

Review of: "On the subject part III: what is the subject's end?"

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While it was at times difficult for this reviewer to follow the often-meandering thread of the author's presentation, I found this paper illuminating and filled with a wide potpourri of interesting ideas! I will make a few suggestions regarding what I believe should be developed further. The author may also wish to clarify those areas where my own understanding of his intent (as revealed in this review) is mistaken.

The author argues that there are two possible ways to explain the emergence of a conscious subject in the world. The first, which he devotes much of the paper to is a view he attributes to Fichte and (secondarily) to the physicist, John Archibald Wheeler, holds that the subject itself posits the objective world. The second, which is derived from the "many world's interpretation" of quantum theory is more difficult to make out, but seems to be that the subject is continually regenerated through an infinite series of quantum events through an infinite series of worlds. The author is of the view that it is impossible to decide between a philosophical perspective that begins with subjectivity and a scientific view that begins with the material world and ends with the emergence of consciousness. I imagine that these are indeed the two broad possibilities, and I see how the first is clearly represented by Fichte (and perhaps Wheeler) but I had difficulty understanding why the Everett many worlds theory is chosen by the author to represent the latter position, if this is indeed his claim. Further, the author makes the very interesting point that Fichte ultimately held there to be a coincidence of opposites between subject and object, idealism and materialism. It would seem that this "dialectical" position can be utilized to reconcile the divergent views "on the subject."

The author proposes that with regard to the question of existence we must distinguish between the theoretical "how come?" and practical "what for?", i.e. between what we might call the *cause* and the *reason* for the subject (and for that matter, the entirety of existence). He indicates that, according to Kant, these two questions cannot be reducible to one another. On the one hand, one cannot make an inference from the phenomenal world to the way the world actually is. On the other hand, since it is impossible for the subject of practical reason to view itself as a determined object, a philosophy that reduces the subject to material causality is unwarranted. One is thus put in the impossible position of both regarding oneself as a free experiencing agent that posits its world, and simultaneously holding that the material world is the substantial substrate and cause of one's subjectivity. Both sides of the subject-object divide cannot be substantial. The author suggests that emergence resulting in *animation* makes the *subject* absolute while *entropy* makes the *object* absolute and ultimately dissolves the subject. However, the author also suggests that both poles of this dichotomy, the absolutes of idealism and materialism are a mirage of the mind, a claim that I will return to at the conclusion of this review.

The author asks the question of whether it is possible to logically both establish the freedom of the subject, and maintain the object as a substrate. He suggests that this may occur by “turning being in the world into being the world.” He argues that the subject/object antinomy might be resolved through a bilateral affirmation of each of their presumably illegitimate inferences and claims to be absolute. He suggests that the subject’s idealistic claim to *retrospectively* be the origin of the world, and the materialistic claim to that the world is the *prospective* origin of the subject, might actually be identical, and only appear to be on the opposite ends of time. Here the author appears to appeal to a Buddhist (“both and”) or dialetheistic logic (Priest, 2006) to provide a viable exit from the Kantian antinomy.

The author asks the interesting question of whether space-time, which, for Kant is merely phenomenal appearance, is necessary for logic. Further, are the laws of logic absolute or are they somehow dependent upon the local and presumably mutable physical laws of our “bubble verse”? While it is easy to assume that logic is universal and trans-world—it may not even be transcultural, viz. Buddhist logic, which recognizes not only True and False but “both True and False,” and “Neither true nor False” as logical possibilities. Still, if the laws of logic, are mutable, what happens to philosophy? Again, perhaps by expanding our conception of logic philosophy becomes open to the possibility that something like “bilinear causation” or *coincidentiaoppositorum* is the vehicle for resolving theoretical controversy.

The author recognizes that the physical laws in the universe are mutable—and yet he curiously appeals to them in order to make certain philosophical points. For example, he states that “the 2nd law rules, supreme in nature, and no theory should attempt to mess with it.” He is particularly enamored of this law and quotes Arthur Eddington to the effect that while life defies entropy locally, there is no hope beyond the here and now, because ultimately entropy will dissolve all. Accordingly, “being in the world... Is the perfect death trap, not only for all subjects individually, but for the subject seen as emergence as such”. In fact, the author argues, following Rayleigh–Bernard, that since cells tend to dissipate heat as rapidly and efficiently as possible, by extension the subject itself is “a self undermining process” on a universal scale. This, I think, is a very interesting point, but it is one that relies upon the mutable laws of our local universe. Further, it assumes a linear interpretation of time, suggesting that the ultimate temporal ascendance of entropy, somehow undermines the subject’s existence—as in those theories which hold that life is meaningless in the face of death. To the author’s credit, the author proceeds to challenge this assumption, and suggests the possibility that the subject can “eventually break through the phenomenal wall into the “thing in itself,” perhaps via the philosophy of Fichte in which the objective world is posited out of the subject’s reflection of it. According to the author, Fichte affirms a bilateral affirmation and interdependence between the subject and object. “Materialism and idealism, to Fichte, are bilaterally, constitutive.”

The author argues that in contrast to Fichte, Kant, despite his efforts to create a synthesis between idealism and materialism, ended up in a form of idealism, similar to those eastern philosophies, which hold that a “non-spatiotemporal singularity” is the only true existent. Fichte, on the other hand points to a singularity that only appears to be binary from our frame of reference, but which involves a unity of opposites between theoretical and practical reason, between object and subject, and between the questions “Why is there something rather than nothing? And “and “Why do I act?” Bravo!

The author goes on to argue that the physicist, John A Wheeler, in his interpretation of the Copenhagen, view of quantum

mechanics, put forth a view that is very similar to that of Fichte. For Wheeler, the entire world is “a gigantic quantum computer “. I must confess that I had difficulty following the author’s argument here. I understand the critical role of the observer in Wheeler’s understanding of quantum physics but it is not clear how subject and object are interdependent in Wheeler’s view. More is needed to develop this.

The author argues that since nothing can come from nothing, existence must somehow affirm its own existence. Absolute existence must come out of itself “for where else would it come from.”

The author distinguishes this from both eternal recurrence, and the view that existence simply “just is.” Some form of “affirmation” and hence some sort of “dynamics” is necessary, and here the author (in Heraclitan or Hegelian fashion) appeals to “opposition“. One is also here reminded of Empedocles’ view that the world arises from strife and love, and even Derrida’s declaration that “difference is older than being.” Finally, David Chalmers (2022) and others have suggested that the universe arises out of the *difference* that produces bits of information.

Subject and object, according to the author, is the “chicken in the egg” through which the universe notices itself. According to the author, it is equal to say, either the subject or the object has primacy as they “are bilaterally constituent.” He then puts forth the interesting but undeveloped notion that the object’s freedom of creation and the subject’s, freedom of liberation, are bilaterally affirmative of one another. A tantalizing hint to his meaning here is found in his assertion that “whatever this something that is not nothing that we call the cosmos comes from, accordingly, it is free, i.e. it is not part of the determined, causal structure of reality.”

In a final, much briefer section of the paper the author turns to what at least initially promises to be an entirely different account of the emergence of the subject, one he suggests that arises out of Everett’s “many worlds” interpretation of quantum physics.

As a prelude to this discussion, the author (to my mind justifiably) criticizes efforts to dispose of philosophical problems through redefinition, e.g. the compatibilist notion of free will, which hold that a free action is one that is in accordance with our desires but is nonetheless caused by antecedent conditions. The author says that such a re-definition does nothing to eliminate our original intuitive conception of uncaused free action. He suggests that a similar, even more blatant effort at “redefinition” is present in efforts to diminish or deny consciousness as an epiphenomenon.

The author writes that the Everett, many worlds, interpretation of quantum physics entails a radical increase in “Gibbs entropy”, which he suggests leads to the conclusion that (because of the multiplication of unknowable worlds) our ignorance is continually increasing. The opposing theory, which posits a collapse of the, wave function” avoids the increase in entropic diversity involved in the infinite branching and re-branching of worlds in the Everett view. The author suggests suggests that in animation and subjectivity, something transcendental is at work. However, it is unclear to this reader how the Everett interpretation, which the author prefers to the traditional Copenhagen interpretation of Bohr, provides a theory of subjectivity. Bohr’s interpretation might suggest that there is no universe independent of the observer, but where is subjectivity, according to “many worlds”?

It seems that the author is suggesting that the only two possible theories of the emergence of subjectivity hinges on the question of how we interpret quantum physics. As a reader, I am unclear why this should be the case. In addition, it seems that in this suggestion the author may have discarded the view that scientific laws are mutable and is placing himself in league who hold that the *science of our world* is determinative for philosophy. Some clarification here would be welcome.

While in my reading several questions are left unanswered in this paper, they are certainly interesting questions and the should be applauded for raising them. I believe that the paper can be significantly improved by providing responses to the questions (and clarifying the misunderstandings) raised by this review, and through a rewrite that, while retaining the many interesting asides, clarifies their relevance and continually keeps the main topic in view.

To my way of thinking, the greatest contribution of “On the Subject, Part III” is to redraw our attention to Fichte’s notion that subject and world are mutually productive and interdependent. A way of thinking that is open to such a coincidence of opposites may enable us to move past the various antinomies of philosophy (subject-object, free-will-determinism, language-world, identity-difference’, etc.) and come to recognize that these dichotomies result from a sundering of an original unity by thought and language (Drob, 2017).

References

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