

“Meditations” on Modernity

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Abstract

Recently there has been a rising tendency in analysing the phenomenon of Modernity in terms of the notion of subjectivity as conceptualised in the Cartesian corpus. I have therefore organised this critical essay around two tasks: (1) to look at the concept of subjectivity in its own right, and (2) to see how far such diagnoses are successful in tracing the origin of Modernity. In this pursuit, I have focused on Harvie Ferguson’s latest monograph, *Modernity and Subjectivity* — as part of his seminal works on Modernity — which epitomises the emergence of this particular tradition of theorising about Modernity.

What is Modernity? This is the question that Harvie Ferguson addresses in his latest scholarly monograph, *Modernity and Subjectivity: Body, Soul, Spirit*.¹ The title concisely captures Ferguson’s contention in trying to trace the genesis of Modernity to the emergence of subjectivity, and, further, to canvass support for, as well as apply, his theoretical explanation of Modernity to the trinity of body, soul and spirit, as the subtitle suggests.

Before delving into Ferguson’s “meditations” on Modernity, it may not be amiss to distinguish two sets of questions about Modernity in general. The first set is of a historical hue where the primary concern is to establish the chronology of Modernity: that is, when did Modernity begin?² Whereas, the second set is more of a conceptual character and is concerned with the nature, outcome and validity of Modernity. Obviously, the two sets of questions are not unrelated since one’s view about the historical root of Modernity very much depends on what one considers as Modernity’s cardinal characteristics: that is, its nature.

Interestingly, Ferguson attempts to answer both sets of questions by appealing to the doctrine of subjectivity as developed by René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

At the very outset, Ferguson readily acknowledges that despite the pervasive and dominant presence of Modernity as a concept in all walks of life, ‘there is little agreement over the formal definition of this common term, and far less about the presumed reality to which it refers.’ (1) Admittedly, the term appears to accommodate, rather generously, ‘ambiguities and contradictions’, yet it is not, Ferguson contends, ‘wholly arbitrary or incoherent,’ or ‘necessarily vague.’ (2 & 3)

One way to define Modernity might be to contrast it with other epochs: ‘archaic, ancient, primitive, or premodern’. (2) However, this will only relegate the problem as these new terms themselves are in need of delineation. Also, at this point, there is every danger of falling foul of the Quinean prohibition of definitional circularity: that is, surreptitiously defining the latter terms in terms of Modernity.³

Ferguson, however, is conscious of this pitfall and, instead of a historical description, opts for an *epistemological* exploration of Modernity. He identifies ‘a genuine understanding of our experience’ as the key to an understanding of Modernity. (1) It is ‘through forms of understanding’ peculiar to the modern age that we might have a chance of capturing the core of Modernity: forms of understanding whose salient features are autonomy, creativity, and freedom. Generally, Ferguson claims that it is the category of experience, or more precisely ‘the sovereignty of experience’, that epitomises Modernity. (199)

But, what is experience? Ferguson widens the net of experience beyond the empiricist connotation of the term to include not only the senses but also reason. However, what is considered to be distinctively modern about the senses and reason is that they are the final arbiters in the court of epistemic adjudication. That is, there is no higher authority than human experience. In contrast to the pre-modern world, experience is no longer subordinate to extra-empirical or mysterious divine reality. Indeed, according to Ferguson, Modernity ‘identifies the real with the experienced.’ (3) Ferguson’s formulation of Modernity here is in fact very much reminiscent of Bishop Berkeley’s famous philosophical dictum: *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).

It is at this point that Descartes’ contribution to the formation of Modernity comes to be explicitly articulated by Ferguson. Earlier it was said that there are three features of experience that are taken to be distinctively modern, *viz.*, autonomy, creativity, and freedom. These terms, however, signify a more technical and esoteric connotation than their common-or-garden variety for Ferguson, and, moreover, among the three, autonomy is assigned to be the most fundamental feature of Modernity. Creativity and freedom are represented as being ultimately derivative from or dependent on autonomy for their signification.

Human autonomy or self-generation is explained as a categorical separation of Subject and Object, where the distinction is purported to constitute the modality of existence in Modernity. The ‘symbolic unity of creation [falls] apart into the categorical opposition’ of Subject and Object. (198) The bifurcation is effectively ‘the categorical separation of two realities, not the (ultimately arbitrary) differentiation of a single reality into two mutually

exclusive and exhaustive parts'. (15) Creativity or novelty is explicated as a differentiation of Self and Other, where by a 'progressive disentanglement and drawing apart of Object and Subject' they come 'to confront one another in mutually incompatible Otherness.' (9) Finally, freedom or self-movement is illustrated as a dialectic of Ego and World, where the activity of Ego as the Subject discloses World as the Object from a whole series of 'points of view'. (13) What is noteworthy about these definitions is their conceptual organisation in terms of 'a logic of duality' inherent in and inherited from autonomy, thus conferring a corresponding 'dualistic structure' on Modernity. (4 & 19)

Ferguson then sets out to argue for his central claim that modern autonomy, as the separation of Subject and Object, stems from the Cartesian method of universal doubt. Descartes' doubt, in Ferguson's view, reveals the persistence of the self-awareness upon which the continuous flux of *doubtful experience* is registered. And, it is in the midst of this sceptical stream of consciousness that the dichotomous classification of Subject and Object is born. To exemplify his point, Ferguson dwells on Descartes' *dream argument* – the second of the three sceptical arguments presented in the *First Meditation* – where the aim is to show that the entire reality could be nothing other than a dream. In the argument, the sceptical challenge is posed in the form of a request for an unequivocal means of demarcating wakeful states from dream states. On that basis, Ferguson points out, the difference between Object and Subject is like the asymmetrical relation between waking and dreaming.

With this theoretical-*cum*-philosophical baggage, Ferguson embarks upon an odyssey into the territories of Body, Soul, and Spirit. He justifies the choice of these conceptual itineraries

on the grounds that these concepts belong to ‘an older set of categories’ that ‘are rooted in the prehistory rather than in the history of Modernity’, thereby providing an opportunity to chart the contours of Modernity through the transformations wrought in each. (18-19)

It goes without saying that Ferguson conducts his explorations with extreme erudition and shows a comprehensive command of the sources consulted. However, despite the allure of such grand journeys, the expedition is scuppered for its lack of provisions for *subjectivity*. The project is predicated on the idea that the best way to understand Modernity is through an appreciation of Cartesian subjectivity, yet there is hardly any material on this essential explanatory concept in the text. Defining autonomy as the categorical separation of two realities of subjects and objects is not sufficiently sharp and detailed to sustain a substantial conception of subjectivity and objectivity, and we are thus none-the-wiser as to what “subjective reality” as opposed to “objective reality” is all about. Moreover, the morsels on offer are either too small to satiate or too at variance to savour of a consistent flavour. Possibly this is in itself symptomatic of what Ferguson calls the paradox of Modernity: ‘incomplete’ and ‘rationally incomprehensible’ postulates. (198 & 199)

However, given the significance of subjectivity for the monograph’s main thesis, the issue deserves to be dwelt on in greater detail. Scattered throughout the book, Ferguson gives several snippets of subjectivity which could be clustered round the following categories:

Subjectivity as an Existential Mode

- ‘All experience was ... subjective in character – experienced, that is, by a subject ...’
(14)

Subjectivity as an Epistemological Mode vis-à-vis the World

- ‘But in principle we can say that the distinction of Object and Subject means that we know nothing directly of objects, that our world is thoroughly and completely subjective. This, ultimately, is the justification for the “subjective” approach adopted here.’ (14)
- ‘The world of “subjects” cannot participate directly in ... a world of estranged “objects” that remain impenetrable so far their qualities are concerned.’ (192-3; slight textual juxtaposition for further fluency)

Subjectivity as an Epistemological Mode vis-à-vis the Self

- ‘Autonomy and dynamism implied continuous self-creation and not just a shifting perspective on a fixed reality. Thus, ... ceaseless inner movement rendered the human subject enigmatic. Endless novelty made the ego a stranger to itself and put self-knowledge beyond the bounds of rational knowledge [thereby resulting in its] solipsistic character ...’ (13)

Properties of Subjectivity

- ‘Subjectivity is distinct from, but inextricably linked to, a specific body and is, therefore, spatially located.’ (5)

- ‘In the emergence of Modernity, there quickly developed a precise model of the universe in which the correspondence between individuated bodies and equally individuated subjects or minds became compelling. And, at the same time that objectivity became identified with the “outside,” subjectivity became one with the “inside,” of the human body.’ (9)
- ‘The human subject – the “interior” of the body image ...’ (45)
- ‘[There are] two contrasting visions of human subjectivity in modern society. One is “scientific,” rational, and materialistic ... The other is “romantic,” irrational, and ideal ...’ (81)

Subjective States and Forms

- ‘... emotions, feelings, intentions, and so on, as well as perceptions and ideas ...’ (5)
- ‘Body, Soul, and Spirit are three forms of subjectivity, not divisions within a single object-subject reality; three worlds of experience from which can be constructed more or less convincing human self-images.’ (192)

The first point to note is that not all the above characterisations are Cartesian. In fact, some of the statements go against the grain of the Cartesian corpus. For example, among the properties of subjectivity, Ferguson lists “spatial location” and claims that subjectivity is identified with the “inside” or “interior” of the human body. But, for Descartes, the very indubitability of subjectivity was partly due to its non-corporal nature; otherwise subjectivity would have similarly fallen victim to his method of universal doubt. Also, the Cartesian conception of subjectivity can be classified as neither “scientific” nor “romantic” in

Ferguson's senses of those words. For, although Descartes' subjectivity is certainly rational (like the "scientific" view and unlike the "romantic" one), it is immaterial in kind (like the "romantic" vision and unlike the "scientific" one).

However, the more substantial issue is concerned with the central characteristic of subjectivity. Ferguson formulates this fundamental feature in terms of our epistemological access to the world: that is, we know nothing directly of objects and as such the world of subjects cannot participate directly in a world of objects. This is what he considers to be the "ultimate justification" for subjectivity. But, the problem with this position is that the recognition of our "mediate and indirect" access to reality predates Descartes not by centuries but by millennia. Undoubtedly, Descartes did exploit this epistemic "predicament" to bring home the immediacy of the sceptical challenge in particular, and to highlight the pre-eminence of epistemology to philosophy in general. Yet, Cartesian subjectivity is essentially existential or ontological.

In contrast to the epistemic sense of subjectivity, the ontological sense refers to the mode of existence: that is, to the ontological status of types of entities in the world. Mountains and monkeys, for example, have an *objective mode of existence* since their being does not depend on being experienced by a subject. But, 'emotions, feelings, intentions, and so on, as well as perceptions and ideas' – to use Ferguson's examples of subjective states – have a *subjective mode of existence*. They exist only as experienced by some human or other conscious subject. Subjective states have what one might call a *first-person* ontology: they exist only from the point of view of some self, agent or organism that has them. Such states exist only as

experienced by some “subject”. Whereas, objective entities like flora and fauna have a *third-person* ontology: their existence does not depend on being experienced by a “subject”.

Interestingly, Ferguson himself comes close to this aspect of subjectivity on one occasion when he states that all experience is ‘subjective in character – experienced, that is, by a subject’. (14) But, immediately, he goes on to downplay this ontological characterisation in favour of the above epistemological mode *vis-à-vis* the world. The “world-related” qualification on the epistemological connotation of subjectivity is due to the fact that Ferguson has a second epistemological explication of subjectivity which concerns not the world but the self. Indeed, the first epistemic rendition of subjectivity is offered *vis-à-vis* the self where, because of its autonomy and the consequent continuous self-creation, it is claimed that the ego becomes ‘a stranger to itself’ and self-knowledge is put ‘beyond the bounds of rational knowledge’, thereby becoming ‘solipsistic’ in character. (13)

But, once again, one encounters a lack of conceptual clarity here. For, even if our psychological states are existentially or ontologically subjective as the definition of autonomy purports to show, it does not follow that they are epistemologically subjective as well. In fact, strictly speaking, such an inference is fallacious. A statement is epistemically objective if it can be known to be true or false independently of the feelings, attitudes, and prejudices of people; whereas, a statement is epistemically subjective if its truth depends primarily on the attitudes and feelings of observers. For instance, ‘Descartes was born in 1596’ is epistemically objective because we can ascertain as a matter of fact whether it is true or false irrespective of how we feel about it. While, ‘Descartes was a better philosopher than

Diderot' is not epistemically objective as its truth is more a matter of taste or opinion; the truth or falsity of the statement is very much indebted to an individual's attitudes, preferences, and evaluations about what constitutes a good philosopher. Yet, existential subjectivity does not entail epistemological subjectivity. The ache in someone's tooth is, for sure, ontologically subjective, but the statement 'Harvie Ferguson has toothache' is not epistemically subjective. It is a straightforward matter of epistemic objective fact, not a matter of epistemic subjective opinion. Therefore, the existential subjectivity of conscious states need not render them solipsistic and beyond the bounds of rational knowledge.

Some of the issues raised here about subjectivity are not, alas, novel, and in fact the topic has been at the forefront of intensive research in philosophy of mind, as well as Cartesian scholarship, for the past twenty-six years or so. The *locus classicus* of the recent interest in subjectivity is generally acknowledged to be Thomas Nagel's famous article of 1974, 'What is it like to be a bat?'.⁴ However, there is not a single reference to Nagel's pioneering work or the subsequent extensive studies on subjectivity in the past quarter of century in Ferguson's monograph. Some of this literature would have had a direct impact on Ferguson's formulation of subjectivity as well as on his reflections on body, soul and spirit.

There is a plethora of issues that Ferguson covers, which deserves to be examined in detail, but in conclusion I will restrict myself to a final point about subjectivity. His contention that subjectivity as an epistemological mode *vis-à-vis* the world is the hallmark of Modernity reminds me of Quine's remark, though catered for a different context, that physical objects are 'comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. For my part I do, qua lay

physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind.' ⁵ It then follows that Modernity is after all of a piece with the pre-modern world. It should be said that Ferguson is content in conceding that 'Modernity remains continuous with its prehistory', but insists that it is 'unlike earlier forms of Western society.' (189) Yet, given the Quinean implication of his position, whatever informs Modernity's uniqueness cannot be attired in the epistemological outfit that Ferguson fashions.

Notes

¹ Harvie Ferguson, *Modernity and Subjectivity: Body, Soul, Spirit*, Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

² For a dissenting voice on the possibility, or even the relevance and usefulness, of answering historical questions about Modernity, see Lawrence Cahoon in the introductory essay of his anthology *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

³ In his classical paper, ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’, Willard Quine famously argued for the rejection of the distinction between analytic statements (a statement like ‘All bachelors are unmarried’) and synthetic statements (a statement like ‘Karol Jozef Wojtyla is a bachelor’) on the basis that there was no non-circular definition of analyticity. The article is reprinted in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953).

⁴ Reprinted in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵ Quine, 44.

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