

## Returning to the Subject

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An academic career, especially in its early stages, is typically marked by ups and downs that can have a lasting influence on the choice and direction of scholarly interests. Disappointments, often due to an unreliable job market—for example, are sometimes inevitable but need to be overcome and, if one is lucky, such reversals can also be counterbalanced by other more favorable developments and encounters. In my own case, having had a teaching appointment terminated twice, I was fortunate finally to secure tenure in the southwest corner of Ohio, not too far from the campus of Miami University. Whence my involvement with the Society for Critical Exchange, which I consider to be one of the more felicitous affiliations to have inflected the scholarly trajectory of my academic pursuits.

My initial contact with SCE took the form of a response to an invitation by Jim Sosnoski. In the spring of 1979, Jim had sent out a “Call for Panelists” who were to become the participants in a workshop on literary theory during the MMLA convention in Indianapolis later that year. I don’t remember where and how I had come across the announcement, but I was most eager to seize this opportunity. Specifically, Jim was asking aspiring participants to submit a series of questions that “we need to ask ourselves at present about the relationship between theory and practice,” and to mention the “problematic critical situations” that were motivating the questions raised as well as recent publications pertaining to this problematization. I submitted my questions and my reasons and was most gratified to receive Jim’s letter letting me know that they had been selected and I was to be a participant on the panel. A few months later, I was on my way to Indy looking forward to a stimulating critical exchange.

As it turned out, the session was more than stimulating and the exchange, at times, took on the appearance of a confrontation opposing two irreconcilable positions. As the rabid post-structuralist and Foucaultian that I had become by this time, I had chosen to present “the death of the subject” as my problem of choice. Little did I know that the moderator/respondent on the panel was to be David Bleich, who had just published *Subjective Criticism* (something I found out only afterwards). David’s main purpose had been to bring out the primacy of the individual self in the dual process of reading and interpretation, while one of my stated aims was to consider the ways in which “language manages to reject the author and to evacuate

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the subject.” I don’t recall the particulars of the debate—which was to take up most of the session and leave very little time for the other issues that had been proposed—but I do remember David asking me somewhat incredulously if I really believed all of this talk of absent authors and disappearing selves. To which I responded by saying something to the effect that I was not able to answer his question since “I,” the subject of my belief, was simply a relay and not really present, ontologically speaking. Everybody laughed and we parted on cordial terms. The liveliness of the debates and the conviviality of the participants were to characterize many other meetings organized by SEC and GRIP over the years, but this first encounter remains among the most vivid for me and it is with a great deal of pleasure that I return to it thirty years later. I would like to do more than reminisce, however, and wish to take up, once more, the topic I proposed back then, with the hope that, today, I can perhaps explain myself better than I did then.

**The Self and Its Truths:  
A Contemporary Take on Some Eighteenth Century Notions<sup>1</sup>**

While the notion of the self can be counted among the most common themes undertaken by philosophical investigations over the centuries, it has also remained among the most resistant to attempts at explaining it. As John Searle puts it, “the notion of the self has for centuries been something of a scandal in philosophy” (32). The concept, it appears, is subject to a number of seemingly intractable paradoxes. For example, it presents itself, at first glance, as a given, as something that goes without saying, as a universally recognizable form of identification common to all peoples and all times. Upon closer examination, however, it turns out to be most imprecise, ever-changing and evolving continuously, as the anthropologist Marcel Mauss pointed out some seventy years ago in a seminal conference paper entitled “A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self.” “Far from existing as the primordial innate idea, clearly engraved since Adam in the innermost depths of our being,” noted Mauss, “it is a notion with a long history, one that “slowly developed over many centuries and through numerous vicissitudes, so that even today it is still imprecise, delicate and fragile, one requiring further elaboration” (20, 1). Mauss also recognized the eighteenth century as a crucial time period that was marked by an obsession with certain fundamental questions, such as the problem of knowing “whether the individual soul is a substance, or supported by a substance: whether it is the nature of man, or whether it is only one of two natures of man; whether it is one and indivisible, or divisible and separable; whether it is free, the absolute source of all action, or whether it is determined, fettered by other destinies, by predestination” (20). Today, the link between our notions of the self and the ideas on the topic that were spawned in the eighteenth century has become a commonplace. According to Thomas DiPiero and Pat Gill, “many of our modern conceptions of the *individual*—both as a political subject and as a psycho-social being—emerged in some form during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (3). Joan DeJean finds that the cultural crisis “that shattered

France in the late seventeenth century, the so-called Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns (1687-1715) known in its English incarnation as the Battle of the Books" was also notable for a fundamental transformation whose effects are still with us: this was a period, DeJean suggests, that "witnessed at the very least a radical redefinition of subjectivity—a redefinition so radical that it might be more correctly termed the invention or the formation of what we think of today as subjectivity" (ix, 92).

Raymond Martin and John Barresi have recently provided a more precise interpretation of the transformations taking place during this time period. For them, what takes place can be summed up as a simple change of terminology: it is a time when the self replaces the soul. The key to this dramatic exchange is the rapid rise of scientific thinking. Thus, "the seventeenth century began with the revolutionary theoretical innovations of Kepler and Galileo. It ended with the dazzling theories of Newton, who showed once and for all that there could be a natural philosophy of the external world" (141). These radical discoveries did not, at first, affect interpretations of human nature. It was Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding" that provided the impetus for a changed approach to the question of the human mind: Following its publication, Martin and Barresi argue, "progressive eighteenth century thinkers were intent on showing that whereas Newton had shown that there could be a natural philosophy of the natural world, their job was to show that there could be a natural philosophy of the internal world" (141).

Needless to say, these inquiries into the nature and functioning of the human mind took many forms and differed from country to country. Though varied in their approaches and assumptions, they did eventually converge toward a kind of consensus. As a result, by the end of the eighteenth century, theories based on a notion of an immaterial substance had been effectively marginalized or discredited to be replaced by "the view that our minds are dynamic natural systems subject to general laws of growth and development." In concluding, Martin and Barresi note that "there would be no transition in the history of Western discussions of the self and personal identity more consequential than this one" (141).

While the eighteenth century thus set the terms of the debates and investigations concerning the self, the scientific and philosophical approaches to these questions have undergone considerable modifications and Martin and Barresi also make the point that, "Although key elements of the eighteenth century debate over personal identity and the debate in our own times are remarkably similar, the larger contexts in which the two debates occurred is radically different. The eighteenth century debate occurred in the context of a larger debate over the naturalization of the soul. In our own times, the debate occurred against the backdrop of an intellectual view in which the 'soul' had already been naturalized" (*Naturalization* x). This is a circumstance recognized most recently by the American philosopher John Searle. "What is so special about the present period?" He asks, and answers: "I am arguing that it is now possible to treat all these issues 'naturalistically,' that is, in a way that makes them consistent with, and indeed a natural outgrowth from, what I

call the basic facts" (18). Here, Searle is referring to the scientific view of the universe thus also pointing to a noteworthy parallel between the circumstances attending the eighteenth century debate and those surrounding our investigations today. Just as science was instrumental in transforming certain basic assumptions governing the debate over the self during the period marking the dawn of the Enlightenment, so today's debates about the reality and function of the self are inflected by advances in the neurosciences. As Jerrold Seigel, the author of *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century*, has noted, "perhaps the most promising attempt to bridge the gap between bodily existence and reflective intentionality has been made in recent studies of the brain" (20). The difficulties are still nowhere near to being resolved, but they are bringing scientists and philosophers together—just as they did in the eighteenth century.

The manner of posing the problem is also strikingly similar, on occasion. Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century, as Catherine Glyn Davies has shown, one of the main advances achieved in the theorizing of the human mind was the "growing belief that consciousness is a function of the body, not a mental perception or even a process different in kind from bodily states"; as a consequence, consciousness could be seen "as a function of suitably organised matter" (84). Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio posits today the relationship between bodily and mental states as a given: There are, according to him, three areas of operation that constitute the unity of consciousness—the body, the world, and the brain: "The neural patterns and images necessary for consciousness to occur are those which constitute proxies for the organism, for the object, and for the relationship between the two. Placed in this framework, understanding the biology of consciousness becomes a matter of discovering how the brain can map *both* the two players *and* the relationship they hold" (20).

Similarly, the dilemmas we face when trying to understand the reality of the self are often expressed in ways that echo eighteenth-century formulations of the problem. Thus the paradox of the circularity in the way we represent the world to ourselves has been succinctly characterized by the British philosopher Roy Sorensen: "The order we 'discover,'" Sorensen writes, "is the order of a notational scheme that we project upon the world" (quoted in Restak 39). Here is Diderot's version of this insight: "The universe," he notes in his *Encyclopédie*, "offers only an infinite number of unclassified, uncategorized particulars; it is the human mind that imposes order upon them" (quoted in Davies 128). For Searle, the dilemma is at the very crux of the theorizing he wishes to pursue. The basic problem is as follows: "How, and to what extent, can we reconcile a certain conception that we have of ourselves as conscious, mindful, free, social and political agents with a world that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless particles in fields of force?" (81). It is of course in the manner of addressing this dilemma that the most dramatic changes have occurred since the eighteenth century. In this regard, some of the basic premises guiding the debate have changed radically. The methodology in the eighteenth century consisted mainly of analogical rationalizations that relied on such metaphors as the eye, the mirror, the musical instrument,

the clock. The philosophes using them were often the first to admit the inadequacy of such explanations and ended up recognizing the limitations of human intelligence in such matters: “These protestations of ignorance about the self,” Davies points out, “were part of a wider skepticism concerning the scope and purpose of human knowledge” (108).

Admissions of ignorance and acknowledgments of the limitations on human capacity for understanding such matters are still commonplace today. At the same time, the scope and complexity of the issues involved have increased considerably. In the context of today’s research, to put it briefly, the work of neuroscientists has resulted in a broadening of the context informing an individual’s perception of self and world. It has extended the socio-cultural perspective to include an evolutionary, adaptive dimension overseen by consciousness, as well as a pre-conscious biological level of functioning. Consciousness is now seen as an integral part of an organism—just as the organism is seen as an integral part of the world it inhabits: thus a greater importance is given to the body and to its genetic and biological determinisms. The self is shown to be grounded in non-conscious neural patterns that form as a result of the organism’s history over time. Awareness of the self is seen as molded by the conscious involvement of an organism with its world, an awareness made manifest by the act of cogitation and the deployment of language.

As an example of some of these innovative approaches, I would like to briefly survey the latest work of Jean-Pierre Changeux, one of France’s preeminent neuroscientists. What makes the research undertaken by Changeux of special interest for us, is his constant insistence on an evidence he deems undeniable, namely the fact that “from now on, human and social sciences find themselves united, for better or for worse, to brain science” (*Raison et plaisir* 16). It is an understanding that is particularly evident in his most recent book on *The Psychology of Truth*. In it, Changeux begins by positing a necessary correspondence between brain and world, “between the facts of the world and our ideas of them.” That is, the brain has to be receptive, ready to make connections, to receive signals and interpret them—there has to be what Changeux calls “an ‘isomorphism’ between the structures of thought and reality” (39, 40). What makes the brain receptive and ready to connect, is a grid of pre-representations that “form the basis of the brain’s ability to make sense of the world” (60). These are neural patterns in the brain that have developed over time in response to sense experience and have been enhanced and reinforced by positive rewards and signals. If, on the other hand, “the signals are negative, or attention is no longer sustained, this pre-representation can be revised or replaced, through a process of trial and error, by another discrete combination of workspace neurons” (93). All of this activity of selection, reinforcement, or elimination takes place in an area of the brain Changeux calls the “global workspace.” It is a space of neuronal activity that is open to input from four types of sources. Two of them are the perceptual systems representing the present and long-term memory relating to the past. These, in turn, are filtered or enhanced by the attention systems providing the necessary focusing and by evaluation systems that control the reception of signals in

terms of established values. The primary result of the activity taking place in the global workspace is to produce a future-oriented output affecting, in particular, the motor systems of the body.

The effectiveness of the whole process is to be understood in terms of the evolution of the human species because “genetic evolution led to the stable storage in memory—that is, the brain—not only of a large endowment of innate knowledge but also of impressive capacities for acquiring, processing, communicating, and testing knowledge obtained from experience of the outside world” (183). In addition, Changeux considers a fluid interaction between genes and the environment to be an indisputable given. “The individual character of each person,” he explains, “is thus constructed as a function of what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called ‘habitus’—a unique synthesis of one’s genetic endowment, circumstances of birth and upbringing, and subjective experience of the social and cultural environment in which one has grown up” (208). The mind’s interaction with its social and cultural environment is thus a fundamental constitutive process serving to shape and develop the individual’s neuronal patterns. To be sure, our understanding of this process has undergone a marked evolution. While there was a time when this interaction was mainly conceptualized in terms of myths and rituals, explains Changeux, “they have to a considerable extent been transformed or replaced in the course of recent cultural history by a new type of representation—scientific ideas” (220). Science, he is convinced, can certainly offer a more reliable account of reality and provide better guidelines for coping with present or future difficulties we may encounter in our interaction with the world around us. The main reason for preferring science over myths is that “myths are ‘frozen,’ whereas “scientific theory, by contrast, [ . . . ] is constantly modified and amended in the light of new evidence” (234). It is the evidence of a changing world that scientific thinking is particularly adept at discerning and, in this regard, what scientists understand better than anyone else, perhaps, is that “the natural world must now be protected against destruction by humankind.” The solution, Changeux is quick to add, “does not lie in a wholesale rejection of technology. It resides instead in the development of a culture that is more harmoniously adapted to the realities of the world” (257). Moreover, to develop a better understanding as well as more efficient and accurate ways of conceptualizing these realities, we are facing today an “urgent necessity to devise new symbolic systems suited to the promise and the dangers of a world of perpetually evolving technologies” (259).

This task of devising new symbolic systems, I would like to argue, has been going on for some time already and the scientific study of the mind can be taken to validate, clarify, or complement the creative and theoretical work that has been accomplished in the second half of the twentieth century in France and elsewhere. By disclosing the unexamined dimension of thought, the theories of New Novelists and of Poststructuralists brought out the metaphysical presuppositions underlying representations of the workings of the mind. The attention paid by these writers to the very fact of our existence, to our experience of existence as it is reflected in language, produced a fundamental reorientation in thinking our relationship to reality. For Michel Foucault

and Pierre Bourdieu, for example, the self is a “subject” that is constructed by social and historical factors residing below the level of consciousness. Thus our very comportment and even understanding of ourselves are already built into our bodies in ways that we do not and perhaps cannot attend to explicitly. This is precisely the insight offered by the more recent discoveries of neuroscientists. While Descartes made thought into the very essence of being, Antonio Damasio’s research has convinced him that our thought is very much dependent on our being or, as he puts it, “we are, and then we think.” It is in this regard that today’s scientists and philosophers are both continuing the project of the Enlightenment and taking it much further along. Richard Rorty has explained that the Enlightenment had in reality two projects: one political, the other philosophical, and that it is the second project that has been most subject to critiques by “philosophers like me,” writes Rorty, “who think the Enlightenment philosophers were on the right track, but did not go far enough. We hope to do to Nature, Reason and Truth what the eighteenth century did to God” (19).

Advances made in these areas today promise indeed to revolutionize the ways in which we have always thought about the reality of the self and its relation to the world because the research conducted in the field of brain science often runs counter to ingrained commonsensical ideas. For example, experiments have shown that the brain makes decisions before these become conscious acts of volition, that is, “the experience of consciously willing an action begins after brain events that set the action in motion. The brain creates both the thought and the action, leaving the person to infer that the thought is causing the action” (Restak 40). “This is a heady and sobering thought,” notes neurologist Richard Restak, “we don’t so much make decisions as our brain makes them for us” (42). Of course, taking the brain as the initiating and controlling agent of actions and decisions does change our perspective on the world. Such notions as free will and responsibility need to be completely rethought, for example. Thus, it is becoming increasingly evident, as Rosen has noted, that “the new neuroscience is not merely about understanding but also about changing the world” (15).

La Bruyère famously stated at the close of the seventeenth century that it was no use trying to come up with new ideas since everything had already been said. More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy has taken up La Bruyère’s phrase and given it a new twist. Yes, he admits, everything has been said, “but everything is still to be said, because the whole as such needs always to be said anew” (*Être singulier pluriel* 112). The singular, Nancy argues, inevitably implies the plural and no singular claim of truth and value derived from a notion of identity can maintain itself today. Thus for Nancy, the reality of our times is to be found in the faults opened up by the failure of meaning, the failure of humanism and civilization to make sense. But these are faults that provide new opportunities for developing a new understanding. As the sense that modernity tried to make of the world disintegrates, we are reminded anew that our thinking, seeing, representing do not “reproduce” or “copy” reality. Rather, as Nancy suggests, “We could say that it is something more like ‘recording’: entering in an order of markings a

reality that is heterogenous to this order" (*L'oubli* 105). Enlightenment thinkers produced some remarkable insights that can still serve as guideposts in the process of understanding who we are today; at the same time we are also bound to come up with a different narrative, since, as Nancy has also aptly observed, we are ourselves the meaning of our being and as we change, as our world evolves, so does the meaning of who and what we are.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper given at a conference on Eighteenth Century Narratives at the University of Exeter.

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Sebastiano Serlio. *Tragic Scene*.

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