

Commentary

Subject, subjectivity, subjectivation by Paola Rebughini

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Paula Rebughini's article offers an insightful overview of the development of the idea of subject/subjectivity in western thinking since the mid- to late nineteenth century. She observes correctly that the idea of the subject has been deeply criticized, yet never completely abandoned, noting contemporary efforts to redefine it as a crucial element of social and political theory. In her concluding remarks she appears to approve of the 'light ontology' adopted by these theoretical efforts, whereby the idea of the subject is conceptualized in a way that takes into account 'cultural and gender differences, historical and situated processes of subjectivation, complex relationships with techno-scientific tools, contextual capacities of resistance and creativity', at the same time moving beyond old dichotomies such as body/consciousness, determinism/voluntarism and imagination/reason. I support such theoretical efforts. In my response to Rebughini I take issue neither with her historical reconstruction nor with the way forward indicated by her concluding remarks, but rather accept her implicit invitation to take some steps towards reconceptualizing the idea of the subject in the direction indicated.

For this purpose I want to highlight a dimension of the idea of the subject that is neglected within contemporary political theorizing. I use the term 'political theorizing' in a broad sense to include many kinds of social theory. It is important to notice, however, that I attribute to political theories an implicit or explicit ethical motivation, by which I mean a concern with political life not just as it exists empirically but also as it could be, were it to be changed for the better from the point of view of the good life for humans.

The neglected dimension is ethical subjectivity. By 'ethics' I mean ideas of the good life for humans,

understood in a loosely Aristotelian sense, expanded to allow for an open-textured account of humans and to include the social arrangements that would facilitate such a life. By 'ethical subjectivity', accordingly, I mean the subject as always positioned in relation to experiences, intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections relating to the good life for humans; these shape its identity (understood in a 'light ontological' sense) and motivate it affectively and intellectually. I start by explaining why political theorizing should take ethical subjectivity seriously. I then briefly consider one implication of doing so: the need to confront the question of ethical truth.

As I conceive it, ethical subjectivity is part of a 'light ontological' conception of autonomous subjectivity, defined as a human subject's capacity and willingness to form and pursue ideas of the good life for humans in engagement with other subjects and with non-human entities; I see this as an important intuition driving modern political theories in the western tradition, at least since Rousseau (Cooke, 2006: Ch. 6; see also Cooke, 2005). In my conception, autonomy has four key components: strong evaluation, rational accountability, independence and purposive rationality (Cooke, 2006: Ch. 6). Taken together, these four components amount to a picture of the autonomous subject that is fundamentally *relational* (interacting with other human subjects and non-human entities), permanently *in process*, *receptive* to otherness (of human and non-human kinds), *owing* accounts of its actions to others as opposed to owning them, and motivated affectively and intellectually by experientially based intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections relating to the *good life* for humans. This last part of the picture constitutes the

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explicitly ethical dimension of autonomous subjectivity. Such a rearticulation of autonomous subjectivity seems to me nicely in tune with the conceptualization of the subject sketched by Rebughini in her concluding remarks.

From the point of view of political theorizing there are a number of reasons why it is important to take account of the ethical dimension of autonomous subjectivity. One reason is that failure to do so leads to a privatization of ethical concerns. In contemporary political theorizing inspired by John Rawls's political liberalism, for example, particular ethical concerns, which are held to be formative of human subjectivity, typically are excluded from the category of public reasons, which are supposed to justify the basic constitutional framework and fundamental normative principles determining the legal and political system (Rawls, 1993). Elsewhere I argue that the resulting privatization may lead to citizen disaffection and also to the immunization of ethical (and religious) convictions and commitments against rational contestation in public spaces (Cooke, 2007, 2009). In the following I consider a second reason: the need to avoid authoritarian theorizing (see Cooke, 2005, 2006). Discussion of this will help to make visible a problem for political theorizing that follows from taking account of the ethical dimension of subjectivity: the challenge of developing an appropriate conception of ethical truth.

I see political theories as vulnerable to the risk of authoritarian reasoning (Cooke, 2006: Ch. 1). There are two aspects to this: an epistemological and an ethical one. Typically, the two go hand-in-hand. A political theory is open to the objection of *epistemological* authoritarianism when it ascribes deeper insight to a human subject or group of subjects, whose epistemically privileged perspective on reality is determined in advance by the theory. It is open to the accusation of *ethical* authoritarianism when it criticizes political institutions, practices, identities and so on without being guided by what particular subjects think and feel in matters relating to the good life for humans. In my account, the importance of avoiding authoritarian theorizing is explained through reference to the idea of autonomy. Thus, I posit a relationship of mutual dependency between autonomy and non-authoritarianism, in the sense that the value of each depends on the value of the other. The value of both can in turn be accounted for only in terms of other values that have emerged within western modernity, for complex, historically contingent reasons, to form an evaluative horizon for the human subjects that inhabit it. This does not in my view undermine the importance of these values since I consider this kind of historically attentive,

contextual argument integral to the process of justification in the case of deep-seated ethical intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections (Cooke, 2006: Ch. 6).

Even *critical* theories run the risk of epistemological and ethical authoritarianism. This is evident, for example, in Max Horkheimer's seminal essay 'Traditional and critical theory', published in the 1930s, when he writes that the transmission of critical theory:

... will not take place via solidly established practice and fixed ways of acting but via concern for social transformation. Such a concern will necessarily be aroused ever anew by prevailing injustice, but it must be shaped and guided by the theory itself and in turn react upon the theory. ... A version of [the theory] that has the propaganda apparatus and a majority on its side is not therefore the better one. In the general upheaval the truth may reside with numerically small groups of men. History teaches us that such groups, hardly noticed even by those opposed to the status quo ... may at the decisive moment become the leaders because of their deeper insight. (Horkheimer, 1975: 241)

Here, Horkheimer grants epistemic privilege to 'small groups of men'. This does not automatically make him epistemologically authoritarian, for there may be good arguments, in concrete circumstances, for holding that access to the truth is available only to certain individual or collective human subjects (arguments referring, for instance, to the 'propaganda apparatus'. Presumably, given the geopolitical context in which he was writing, Horkheimer has in mind the Stalinist and/or National Socialist propaganda machines).

Nor does it necessarily make him ethically authoritarian. To be sure, Horkheimer implies that the human subjects addressed by critical theory suffer from an ethical false consciousness; this entitles 'small groups of men' to criticize the prevailing injustice and work towards social transformation without taking account of how the subjects involved actually articulate their thoughts and feelings in matters relating to the good life for humans. However, here too his worries about the 'propaganda apparatus' could help him to make a case for by-passing the actually articulated ethical thoughts and feelings of those who suffer from the prevailing injustice.

However, it is at best an open question whether the 'propaganda apparatus' constitutes a convincing reason for restricting knowledge of the truth to certain human subjects and, in consequence, by-passing the actually expressed ethical thoughts and feelings of those who suffer under the prevailing injustice. It should be pointed out, moreover, that any such

justification would, if at all, hold only in the short term for a highly specific socio-cultural context. Since the line between convincing justification of superior insight and authoritarian theorizing is easily crossed, it is important to see that there are hints of an *alternative* model of critical theorizing in the above quotation that is more congenial from the point of view of autonomous subjectivity. This alternative model can be extrapolated from the opening lines of the quotation, in which Horkheimer appears to call for a *feedback loop* between theory and actual experiences of injustice. He writes that concern for social transformation, which is aroused by the prevailing injustice, must not only be shaped and guided by the critical theory, it must react upon this theory.

To begin with, these lines by Horkheimer can be read as a point about the *experiential anchoring* of theorizing and as a first step, at least, towards an ethically non-authoritarian approach. I take him here to insist on the experiential basis of the concern for social transformation, reminding us that experiences of injustice drive this concern. Read in this way, Horkheimer's position satisfies an important condition of ethical non-authoritarianism, for it acknowledges the importance of taking seriously the experientially based ethical thoughts and feelings of the human subjects on behalf of which critical theories speak. Admittedly, Horkheimer is suspicious of actual articulations by human subjects of these thoughts and feelings. Due to the 'propaganda apparatus' the subjects of experiences of injustice may articulate their ethical thoughts and feelings in distorted ways, in terms of needs, desires and hopes for the future, the satisfaction of which would merely reproduce the social conditions that caused the experiences of injustice in the first place. In other words, ethical experiences as articulated by actual human subjects are not epistemically reliable: we cannot take them as reliably representing truth, understood here as the reference point for claims to valid knowledge of the good life for humans. I want to emphasize, however, that there is no necessary conflict between the thesis of epistemic unreliability and non-authoritarian theorizing. For, a non-authoritarian approach to theorizing does not mean that the ethical thoughts and feelings of individual human subjects are epistemically privileged, in the sense that the subjects involved have access to valid knowledge of the good life for humans (to ethical truth). Such a radically subjectivist position would itself be a form of authoritarian reasoning, in this case coming from individual human subjects rather than theories (for a critique of radical subjectivism, see Hegel's reflections on 'Romantic inwardness' [Hegel, 1977] and my discussion of this [Cooke, 2009]). To the

contrary, a non-authoritarian approach means opening up subjective thoughts and feelings to critical interrogation in public spaces, with due attention to context-specific considerations that may make such interrogation unproductive or, indeed, itself a form of injustice (Cooke, 2006: Ch. 6).

The quotation from Horkheimer's essay can be read as a point about the epistemic unreliability not only of subjective ethical thoughts and feelings but also of the ethical perspectives adopted by critical theories. As we have seen, their ethically informed, critical perspectives may be distorted (perhaps due to the 'propaganda apparatus') and/or blinkered (perhaps due to the unavoidably limited character of human knowledge of truth). This, presumably, is why an experientially based concern for social transformation must 'react upon the theory': actual *experiences* of injustice must continuously feed into critical theorizing, enlightening it and keeping it open for new or forgotten possibilities relating to the good life for humans that, at any given time, are not part of its ethical self-understanding.

I have suggested that in Horkheimer's essay we find hints of a conception of political theorizing that is more congenial from the point of view of avoiding authoritarianism than one that takes its lead from his attribution of 'truth' and 'deeper insight' to small groups of men. In this alternative conception, political theorizing is a dynamic relationship, maintaining a feedback loop between the ethical concerns driving the theory and the ethical experiences of the human subjects it addresses. One advantage of this alternative model of theorizing is that it is fundamentally non-authoritarian, for it neither grants theories an epistemically privileged position nor by-passes the ethical experiences of the human subjects on behalf of which the theories speak. A further advantage is that it alerts us to a further danger endemic to political theorizing, while indicating a way of dealing with it. The risk is what I call the petrification of the theoretical imagination, understood as epistemic rigidity and lack of openness to new or forgotten ethical intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections. This risk can be mitigated, if not avoided entirely, if actual experiences of injustice continuously react upon theorizing, prompting revision and rearticulation of the ethical intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections underpinning it at any given time. Evidently, the same holds for the imaginations of the individual ethical subjects with which theorizing is concerned. Their imaginations, too, risk petrification, to be combatted by continuous exposure to the critical perspectives adopted by theories (combined with openness to learning from other sources of potential enlightenment such as art, political action and religion).

However, while the alternative model seems well suited for the purposes of non-authoritarian political theorizing, it engenders a problem for which there appears to be little appetite in contemporary discussions. For, it obliges political theorizing to confront the question of ethical truth, understood as the reference point for claims to knowledge of the good life for humans. In the alternative model both individual ethical subjects and theories make claims for the validity of the ethical intuitions, expectations and imaginative projections that guide and shape their identities but, in each case their claims are epistemically unreliable. One of the purposes served by the feedback loop between individual ethical experiences and theories is to make such claims more reliable epistemically (another is to avoid authoritarianism, yet another is to keep open the individual and theoretical ethical imaginations). To make ethical validity claims more reliable epistemically is to advance ethical learning in a context-transcending sense; by 'context-transcending' I mean that what counts as ethical learning is determined neither by the individual ethical subjects involved, nor by the theories that reflect on them, but through reference to some source of validity (truth) beyond either of them. Thus, in order to make sense of ethical learning in a context-transcending sense, we need a corresponding conception of ethical truth.

Broadly speaking, there have been three responses to this problem in contemporary political theorizing. The first has been to adopt the position advocated by Rawls in *Political Liberalism*, which holds that claims to truth have no place in public deliberation on the constitutional framework and basic normative principles in a given political order (Rawls, 1993). The second has been to embrace the kind of radical contextualism advocated by Richard Rorty in a series of essays since the late 1970s (see Cooke, 2006: Chs 1 and 2). The third has been to follow the lead of Jürgen Habermas, who proposes an epistemic-constructivist account of moral truth, and on my reading at least, also of truth in the domains of law and politics (see Cooke, 2013).

I have contended that a non-authoritarian model of political theorizing, which is in turn necessary from the point of view of autonomous agency, obliges such theorizing to confront the question of truth as the reference point for ethical learning. The first response is thus clearly unsatisfactory for our present purposes since it simply leaves the question of ethical truth to one side.

The second response, too, is unsatisfactory. I have claimed not only that non-authoritarian political theorizing requires an appropriate conception of truth; I have contended that this conception must be context-transcending in a certain sense. As I argue in

detail elsewhere, radical contextualism is ultimately unable to make sense of the idea of epistemic progress (and by extension, ethical learning) across fundamentally different historical epochs and socio-cultural contexts: it cannot consistently describe the relevant shifts in perspective as gains in knowledge; rather it is obliged to deny them any epistemic status and view them as essentially a-rational, for there is no epoch- or context-transcending vantage point that would permit it to describe these shifts in perspective as historical or inter-cultural learning (Cooke, 2006: Chs 1 and 2). In other words, radical contextualism lacks the conceptual resources to make sense of an idea of validity that transcends not only specific ethical subjectivities and specific theories, but also specific historical and socio-cultural contexts.

The third, Habermasian, response has the advantage that it allows for an idea of truth that transcends all given historical and socio-cultural contexts. However, it too suffers from certain weaknesses. One weakness is that Habermas (and those who follow him in this regard) has never developed an account of ethical truth, as opposed to truth in the domains of morality and law/politics (see Cooke, 2014b). This means that he lacks the tools for conceptualizing the kind of truth at stake in the non-authoritarian model of political theorizing I have sketched above. This is not just a temporary gap in his theory, to be filled at some time in the future. I hold that Habermas and his followers will never be able adequately to conceptualize ethical truth so long as they remain committed to the epistemic-constructivist conception of validity that Habermas continues to assert in the case of moral and political/legal truth. Since the limitations of this conception are instructive, let me conclude with a brief discussion of Habermas's position and my reasons for rejecting it as a potentially fruitful approach to ethical validity (see Cooke, 2013). Since his epistemic-constructivist conception is most evident in his account of moral validity, I use this to illustrate its weaknesses.

In his account of moral validity – his discourse ethics – Habermas rejects any source of validity independent of human practices of linguistic communication, leading him to propose what we may call an *epistemic-constructivist* conception of moral truth (Habermas, 2003: 266–75). In his view, moral reality – the moral world – is constructed. It is 'made by us'. The realm of morality is itself generated in discourse. He holds that in the case of moral validity, the very domain of validity has to be *produced*. Moral validity is defined as the outcome of an idealized discursive procedure, universal in extent, in which participants reach agreement that a particular norm or principle is equally in everyone's interests. This

discursively generated agreement is conceived of as the 'single right answer' to the question at hand; moreover, as an answer that is arrived at by everyone for the same reasons. This is what lends moral validity its unconditional, universally binding character and makes it analogous to truth.

I have a number of objections to this epistemic-constructivist account of practical validity. In the context of our present discussion, the most relevant objection is that it is unable to accommodate the experientially based dimension of ethical reasoning (Cooke, 2013). For, in the ethical domain the rational acceptability of validity claims may depend on shifts in perspective that are not attributable primarily to the exchange of arguments. Think, for example, of trying to convince someone by reasoned argument that she should become a vegetarian. In some cases, at least, no amount of reasoning will work until the person in question has come to see the world in a way that make her receptive to the reasons for being a vegetarian (perhaps as a result of an existentially significant experience such as a visit to an abattoir). But as soon as we allow for subjective experiences in specific contexts as possible co-determinants of rational acceptability, the Habermasian conditions for generating unconditionally valid knowledge (truth) no longer obtain. No matter how perfect the argumentative conditions, in any given instance the rational acceptability of a particular argument might depend on argumentation-external factors absent in that instance. This would mean in turn that even perfect argumentative conditions would not guarantee a consensus and, hence, that an argumentatively achieved consensus could not *produce* truth. In other words, if the experientially based dimension of practical reasoning is given its due, there can be no guarantee that participants in deliberation would agree on the rational acceptability of moral norms or principles *even under ideal discursive conditions*. In order to do justice to this experiential dimension, therefore, we need a conception of truth that transcends even idealized argumentative practices.

For these and other reasons, I do not consider an epistemic-constructive approach to truth helpful for our present purposes. For, in my conception ethical subjectivity involves actual experiences in the real world (here I have mentioned only experiences of injustice, but I argue elsewhere for a more encompassing approach that acknowledges the putative ethical significance of a plurality of kinds of experience, including, for example, epistemically unsettling ones (Cooke, 2014a, 2014b). Such experiences

in the real world contribute in important ways to ethical learning on the part of human subjects, and by extension political theories, and also help to avoid the petrification of the individual and theoretical ethical imaginations. Thus, if, as I suggest, contemporary political theorizing must take seriously ethical subjectivity and, as the appropriate complement to this, adopt a non-authoritarian approach to reasoning, it must make an effort to develop a conception of ethical validity that is not alone context-transcending, but also argumentation-transcending, perhaps even language-transcending. If I am correct, contemporary efforts to reconceptualize the subject beyond traditional dichotomies, on the basis of a light ontology, in ways attentive to cultural and gender differences, to its formation within socio-culturally engendered power relations, to its relationships with science and technology and to its capacities for resistance and creativity, will have to include efforts to reconceptualize truth as it relates to the ethically good life for humans.

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