

Chantal Bax

Subjectivity after Wittgenstein: The Post-Cartesian Subject and the 'Death of Man'.

London and New York: Continuum 2011.

x + 208 pages

\$120.00 (cloth ISBN 978-1-4411-4410-2)

In this book, Chantal Bax makes an admirable analysis of Wittgenstein's (W's) views on human subjectivity. Her goals are twofold: one, to find W's positive account of subjectivity by exploring different aspects of W's philosophy such as methodology, ethics, religion, psychology, ontology, epistemology, sociology, and anthropology; two, to contribute to the debate of 'death of man' by validating W's anti-Cartesianism as a rethinking (and not an unthinking) of human subjectivity.

The book has six chapters and two intermezzos. Chapter 1 gives an 'overview of the main argument and structure' of the book by outlining the main tasks carried out in the chapters to follow; besides that it explains the key words 'Subjectivity', 'Wittgenstein', and 'After'. The second chapter is on W's philosophical method. Bax gives a constructive reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*' 'discourse on method' (PI 89–133), while being well aware of the fact that many take W to be anti-philosophical. Very tactfully, by investigating the concepts of 'language-game', 'family resemblance', 'form of life', and 'grammatical investigation', Bax has certainly minimized, if not rooted out, the anti-philosophical threat from W's remarks on philosophical engagements as engagements with 'phantasms' (PI 108), 'chimeras' (PI 94), and 'illusions' (PI 96) as well as from W's demand for different 'therapies' (PI 133) in place of theories in philosophy and W's idea of exposing different philosophical 'pieces of plain nonsense' (PI 119) in order to bring 'words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (PI 116). Bax's insightful arguments against this threat form the heart of this chapter, which finally arrives at the conclusion that W is not asking for us to stop doing philosophy but to be aware of what may go wrong in the process of doing philosophy. We need not give up investigating the nature of things but must not overlook the particularities for the sake of generality. Accordingly, Bax interprets W as to be identifying a tension (between the 'craving for generality' and the 'heterogeneity' underlying the nature of things) rather than a mistake in philosophical theories.

Chapter 3 is on W's philosophy of psychology. According to Bax, this captures the nature of human subjectivity better than the way Cartesianism does, since W's account gives a more balanced treatment of the relation between inner and outer, or self and other, than the Cartesian one-sided treatment, which overemphasizes only one aspect of the human subject, namely, the mental aspect (the mind). Bax contends that 'W situates psychological phenomena on the outside rather than inside of the subject, or even in the interspace between a community of subjects' (71). Apart from highlighting some of the fundamental points regarding W's philosophy of psychology (e.g., there is no possibility of a 'private language', 'psychological language is not private language', 'thinking is not talking in the head', 'remembering is not perceiving with the inner eye', 'private ostensive definition' is no criterion for use of private words [as argued through the Private Diary User of PI 258], psychological terms do not refer to

private entities [as argued in the Beetle-box thought experiment of *PI* 293], the Wittgensteinian [anti-Cartesian] account of the asymmetry between First and Third person expressions of feelings and thoughts, that W's anti-Cartesianism is neither a kind of physicalism nor a kind of behaviourism), a very persuasive argument in terms of the concept of 'seeing as' is advanced in support of the idea that mental matters constitute only one aspect of human subjectivity. Bax applies her analysis of the concept of 'seeing as' to W's philosophy of psychology in order to reconcile the thinking subject with the perceiving subject, the inner with the outer, the subjective with the objective, and the interior with the exterior. Such a reconciliation, Bax contends, is the main problematic for W's account of the 'embodied and embedded subject'.

To contribute to the debate about the so-called 'death of man', in the intermezzo between chapters 3 and 4, Bax briefly explains what has gone wrong in the arguments of Frank and Murdoch when they ultimately try to conclude that 'the demise of the Cartesian ego undermines the very possibility of ethics' (75). Bax suggests that because W does not jeopardize 'the idea of the thinking and feeling human being' he does not negate ethics at all. One can very well take W's idea of ethics in a renewed way consistent with his rethinking of the human subject. Bax argues that when there is a conflict between our understanding of subjectivity and our ethical practices, there is no need to reject a new understanding of human subjectivity in lieu of ethical practices; the ethical practices may well be understood in a renewed way along with its corresponding subjectivity. After all, as Bax asserts, following Levinas, no satisfactory account of ethics is possible without 'overturning Cartesian schemata', insofar as no ethics can be understood without the self presupposing another.

Chapter 4 addresses W's philosophy of religion. Bax finds 'a not-quite-perfect compatibility' (114) between W's philosophy of religion and his philosophy of psychology. The extent to which W regards religious belief as residing in a 'person's verbal and nonverbal behaviour' W's philosophy of psychology is compatible with his philosophy of religion. But W's philosophy of religion also indicates that the interiority of religiosity cannot be dismissed. Of course, for W, 'there is no such thing as the soul' (*TLP* 5.5421); but he accepts a metaphysical subject as well as a metaphysical will that 'concerns the world in its entirety' (88). This metaphysical will, is '*sub specie aeternitatis*' (*TLP* 6.45), can according to Bax reconcile the conflict between the interiority and exteriority of religious beliefs, since will coincides here with action and since religiosity is manifested in a person's entire way of living. Looking into W's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, *Lectures on Religious Beliefs*, and *Culture and Value*, Bax unfailingly finds that 'the categorical difference between science and religion' 'forms the most consistent factor in Wittgenstein's religious work' (105). In addition to this, Bax is quite meticulous in outlining the finer distinctions underlying the religious points of view expressed through these three texts: the *Remarks* emphasizes the 'unreflective nature of ritualistic behaviour', the *Lectures* underlines the interiority aspect by explaining 'religious belief in terms of thoughts and picture' (101) without taking 'religious belief to be a literally inner event or process' (104), and *Culture and Value* underscores the role of the (religious) community without negating the autonomy of the individual.

The second intermezzo that follows chapter 4 is an intermediary between Bax's discussion of W's philosophy of religion and W's account of the relation between individual and society as found in *On Certainty*. It also briefly points out that the political adequacy of anti-

Cartesian (post-Cartesian) subjectivity cannot be denied on the grounds that subjectivity as represented through the Cartesian Ego is done away with in an anti-Cartesian move. Bax places Judith Butler's critic of Benhabib's demand for 'a form of subjectivity prior to power relations' and tries to explain how anti-Cartesianism is 'feminism's closest friend rather than its enemy' (118).

The social epistemology advanced through W's *On Certainty* does not result in an account of subjectivity that would have the subject socially constituted. In Chapter 5, with reference to *On Certainty*, Bax advances the idea that 'no subjectivity without community' does not entail that a subject cannot 'diverge from the customs and conventions' of the community. Accordingly, she finds no contradiction between the theses that 'subjectivity is essentially social' and that 'religious believers should choose a direction in life' (140). After highlighting the social aspect of the certainty which is 'never called into question' (OC 87), which is kept beyond doubt (OC 280) with no requirement of any justification and which stands as a 'river bed' for the flow of beliefs to survive, Bax argues that W also advances a kind of naturalism which keeps the autonomy and creativity of the subject intact. Not only is it natural for infants 'to believe or trust their parents and teachers', which Bax regards as 'basic in the sense of being unacquired or instinctive' (127) and takes 'their trusting attitude to be default' (128); even in beginning to believe the certainties handed down by her elders, the infant 'already distinguishes self from the other and other from the self' (129). This ability to differentiate is not leant from others. Finding this naturalism quite significant in W's account of the relation between the individual and society, Bax concludes that W's 'naturalism prevents him from maintaining that the subject is socially constituted all the way through' (130).

In the concluding chapter, Bax summarizes the question of 'subjectivity after Wittgenstein'. Highlighting her conclusions in the previous chapters, she claims with some justification that W's 'embodied and embedded account of subjectivity' is not 'a simple reversal or negation of the Cartesian take on the nature of man' (147). As W's rethinking of subjectivity is not a complete 'unthinking' of the subject, 'subjectivity after Wittgenstein' does not presuppose an ethically and politically inert subject. On the contrary, it upholds a dynamic, creative and autonomous subject manifested in the 'sayings and doings' of different dimensions—psychological, ethical, religious, cultural and socio-epistemological.

Although scholars familiar with Anglo-Saxon interpretations of W's philosophy may be disappointed in their search for a serious discussion of any such interpretations in this book, the book can be taken as a positive step towards the goal of presenting W's account of subjectivity as an alternative to Cartesianism. Moreover, one should appreciate that the embodied and embedded self of the authorship *qua* a creative subjectivity is not an unconditional activity. This scholarly book is certainly a notable contribution to the literature on Wittgenstein, particularly to W's philosophical anthropology. I believe that no future discussion on the 'embodied and embedded self' from W's point of view should overlook it, at least among scholars in the continental tradition.

Laxminarayan Lenka

North-Eastern Hill University, India