hierarchy, insertion or integration, envelopment and development. The relation is found to be *conflictual*. The reference to philosophy on one hand, to social practice on the other hand, and still more the introduction of revolutionary practice are the foundations of dialectics. It is at this level, that of the State and of philosophico-political discourse, that we must place the separation between Hegel and Marx. This separation is far from being simply an epistemological or philosophical separation, but goes much further, for it concerns practice, the relation between existing practice and the perspective of revolutionary practice. Is it necessary to add that Marx's thought does not refer to such and such a State, or such and such political formation, but to the State in general and the fetishism of the State and the political thought permeated by this ideology? Is it necessary to say that this political critique is quite different from anarchising nihilistic negation, and that it is even a political theory, that of the decline of the State and of politics? If we have to insist on this point, it is because this essential aspect of Marxist thought has been hidden, kept in the background. Not even disputed, forgotten! Marx's socialism has been confused with the socialism of the State, for which the State remains the supreme and absolute Subject, depository of philosophico-political rationality and totality. The Stalin era completed this confusion and we are undergoing its consequences today.

6. Still speaking of Marx and Marxist thought, can "man" consider himself as a *subject*? That is the position of Feuerbach's anthropology

which is a stage and a moment in Marxist thought. For Feuerbach "human nature" is defined on an almost biological plane, as the general or generic essence of the species: perception, desire, enjoyment. In relation to this essence lost in the course of history, alienation is defined.

It is easy to show that Marx used Feuerbach against Hegel and Hegelian dialectics against Feuerbach's anthropology. There is no generic human essence lost in the course of history, since the "human being" comes into existence thanks to his productive and creative activity; but this production of the human being by himself in the course of history does not re-produce the phases and moments of the Idea.

Although it is superseded, put back in its place, the anthropology of Feuerbach does not become ideology pure and simple with Marx, after the period when he confronts the teachings of his predecessors and inspirers. It still has a meaning. It implies a political *project*, that of liberalism and advanced democracy. Without going as far as the idea of total revolution, originated by the working-class, with it, by it and for it, this anthropology stands out as a landmark: humanism, that is, concern with "the human being," sensitive, sensorial, sensual.

Consequently, *the human is not a subject*. It does not disappear for all that. The "human world" is defined:

a) by the totality of social relations, with their contradictions, and the conflicts between partial "subjects": society and social groups, classes, etc.;

b) by the totality of the objects, products and creations, thanks to which they become a human "world";

c) by the totality of the possibilities of social practice, including those of revolutionary action.

7. This theory of the "subject," and of the modifications and transformations of this concept, cannot be found in the often-quoted *Manuscripts of 1844*, nor in *Capital* which is often contrasted to the *Manuscripts* in the way that a product of science might be contrasted to a philosophical work. One must consult the *Grundrisse der Kritik des politischen Ökonomie (Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy)* (1857-58).

In *Capital*, a work in which economic theory implies and presupposes the critique of economic science as fragmentary knowledge in the service of a policy and a State, the notion of the subject becomes two-fold. It is the *subject of knowledge*, which comprises:

a) the social support of knowledge, that is to say revolutionary practice, the activity of the working-class;

b) the theoretical support of knowledge, that is to say the logical form

taken by the exposition and especially by the theory of exchange-value, considered as a form linked to logical form. On this point, the literal reading of the first chapter of *Capital* is still to be recommended, this initial and fundamental chapter never having been really understood!

8. In what concerns the individual "subject," *private* conscience outside social conscience, class conscience and the other degrees, modalities and possibilities of conscience (political conscience, for instance) belongs to a critique implied in the term. Far from being considered as an essence or a model, this subjectivity reveals itself on analysis as *private*: outside social relations and especially relations of production, and yet linked to property and the representations accompanying it. In other words, *individualism* does not give rise to a philosophy of subjectivity or intersubjectivity. It is considered:

- a) as a certain social practice in bourgeois (capitalist) society;
- b) as an ideology;
- c) as an element which dissolves social relations in bourgeois society

itself.

This critical appreciation does not do away with the problem of the individual and his social status. Far from eliminating it, dialectical critique sets the problem of the "subject" in its entirety. In a bourgeois society the individual falls a victim to the powers of repression from the very moment that he does not conform to the norms and constraints by which this society produces "individualistic individuals," which are isolated, separate and alike if not identical because they accept the same values. For the concrete individual in this society where individualism is the dominant ideology, his own accomplishment and development appear to him like a fleeting mirage, a promise never to be kept: *a possible-impossible*.

9. Here of course we have left the texts of Marx and their 19th Century context to describe and analyze in the same orientation (radically critical) the situation of the individual as a concrete subject. The dialectical category of the *possible-impossible* answers the questions relating to the reality, that is to say, the realizations of the individual subject. Everyone knows and feels himself to be entangled in a series of possibilities and impossibilities in which are intermingled presences and absences, the far and the near, the strange (which stimulates) and the alien (which puts an end to the adventure and blocks any possible opening).

In this adventure (ever repressed and ever recommenced) of the individual seeking for self-realization outside the norms and constraints of individualism, the substantiality of the "subject" finally dissolves. What

becomes of him? What is he? A set of substitutions. "I" am an "other?" No. Several others. Those whom I can understand, excluding those whom I refuse and reject, those whom I love and with whom I identify myself, those whom I love without identification or imitation, those whom I understand and hate, etc. A certain dissolution of the meaning of "me," a marked conflict between the "I" and the "me" and between the self and the other, and consequently an extension of the subjective conscience which accompanies this dissolution; thus can the situation be defined.

10. Non-Marxist critics of Hegelianism and of traditional philosophy such as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, or Heidegger foreshadow the crisis of the subject and of subjectivity. The "end of man" which has recently become fashionable again in France was foretold by Nietzsche as well as the death of God. Nietzsche accompanies this thesis by a profound and radical critique of the "subject," which stresses its crisis. What is the "subject"? Sometimes the moving surface, meeting-place of the depths and the light, Dionysos and Apollo, sometimes the deceptive flowering of the will, of hidden powers and of the will to power: their mask and the scene of their wily manifestations. The unthought and perhaps unthinkable relations which hide under the subjective surface are relations of power rather than rational relations (or irrational ones in the affective sense).

It is not our intention here to show in detail how certain psychoanalysts, certain linguists and especially some philosophers inspired by linguistics and psychoanalysis, have brought the "crisis of the subject" to its culminating point. For them the subject evaporates and the illusions of subjectivity are reduced to seemingly actual experiences dispelled by knowledge. Thus language is a system whose coherence has no need of that accidental support, speech.

11. In our view the problem is no longer to criticize the subject and the object of philosophers. This critique has been accomplished and terminated. The problem is to *reconstruct the subject*, practically and theoretically. It must be a multiple and multiform reconstruction answering multiple questions: "Who? For and by whom? How and why?" We have to reconstruct the *historical subject* which is not or is no longer the State, the class, the people or the nation. This reconstruction of the historical subject might coincide with that of the *political subject* which can no longer be the party but would consist essentially of a new "avant-garde," comprised of workers, students and intellectuals. We shall also probably have to construct or reconstruct the *subject of knowledge* (epistemological or logical) and even the *psychological subject* (which might be the task of those psychoanalysts who are freest from psychoanalytical dogmatism and ideology).

Thus can be defined an aspect of the “problematics” which we have elsewhere called “meta-philosophy.” It cannot avoid a risk, that of passing from the old *philosophism* (which has split up under the pressure of the fragmentary sciences) to an economism, a historicism, sociologism, that is to say, to a privilege granted, implicitly or explicitly, to a particular fragmentary science.*

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* Translated by Gérard Deledalle.