

Original Article

# I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT GOT INTO ME: WHERE IS THE SUBJECT?

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that subjectivity needs to be understood as a geography. The "psychotopical" analysis that is necessary in order to understand subjectivity requires that more emphasis be placed on arts of experiment drawn from the battery of performing arts that exist on the borderline between the humanities and the social sciences. Some examples are given.*

## Keywords

geography; space; psychotopical; affect; Tarde

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Grasping anything trustworthy concerning the soul is completely and in every way among the most difficult of affairs. (Aristotle, *De Anima*)

She's all states, and all princes I. Nothing else is. (John Donne, *The Sun Rising*)

**W**e have all had the same experience as Frank Bascombe in Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, blurting out an invitation that we really didn't mean to make, to a person (in this case his ex-wife) we are not sure we even like, simply in order to complete a conversation we never quite got on top of: "I am locked in a fury of self-regret, self-reproach and bafflement. Why, why, why, why, why did I have to ask?" (Ford, 2006, p. 158). Many lessons could no doubt be drawn from this everyday occurrence. We could draw psychoanalytical lessons



about mistakes, psychological lessons about turn-taking in interaction, and phenomenological lessons about how we experience the other. We could draw a sociological and historical lesson about the nature of middle-class interaction in the United States at the close of the 20th century. Or we could move into the neuroscientific domain and draw a lesson about the frailty of what we regard as a decision.<sup>1</sup> All valid and worthwhile moves, no doubt. But I want to use this common experience to draw a slightly different lesson about human beings: namely, about the location of subjectivity. I want to ask *where* quotidian decisions like Frank Bascombe's are actually taken, the decisions that seem to come from somewhere else. In order to ask this question (and like all good questions, it only leads to further questions, not answers), I want to start back in the history of what we now call psychology.

In order to undertake my task, I do want to retain the word psychology but I want to use it in the Aristotelian sense, as the branch of science that studies the soul (*psuchē* in Greek, *anima* in Latin) and its properties, but with the soul equated with the general principle of life so that psychology becomes the study of all animate beings, and not merely those regarded as having what we have come to call mind.

Of course, straightaway we face the problem of what constitutes an animate being. Nowadays, that is decidedly a difficult affair to handle. The boundary of what counts as animacy has been moving steadily outwards as the old Western distinction between nature and culture increasingly appears to be simply an artefact of perspective (Lloyd, 2007) and where, as a consequence, agency is ascribed where before no agency was noticed. So Aristotle included plants and animals in *psuchē* and nowadays, knowing what we do now, their claim would be even more pressing. After all, we live in a world in which parrots have been taught large vocabularies and can get an obituary in *The Economist* and in which New Caledonian crows routinely use all manner of tools to forge tools, not just in laboratories but in the wild. Indeed, rationality is a value that is now being associated with animals as well as humans (Hurley and Nudds, 2007). Equally, more and more opinion is starting to take in the object world, not just because human being is tool being but because objects are increasingly seen as having their own special powers that cannot be reduced to the status of acolyte (Harman, 2005). Some go farther still and talk of "nature-actors" like oil upon which civilizations have been built (Sloterdijk, 2007). Even more radically, many writers argue that space, understood as an ensemble of animate beings in interaction with each other in particular events, has its own push. The lay of the land really counts. It is this final moment of animacy that I will concentrate on in this short piece, and the issue of the melding between subjects and their "environments" (itself an inadequate 19th-century term) that is implied by it, a melding that goes far beyond a simple iterative interaction and that

taps states of awareness that go far beyond sight and sound and into the world of proprioceptive transformation brought on by extrapersonal loci (Pylyshyn, 2007).

For, whatever the case, it seems very hard to argue any longer that the geography of subjectivity is rooted in an individual subject, a nation state militantly united in the pursuit of consciousness and marching under the banner of a rationality inherited from the Ancient Greeks.<sup>2</sup> Whether the author is Jacques Derrida or Derek Parfit, pretty well everyone seems to subscribe to the idea that that kind of identity is an invented Western tradition that has had its day. But if that is so, how might we understand where the subject is. That is a much more tricky question. One answer, oft given, is the brain. But the brain is as much a transmitter and receiver as a fixed node. Its power comes from its ability to forage and monitor and then communicate that foraging and monitoring, rather like flocks of starlings do. Subjects are born in interaction out of patterns of interaction that spark characteristic responses. Or what about subjects as human bodies in intersubjective interaction, the classic terrain of microsociological approaches? Again, a highly attractive option but one undermined by an insistence that human interaction is the be-all and end-all of subjectivity. Or what about subjects as obeying the dictates of a vast underground territory of the unconscious? Again, is there really any need to posit an unconscious if so much human life occupies a realm that is both and rather than either or? Let's be clear. All of these approaches have something important to say about the wherewithal of the subject. But I want to start somewhere else, by returning to the turn of the century when psychology was only just crystallizing out as a separate discipline. Then, disciplines like sociology and psychology and anthropology occupied a space in which crossovers naturally occurred because these disciplines were still in solution – just as they are now again.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I want to take my inspiration from the work of Gabriel Tarde, work that was influential in its day and is currently enjoying something of a renaissance (Barry and Thrift, 2007).

For Tarde, the elementary social/psychological fact – interestingly, he made no real distinction between the terms sociology and psychology – was the relation of modification or communication (such as affect, obedience, sympathy, or education), not a subject that was there to be modified. His sociology neither assumed the existence of an autonomous individual nor of a global network of interconnected individual nodes. Rather, he was concerned with the sites at which behaviour was modified, that is with the moment, the location, and the mechanism through which difference or invention was produced. It followed that all kinds of actors might intervene in building an affection and Tarde's thinking gives them permission to do so. If there is a modern correlate for Tarde's thinking, it probably exists in the kind of postdramatic performances that have recently become popular, and which

attempt to generate new locatives that show us different things about how ourselves self by generating new forms of space.

What this conception moves towards is a notion of subjectivity as lines or fields of concerned and affecting interaction taking place in time. These lines and fields are not individual subjects. Rather, they are mimetic soups, waxing and waning territories of interest and desire, usually produced semiconsciously through proprioception. Their geographies can carry the interests of vast numbers of bodies and last for years, vast numbers of bodies but last for just a few days – but then continue to resurface (as in the periodic attention to the effigy of Princess Diana). They can pass in to and out of existence in very short timescales in large or very restricted spaces. They can glide from one register to another and be felt as literal shocks to the body. They are quite literally geographies of concern that can crop up in what we think of as a person's life before moving on to the bodies of others (Thrift, 2006, 2007).

In this conception, persons still exist but as much looser allocentric formations with porous boundaries over which they have only limited control. The geography of each person consists of numerous layered subjectivities flowing through them, modulated by a particular characteristic style that we might understand, as a way of composing, as soulful compositions, even as artforms. A person becomes a shifting ensemble of states that are received and passed on, states over which that person rarely has much in the way of direct control but which can be modulated in the passing in such a way as to produce nuances or even, at the limit, quite new forms of going on.<sup>4</sup>

Further complexity is provided by the fact that these lines and fields do not just circulate through human flesh but through all manner of other animate bodies too, bodies whose actions are more than reactions. Thus the world is being continually animated by actors who never work individually, always in concert, in a space that is in-between. Indeed, we might go so far as writers as various as Shotter or Sloterdijk and argue that the in-between of shared situations, and an accompanying art of orientation and tuning, is what there is and all there is.

In other words, I am suggesting that what we need is an epidemiology of subjectivity, understood as a study of the shifting distribution of subjectivity in a population of actors.<sup>5</sup> We might see such a geographical conception as a means of understanding subjectivity in what Sloterdijk calls a “psychotopical” way. Thus, Sloterdijk deploys a means of understanding that parallels psychoanalysis in that the aim is to get at unconscious truths but in this case by making explicit the truths about places of existence without using the analytical means of representational reason (Van Tuinen, 2007). Such a viewpoint immediately produces a very different stance to the world since what constitutes “inside” has to be rethought. People and things and circumstances become intermixed in an interior community which offers some degree of immunity to its members and

so produces a kind of temporary skin. The “environment” in which “we” are situated becomes something much more fluid – “atmospheric” as Sloterdijk would have it. In turn, such an approach demands quite different forms of methodology. That is why I have turned to the borderlands between geography and the humanities for sustenance and to a vision of the world increasingly put in circulation by artists and all the others who are trying to map subjectivities, each in their own way. In these borderlands we find an approach to the geography of subjectivity as space that is sophisticated and, at the same time, experimental, which attempts to produce artworks that can stand for particular subjectivities but also work on them at the same time. Might it not be possible to think of subjectivity as artists have begun to think of being, as a series of ephemeral mental objects of concentration and dispersal in which “physical handwork, material industry, and intellectual labour stand in for the hidden work of crafting self-awareness out of environmental fluctuations” (Stafford, 2007, p. 12)? Coherence does not emerge but “it is superimposed upon, or laced together [out of] preconscious processes oscillating with discrete or ‘self-collapsing’ conscious events” (Stafford, 2007, p. 14). Thus, the centres of control are propagating signals, not bounded entities.

A whole series of forms of art based on this premise have appeared in the last half-century or so, which act both as investigations of subjectivity and as challenges to accepted models of what subjectivity might be, and, at one and the same time, as means of undermining fixed notions of space and location and more generally what we regard as the inanimacy of space: installation art, land art, site-specific art, digital art, video art, and the like – and that is before we get on to the suite of investigations of subjectivity as space that have been going on in performance, in postdramatic theatre that refuses the space of the stage, in various forms of experimental dance, in the creation of soundscapes, in some of the remarkable ways in which digital innovations and mobile technologies have allowed new forms of scattering of action and meaning. Each of these challenges has routinely explored particular models of subjectivity understood as a roaming vector or a field, not least because they refuse the distinction between subject and environment, through, for example, their understanding that an extrapersonal locus is implicit in allocentric models of personhood, and through the creative use of props as means of explicitation. In turn, they are able to generate new locatives that can act as models for different kinds of subjectivity. For example, in installation art, Bishop (2005) considers the way in which psychoanalytic models, phenomenological models and models based on mimetic engulfment and activated spectatorship have variously played the role of theoretical animateur in installations. At the same time, no one could easily claim that these installations were simply illustrations of these theories: rather the theories become something between models of survey and playthings, mobilized by but never reducible to their audiences. Many other ways of proceeding that work on the borders between the humanities and social sciences

have also been invented. There is no space to go into these details here, but hopefully I can now make two more general points.

One is that the best way to investigate subjectivity is through the cultivation of arts of *experiment*. Thus, installations work on the principle that the best kinds of experiments are risky because they allow the world to speak back. Experiments can tell us a lot, in other words (well, at least the good ones can). The other is that such an experimental approach suggests a political project that has affinities with some psychological thinking but also moves beyond it. What is to be found is an art of making more out of the collision of subjectivities to be found in events, a means of making merry with all the states that compose a person with the intention that they will suggest new means of composition that heighten experience, a “vocabulary of affirmation” as Richard Ford has it (Adams, 2007, p. 11). States can be restated through commonwealths that act as constant generators of new possibilities. Many traditions in the humanities, some avowedly psychological, some not, have attempted this psychotopical task in one form or another – from street theatre to encounter groups, from various forms of co-improvised dance to participatory art. But perhaps they needed to think about space a little more as a means of unlocking the soul if we are ever to arrive at the expressive ecology that Sloterdijk (2007) calls “psychonautics”.

So let me end back with Frank Bascombe lamenting his lack of judgement, unable to understand his own mobilizations. Perhaps we need to see his involuntary slip-up not as a mistake but as an intervention coming from elsewhere that settled briefly in this event. It really did come from somewhere else. If that is the case, then the geography of subjectivity is no longer incidental. It is central to how and what we are. In other words, we need to study the construction of the where in wherewithal.

### About the author

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### Notes

- 1 We are, it is clear, a long way now from any thought of rational economic man, or indeed many other variants on this model of being human; it is commonplace nowadays that persons are not discrete islands of consciousness and agency. But, as the years go by, we are getting even further away from this depiction, as it becomes clear that this model and its variants do not even begin to describe human beings or human decision-making. In the past, I have used Libet’s experiments,

which showed that we are aware of intentions to act only after the brain area responsible for initiating acting has already been activated. But, as Roessner and Eilan (2003, p. 1) argue, this is actually a conservative finding, given what we now know about the illusion of conscious control; “for the suggestion underpinning Libet’s claims is that unless the initiation of the action is something we are aware of, the action itself is not under the kind of control we think we have as agents, the kind of control in virtue of which we speak of freedom of will”. In fact, the implied link between agency and self-awareness which still haunts Libet’s work is difficult to articulate or to defend. We can now be fairly sure that what awareness a person has is immersed self-awareness – awareness engrossed or absorbed in some temporally extended activity – in which the self figures only implicitly. Perceptual attention in action is typically focused on the objects acted upon rather than the actor’s own body: oneself *is* the doing. Insofar as a sense of personal ownership can be attributed to actions, it results from the *spatial* content of the movement specifications of actions: “the self enters the representational scene as the origin of the egocentric frame of reference utilized in movement specifications” (Roessner and Eilan 2003, p 44). In other words, a sense of self comes from the geography of concerned involvement in the world. That is an important finding for it suggests that personhood is bound up with objects, not separated out and projected on to them. Persons are maps of concern, constantly forming and breaking up. It also comes from the cognitive feeds that a person can access. Many of these will be in the form of systems of distributed cognition, very broadly specified to include codes like writing, addresses, and systems of numbers as well as all manner of everyday objects. In turn, such findings have considerable implications for what we regard as a person.

- 2 Of course, as Lloyd (2007) points out, there was no fixed Greek view of the subject.
- 3 As the boundaries between the psychological, the social, and the natural become increasingly open to question, so the study of subjectivity becomes an enterprise that will routinely refuse these disciplinary categories, whose end will, in any case, be hastened by the advent of machines of mass survey, information, and community like the internet which lay bare the soul in new ways that cannot be classified as sociological or psychological (Latour, 2007).
- 4 Here, I believe that the notion of character still has traction but reformulated in antihumanist ways.
- 5 Understanding actors in a Latourian way as the “cosmos” of unruly entities that can impinge on any particular situation.

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