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A Systems Approach to Intersubjectivity

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*If all knowledge were knowledge of the universe
as a whole, there would be no knowledge. —*
Bertrand Russell

1. The question of intersubjectivity has a long history behind it;
however, it is still an unsolved problem. It is by now widely
accepted that the nature of any real philosophical question is such
that it can be dissolved, not solved. It may be added that a prob-
lem ought at least to be exactly located if it is to be dissolved; but
this is not even the case with intersubjectivity. A heap of different
objects are covered by this heading, ranging between the criterion
of intersubjective validity (in neopositivistic theory of knowledge,
this takes the place of the old concept of truth as reciprocal ade-
quacy between subject and object) and the concept of mutual
understanding in a hermeneutic theory of communication with its
ethical consequences. As is well known, the concept of intersub-
jectivity reached sociology via Alfred Schutz (1962), especially
through his reworking of Husserl's (1954) notion of *Lebenswelt*,
this being under many respects analogous to Wittgenstein's (1953)
Lebensform.

The contact point between these theories seems to me to be a negative, rather than a positive one: that is to say, none of them dares to question openly what all of them presuppose: the concept of subject. This failure is probably pushed to the extreme in Habermas's *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns* (1981), an attempt to combine all current theoretical approaches to the problem of intersubjectivity. Here subjects seem to arise almost spontaneously out of the interactive field, coming into existence through verbal language. The intersubjectivity of shared symbols and values inheres from the beginning in language, whose immanent *telos* is that an agreement should be produced between subjects who may be defined only through intersubjectivity itself. Such a circle, however, only conceals the theoretical vacuum where the notion of subject lies abandoned.

This notion was last thoroughly scrutinized by Husserl. It is well known that the phenomenological analysis aims at grasping the nature of consciousness in its most minute details: to this effect, intersubjectivity is introduced in the first place through the notion of "monadological intersubjectivity" (Husserl, 1950), i.e., beginning with the closed dimension of consciousness within which the *alter ego* is posited by analogy. Later on, in order also to mitigate the virtually solipsistic character inherent in the monadological approach, Husserl will lay stress on the world that is common to all, the *Lebenswelt*. In any case, the subject, or consciousness, is never questioned in the phenomenological theory despite extremely interesting analyses. In my opinion, however, a theory of intersubjectivity cannot avoid facing the problem of defining the subject: it must first of all be a theory of subjectivity.

2.   In order to define what is a subject, one has to describe the process by which it is constituted. In what sense may someone, or something, talk about itself as being a subject provided with memory, self-consciousness and all the other features which philosophy has traditionally assigned to the subject? When beginning to answer this question, a systems approach can make use of the distinction drawn between the observer and the system. If the problems of subjectivity, and the related one of intersubjectivity, have to do with the question of the observer, it follows that they are on the level of the theory of knowledge, i.e., not, for instance, on the level of ethics. The constitution of the subject pertains to the manner after which the system is observed. This relation is, of

course, itself ambiguous, in that the observer, as observed by another system, is himself a system. Saying that the constitution of the subject pertains to the relation between observer and system implies that we should deal with observing a system that observes other systems. It can be seen that we are moving within the scope of a "second order" cybernetics (von Foerster, 1984).

On which conditions, then, is it possible to call *subject* an observed *and* observing system? By laying stress on the conditions, we turn the classical transcendental problem of the "conditions of the possibility of experience" into the problem of the conditions of the possibility of the subject. The subject is seen there as the result of a process, or rather of a constrained set of processes. In other words, we need only assume the existence of cognitive processes (perceptions, beliefs, and so on) as processes that may in turn be observed and described. However, we will not go so far as to attribute these cognitive processes directly to a transcendentally structured subject, nor to an individual empirical mind; rather, we shall consider them as being part of Bateson's (1972) *mind:* short arcs of a wider circuits network. Thus we try to avoid the traditional fallacy met when talking about the subject, i.e., that of considering it as a wholly self-transparent observer, one that cannot be observed, but can only self-observe itself. On the contrary, we aim at observing, from a relatively external point of view, how short arcs of a circuit, i.e., partial cognitive processes, generate something like a self-conscious subject.

The question is then: On which conditions may an observing system, that is, a certain set of cognitive processes, be called a subject? In order to get ready to answer this question, we must introduce the concept of *point of view.* Like all cybernetical processes, cognitive processes are selective ones. Any selection process may be observed and described as triggered from any determined point. That is to say: the above-mentioned short arcs of a circuit may be cut after different ways. We shall call *point of view* the point where a selection process is triggered off: to an observer's eye, this is the point whence a given cognitive process starts. Thus the concept of point of view, as a tool in observing cognitive processes, refers to the way in which they are to be handled. Because only a cognitive process is able to observe and describe another cognitive process, the notion of point of view refers to the concept of self-observation of cognitive processes as a whole. If

the short arcs are never a whole circuit, self-observing of the cognitive processes may only succeed by putting the partial segments together and letting them play with each other. However, each cognitive process—that is, each arc of the whole circuit—may be observed by cutting yet another arc, i.e., through the *shifting* of points of view. Any point of view refers to another point of view from which it can be observed. Thus the network of knowledge is progressively construed in a self-referential way.

We may now apply the constructivist theory of knowledge (Morin, 1986; von Glasersfeld, 1987; Genovese, 1989) thus sketched to the subject itself. How can an observer attribute the features of the subject either to himself or to another? The subject is constituted by cognitive processes: that is to say, the subject should be understood as the possibility for given processes to return, as *selective insistence* of certain points of view as opposed to others. In other words, the subject is a set of points of view repeating itself. This definition is part of a theory of observation which differentiates, on the one hand, points of view returning as triggers of actual cognitive processes and, on the other hand, merely hypothetical points of view: these are considered, and then set aside, or else simply neutralized as triggers of possible observations. A set of points of view is a subject if it repeats itself; relatively stabilized cognitive processes are produced in relation to a point of view within its circle, and/or in respect of an external observer who may, of course, be a merely hypothetical one.

3.   From what has been said till now, it may be derived that the shifting of points of view is the crucial moment in the constitution of the subject: because of it, certain cognitive processes may be taken to be relatively stabilized, as distinguished from other processes. Failing this play or shifting of perspective, nothing like a subject would appear; indeed, there would be no knowledge at all, as no term of comparison would be available. A set of points of view may only repeat itself, and stabilize certain cognitive processes, if it is compared to others which do not repeat themselves. This in turn happens under an observer's eye: a subject may be defined as such within a shifting of points of view, outside or inside of its circle, which makes it identifiable by an observer, or even by itself in the process of self-observing.

A subject is a subject on condition that a relatively stabilized set of points of view be cut out of the total network of cognitive

processes in the world. Cognitive comparisons are brought about through a shifting of points of view: on the ground of these comparisons, it becomes possible to decide what is a subject and what is not. Thus, any observer may attribute to itself, or another, the features of the subject. The notion of subject is twice observer-dependent: first, because the subject is such for an observer; second, because a subject is nothing else but an observing system whose ability to repeat its cognitive operations is recognized.

The distinction between different kinds of cognitive processes is implied by the definition of the relation between the notions of observer and subject, as given above. Some cognitive processes are actually available, e.g., in computers and automata; on the contrary, others may only come up again through the play of virtual points of view. An individual and self-conscious mind constitutes itself whenever a set of points of view is able to find its selections again and again, not just by identifying itself with the other, and taking the other's role—this is the opinion of George H. Mead—but also by attributing a role to the other, i.e., through the construction of a term of comparison for its own repeatable identity. In my opinion, this constructivist moment, when the other is produced, is the salient feature of a systems approach to the problems of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. If the other were not there, one should make it up: only by comparing itself with points of view that are not its own, a set of points of view is established as a repeatable identity. This is proved by the function of memory, where actual points of view refer to merely virtual ones, those from the past, as if these were others; those that return are able to do so because others are excluded, as they are forgotten or repressed through a selective relation. The function of the other is then more general than the function of memory. Husserl thought memory provided the pattern from which the *alter ego* could be inferred: the other in an intersubjective relation was introduced on the analogy of the past ego, which is equally alien to the actual ego. Husserl aimed at finding the other immanent within the consciousness: here, however, it is the other who ensures the very possibility for memory, and therefore for consciousness, to exist. This is a consequence of the loss of the immediate notion of consciousness; it also follows from the attempt at providing a description of its constitutive process. The function of the other enables the points of view to shift and compare themselves to others. This function is more general than that of memory

because it implies an ability to draw comparisons which operates in memory, too. Selectivity ensures that nothing may be taken as a term of comparison if not by excluding something else. Selectively again, memory stabilizes a subject by causing something to return, while leaving something else out.

Within this theoretical frame a cognitive process—for instance, a belief—may be attributed to a subject only if it returns in relation to other beliefs which also return, but only as excluded ones. We may then draw a distinction between *believed* beliefs and *unbelieved* beliefs. A subject stabilizes itself in relation to something generally other. Also, the function of the other makes it possible to establish relations to this "other": it makes no difference whether these are relations of agreement or disagreement, aversion or indifference.

What does matter is that terms of comparison should be available, so that there may be other possibilities against which one can measure itself. Other beliefs may even be only *imagined* ones, just fictions.

4.   There are remarkable consequences to intersubjectivity which derive from the notion of subjectivity sketched above. First of all, this notion is part of the theory of knowledge: it would be very difficult to build social and ethical theories upon it, as these need to assume the existence of shared symbols and values. On the contrary, the shifting of points of view and the comparison are possible precisely because not all symbols and values are shared. Sharing is a very special case of intersubjectivity, whereby circles of points of view establish habitual comparisons with other circles, on the ground of an actual or presumed agreement, so that particular cognitive operations of anticipation and forecasting may be obtained. The scientific community offers a well-known example. Through fixed, repeatable procedures an intersubjective standard is reached which on principle causes possible divergences to be reduced, thus making future results foreseeable.

However, not all existing beliefs are *scientific* ones, and it is by now well known that no cultural form can understand all cultural forms. The tendency to closure in the different communicative milieus, each cultural form presenting itself as exclusive of the others, when not as the best one, sees to it that there are different ways to share values and symbols, all of them equally legitimate. Such being the state of things, concepts like *point of view,*

shifting and *comparison* are not to be taken as regulating ideals and exhortations to openness, which would risk being utterly useless, but rather as the description of moments that are as it were necessary in order that even a closure may be effected. If a belief or a cultural form does not *see* the others, this does not mean that it will not have a relation to them, be it a merely negative or neutrally indifferent one; what it does mean is that the circle of its self-observation, the circle of points of view available to it, generates a limited number of comparisons. No matter how hard one tries to increase the possibilities to shift one's points of view, to enlarge, so to say, one's horizons, these will always be limited to a certain degree. It is part of the principle of selection itself that something should be left out entirely, so that comparisons may be established with something else. Should there be total knowledge, there would be no knowledge, as in that case there would be no perspective, no distinction between fore- and background, and all would shade off.

Talking about intersubjectivity leads to a kind of perspectivism, all the more radical in that it is aware of its being unavoidable. But if it is true that one cannot escape the relativity of perspectives, we can nevertheless describe the movement through which this relativity gets organized. In this sense relativism does by no means imply a conviction to theoretical powerlessness. The different perspectives pertain to meaningful contexts within which the shifting of points of view and the cognitive comparisons are possible by means of their very self-referential closure. Any observer is a subject in relation to others, if only in a negative way, when it establishes habitual comparisons which fix some cognitive processes: beliefs, for instance. The intervention of theory in the field of belief appears therefore to open other possibilities and soberly recalls the necessary limitations inherent in any perspective.

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