Beyond the Inner–Outer Model: *Subjectivity after Wittgenstein* by Chantal Bax

Olli Lagerspetz

Chantal Bax. *Subjectivity after Wittgenstein. The Post-Cartesian Subject and the 'Death of Man'*. London: Bloomsbury 2011 (hb), 2012 (pb).

In his philosophical psychology, Wittgenstein is known to challenge broadly Cartesian ideas of the metaphysical ego as the self-sufficient site of agency and consciousness. Especially since the 1960s, dismantling the Cartesian Subject also has emerged as one of the theoretical preoccupations of the humanities and social sciences. Many authors, especially of the Continental traditions, have hailed "the death of man" as an emancipatory development while others claim that some version of the traditional conception of the Subject is necessary for meaningful ethics and politics. In her book, Chantal Bax asks to what extent Wittgenstein's writings participate in the slaughter of "Man". Perhaps most notoriously, Iris Murdoch claimed that Wittgenstein undermines ethics by doing away with "the individual self as a moral centre or substance" (Murdoch quoted on p. 75).[1]

The debate on "the death of man" has mainly occurred well after Wittgenstein's demise; hence the book title, referring to subjectivity "after" and not "according to" Wittgenstein. These are questions he did not face in their present form. This being said, the emphasis is entirely on Wittgenstein and the book can be read quite profitably without knowledge of (or deeper interest in) the said debates.

Precisely what is the non-Cartesian alternative conception that emerges from Wittgenstein's writings? The back cover states that "no

[1] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 152.

detailed description" of this "has so far been available". That is perhaps an exaggeration, considering the large amount of already existing work on Wittgenstein's philosophical psychology, which Bax properly acknowledges. [2] Nevertheless, this book helpfully presents a full-blown picture that covers Wittgenstein's entire active period.

By choosing this topic, the author consciously rejects views that describe Wittgenstein as putting forward an "anti-philosophical" approach (p. 16). She argues that Wittgenstein's "methodological manifesto" contained in *Philosophical Investigations,* I: §§ 89-133 establishes his distance from *science* and philosophy conceived as a kind of science, not from philosophy as such (p. 22). The challenge is to create *übersichtliche Darstellungen* that, while providing perspicuity, also preserve the particulars of the phenomena that they present. Bax hopes to reconstruct Wittgenstein's constructive contribution to the issue of subjectivity. Hence she wants to see whether any fairly consistent view on this runs through his writings – even though the task is not to show that "Wittgenstein can never be caught contradicting himself" (p. 78).

The author's exegetical enterprise is organised around three main bodies of Wittgenstein's work: his philosophical psychology (Chapter 3), his philosophy of religion, including remarks on Frazer (Chapter 4) and *On Certainty* (Chapter 5), with two reflective "Intermezzi" placed in between the chapters. Bax points out that attempts to reconcile Wittgenstein's approaches to subjectivity in these three key areas may seem to present some *prima facie* difficulties, but she argues that they actually elucidate rather than contradict each other. The main "surplus value" of this book comes from juxtaposing bodies of work that are often treated separately.

In his treatment of the inner-outer distinction Wittgenstein, as Bax helpfully puts it, may be said to situate the 'inner' neither inside the individual subject nor on the outside, but "in the interspace between the subject and his or her fellow men"... "it is only in the context of a recurring social pattern that a person's doings and sayings make for, and can be taken as, instances of a particular psychological phenomenon" (p. 63).

[2] Given the nature of the topic it is easy to think of work that Bax might also have quoted and which might have advanced her work even further. For my part, and thinking of the relatively early work on Wittgenstein and subjectivity, I would have liked to see her comments on Norman Malcolm's *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) and several essays by Peter Winch included in his *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) and *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). Vincent Descombes, in *The Mind's Provisions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) also relates Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind to later debates on subjectivity.

In contrast, when thinking of religion, Wittgenstein often emphasises "interiority" in line with a Protestant tradition. Religion is a matter strictly between the individual believer and God, not to be reduced to a social context. However, as Bax argues, far from representing a return to the Cartesian conception of the inner, Wittgenstein's work on the topic gives the reader a chance to specify what his upsetting of the traditional inner-outer model comes down to (p. 77). In religion, "the believer's existence displays a distinctive unity or structure" (p. 111). The believer makes her life into a meaningful whole by placing herself in a relation to the social context of religious tradition (p. 114). This presupposes *interplay* between individual subject and social context.

On Certainty is a body of work that explores relations between thinking and membership in a community. Our certainties are not achieved by us as individuals but they hang together in a web of socially shared practices. This is one reason why Wittgenstein might easily be read as conveying a conservative message in which the individual's freedom is minimised. Bax argues, however, that the individual in *On Certainty* is not represented as passive. The community is never monolithic. There is no subjectivity without community, but this does not imply that one cannot "diverge from the customs and conventions one always already finds oneself immersed in" (p. 140).

Bax connects the individual's freedom with the nature-nurture debate in social science (pp. 61-62). As she puts it, "Wittgenstein's naturalism" (pp. 130, 137) "grants nature as well as nurture a role in psychological development" (p. 164*n*91). The child's inborn qualities may prevent complete uniformity with the host culture from being attained. This is one of the few places where I found myself hesitant about the author's treatment of the topic. It comes uncomfortably close to the kind of theorising that Wittgenstein stayed away from. Her description seems to present the learning process as a matter of a balance between two kinds of determinism: the child either trustfully accepting wholesale what adults say to it or employing *innate* patterns of thinking (pp. 127-130).

On Certainty allows for a more dynamic, interactionist interpretation which is, moreover, more in harmony with what Bax says elsewhere. Children tend not simply to accept things unquestioningly but also to challenge adults in various ways. In a learning environment characterised by trust they can do so without fear of rejection. The varieties of adult responses in turn reflect *their* degree of trust in the child. Moreover, their reactions inform both the child's and the adults' own understanding of the issues in question – e.g. of what is negotiable in the situation. It is because of such reciprocity that "acquiring a practice" differs from zombie-like imitation. This obser-

vation is not dependent on any particular view on the nature-nurture question.

Despite this one objection, Bax certainly does not present Wittgenstein as putting forward "a theory of the subject" in the sense which most Wittgenstein scholars would find objectionable. She gives us an illuminating overview of Wittgenstein's approach to subjectivity. The argument is well-organised and lucid throughout, including helpful summaries of main points along the way. The book will make an excellent textbook for courses and seminars.