

Substance and Subject, from Kant to Hegel

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In the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* we find one of Hegel's best-known phrases: "In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" (PhS, pp. 9-10; GW 9, 18). By making this claim, Hegel uses the term "subject" to characterize the way in which the Absolute realizes itself, which is that of a "movement of positing itself", as Hegel puts it somewhat later (PhS, p. 10; GW 9, 18). No doubt, this explication of the nature of a subject is an echo of the conception of the subject which Fichte had developed in the 1794/95 account of his Science of Knowledge. "The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it exists", Fichte claims here (SK, p. 97; GA I/2, 259). However, at the same time it becomes very clear in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* that Hegel's systematic project cannot be identified with that of Fichte. This raises the question what the Hegelian notion of the Absolute as subject owes to Fichte's conception of subjectivity and in what respect it diverges from it.

Insofar as the famous Hegelian claim in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* expresses the basic idea of the Hegelian system as a whole, this question is far too complex to be investigated here. Therefore, only one aspect of the Hegelian claim will be discussed here: the idea that the unity of substantiality and subjectivity is essential to the notion of the Absolute. It is important to note that Hegel does not say that the Absolute, instead of being thought as substance, is to be

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thought as subject. Rather, Hegel claims that the Absolute is to be thought as substance and *equally* as subject. Thus, the Hegelian claim involves the idea that the notion of the Absolute requires combining the concepts of substance and of subject. With this, Hegel's famous formulation takes up the question of the relation between the concepts of substance and of subject which had already been discussed by Fichte, whose contribution, however, would not have been possible without the Kantian discussion of the relation between these concepts. In what follows, I intend to elucidate the Hegelian claim in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* by putting it into the context of a 'narrative' which begins with Kant, however, showing at the same time that Fichte changed the way in which the concept of subject is understood in such a way that the Hegelian claim became possible. In this sense, it is the objective of what follows to show in how far it can be said that Hegel's famous claim owes something to Fichte.

1. The concept of subject and the metaphysics of the soul as substance in Kant

As is well known, the concepts of 'subject' and 'substance' play a central role in Kant's critique of rational psychology, more precisely, in Kant's critique of the syllogism which he considers to be fundamental to the rationalist metaphysics of soul as a whole: the "Paralogism of Substantiality". In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this syllogism is formulated in the following way:

What cannot be thought otherwise than as subject does not exist otherwise than as subject, and is therefore substance. Now a thinking being, considered merely as such, cannot be thought otherwise than as subject. Therefore it also exists only as such a thing, i.e., as substance (KrV, A 447/B 410-411).

How are we to understand the concepts of subject and substance which are present in this syllogism? To answer this question, it seems to me necessary to begin by looking at the first of these concepts and to note that Kant uses the term "subject" in (at least) three different meanings¹:

¹ The following discussion of Kant's concepts of subject and of their role in Kant's analysis of the First Paralogism owes much to Tobias Rosefeld's illuminating account (2000, see particularly 31 ff.).

(i) In the *logical* sense of the term, “subject” means either the subject-concept of a categorical judgement or that which this concept refers to and to which some characteristic is attributed by the predicate-concept of the judgement. In general, when Kant speaks of the “subject of a judgment”, this must be understood as expressing the logical sense of the term.

(ii) When Kant speaks of the “subject of inherence”, he uses the term “subject” in an *ontological* sense, referring to the ontological status which consists in something’s possessing properties without being a property of something else. According to Kant, to be a subject in this sense is nothing else than to be a substance. Something’s being a subject in this sense, that is, a substance, does not necessarily imply that it is also a subject in the logical sense – this depends on if there is a judgement whose subject-concept refers to it.

(iii) Finally, Kant speaks of a ‘subject’ in the sense of a thinking or knowing self – we may call this the *epistemological* sense of the term “subject”. When the word is used in this sense, the opposed concept is not that of predicate, nor that of property (or accident), as is the case with the logical and the ontological meaning, but the concept of object. Note that, when Kant speaks of the subject which judges (“*urteilendes Subjekt*”), he uses the term “subject” in the epistemological sense, whereas, when he speaks of the subject of the judgement (“*Subjekt des Urteils*”), the term “subject” is used in the logical sense, signifying the subject-concept of the judgement or that which this concept refers to.

All these three concepts of subject are involved in the Paralogism of Substantiality. Insofar as the minor premise speaks of “a thinking being, considered only as such”, the third concept of subject is present. Kant defends that the nature of a thinking being can only be understood from the point of view of the first person. I know what a thinking being is because I am aware of being myself a thinking being. In this sense, Kant says that “I cannot have the least representation of a thinking being through an external experience, but only through self-consciousness” (KrV, A 357/B 405; p. 415). Thus, the minor premise can only be understood from the point of view of the consciousness “I think”, that is, under the implicit presupposition that we are subjects in the epistemological sense of the term.

However, the term “subject” as it occurs in the major and in the minor premise of the Paralogism of Substantiality is not to be understood in the epistemological, but in the logical and ontological sense. Let us first look at the middle term of the syllogism: “what can

only be thought as a subject”. Here, the term “subject” refers to something to which some property is attributed by the predicate of a categorical judgement. Thus, the minor premise says that when I form a judgement which contains the concept of myself as a thinking subject, I can think myself only as the logical subject of the judgement, and not as its predicate. In a parallel passage in the *Prolegomena*, Kant says that “the thinking self (a soul) ... is the ultimate subject of thinking, which cannot be represented as a predicate of something else...” (Prol, AA 04: 334). The reason is that by the concept ‘I’ one does not represent a property which various objects can have in common. Instead, each one can apply this concept only to oneself – under this aspect, the concept ‘I’ differs from normal concepts, bearing similarity with a *conceptus singularis* (Cf. Rosefeldt, 2000, p. 40ff.).

According to Kant, the error in the Paralogism of Substantiality consists in confusing the “logical subject of thinking” with the “real subject of inherence” (KrV, A 350; p. 417). Thus, the distinction between the logical and the ontological concept of substance is decisive for the Kantian analysis of the paralogism. According to Kant, from the fact that in his self-consciousness each one can understand himself only as the logical subject of the judgements which contain the concept of ‘I’ it is inferred that we exist as ultimate subjects of inherence which cannot be determinations of something else. However, Kant objects, such an inference cannot be valid. At the same time, Kant considers the first premise of the argument true: “What cannot be thought otherwise than as subject does not exist otherwise than as subject, and is therefore substance.” But does this premise not permit exactly the transition from the logical to the ontological concept of substance? The decisive point in Kant’s critique of the Paralogism of Substantiality is that the first premise of the syllogism legitimizes this transition if and only if what can only be thought as logical subject is given as an object by some intuition. Only if something is given in intuition in such a way that it can only be thought as a logical subject we can conclude that it is an ultimate subject of inherence, that is, a substance. Kant holds that this is only the case when the object can be characterized as permanent in time whereas its determinations are subject to change, which, in turn, can only be the case when the object exists in space. In contrast, the consciousness ‘I think’ does not involve any intuition of oneself as permanent, but only the thought to be oneself an identical subject, which is a pure, thought-generated condition of the possibility of the “mine-ness” of experiences and, with this, the source of the unifying

activity without which multiple contents of experience could not be self-attributed. Kant expresses this claim by saying that pure self-consciousness is a “form of representation in general”, instead of being a representation of a determinate object (KrV; A 346/B 404; p. 414). Thus, the Paralogism of Substantiality confounds ‘thinking’ as an activity which refers to an object given in intuition (which the first premise is about) with the thinking of oneself as a subject, which involves no intuition of oneself as an object (which the minor premise is about). “Thinking” is taken “in an entirely different signification in the two premises”, says Kant (KrV, B 411; p. 448), and exactly for this reason the syllogism is a “paralogism”, a syllogism which possesses only apparent validity.

It is not my intention here to discuss Kant’s analysis of the Paralogism of Substantiality in a more detailed way. The important point I want to stress is an implication of Kant’s analysis of the argument which relates to the concept of subject in the epistemological sense: Kant’s critique of the rational psychologist’s argument presupposes that we are subjects and that we know we are subjects in the epistemological sense. The syllogism involves the concept of a thinking being which, according to Kant, is at our disposal only because each one is conscious of oneself as a thinking subject. This becomes particularly clear in the formulation of the second premise of the argument in A: “I, as a thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgements, and this representation of Myself cannot be used as the predicate of any other thing” (KrV, A 348; pp. 415-416). Thus, the argument presupposes that we are subjects in the sense of beings which possess self-consciousness. However, as Kant’s critique of the paralogism is intended to convince us, in spite of our knowing that we are subjects, it is not possible for us to know if we are substances, or not. Thus, Kant adopts a concept of subject which is characterized by ontological abstinence. There is a Kantian conception of the subject, but there is no Kantian ontology of the subject. This result will be important for the understanding of the characteristics of the Fichtean conception of the subject, to which we turn now.

2. The non-substantialist ontology of the subject and the transformation of the concept of substance in Fichte

The formulation of the principle of the *Science of Knowledge* in its first version (1794/95) introduces a concept of subject which Fichte explicitly relates with the Kantian discussion of self-consciousness in the Transcendental Deduction of the categories: “That our proposition is the absolutely basic principle of all knowledge, was pointed out by *Kant*, in his deduction of the categories; but he never laid it down specifically *as* the basic principle” (SK, p. 100; GA I/2, 262). However, as becomes clear in the exposition of the first principle of the Science of Knowledge, the Fichtean principle is not just a more determined formulation of the Kantian conception of the “I think”. Thus, a few lines later Fichte distances himself explicitly from the Kantian conception: “Thinking is by no means the essence, but merely a specific determination of existence; and our existence has many other determinations besides this” (SK, pp. 100-101; GA I/2, 262). This observation is revealing: it shows that Fichte pretends to understand our “essence”, or, more precisely, our mode of being as subjects. Thus, in contrast with Kant’s view, the Fichtean concept of subject concerns a certain mode of being. Whereas the Kantian concept of subject doesn’t involve any determination of our ontological status (Kant’s ontological abstinence), in Fichte the concept of subject turns into an ontological concept, referring to a specific mode of being. Thus, Fichte contributed to post-Kantian philosophy by founding an ontology of the subject. In Fichte’s definition of the concept of subject in the first paragraph of the *Science of Knowledge*, it becomes clear what this ontology of the subject involves: “*That whose being or essence consists simply in the fact that it posits itself as existing, is the self as absolute subject. As it posits itself, so it is; and as it is, so it posits itself; and hence the self is absolute and necessary for the self. What does not exist for itself is not a self*” (SK, p. 98; GA I/2, 259-260).

Two aspects of this definition are worth being highlighted: first, the mode of being of a subject cannot be understood from the point of view of an external observer. In contrast to “things”, which are what they are without possessing any knowledge about themselves, a subject cannot be what it is without having knowledge or consciousness of itself. Thus, a subject’s knowledge of itself is constitutive of its very being a subject. And, second, a subject possesses determinations only insofar as it attributes them to itself, in Fichte’s own words: “The self

is that *which* it posits itself to be; and it posits itself as *that* which it is” (SK, p. 99; GA I/2, 260). Consequently, if we want to understand the mode of being of a subject, we must understand in what way the subject is “for” itself and how it understands itself in the being-for-itself through which it constitutes itself as a subject. Obviously, some doubts arise here – for instance, it is not clear what is the epistemic nature of the original, self-constitutive knowledge or awareness of oneself which Fichte characterizes (rather vaguely) as a “positing” of oneself. On the most fundamental level, self-positing seems to be a pre-reflective self-consciousness which precedes the judgements about itself which a subject may produce.² However, the point which is most important here is clearly pointed out in Fichte’s 1794 account of the *Science of Knowledge*: with regard to its essence, a subject cannot be considered to be a substance in the sense of a “substrate” of consciousness. The concept of a substrate does not involve the idea of an essential being-for-oneself. In order to be a substrate – a “subject of inherence”, as Kant would say –, it is not necessary to understand oneself as a substrate. To be a substrate is a characteristic of “things”, and not of subjects as such.

With this, Fichte does not want to deny that we understand ourselves also as substrates, that is, as a kind of “thing”. Therefore, I can ask the question: “*What* was I, then, before I came to self-consciousness?” (SK, p. 98; GA I/2, 260) – a question which doesn’t make any sense when understood as being about me as a subject. However, such self-objectivation is a secondary act which presupposes our being subjects. Only insofar as we understand ourselves as subjects of representations, we can represent ourselves and become an “object of reflection”, as Fichte says here. Thus, our original mode of being as subjects does not consist in our being substrates and, with this, a kind of object, but in our exercising a self-referential activity through which we constitute ourselves. Whereas Kant holds that we know we are subjects, but cannot know if we are substances, Fichte claims that by knowing that we are subjects, we know that we aren’t substances. Fichte can defend such a claim because, differently from Kant, he understands the concept of subject to be an ontological concept which refers to a specific mode of being which differs from that of things. Consequently, in order to understand what a subject is it is necessary to adopt a new

² For an illuminating discussion of Fichte’s concept of positing (*Setzen*) as the I’s fundamental activity, see Zöllner, 1998, p. 43–47.

ontological conception whose core is, the idea of self-constitution by a self-referential epistemic activity – the act by which the I is “for itself”, which cannot be understood to be an act of some pre-existing substance. It is not an easy task to understand the nature of this act which doesn’t presuppose the existence of an agent and which Fichte in his 1794 account of the *Science of Knowledge* calls “*Tathandlung*”, emphasizing thereby the idea of the self-constituting nature of this activity or, as we may also put it, the performative character of the I. No doubt, this conception has a paradoxical character – and therefore, Fichte notes, the majority of men “could sooner be brought to believe themselves a piece of lava in the moon than to take themselves for a *self*” (SK, p. 162; GA I/2, 326). However, according to Fichte it is exactly here that the fundamental task of philosophy appears, namely that of understanding the peculiar nature of a subject which differs from that of any “thing”.

Even if according to Fichte a subject in its essence is not a substance, Fichte does not pretend to eliminate the concept of substance in his theory of subjectivity. As was already pointed out, in the first paragraph of the *Science of Knowledge* from 1794/95, Fichte refers to the conception of the subject as substance in the sense of a “substrate”, admitting that we are substances in this sense. But, according to Fichte this applies only insofar as we are objects for ourselves. Thus, the concept of substance essentially applies to objects of representation, therefore being a secondary concept in comparison to the fundamental concept of subject.

However, the systematic function of the concept of substance in the 1794 account of the *Science of Knowledge* is somewhat more complex. In the fourth paragraph of the 1794 account of the *Science of Knowledge*, Fichte introduces the category of substance as a condition of the possibility of representational consciousness – or, more precisely, as a condition of the possibility of the subject’s attributing to itself a determinate activity which is directed to objects. The subject can be aware of a representational act as its own act only insofar as it is aware of the act as one among various possible determinate acts which might be performed by it. At no moment a subject can perform the totality of its representational activity; only a determinate, limited part of this totality can be realized and consciously be self-attributed: “Every possible predicate of the self denotes a limitation thereof. The subject, I, is the absolutely active or existent thing. The predicate (e.g., I present, I strive, etc.) confines this activity within a delimited sphere” (SK 135;

GA I/2, 298). As has already become clear (and here is emphasized by Fichte once more), this applies also to the ‘I think’, that is, to thinking as one of the determinate or “limited” activities which can be performed by the self. Thus, in order for the subject to be capable of self-attributing determinate, object-directed activities such as thinking something or pursuing a goal, the subject must understand itself as a “substance”, that is, as something which can bear accidental determinations. And this means: the subject must understand itself as a substance in order to be able to *perform* determinate object-related acts, for it only performs such acts insofar as it “posits” itself as performing them.

Fichte claims that with this he identified the original function of the concept of substance. Thus, originally the concept of substance is not – as Kant holds – a “concept of an object in general”, but a concept by which the subject understands itself to be the author of determinate and accidental object-related activities: “There is initially only one substance, the self...” (SK 136; GA I/2, 300). As a consequence of this, the concept of substance must be understood to be a concept which is subordinated to the concept of subject, insofar as it is construed to be a concept by which the subject understands itself as being something (namely, as the author of determinate, “accidental” activities). With this, we have all the elements which are necessary to understand the Hegelian claim that the Absolute is to be understood as substance and as subject as the last step of a conceptual development which began with Kant and which took a decisive turn with Fichte’s thinking about subject and substance.

3. Subjectivity as the self-constitutive activity of substance in Hegel

Let us now return to Hegel’s famous claim in the Preface of the *Phenomenology*, in order to read it in light of the Kantian and Fichtean context presented above: “In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*” (PhS, pp. 9-10; GW 9, 18). Somewhat later in the Preface, Hegel makes it clear that the concept of subject is used here in order to highlight the mode how the Absolute turns itself “actual” (PhS, p. 10; GW 9, 18). And this means: Hegel construes the concept of subject as an ontological concept, as a concept which signifies a determinate mode

of being – and not, as Kant, as a concept which refers to the mere ‘form of consciousness’ without permitting any conclusion regarding the ontological status of ourselves as subjects. Thus, the Hegelian claim presupposes the transformation of the concept of subject which was brought about by Fichte. However, this does not mean that the concept of substance which is involved in the Hegelian claim can be identified with the Fichtean conception of the subject. The Hegelian conception is not about the active, self-constitutive character of the subject as an immanent ground of representational consciousness. Instead, the mode of being of a subject to which Hegel refers in his famous claim is that of an Absolute which is also substance. In contrast to Fichte, who subordinates the concept of substance to the concept of subject, Hegel construes the concepts of subject and substance as being equally original.

By the “substantial” character of the Absolute, Hegel understands its ontological immediacy, which he also characterizes as “being”, “essence” or that which the Absolute is “in itself” (PhS, pp. 10-12; GW 9, 18-20). This seems to mean that the Absolute possesses an intrinsic character which does not depend on any relation with something else, not even on its appearing or manifesting itself to subjects. Thus, Hegel’s characterization of the Absolute as substance involves a robust realism about the Absolute. Consequently, the Hegelian claim expresses the idea that the Absolute, which is “being” itself, realizes itself in an active, self-referential way – exactly in the way which is characteristic of subjects as such. This idea would not be possible, if “subject” was not understood as expressing an ontological concept, that is, as signifying a mode of being (the Fichtean legacy in Hegel’s claim). However, the Hegelian claim also implies that this self-referential activity cannot be identified with the “pure consciousness given in empirical consciousness” of which Fichte speaks in the first paragraph of the 1794 account of the *Science of Knowledge* (SK, p. 101; GA I/2, 263). What is in focus here is the subjectivity of being itself – and not subjectivity as the “being-for-itself” of the subject of consciousness.

But how are we to understand such a notion of subjectivity? The question of how the combination of the concepts of subject and substance as equally original concepts is to be understood seems to me the principal problem we face when we want to understand the Hegelian claim. Very different answers to this question were given by the interpreters of Hegel’s philosophy. Thus, Charles Tayler explains the

Hegelian claim that the Absolute is equally subject in the following way: “God thus posits the world in order to think himself in it” (Taylor, 1975, p. 108). According to Taylor, in Hegel’s conception the world is understood as that expression of God which is necessary for God’s self-knowledge. In this interpretation, the notion of subject which is involved in the Hegelian claims signifies a mode of being which essentially involves self-consciousness or self-knowledge. A different interpretation of the Hegelian claim was suggested by Walter Jaeschke. According to Jaeschke, the Hegelian claim expresses the idea that a self-referential movement which is characteristic of subjectivity is the structure of “actuality in general”, as well of logical actuality as of natural and spiritual actuality (Jaeschke, 2003, p. 182). Thus, by claiming that the Absolute is also subject, Hegel intends to establish a structural monism, the notion of subject signifying an ubiquitous, dynamic structure which is present in all spheres of “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*), even those which do not yet involve ‘being-for-oneself’ in the epistemic sense of self-awareness or self-knowledge. In fact, Hegel characterizes the self-regulating and self-organizing mode of being of plants and animals as forms of “subjectivity”. Dieter Wandschneider has shown that Hegel’s concept of subjectivity is similar to the concept of “autopoiesis” as used today in systems theory (Wandschneider, 2010). From this perspective, ‘being for oneself’ in the sense of self-consciousness or self-knowledge is only a special case, a “higher order”-case of subjectivity which, as the “telos” of the self-organization of actuality is a privileged case, but not the only instance of subjectivity. If we follow this line of interpreting Hegel’s claim, we can say that whereas Fichte turned the concept of subject into an ontological notion which signifies a determinate mode of being, Hegel transformed this concept into a category which includes the mode of being of any self-organizing whole or sub-system of actuality, from living beings to mental and social systems. From this, we can understand the Hegelian claim in the *Logic* that actuality is fundamentally “concept”, self-consciousness being only a particular case of the self-organizing activity which is characteristic of the concept. In fact, this claim would only be a later formulation of the idea which Hegel expressed earlier with his famous claim in the Preface of the *Phenomenology*.

Taylor’s and Jaeschke’s interpretations leave us with the question if Hegel wants to understand actuality (including

ourselves as “finite” subjects) as the expression of a superordinate subject which, through this self-expression, builds its self-consciousness, or as a hierarchical totality of instances of the same categorical structure. It is not the aim of this paper to give the answer to this question. Whatever the right answer may be, it refers to a transformation of the concept of subject which presupposes the Fichtean ontologicalization of the notion of subject, going at the same time beyond the Fichtean conception by considering the concepts of substance and subject to be equally original. To achieve this contextualization of the Hegelian claim in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* was the purpose of this paper.

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Resumo: No Prefácio da *Fenomenologia do Espírito*, Hegel defende a famosa tese de que “tudo decorre de entender e exprimir o verdadeiro não como substância, mas também como sujeito”. O objetivo deste artigo é colocar a tese hegeliana no contexto das discussões anteriores sobre os conceitos de sujeito e substância em Kant e Fichte. Enquanto que Kant adotou um conceito de sujeito que é compatível com o agnosticismo acerca da questão de se sujeitos são substâncias, Fichte transformou o conceito de sujeito num conceito que diz respeito a um determinado status ontológico, isto é, a um modo de ser que é caracterizado pela atividade de pôr a si mesmo pela qual um sujeito se distinguiria de coisas. Ao mesmo tempo, Fichte entende o conceito de substância como sendo subordinado ao conceito de sujeito. A tese central do artigo é que a concepção hegeliana pressupõe a ontologização fichtiana do conceito de sujeito. No entanto, defende-se também que, diferentemente de Fichte, Hegel entende os conceitos de substância e sujeito como sendo igualmente originários.

Palavras-chave: substância, sujeito, autoconsciência, monismo, o absoluto.

Abstract: In the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel famously claims that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*”. This article aims to put Hegel’s claim into the context of the preceding discussion about the relation between the concepts of subject and substance in Kant and Fichte. Whereas Kant adopted a concept of subject which goes together with agnosticism regarding the question if subjects are substances, Fichte transformed the concept of subject into a concept which signifies a peculiar ontological status, that is, a mode of being which is characterized by the self-positing nature which distinguishes subjects from things. At the same time, Fichte understands the concept of substance as being subordinated to that of subject. It is the central thesis of the article that the Hegelian claim presupposes the Fichtean ontologization of the concept of subject. However, it is also argued that Hegel, in contrast to Fichte, construes the concepts of subject and of substance as being equally original.

Keywords: substance, subject, self-consciousness, monism, (the) absolute.

Recebido em: 11/2020

Aprovado em: 12/2020