Review essay

What gives? Getting over the subject


Discussion of Heidegger’s philosophy has centered on the figure of the “subject” since its earliest reception: neo-Kantians like Cassirer read “Dasein” as a concrete version of the transcendental subject incapable of grounding reason’s ideal validity; Husserlians complained of an anthropological reading of phenomenological subjectivity; and Sartre denied that being-in-the-world could displace the *cogito* without tacitly presupposing it. In debates surrounding Heidegger’s Nazi involvement his complex relation to traditional tropes of subjectivity — including responsibility, autonomy, critical reason, and sociality — has taken on renewed urgency. German thinkers like Habermas, Apel, Frank, Tugendhat, and Henrich tend to reject Heidegger’s attempts to deconstruct the philosophical tradition and seek to renew Hegelian or transcendental motifs (often reconfigured in terms of the Anglo-American “linguistic turn”). In France, thanks to the pre-eminence of the deconstructive or post-structuralist reading of Heidegger, the title “Heidegger and the Subject” raises different expectations. Here, in positions associated with the names of Derrida, Janicaud, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Marion, the supposedly unsatisfactory “subjectivism” of *Being and Time* generates enthusiasm for the later post-subjectivistic thought of Being that is no longer the Being of beings. Questions of the “subject” are reconfigured in light of what has been dubbed a “theological turn,” drawing in complex ways on Levinas. A book on “Heidegger and the Subject,” then, has its work cut out for it, not least in constructing its topic in a manageable way.

François Raffoul negotiates this problem by leaving the Germans entirely out of the picture. No reason is given but one is implied in the book’s argument that Heidegger’s account of the subject in *Being and Time* wholly escapes “subjectivism.” Those French thinkers who fail to recognize this — notably Taminiaux and Courtine — are severely criticized and may be seen as
emblems for German philosophers like Habermas, Tugendhat, or the Heidelberg school. Raffoul’s book belongs strictly within the context of the French debate, then, and two theses stand out: First is the insistence that “it would be misleading to oppose in Heidegger’s work a still subjectivist period to a later ‘de-humanized’ one” (255). This denial that the Kehre represents any real discontinuity on this point authorizes the book’s essential—and essentially debatable—methodological principle, viz., that Being and Time can profitably be interpreted in terms of later works. Second is the claim that “Being” is enough. Recent French thought has typically held that an adequate approach to the subject must go “beyond Being”—whether by appeal to differance, to the face of the Other, or to a “God without Being.” Raffoul, in contrast, goes about as far as one can go in arguing that the resources for a “post-metaphysical” concept of the subject—responsive, receptive, heteronomous—are already present in the “thought of Being” itself. Emerging from a detailed, expert reading of Being and Time and the Marburg lecture courses, it is this thesis that marks the book as a major contribution to Heidegger scholarship. Heidegger and the Subject is by far the most comprehensive treatment of the topic available, and though it rarely questions Heidegger’s own take on things, it gives much to think about within the horizon of that take.

The first two of the book’s three sections—dealing with Heidegger’s criticism of the traditional subject-concept (Descartes, Kant) and with the ontological basis for a new subject-concept—build toward an “ontology of mineness” (Jemeinigkeit) in the third, a non-subjectivist account of what selfhood is. Cumulatively, the aim is to show that Being and Time does justice to the “subjectivity of the subject” without falling into “subjectivism” since mineness is not “a property belonging to a subject that is closed in upon itself” but “is given only through the relation to Being” (9). In interpreting this “relation to Being,” Raffoul’s methodological decision to read Being and Time in light of the later works proves crucial. For by its means he can eliminate all trace of what in the 1927 text (where the issue is not Being but Dasein’s understanding of Being) still looks to be a presumably subjectivistic transcendental problematic, in favor of a reading where “Being itself” is employed as an explanans for subjectivity. I confess little fondness for this sort of account, which in spite of all disclaimers always seems to “ontify” Being, attributing to it a kind of agency (giving, granting, sending) that effaces the ontological difference. Nevertheless, if one grants his methodological principle Raffoul provides an extremely acute reconstruction of a certain inner logic of Heidegger’s thought and offers a powerful defense of Heidegger’s struggle to escape traditional (especially modern) philosophy.