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The Question of Subject in Descartes and Foucault

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Abstract: It is important to make clear the question of subjectivity, how the Modern zeitgeist imposes "subject" idea and around which thinkers the important breaking points that appear in the historical adventure of subjectivity is formed. Since the metaphysical understanding of modernity is based on subjectivity, the essence of human existence becomes science, and the issue of truth evolves into the consciousness of consciousness to know first "itself" and then other existing ones. This work will examine the "subject" issue, which has a wide scope, based on Descartes and Foucault. Thus, it will be analyzed how modern subject thought transformed with Descartes and how it is related to Foucault's criticism of the subject. The study reveals the connections of the humanist belief in the subject on the lines of Descartes and Foucault. The article will present a comparison of Descartes' and Foucault's theory of the subject after a brief review of how subjectivity has transformed.

Keywords: Descartes, Foucault, modern philosophy, humanism, subject.

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1. Transformation of Subjectivity from Hypokeimenon to Human Subject

It can be stated that the notion of subjectivity has expanded, enriched and changed direction throughout the history of thought. The phenomenon of "subject" mentioned in the Greeks is used in the meaning of "hypokeimenon (the thing that stands in front), the reality that confronts the man." In other words, in Greek origin "the Latin equivalent of hypokeimenon, which means basis, is subjectum."[1] Ancient Greek thinkers call what we call "the object" today "the subject". The fact that they find themselves in it, not despite the reality that comes before them. Thus, the term *hypokeimenon*-subject refers to what collects everything within itself and what lies beneath.[2]

For the Greeks, the hypokeimenon meant "substance" in the meaning of the fundamentally prominent thing that contained the various dimensions of a whole. With another phrase, the hypokeimenon was the "foundation" or "substance" member of things. The living substance was used to mean the thing that brought it to the fore and "realizes" itself. Therefore, the substance has found meaning as synonymous with "subject." It is a phenomenon that can be defined as we speak of "the subject of research" in today's world.[3]

However, note that the word *hypokeimenon* is not used in Ancient Greek thought to mean a subject that provides a basis for knowledge. As can be seen from here, the meaning expressed by hypokeimenon, in other words, "the subject of the Greeks," was definitively transformed by Descartes.[4] In this way, in the process up to Cartesian thought, the dominant and unique understanding of the subject reaches our present-day by going through radical

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1   Ahmet Cevizcï, "Özne," *Felsefe Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 1999), 668.

2   Doğan Özlem, *Heidegger ve Teknik* (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 1998), 19.

3   Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger: Moderniteyle Hesaplaşma: Teknoloji, Politika, Sanat,* Tr. trans. Hüsamettin Arslan (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayıncılık, 2011), 317.

4   Özlem, *Heidegger ve Teknik,* 18.

changes and transformations. For example, the concept of the subject was not affected by changing conditions as discussed by Aristotle in Scholastic philosophy and the Middle Ages until the 17th century. It contains a meaning "very close to the substance that remains the same with itself, really exists there, as a thinking entity, does not need anything other than itself to exist as a mere mental content."[5] In this way, it is possible to summarize the traces of the concept of the subject before Descartes throughout the historical process.

As a general acceptance, the issue of subjectivity is based on the "thinking self" and the transformation of the human subjectivity is linked to Descartes, who pioneered the search for a ground that will form the basis of all existence. He put the subject in the center and replaced it with God. The mind, whose content changed Cartesian philosophy, turned from "substantive mind" to "instrumental subjective mind" by turning to the essence of existence, as in Ancient Greek thought.

Descartes makes a touch that will affect the whole modern philosophy, and that is the determination of the thinking substance as the subject.[6] With the Renaissance, nature became objectified while humans became subjects and this change deeply affected the entire philosophy. The modern era bears witness to the overthrow of the God of the Middle Ages, the emergence of a new vision of the subject by placing the human at the center of truth and meaning.

Subjectivity metaphysics has been established as a system of subjective consciousness by starting the whole philosophical inquiry from the "I" and basing it on the "I". "My mind" is the only definitive and undoubted basis that creates my self-consciousness and has no epistemological-ontological relationship with other

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[5]   Sevcan Yılmaz Kutlay, "Çeviribilimde Özne ve Özneyi Konumlandırmak," *Çeviri Üzerine Gözlemler: Observations on Translation*, ed. Seda Taş (İstanbul: Hiperlink Yayınları, 2019), 124.

[6]   Gilles Deleuze, *Kant Üzerine Dört Ders*, Tr. trans. Ulus Baker (İstanbul: Öteki Yayınevi, 2000), 73.

things in the world. Therefore, the subject is the main distinguishing parameter of modernity.[7] When considered within this framework of meaning, Descartes strives to overcome philosophical skepticism and relativism with the precise knowledge it finds on the subject itself.

Consequently, the birth of modern science is associated with the transformation of substance from hypokeimenon to the human subject. Making man a subject in contrast to the world-made object has been the extremely important breaking point. As Küçükalp notes humanism, in which the human mind is centered as a reference in the knowledge of the truth, refer to an understanding in which the search for all kinds of the truth is reduced to a human perspective and turned away from the idea of the other world in favor of this world.[8] Based on this idea, it should be stated that in modern thought, although the subject is a rational and willful being that forms the basis for knowledge, the transition from the God sphere to the human sphere. In other words, the transition from absolute subject to the individual and empirical subject is observed.

In modern thought, the world declares that it is composed of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, accepting that the mind is limited only to the individual mind and what is beyond it constitutes the objects in the mechanical-physical realm.[9] With the Cartesian "return" humanity has made itself the substance of "things," the self-confident subject, the foundation-builder, the founding foundation of every truth and value.[10]

With the transformation of the world into an object, the change in the perspective of the universe, the use of mathematics

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[7]   Couze Venn, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 107.

[8]   Kasım Küçükalp, "Yeni Hümanizm ve İnsan Kavramının Küçülmesi," *İnsanı Yeniden Düşünmek*, ed. Lütfi Sunar and Latif Karagöz (Ankara: İlem Yayınları, 2019), 289.

[9]   Lawrence E. Cahoone, *Modernliğin Çıkmazı,* Tr. trans. Ahmet Demirhan and Erol Çatalbaş (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2001), 68.

[10]   Zimmerman, *Heidegger: Moderniteyle Hesaplaşma*, 317.

as the basic instrument of physical sciences every day. The denial of qualitative evaluations by expressing the results in numbers is an expression of the change and transformation of the philosophical perspective.[11] In the pre-modern period, while metaphysical questions about the "why of things" were at the forefront, now with modernity, this situation has been replaced by scientific questions about "how things". The scientific questions are answered only by establishing connections between the facts through logic or mathematics that reach the goal.[12] As it can be interpreted that the central concern of philosophy has shifted from ontology to epistemology. It has reduced the entire philosophical structuring to only the epistemological context. Therefore, since the metaphysical understanding of modernity is based on subjectivity, the essence of human existence becomes science, and the issue of truth evolves into the consciousness of consciousness to know first "itself" and then other existing ones.

2. René Descartes and the Active Subject Design

Since epistemology has replaced ontology in the Modern period, Descartes develops a new concept of the subject using the concept of "epistemological subject." This changes the object definition and the style of relationship that exists between them. The subject is the one who builds and uses knowledge, not merely to know. In the construction of the concept of the subject, Descartes directs his focus to "the consciousness of itself and what is present in this consciousness. At this point, man becomes a self-consciousness, that is, the subject" henceforth, the reality is not the prominent thing but rather Descartes' subject.[13] Descartes' basic approach towards the subject is that thinking is only a predicate belonging to the "thinker" and the thinker cannot be separated from the being. In this way, Descartes finds the undoubted thing in the

[11] Colin A. Ronan, *Bilim Tarihi*, Tr. trans. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Feza Günergun (Ankara: Tübitak Yayınları, 2005), 373.

[12] Alexandre Koyré, *Yeniçağ Biliminin Doğuşu*, Tr. trans. Kurtuluş Dinçer (Ankara: Gündoğan Yayınları, 1994), 63.

[13] Özlem, *Heidegger ve Teknik*, 19.

expression "Cogito ergo sum," in other words, in the "thinking subject" without interruption.[14]

Descartes argues that thinking requires a thinker, and that is a subject. By expressing the unquestionable certainty of the "I", he also pushes philosophy into the lane of subjectivity metaphysics. Because for Descartes, it is the subject whose existence and certainty cannot be doubted. In other words, the knowledge of the "I" is correct and it is the first principle on which the whole system will be built. Thus, the "Cogito ergo sum" proposition reveals what is undoubted about the existence and the certainty of the thinking self, that is, the subject.

In modern philosophy, it is undoubtedly the Cogito that moved to a centralized status that sparked discussion of the subject. Descartes constructs the manifestation of truth through the first thinking subject. He sees the Cogito as a subject who is conscious of his existence and firstly proves itself, and then the existence of God and the external world with the ideas. The man comes to the fore as the subject of his/her thought and singularity, abandoning his/her passive position against the absolute subject. As Descartes "searched for subjectum in the predetermined path of metaphysics, he found the ego Cogito as constantly found. So, the ego sum became the subjectum, that is, the subject became self-knowledge."[15] In other words, the Cogito is the subject that makes others "objects." Only after the subject has proved its existence as a Cogito, God and other beings are proved, and their knowledge is reached by this method.

The subject is not merely knowing, but the one who builds the knowledge and uses the information it has built. The condition of being the subject who does all this is realized by thinking. In this way, the subject grasps itself as a thinking being. The activation of humans from the object is due to its thinking ability. In other

14   René Descartes, *İlk Felsefe Üzerine Meditasyonlar*, Tr. trans. Aziz Yardımlı (İstanbul: İdea Yayınevi, 2011), 34.
15   Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche'nin Tanrı Öldü Sözü ve Dünya Resimleri Çağı*, Tr. trans. Levent Özşar (Bursa: Asa Kitabevi, 2001), 36.

words, the subject becomes the active knower and ceases to be the passive knower. This causes the object to be interpreted as being separate from the subject and unable to think.[16]

With the metaphysics of subjectivity, Descartes put forward the formula of escape from Cartesian anxiety that is the chaos with the subject and subjective mind, which are the basis of universal, precise knowledge. According to Descartes, a person who rises to the position of the judge of nature with his knowledge is the product of a thinking subject. At this point, Descartes' metaphysics of subjectivity appears because the "thinking I" is conscious of its existence. Therefore, this active entity is the subject. The source of such an effective being of subjectivity is that it can return to itself with the thought. As all these points out, this activity of subjectivity separates it from the object that makes it active. This separates subjectivity from the object that does not have thinking and unconsciousness and dominates it because of its activity on the object. Thus, the subject-object relationship is reversed, in other words, subjectivity is not only knowing but also ruling.

3. Michel Foucault and Death of the Subject

At Foucault's work, which criticizes the fundamental paradigms of the Enlightenment, the subject holds a key position. Underlining that he is concerned with "a power that transforms individuals into subjects," Foucault uses the word subject in two senses; in the sense of being controlled by others and in the sense of being attached to identity with self-consciousness and knowledge.[17] Later in his career, Foucault admits that he identifies the subject very closely, with a certain humanistic understanding of the human being.[18] According to Foucault, "man is not giving meaning, but a second-order interpreter and descriptor who is placed in the essence of things by a transcendent and infinite

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16 Afşar Timuçin, *Descartes'çı Bilgi Kuramının Temellendirilişi* (İstanbul: Bulut Yayınları, 2000), 76.
17 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982), 777.
18 Clare O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 110-111.

source, trying to understand and explain the meaning."[19] In this respect, Foucault's analyzes describing the limits of humanism are condemnations of the modern humanist regime.

Foucault's subject is certainly not rational, yet socially intelligent and in his historical analysis "reason" is in a very special position because it is societal-specific.[20] The problem with this understanding of the subject concept, according to Foucault and other thinkers of the 1960s, was that it determined the status quo and linked people to special identities that never be changed. His rejection of the subject reflected his desire to decipher identities and organize information differently. For Foucault, the denial of humanism did not mean the denial of "human rights" and "freedom," on the contrary, it meant that humanism, as a concept, is an unchanging essence of human nature that limits these values. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Foucault stated that people unhesitatingly agreed that they were part of universal humanism, suggesting anonymous structures and networks of knowledge that do not stem from individual consciousness, instead of from the subject. According to Foucault, the older spiritual knowledge systems that required working on the self to reach the truth were changed in favor of new forms of scientific and intellectual rationality.[21] As it can be understood from this approach of Foucault, self-studies have changed shape with the gaining of rationality for the sake of reaching the truth, and the values of the old have been left behind.

Foucault emphasizes that the subject, like the truth, does not go down in history. Rather, the subject is constantly dissolved and recreated in different configurations, along with other forms of knowledge and social practices.[22] A subject is a form, not a thing, and that form is not constant even when connected to the same

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[19] Veli Urhan, *Michel Foucault ve Arkeolojik Çözümleme* (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 2000), 70.

[20] Orhan Tekelioğlu, *Foucault Sosyolojisi* (Bursa: Alfa Aktüel Yayınları, 2003), 13.

[21] O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault,* 111-112.

[22] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977,* trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 118.

individual.[23] In Foucault's view, form is nothing and does not have a fixed quality. Foucault's discourses on the subject, which mention that the essence is not isolated in the ego and the existence of certain models imposed by the culture on the ego, are statements outside the humanistic line and draw attention as the anti-humanistic view. According to Foucault, the created self is a form that trusts its existence in its interaction with others, history and culture. Here he opposes the idea of a true self that must be discovered in inner isolation and can be uncovered when cultural and historical veils are swept aside.

The aim of Foucault's work over the last two decades is to create a history of the different modes in our culture in which people are made subjects.[24] Foucault positions himself by being subjective: "The relationships we must maintain ourselves are not identity relations; rather, these should be relationships of differentiation, creation and innovation. It is boring to be the same all the time."[25]

According to Foucault, who tends to investigate the problems caused by the division of man into two as subject and object, man is the object of our knowledge of the last two centuries and man might be simply "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[26] So, "man" is an invention of recent date and one perhaps nearing its end.[27] As can be seen, most of his arguments in his philosophy are his provocative statements that man, whose recent death was promised, is an invention. Foucault, who frequently emphasizes that man is a discovery of modern thought, states that the modern age is a period when "human" is the subject of episteme. According to Foucault, "man" witnessed both his

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[23] Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), I, 291.

[24] Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 7.

[25] Foucault, *İktidarın Gözü*, Tr. trans. Işık Ergüden (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2003), 276.

[26] Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 387.

[27] Tony Davies, *Hümanizm*, Tr. trans. Emir Bozkırlı (Ankara: Elips Kitap, 2010), 73.

birth, his death at the same time. To put it briefly, it is the "death of man" that Foucault refers to, which he usually calls "the death of the subject." It should be read as the death of a particular human view, which took shape within the humanist tradition and that regarded man as the measure of all things, in which infinite progress on the personal level can be experienced. Indeed, for Foucault, this approach led to a distorted view of human nature hence, it is an ideal that can be overcome. As Foucault highlighted, man is the invention of recent history, and perhaps now he is approaching the end. When this probable end occurs, the humanist tradition will lose its significance.

4. Comparison of Descartes' and Foucault's Subject Theories

Foucault does not deny that Descartes caused the important break in philosophy while reaching precise information. However, the conceptualization of modernity, which includes the character of absolutism about human beings, is a situation that Foucault avoided. According to Foucault, the distortion of the modern period regarding the subject is the formation of the modern subject isolated from ethical and aesthetic concerns and the fact it becomes an undisputed ruler of human life.

In Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" determination, a relationship has been established between thought and being. In this regard, language is seen as the determinant of the thinker. According to Foucault, if this situation is accepted as correct, it is not possible to problematize human existence in such an analysis. Because despite being thinking and existing is claimed simultaneously in the discourse, "Cogito" cannot be claimed as a solid basis for existence. Foucault argues that Descartes de-ethicalized scientific rationality to make it possible.

Unlike Descartes, Foucault does not accept a moral structure consisting only of codes and codes of conduct. It is seen that he is oriented towards a holistic and self-related moral understanding. According to Foucault, the subject as determined in Descartes' phi-

losophy was not seen as a substance.[28] Foucault says that the Cogito does not provide a solid ground for "being" on the contrary, he argues that it has revealed a series of problems about being.[29] Foucault, accepting that he left modern philosophy aside, claimed that all systems of thought that prioritized the subject from Descartes to the present and placed it in a supra-historical position have been dissolved. Foucault stated that he believes that different subjects who change, transform and have certain operating rules are positioned throughout history.[30]

In Descartes, the subject excludes changes and transformations regarding his existence. It is a subject claimed to be able to reach the truth as it is. Foucault proposed genealogy, despite its understanding of absolute subject and essence. In this way, it is necessary to express how different identities are possible. In this context, he argued that instead of establishing an unhistorical subject, the possibilities that make the genealogy of the subject possible should be investigated. Foucault thinks that identities are dissolved inherently in history.

In contrast to Descartes, Foucault stands against humanism (or the transcendence of the subject). Foucault's anti-humanism has a political character. According to Foucault, the humanist belief in the subject is a politically suspicious manifestation of modernity. He prefers to bring a historical interpretation to the emergence of the subject rather than completely removing the subject. Foucault takes the subject away from his privileged epistemological position and makes the subject not a premise but a subject of analysis.[31]

By rejecting humanism, Foucault distinguished between three

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28 Foucault, *Özne ve İktidar*, Tr. trans. Osman Akınhay and Işık Ergüden (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2014), 234.

29 Foucault, *Kelimeler ve Şeyler*, Tr. trans. Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2001), 453.

30 Foucault, *Felsefe Sahnesi*, Tr. trans. Işık Ergüden (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2011), 291.

31 David West, *Kıta Avrupası Felsefesine Giriş*, Tr. trans. Ahmet Cevizci and Hüsamettin Arslan (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayıncılık, 2016), 282-283.

possible grounds: (a) "conceptual or philosophical" (humanism so confused in Western subject-oriented metaphysics), (b) strategic (objection to humanist values as covering strategies of domination) and (c) normative. These three possibilities are expected to be suitable for the three main stages of Foucault's philosophical development (archeology, genealogy and history of subjectivity).[32]

Conclusion

In today's ethical and political world, where the death of the subject is discussed and the artificial human being portrayed, this intellectual trend brings with it new epistemological, ontological and methodological problems. The "subject" discourse, which influenced the modern period, has changed dimensions with the effect of science and technology at the point we have reached and lost its privileged and central position. The possibilities offered by technological applications play an active role in the emergence of new subject conceptions and in shaping the interest towards the postmodern subject.

The evaluation of Descartes and Foucault's subject theories with the method of comparison is meaningful in that it reveals the close connection with today's new subject debates. In contemporary philosophical theories, the problem of the subject has an aspect that determines the course of philosophy. For postmodern thinkers, the position of the subject opens the door to serious questions. Even the loss or death of the subject is touted as the beginning of postmodernity.

This study has clearly observed that Foucault's analysis of the subject problem, starting with Descartes, is important in terms of presenting the inclusive perspective to modern and contemporary subject conceptions. We need to understand the modern period in which the subject is glorified and the contemporary period in which anti-subject approaches are intense. In this way, important

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[32] Béatrice Han-Pile, "The 'Death of Man': Foucault and Anti-Humanism," *Foucault and Philosophy*, ed. Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon, (Malden: Blackwell, 2010), 119-120.

findings have been obtained in terms of showing how different subjects are possible.

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