Paul Ricoeur’s Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject
For Martyna and Zuzanna
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Hermeneutic investigation is not just a *mode of knowing* but a *mode of being*. Thus, by its very nature, it embraces a far wider than envisaged range of those to whom we can and should express our gratitude for a possibility to undertake the precious task of interpreting and understanding. This book has come into being as a result of my increasing hermeneutic sensibility which is rooted in the existential experience of my life.

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Introduction

In an age of growing doubt which is enshrouding human subjectivity, Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics, and especially his concept of narrative identity, combat the postmodern “death of the subject” and revitalize the human subject with efficacy. In his influential *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Michel Foucault proclaims the “end of man,” which denotes the refutation of humanism, and, in reference to subject-focused metaphysics, is evocative of the death of the subject. The concept purports to show the postmodern retreat from an unproblematic subjectivity, as well as the crisis of identity. Ricoeur holds to the notion of the reflecting subject, capable of self-recognition and self-identity, as it already retains self-consciousness, and is capable of differentiating between oneness and otherness. He follows the tradition of the French philosophy of reflection which attempts to uncover how the “I” comes to an awareness of itself. Ricoeur’s view of the subject is that of a subject whose vulnerability is a constitutive trait of consciousness, and who is bound to bodily experience. His main achievement in maintaining and defending the notion of selfhood against the deconstructive forces of contemporary continental philosophy is his cutting-edge dialectics of identity—*idem* identity, which bespeaks the unchangeable, and *ipse* identity, accounting for the identification of the self as it changes over a span of time.
In order to delve deeper into Ricoeur's revalidation of the human subject via his philosophical hermeneutics, we first present a brief introduction to hermeneutic interrogation and the concept of “a hermeneutic circle” (Hermeneutischer Zirkel). By and large, this part is devoted to Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics—his theory of interpretation. We concentrate on his analysis of discourse and meaning, distance, symbol and metaphor, as well as the three-fold *mimesis*: preconfiguration, configuration and reconfiguration, the categories which he introduces in an extensive study of narrative structure. Subsequently, we grapple with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, an important perspective which is the meeting point for the hermeneutics of the self and the postmodern theorization of subjectivity. Ricoeur's philosophical enterprise displays a double allegiance—the hermeneutics of understanding and the hermeneutics of suspicion are its two vital poles. Contrary to Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose hermeneutics is solely the hermeneutics of understanding, and Jürgen Habermas, whose approach is only in some sense representative of the hermeneutics of suspicion, for Ricoeur the readiness to suspect and readiness to understand equally importantly comprise his hermeneutic sensibility (Thiselton 2009, 19).

Part two, entitled “the postmodern predicament—the absence of the self,” delineates the postmodern difficulty in subscribing to a clear-cut modernist notion of the self, expressed in the proclamation of the death of the subject. For reasons of brevity, we restrict ourselves to a selection of the postmodern philosophical positions and to some of the most prominent thinkers, whose voice in the ongoing debate on the nature of the human “self” and the disparaging of the notion of an autonomous individual seem to be the most representative. As a result, the study is more of a panoramic view rather than an in-depth analysis of particular postmodern philosophies. As the most famous proponents of postmodern thought we have selected Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida, who all effectively argue against the modern claim to objectivity, the univocal truth in humanities in a more general sense, and in philosophical discourse in particular.

This deflationary attitude to the certainties of the modern vision of human existence, subjectivity and the position of the self, deconstructs the innocuous understanding of the innate nature of the self, the
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universality of ethical values and the transcendental certitude of truth. We pinpoint Lyotard’s incredulity towards grand narratives as the pivot of the postmodern denial of the univocal character of truth, the denial of the validity of the so-called grand narratives like democracy, Christianity, or Marxism, as well as the turn in the use of language.

The linguistic turn has exerted an enormous impact on the apprehension of reality and the human subject. A new understanding of the two underwent multitudinous and versatile studies. To use Dorothea Olkowski’s insightful analysis in this respect, particular language conventions, or systems of conventions, are created which are tailored to make words perform particular functions (Olkowski 2012, xiii). Speakers learn to use these functions. Words seem to cease to play functions in themselves, but rather gain their importance within a certain language convention which is in accord with a given cultural framework. The performative role of language, its being subordinate to the performance of certain functions in postmodernism, is interrelated with its proclaimed arbitrariness. If the relation between the signified and the signifier is deemed arbitrary, the search for meaning is a futile task; words can mean anything and the relevance of their meaning is not something one needs to be bothered with or follow. Furthermore, if meaning verges on the flimsy borderline between what is relevant and what is not, this also entails a new view of the concept of truth. The arbitrariness of language allows to hold that truth as a concept can be discarded as it becomes equally irrelevant, or replaced by the multitude of truths in accordance with the multifarious meanings produced by the “floating signifiers” (Barry 2002, 64).

The postmodern approach refers to language games, and also to the cultural and social frameworks whose conventions increasingly mold its use of language (Olkowski 2012, xii). Interestingly, Olkowski notices that we are not only prisoners of language in its not one-to-one relation between the signified and the signifier, but more prisoners of thought, perception and sensation (Olkowski, 2012, xx). She argues that aligned with the arbitrariness of language, our expressions and also intentions become irrelevant. In the world of the irrelevance of word meanings, no truth means no responsibility. The poststructuralist insistence on the aleatory nature of language—the arbitrariness and slipperiness of
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language, and the irrelevance of the search for meaning and truth—retains an inextricable bond with the deconstructive attitude to the human subject, as well as the postmodern rejection of metaphysics and intuition.

Bearing in mind the importance of the linguistic turn on the postmodern philosophy, we investigate the origin of the concept of the death of the subject, the postmodern identity crisis and axiological crisis, as well as a set of postmodern dilemmas interrelated with the criticism of the stable “self” such as fragmentation and incongruity of human experience, and the pervasive feeling of alienation. Reflecting on the concomitant sense of an existential void and uprootedness, we view subjectivity in light of the postmodern ethics, as well as examine the interrelations between subjectivity, memory and history.

At the heart of the dispute over the position of the self in postmodernity, there is a question whether the self is to be understood as something innate, or according to a variety of competing contemporary approaches as emerging in the process of individual development, as well as in social interaction. The critique, or more poignantly, the “destruction” of the Cogito which was launched by Nietzsche and his hermeneutics of suspicion, and deepened by postmodern thinkers, constitutes the perspective from which we view both the postmodern dissolution of the subject and Ricoeur’s rehabilitation of it. As a result, the postmodern eradication of the subject is presented here as contestable in light of Ricoeur’s state-of-the-art contention of narrative identity and the narrative coherence of life. On the one hand, our attempt is to demonstrate the difference in the philosophical positions regarding subjectivity represented by Ricoeur and the postmodern thinkers discussed, and, on the other, this study focuses on the ways in which Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics of the self “bridges the gap between the cogito and the anti-cogito” (Cohen and Marsh 2002, 7) proclaimed by postmodern thought.

Juxtaposing Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the self with the postmodern claim of the death of the subject in part three, we demonstrate his approach as a philosophy capable of a meaningful defense of the subject. Firstly, we discuss Ricoeur’s model of the narrative coherence of life and its efficacy in combating the postmodern incongruity of human existence. Secondly, we show the redeeming force of hermeneutics in
Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity—the dialectics of *idem* and *ipse* identity. In his influential *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur demonstrates the hermeneutics of the self, in which he explains both its epistemological and ontological aspects and presents compelling arguments in favor of his rendition of personal identity. Thirdly, we focus on the ethical aspects tackled in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics: the call of the Other, responsibility, “mutual vulnerability” and indebtedness. His explanation of the demand of the Other embraces justice, love and normativity. Ricoeur devotes much space to these issues especially in *Oneself as Another* and *The Just*. His preoccupation with the institutionalized dimension of the relation of the self to the Other finds its expression in the frequently quoted words from *Oneself as Another*: “to live a good life with and for others in just institutions” (Ricoeur 1992, 172) has had immense resonance. In this ground-breaking work, Ricoeur expresses his assertion of the prevalence of ethics over morals, the necessity of the testing of the ethical aim by means of morality and most significantly, recurrence to teleological aim in case of morally conflicting situations (Cohen and Marsh 2002, 17).

In his hermeneutics of the self, Ricoeur also explains his term of imputation, and the way in which he draws upon Gabriel Marcel’s concept of “attestation,” rooting the ethical subject in Marcel’s proposition of one’s having to attest to one’s actions. The explication of the ethical subject includes Ricoeur’s eluding to the importance of practical wisdom and Aristotelian *phronimos*. Finally, in this part, we demonstrate his view of memory as an essential constituent of subjectivity, memory and forgetting as displaying the recuperative force of hermeneutics.

Ricoeur’s defense of the coherence of human existence against the challenges of the pluralist and relativist theories counterbalances the postmodern manifestations of an impossibility to conceive of the univocal nature of the human subject, as well as an impasse in recurring to so-called objective knowledge. On the one hand, contemporary philosophy is marked by a remarkable turn to the human subject, on the other hand, however, it tends to spread doubt as regards its existence. The propounded “absence” of the subject becomes a commonplace issue, articulated in a variety of ways and upheld by many contemporary theorists, inventive in replacing the traditional notion of the self, mainly by conveniently
Deleting the undiluted, transcendent conceptualization of the human subject. The pervasive skepticism which characterizes postmodern thought entails the violation of the precepts which make the modernist theorization of the human subject possible. The rejection of the unadulterated, traditionalist conception of the human subject ensues from an entirely different view of knowledge's capability to explain reality.

Discussing the concept of subjectivity involves interlocutors from various, conflicting, but also complimentary schools of thought. In terms of the historical account of human subjectivity, it is worthwhile to call to mind the interconnection between the terms of “substance” and “subject,” the substantive element of subjectivity, and the separation of the subject from substance. We use here a luminous explanation by Rotenstreich:

Terminologically speaking “substance” and “subject” have the same meaning. Both are Latin renderings of the Greek “hypokeimenon.” Substance, substantia, is essence that which subsists in itself, the status of the thing in its independence. Subject, subjectus, is that which underlies, which is underneath, in which qualities inhere, and of which qualities are predicated in propositions. […] Philosophical tradition has brought about a separation between substance and subject. Substance has retained its original meaning of essence, that which underlies, while subject has come to mean the sum total of perceptions, images and feelings, that is consciousness. Thus we use subjective in its current sense, whereas in the traditional sense subject is not at all subjective—personal, erratic, impressionistic, but substantive. (Rotenstreich 1974, 1)

The perceptions, sensations and images which comprise human consciousness have come to be associated with the human subject. Although, the task of discussing the historical development of the philosophy of the subject goes beyond the ramifications of the problematic rendered here, it is necessary to mention at this stage Descartes’ Cogito. The Cartesian Cogito confined subjectivity to thinking. In the later phases of the development of the philosophy of the subject, and especially in contemporary continental philosophy, Descartes’ Cogito has proved to be a problematic issue. We set ourselves the task of reflecting upon the limitations of Descartes’ postulation of the subject both in reference to Ricoeur’s conceptualization of subjectivity and the postmodern claim of the “death of the subject.”
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The humanist model of human subjectivity presupposes the transcendent ego. Is an ability to think of oneself in the first person “I” a sufficient ground for the conceptual content of subjectivity? (Musholt 2015, 2). To reflect on oneself, to recognize oneself as an object—are these prerequisites for self-creation? Is the pre-reflective self-consciousness a starting point for the self-conscious subject? Is the subject an entity capable of deploying its representation in ethical judgement and reasoning? Discussion of subjectivity involves the above queries, as well as highly nuanced streams of thinking, the interconnections between diverse and opposing philosophies. The subjectivity theorized by the postmodern thinkers revolves around the productive constraints of subject-creation. By contrast, Ricoeur’s concept of subjectivity is a wide-encompassing theorization of subjectivity accounting for human vulnerability, mutuality of recognition and responsibility. His hermeneutics effectively bridges subjectivity and ethics, and his concept of the subject is that of the ethical subject.

We investigate answers to queries regarding the important aspects of the disagreement between Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and the postmodern views on subjectivity. Ricoeur’s attempt to restore the self in a time of doubt and suspicion as for the stable grounds of human subjectivity is both past and future oriented. His hermeneutics of the self—an analysis of the fallible and the capable self, substantially endorsed with extensive studies of human memory, history, forgetting, an individual will, recognition and the mutuality of responsibility—allows us to see the weight of the “self” obliged to provide an answer to the question of “who am I?” In contrast, the postmodern schools of thought offer re-imaginings of subjectivity in terms of an answer to the question of “what am I?” Ricoeur represents an anti-reductionist approach, which rests on intersubjectivity and engages both the self-formative and the innate dimensions of human subjectivity. The postmodern and post-structuralist philosophies, with messengers such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, embody a relentless call for the focus on one particular angle of subjectivity and subject formation, oft-claimed to be the sole constitutive force—decenteredness and/or constructedness. Ricoeur challenges the postmodern theorizations with their fragmentizing implications and brings together the disparate
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elements of the dissolved and continuously dissolving self. His philosophy manifests a life-long struggle to combat the encroachment of the relativist and reductionist currents of contemporary thought. Hans-Georg Gadamer voices the anxiety about the limitedness and the void of the positivist streams of philosophical thought thus: “… over against the whole of our civilization that is founded on modern science, we must ask repeatedly if something has not been omitted …” (Gadamer 1996, 153). Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the self is an all-encompassing answer to that void and the loss of a meaningful explanation of human existence.

His philosophical hermeneutics deals with the pressing need to understand one’s existence, to understand oneself, to find and answer to the query of “who am I?” He contests the contemporaneous sense of alienation and fragmentation. The plurality of voices in today’s philosophy expressive of the manifold demystifications call for a clear and credible response. “To understand” and “to self-understand” is a challenge which Ricoeur undertakes. His endeavor is concurrently radical and full of hope, capable of counterbalancing the postmodern melancholia, the dissolution of the subject and an axiological crisis. The heart of our attempt here is to show that Ricoeur effectively counteracts the postmodern delimitations, proposing an alternative which convincingly integrates the Heideggerian ontological hermeneutics and his insistence on authenticity, the discoveries of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of understanding, as well as his own idiosyncratic course of thought. Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics is text, discourse and reader-oriented, and forefronts understanding-explanation-application paradigm.

Our ultimate objective is to productively partner hermeneutic and poststructuralist thinking to invite a fruitful dialogue of subjectivity. Ricoeur’s prolificity, the scope of the problems he grapples with, and the methodologies he utilizes, show that the entire body of his books, articles and essays can be viewed as a cohesive meta-narrative in which his individual trait of thought, as well as his responses to various contemporary philosophies demonstrate an impressive progression. The overlapping character of the themes he writes on is productive and involving. He himself expresses the specificity of his writings in the following fashion: “… each work responds to a determinate challenge, and what connects it to its predecessors seems to me to be less the steady development of
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a unique project than an acknowledgement of a residue which gives rise in turn to a new residue” (Ricoeur 1981, 32). His practice of hermeneutics, both the theory of interpretation—his textual hermeneutics, and the theory of demystification—and the hermeneutics of suspicion bespeak the truth that the potential of hermeneutics can be deployed with efficacy in the human sciences to the effect of proposing credible answers to the queries of understanding, and perhaps even more rewardingly self-understanding of a human in the contemporary world. The abundant streams of his analysis are amply integrated into a synthesis, which is a clear, reflective, contemplative and methodological reply to the pressure of the question of the human subject. His hermeneutics of recovery provides an all-embracing alternative to postmodernist doubt and the decentering of the human subject.

Ricoeur’s works focus on the uniqueness and the singularity of human existence. Like Gabriel Marcel, Ricoeur is interested in the incarnate aspect of the human subject—the embodied subject. He seeks to resolve the quandary of “I have a body” and concurrently “I am a body.” For Ricoeur, the unity of the incarnate subject is most evident in human action, hence his concern for human freedom. He attempts to account for the interrelation of such aspects as: motivation, which influences any act said to be chosen freely, the fact that we are embodied beings, and that the action we undertake is also temporal. In Freedom and Nature, which launched his interest in the voluntary and involuntary aspect of human existence, he aims to render the two central notions: the voluntary and the involuntary, the reciprocity of the two causes that human freedom is something meaningful. His study entails also the issue of an event—something happens when a human acts, but an act cannot be named just another natural event. The query that he investigates is “what makes it a voluntary act for which we are responsible and not just another occurrence in the sequence of natural events?” (Pellauer 2007, 5).

Ricoeur’s philosophical interrogation concerns the existence of something which is always prior to philosophy: life, reality—the ontological perspective is thus the guiding thread throughout his works. Ricoeur holds to philosophy’s openness; philosophical questions can always be viewed afresh. In a circular fashion he begins with the problem of existence, then investigates the issues of language and reflection,
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and subsequently goes back to the problem of existence again (Reagan 1998, 46). Although Ricoeur comes from an existential tradition, in his *Phenomenology of the Will*, he debates with Sartre and debunks his *Being and Nothingness*, molding thus his unique, individual path to graft the existentialist reflection onto phenomenology and later onto hermeneutics.

Contrasting Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the self with postmodern thought, we show it as an appealing alternative to the proclaimed demise of the human subject. The opposition to the Cartesian conviction—the meeting point for Ricoeur and the postmodern thinkers—results in divergent philosophical stances. Ricoeur’s response to and a critique of Descartes’ model of subjectivity centers on taking cognizance of the discrepancy between Descartes’ model of subject-object theory of knowledge and its impossibility of fully accounting for the sense of human existence. The doubt ingrained in Cartesian *Cogito* that nothing except one’s own conscious reflection can be the source of the knowledge about oneself is not acclaimed by the hermeneutic way of thinking, and it is even viewed as useless and inadequate. Hermeneutics regards Descartes’ model as problematic, and in its investigation resorts to signs through which we can more fully make sense of our experience of who we are. The conflict between the position of Descartes and the existentialist tradition, which Ricoeur grew in, leads him to propound that what is to be investigated is the nature of the self—the self as an agent rather than a knower. For Ricoeur, it is the self as an agent who has identity and responsibility for his or her deeds (Pellauer 2007, 6). His re-articulation of the Cartesian model leads him to formulate a hermeneutics of the self which effectively opposes the reductionism of the postmodern approaches to scientific investigation, proposes a far more embracing alternative, and is capable of recuperating the human “self” in the age of the “death of the subject.”