Reductionist Interpretations of Human Experience: From Modernity to Postmodernity

The question of human experience is essentially anthropological in its nature. That is to say, the loss of the integral vision of man inevitably leads to the reduction of the notion of experience. The aim of this article is to present a historical outline of the philosophical conception of experience seeking to demonstrate that by conceiving of dichotomies of mind-body, subject-object, and self-other, René Descartes has made a tremendous influence on the philosophical anthropology and opened the door to reductionist interpretations of human experience. Under the influence of Cartesian dualism, modernists depersonalize experience, reducing it to the ‘product’ of sense perception, reason, or consciousness, while postmodernists present the concept of so-called “experience without the subject”.

Introduction

In modern philosophy, there has been a great emphasis on human experience since the middle of the twentieth century. Many philosophers have started using experience as the main source and foundation for the development of their arguments. For example, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other philosophers who have explored the existential and phenomenological ideas in their writings, dedicate themselves to the analysis of the lived experience of the individual subject. Moreover, we know that liberation theology, including its feminist versions, finds its basis in the concrete, lived experience of the poor and the oppressed. Finally, the postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty have argued for the radical deconstruction of the concept of human experience, calling into question the validity of the phenomenological description of lived experience.

Owen C. Thomas describes this remarkable increase in attention to experience as a “hunger for experience”. This tendency can be seen in Hans Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. As he tells us, “the experienced person <…> because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience
has its proper fulfillment not in definite knowledge but in openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.” In other words, man’s openness to experience is regarded as the way of growth in one’s understanding of previous experiences; it is the way to maturity.

However, many authors point out that ‘experience’ is one of the most difficult terms to understand and explain. For example, Gadamer declares, “The concept of experience [Erfahrung] seems to be – as paradoxical as it may sound – one of the most obscure we have.” Mouroux begins his discussion on religious experience with the same comment on human experience in general: “Certainly there is nothing more difficult to define than experience. Philosophers give us either a chaos of conflicting definitions or no definition at all.” Michael Oakeshott is another author who makes a similar remark, saying, “‘Experience’, of all the words in the philosophical vocabulary is the most difficult to manage, and it must be the ambition of every writer reckless enough to use the word to escape the ambiguities it contains.”

The term ‘experience’ is a complex concept with many dimensions, which can be approached, interpreted, and evaluated from various different angles. For example, some philosophers have concentrated on the etymological analysis and explanation of different meanings and definitions of the term ‘experience.’ Other thinkers have focused on clarification of the structure of experience by trying to explain how or whether man can acquire any knowledge through experience. Others have dedicated themselves to the analysis of the relationship between experience and language. They raise questions regarding whether it is possible to express experience through language fully or how one should interpret experience expressed in a text.

On the one hand, it is important to see this complexity of experience and try to avoid its simplification, which might lead us to the reduction and devaluation of the concept of experience. We should agree with Marcel, who expresses his concern about the danger of oversimplifying experience. He says, “Experience is not comparable to a ready-made object that is subsequently covered with coating. Nothing is more important than recognizing how difficult it is to think of experience.” On the other hand, since the question of experience touches on a multitude of issues, it is obvious that we cannot discuss all of them in this paper. For this reason, we are compelled to narrow down our focus to one specific question.

The object: the reductionist interpretations of experience.

The task of this paper is to present a historical outline of the philosophical conception of experience unfolding the reductionist interpretations of experience developed in the history of philosophy after René Descartes.

There are four principal goals of this work:

1. The first is to show that Cartesian dualism has opened the door to the radical transformation of the philosophical understanding of experience.
2. The second is to demonstrate that empiricism, rationalism, and idealism depersonalize experience.
3. The third is to discuss a critique of the ‘impersonal’ conception of experience from the existential–phenomenological point of view.
4. The fourth is to present the postmodern notion of the ‘experience without the subject.’

We begin our historical overview with Descartes, who by giving birth to the dichoto-
mies of mind-body, subject-object, and self-other has made a tremendous influence on
philosophical anthropology and opened the door to the reductionist interpretation of
experience.

**Cartesian Dualism: The Transformation of the Notion of ‘Experience’**

In order to identify an ultimate principle of truth on which all other knowledge can be
based, Descartes develops a method by which he doubts everything he knows. Since
sense experience, according to Descartes, is “in many cases very obscure and confused”
man can never be sure that his sense experience is true. Therefore, it is best to doubt
the senses. Likewise, he cannot be sure that he really has a body or that his experience
of the world in general can be trusted; after all, he assumes that he might be dreaming
the whole thing. After testing all human experiences and doubts, Descartes is left with
the experience of his mind, which leads him to the conclusion, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think,
therefore I am”).

From the starting point, *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes arrives at his second conclusion:
“I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or
understanding, or reason.” Descartes is saying here that there are no grounds for
affirming that I am more than a *res cogitans*. He makes a clear distinction between *res
cogitans* (the thinking thing) and *res extensa* (the extended thing). If the soul subsists
in consciousness, the body subsists in extension; if the soul consists all inside, the body
is all outside. The body (*res extensa*) and the soul (*res cogitans*) are two separate *res*,
which means that in principle the soul could exist apart from a given body. Within this
reasoning, a set of problems arises about the relationship of the two entities which are in
principle self-subsistent.

The identification of the body with *res extensa* and the separation of the body from
the soul lead Descartes towards a complete new understanding of perception. In our
view, he reverses the natural structure of human experience such that in the process of
knowledge, the whole person – an inseparable unity of the body and the soul – does not
participate any more. In Descartes’ thought, the body plays an absolutely passive role
in the experience of the self, the world, and others. Even cognition of sensible things is
based only on the work of pure mind. Descartes claims, “I now know that even bodies are
not, properly speaking, perceived by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by
the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived through their being touched or seen,
but only through their being understood.” The body itself becomes merely an object of
the mind, which the mind can put before itself and scatter into smaller units. That is why
it is not surprising that Descartes openly says that the body is only a *machine* of various
tissues, nerves, blood, etc.

Descartes’ dualistic understanding of the human person originates a self-world
dichotomy. In Descartes, there exists a chasm between a self-conscious subject and the
material world. The ‘thinking subject’, who is separated from the world of things, posits all beings as standing ‘out there’ outside of him, wherein the subject himself becomes the master of the world. It lays the foundation for egocentrism and gives birth to a self-other dichotomy. Ego becomes the sole criterion and center of the truth. Man’s ego is the only ego, which can be experienced from inside, and nobody else has the access to that ‘I.’ This posits a great temptation for a man to withdraw completely into himself. As man meets another ego, he cannot experience it in the same way as he experiences himself. Jean-Luc Marion, therefore, rightly argues that in Descartes’ method ego cannot be transcended and the ego is incapable of experiencing an alter ego (the other I); there is no ego and alter ego but rather ego and object.\(^{13}\)

From the foregoing we see that Descartes establishes a self that is always prior to everything that the self could know. He defines man as a subjective self-consciousness, which can achieve self-awareness without the body, without the external world, and without others. Further analysis will show that Descartes philosophy made a radical step in the history of philosophy: it had a profound influence on philosophical anthropology and opened the door to the reductionist interpretation of experience.

Empiricism and Rationalism: A Question of the Importance of Experience in Epistemology

The Cartesian formula ‘I think, therefore I am’ transforms the basic understanding of the meaning of experience. If we look at the history of philosophy, we see that this understanding was taken in different directions later in the seventeenth and eightieth centuries by the empiricists, such as John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume, and the rationalists, such as Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, and especially by Immanuel Kant and his concept of transcendental idealism.

Even though many empiricists and rationalists reject Descartes’ dualistic belief that body and mind are two separate substances, neither empiricists nor idealists preserve the integral vision of the person in their discussion of the importance of experience in epistemology. As we know, empiricism claims that only sensory-perceptual experience is epistemologically valid, while a priori knowledge – knowledge attainable by reason alone – cannot be trusted. Empiricists therefore propose that the only knowledge man can attain is a posteriori, that is, based on sense experience. For instance, in opposition to Descartes’ “thinking thing” who can achieve absolute certainty from “within”, Locke proposes the idea that the human mind remains a tabula rasa – in his own words “white paper” – unless sense-based experiences leave their marks on it.\(^{14}\) Locke arrives at this conclusion after he recognizes the falsity of Descartes’ claim that the essence of the self consists solely in the fact that he is a thinking thing. While Locke accepts a Cartesian type of dualism, in which mind and body are viewed as different kinds of substances, he is looking for the link between the body and mind, arguing for the self that is both the mind and its body and for whom knowledge must and does primarily rely on sensual experience and observation. A generation later, in response to Locke’s Essay on human understanding, Berkeley develops an extreme form of empiricism – later called ‘subjective idealism’
– in which things exist only as a result of being perceived\textsuperscript{15}. According to this extreme empiricist theory, physical objects are a kind of construction of man’s experiences.

Unlike empiricists, some philosophers influenced by Descartes accepted epistemological primacy of reason over sense experience. We can take Spinoza and Leibniz as an example. It is necessary to say that both philosophers point out that Descartes’ dualism is a serious problem in his philosophy. Both of them seek to avoid the dualistic view of the relationship between mind and body, especially the substance dualism found in Descartes, according to which the body and soul are conceived as two disparate substances: an extended material substance (body) and unextended thinking substance (mind). Against Descartes, Spinoza proposes his idea of God who is the immanent cause of substance of all things, both extended and unextended. This allows Spinoza to argue that corporeal objects and thoughts must be conceived as two attributes of one and the same substance. Leibniz then offers his solution to Descartes’ dualism by arguing that “being” and “one” are equivalent, that is, if something is a real being, it must be “truly one”, i.e. a substance, “monad”. We can see, however, that, like Descartes, both Spinoza and Leibniz seek to create a theory of knowledge based on certainty with a complete absence of doubt. Their search for a method for achievement self-evident truths leads to the conclusion that mathematics should be a guide to their philosophical method. The application of exact mathematical reasoning seems to be the guarantee of truth. This clearly attests their insistence on the primacy of reason in epistemology. Both Spinoza and Leibniz assert that all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, can be attained by reason alone.

Later, Kant develops a distinctive and very influential rationalism, so-called transcendental or objective Idealism, which attempts to synthesize the traditional rationalist and empiricist traditions. Unlike Descartes, for whom cogito ergo sum is the starting point for any further knowledge, Kant argues for the transcendental ego or transcendental consciousness – the self that precedes any sense-based experience\textsuperscript{16}. For Kant, the human mind does not receive sense data passively, but rather all sensory experience is filtered and structured according to the categories of the mind. Since all human cognition of the world is channeled through the mind’s categories, man can perceive objective reality only to the extent that the reality conforms to the a priori structures of the mind. Thus, we can say that experience for Kant is a construction of the mind imposed on sensation. Man does not receive knowledge from experience, but knowledge in a sense already introduces itself into his experience in the process of cognition.

It is important to see that neither empiricism nor rationalism overcomes the Cartesian reductionist view of man and, as a consequence, tends to depersonalize experience. Mouroux rightly argues that both philosophical traditions distort an adequate understanding of experience by proposing either an ‘empirical’ or ‘idealist’ definition of experience. The former reduces experience into mere sense experience, conceived as if “there was no experience except of ‘things’”, and as if “an out-and-out subjective passivity was the absolute criterion of experience”\textsuperscript{17}. The latter definition reduces experience to a mere mental construct. It is experience that is “the expression of the immanent activity of independent and absolute mind”\textsuperscript{18}. Therefore, Mouroux concludes, “these two conceptions
are equally unfaithful to the person, because the first tends to regard him as a thing, and the second as a self-enclosed, impersonal activity”\(^{19}\).

Like Descartes, both philosophical traditions – each in its own way – devalue the human body. While empiricists, by applying a mechanistic understanding to the human body, reduce it to mere matter and turn it into an object, rationalists completely exclude the body from the processes of perception. Merleau-Ponty expresses this in his sharp criticism of both intellectualism and empiricism. Intellectualism, he says, denies the contribution of the senses to the experience of the world; it does not entail a concept of sensation because it is only through the act of reason that objectivity can be achieved; thus, for intellectualism “there are not the senses, but only consciousness”\(^{20}\). The inadequacy of empiricism consists in its loss of the unity of the senses; it loses the insight, Merleau-Ponty argues, that “the sensory aspects of my body <…> are immediately symbolical of one another, precisely because my body is a ready-made system of equivalents and intersensory transpositions”\(^{21}\). In other words, empiricism rejects the idea that man experiences the body as an organic whole.

A further consequence of the reductionist approach to man is the tendency to locate experience within the entirely isolated subject while objective reality remains utterly outside of the subject. The problem of the subject-object dichotomy, which emerges with Descartes, remains unresolved by the philosophers in the age of Enlightenment. This inevitably affects the concept of experience. The separation of the object, something that is ‘really there’ to be encountered, known, and explained, and the subject, the autonomous self who encounters, leads to the idea of experience as a continuous amount of data given to and received by an individual mind. The subject is treated largely as a theoretical knower of the world, and, in turn, the world is reduced to the status of a set of phenomena waiting to be known and explained. As a result, objectivity, what is stable, reliable, and independent of individual, is attached to the so-called external world, while experience is taken as subjective content.\(^{22}\) The assignment of the labels ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ exclusively to one side and the other causes a gap between man and the world and sets clear limits on experience.

Finally, the subject-object dichotomy leads to the issue of the relationship between the subject and the object. The question is raised whether man is capable of experiencing things as they are in themselves. Kant, for instance, makes a distinction between the objective reality as it is in itself, i.e., things as they are in themselves (noumena), and the objective reality as we know it, i.e., things as we experience them (phenomena). According to Kant, reality always remains transcendent to a man, which means – the mind never reaches what is ‘out there.’ That is why, in Prolegomena Kant claims that we cannot know the things as they are in themselves [Dinge an sich]; but only the things as they appear to us [Dinge wie sie uns erscheinen] (§ 10: 283; § 57: 350–355).\(^{23}\) Such a claim – ‘man cannot know the things as they are in themselves’ – put sharp bounds on experience. If our knowledge, as Kant affirms, is limited to the ‘things as they appear to us’, everything that we perceive in the world is beyond our experience. The human mind remains to deal only with phenomena or ‘appearances’, while the reality as it is in itself is something one can only think about but never know.
The foregoing shows that the Enlightenment philosophers either present the subject of experience as an autonomous, self-constituting consciousness and attribute to the sensual body an absolutely passive role, or they overemphasize the role of sense experience by tending to reduce man merely to a thing. What is common to both rationalism and empiricism is that, in some sense, both philosophical traditions accept the Cartesian dichotomies of mind-body and subject-object, which result in the impoverishment of the concept of experience. A critique of the ‘impersonal’ conception of experience from the existential-phenomenological point of view will help us to see this more clearly.

Existentialism and Phenomenology: A Critique of the ‘Impersonal’ Conception of Experience

While historically existentialism and phenomenology emerged as two distinct philosophical movements and each existentialist or phenomenologist holds widely different views, both existentialists and phenomenologists share a critique of the ‘impersonal’ conception of experience produced by the Enlightenment, which abstracts and devalues concrete subjective human experience. In opposition to modern reductionist accounts of experience, existentialism and phenomenology strongly emphasize the importance of the lived experience of the individual.

The most radical statement on existence has been made by Sartre by his well-known assertion that existence precedes essence. On the one hand, with this claim, Sartre tends to maintain that there is no such a thing as ‘innate’ human nature and, therefore, opens the door to the idea of a non-essential, contingent subject, that is, the self that has to be created through the experience of concrete actions and self-interpretation. We will see later on that postmodern philosophers have replaced Sartre’s thought with linguistic and social structures arguing that the self and experience itself are framed by these structures. This has lead to the idea of the ‘decentered subject’ and, consequentially, to the notion of the ‘experience without the subject.’

On the other hand, the assertion ‘existence precedes essence’ emphasizes the idea that the human being is always in the world, or, as Heidegger says, a human being is ‘thrown’ into the world. To the philosophers, such as Heidegger, Marcel, and Merleau-Ponty, the idea of ‘being-in-the-world’ is central. Their existential thought, ‘being-in-the-world,’ sharply opposes modern rationalist thought, which claims that reason or consciousness is the most certain and primary reality. We could say that with existentialism, the Cartesian I think, therefore I am, has been reversed to I am, therefore I think. The switch to the idea, ‘being thrown into existence’, gives birth to a new conception of experience. If in Descartes, as we have shown before, cogito ergo sum is prior to everything man can experience, then in existentialism, experience begins with the fact that man always finds himself in a world.

Man’s irreducible being-in-the-world opposes the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object. This reality refers immediately to the primordial unity of the self and the world, the unity that, according to Marcel, manifests itself as a ‘mystery.’ Revolting against the self-enclosed ego of Descartes, Marcel refutes man’s tendency to approach reality as
a ‘problem.’ He says, “A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce.” However, reality cannot be “assimilated to an object placed before us on which we take bearings.” A man is not the one who gives the meaning to reality, for it is reality that speaks about itself and allows itself to be perceived. Marcel invites man to look at reality as a mystery, which is to experience something “in which I myself am involved”, and which “by definition, transcends every conceivable technique”. He invites man to approach reality with a ‘good attitude’, which means – man cannot demand certainty like Cartesian man. He can only hope, and “the only genuine hope is hope in what does not depend on ourselves, hope springing from humility and not from pride”.

Another important step that had been made by the philosophers in the beginning of the twentieth century was a turn towards the embodied experience, arguing that man’s experience of embodiment is primordial. In order to overcome Cartesian dualism and to escape the reduction of man to either consciousness or matter, the philosophers such as Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, and Merleau-Ponty have proposed a ‘holistic’ concept of man. There is no ‘gap’ between the mind and the body: the body is a constitutive element of man’s identity. Unlike for Descartes, the body is not a thing, a potential object of study for science, but rather it is a permanent condition of experience. The ‘thinking self’ is not the whole self; mind and body are two realities of the one complex whole of the human person. In the words of Marcel, “My body is my body just in so far as I do not consider it in this detached fashion, do not put a gap between myself and it. My body is mine in so far as for me my body is not an object but, rather, I am my body.” In *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Merleau-Ponty expresses the same idea, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body.” This phenomenological reality proves that it would be impossible for man to exist without his body. Man is linked to his body fundamentally and not accidentally. Even though it is not easy to explain this reality, man is always involved in this mystery.

There is an internal relationship between the perceived world and the lived body; the world and the body together constitute one inseparable system. In *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, by offering his own phenomenological account of the body, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that “it is not only an experience of my body, but an experience of my body-in-the-world”. He presents his argument for the correlation of the lived body and the world in the following words, “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.” It follows then that it is precisely the body that testifies the falsity of the Cartesian view of a self that is separated from the external world. The body is that by which man is in contact with the world and others. “The body is the vehicle of being in the world”, says Merleau-Ponty; the body “is my exposition: to myself, to the world, to everyone else”, tells us Mounier. In other words, because man is a body, he is able to be in contact with the physical world; he is able to express himself and able to perceive others. In the book *Sens Chrétien de L’Homme*, Mououx speaks of a mother’s experience of the first smile of her child as the example of the fundamental experience of
the role of the body in the encounter of the other. He says, “Such is the first smile of the infant to his mother: <…> it is the body itself that has become a means of communion, and thanks to this, the mother and the child share the same joy.”

Existentialism and existential phenomenology, in opposition to the rationalists’ distrust of feeling, put emphasis on the role of emotions, feelings, and moods in man’s perception of the world and his discovery of the truth about himself. Kierkegaard, for example, focuses on the role of anxiety in leading man to confront the fact that he exists as a finite being who must decide the content of his own life. Heidegger, influenced by Kierkegaard, stresses the importance of moods in human life. Only ‘with a mood’ can man encounter things in the world. Heidegger’s theory of moods opposes the traditional conception of moods as sensuous states that only ‘accompany’ the faculties of reason and will. Heidegger’s basic idea is that moods are a unique and primary way of disclosing Dasein’s Being-in-the-world – the disclosure that is always prior to the cognitive disclosure by the faculty of reason. Moreover, we should mention the philosophers such as Max Scheler, Sartre, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur, who also argue for and explore the role of emotions, feelings, and moods in man’s apprehension of the world and self.

Approaching experience from the existential phenomenological point of view, the relational aspect or the aspect of encounter is seen as the essential element of an authentic experience. Experience is not just a reflection of the person on ‘outside reality’, while reality itself remains passive with respect to the person; neither is it just a reception of what is given from outside where the person remains passive with respect to what is outside of him. Experience is not just a matter of knowledge, but a matter of dialogue with the self, the world, and others. In regard to this question, we may mention Buber’s well-known book *Ich und Du*, in which he defines man’s life in terms of ‘relation’, ‘meeting’, or ‘encounter.’ He distinguishes two basic forms of relation: the relation by means of monologue, called I-It relation [Ich-Es-Beziehung], or the relation by means of dialogue, called I-Thou relation [Ich-Du-Beziehung]. Through the monologue man experiences ‘the world to be used’, while through the dialogue he experiences ‘the world to be met.’ If in the I-It relation, man deals with the world and others functionally, manipulatively, then in the I-Thou relation, man encounters the world and other persons as the ‘Thou’ in the interpersonal dialogue.

Experience understood in terms of ‘mutual encounter’ preserves philosophers from turning to either subjectivism or objectivism. In the phenomenological sense, man experiences reality not as a static and ‘speechless’ object, but rather reality ‘calls’ and ‘provokes’ him to enter into a dialogue. Reality ‘speaks’ and ‘manifests’ itself to a man. In this sense, the experience of the other person is the experience of another subject who freely opens himself in order to be ‘experienced.’ Man encounters a reality that is always transcendental and immanent, open and hidden, known and mysterious. That is why, Marcel concludes his book, *The Philosophy and Existentialism*, with the following words, “I am convinced that I can be creative as a philosopher only for so long as my experience still contains unexploited and uncharted zones. And this explains at last what I said earlier on about experience being like a promised land.”
And now we will take a closer look at postmodernism which opposes both modern rationalism and the ‘philosophy of experience’ central in existentialism and phenomenology.

**Postmodernism: The ‘Experience without the Subject’**

In modernism, the subject takes the central place in the process of cognition. In postmodernism, the subject has been ‘decentered’, it has been “stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse”\(^{38}\). If in modernism, experience consists of the Cartesian knowing subject, i.e., the subject that constitutes experience, then in postmodernism, we have the ‘experience without a subject’, i.e., the subject that is constituted through experience.

To show postmodern deconstruction of the concept of experience, we will turn briefly to Foucault, a leading postmodern figure. Foucault argues that after “the death of God,” we cannot talk about objectively defined limits of thought or action any more, since all limits have been created by human beings themselves\(^{39}\). That is why, Foucault himself is more interested in the ‘game of truth’ rather than in discovery of true things. He develops his theory of power arguing that all notions of truth are ‘subjugated’ to power. Foucault claims, “Notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system.”\(^{40}\) For him, even the human body is discursively constructed – either linguistically, culturally, or within discourse of power relationships. He writes in one of his essays that “nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.”\(^{41}\) In *The Order of Things*, we find one of his most notorious ideas – his proclamation of the ‘death of man.’ He declares, “[Y]ou may have killed God beneath the weight of all that you have said; but don’t imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he.”\(^{42}\) Foucault does not simply warn us of the death of man, but, as Michel Mahon notes, “he celebrates man’s demise”\(^{43}\). Foucault writes, “It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form.”\(^{44}\)

Gary Gutting rightly notes that in Foucault, “modern interiority is replaced with exteriority <…> the central and controlling subject is replaced by language itself”\(^{45}\). It is not surprising that Foucault challenges the assertion that human experience is the basic ground for philosophical and theological theories. In his discussion on the role of experience in science, Foucault denounces the “illusion that consists of the supposition that science is grounded in the plentitude of a concrete and lived experience.”\(^{46}\) Human experience cannot be the starting point for our knowledge of the world. Instead, all teaching systems, which disseminate knowledge of the world, constitute the experience of man. For Foucault, his books become the most authentic experience. In his interview with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault says: “What I think is never quite the same, because for me
my books are experiences, in a sense, that I would like to be as full as possible… However boring, however erudite my books may be, I have always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself."\(^{47}\)

Foucault is not interested in man’s everyday experience. He tries to separate himself from the phenomenological notion of experience, that is, from ‘lived experience’, particularly used in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. He develops a new kind of experience – the ‘unlivable’ experience of Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, the experience that involves “the maximum of the intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time”.\(^{48}\) Foucault brings the idea of ‘a limit-experience’, the experience that “is trying to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable', to that which can't be lived through.”\(^{49}\) For him, the 'limit-experience' is seen as the tool for self-fashioning – the experience which can liberate man from the forces of power and produce intense of joy. That is why he is fascinated by the ideas of madness, violence, death, or suicide – the realities that are seen as ‘creative phenomena.’

We should agree that experience is shaped to a certain degree by the social environment, since it always takes place in history and through history. Gadamer, for instance, talks about “historical consciousness” [\textit{historische Bewuβtsein}] or “historically effected consciousness” [\textit{wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewuβtseins}] emphasizing that the consciousness of man is historically effected consciousness\(^{50}\). He says, “We are not observers who look at history from a distance; rather, insofar as we are historical creatures, we are always on the inside of the history.”\(^{51}\) The culture and social surroundings influence the thought of man and his attitude towards life; man can never remove himself from the situation in which he belongs. As Gadamer puts it, human beings have certain “prejudices” [\textit{Vorurteile}] because they are part of the historical process\(^{52}\).

Moreover, it is true that experience is always open to the future, since it is never ending process. For example, Gadamer argues, “The experienced person proves to be <…> someone who is radically undogmatic [\textit{radikal Undogmatische}].”\(^{53}\) That is to say, properly understood experience always implies an orientation toward new experiences: a person who openly embraces the reality of life, which offers a wide spectrum of experiences – positive and negative, joyful, pleasant and painful – is ready to discover ‘new horizons.’ Commenting on Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer notes that “having an experience means that we change our minds, \textit{reorient} and \textit{reconcile} ourselves to a new situation”\(^{54}\). It is in this sense that we can talk about man’s openness to the experience of ‘possibility’, the experience of something that has not yet come.

Finally, we should agree that writing or reading a book is an experience too. For instance, Martin Jay says, “Even writing a book about ‘experience’ is <…> an experience, for it involves many encounters with the texts of countless others who have pondered the same issues before, and if it finds readers, it will enter into the thoughts of those who come after.”\(^{55}\) Thus, we are not arguing against Foucault’s statement that ‘books are experiences.’

However, what is at issue in Foucault’s thinking is his attempt to ‘de-subjectivize’ experience. Foucault says, “…no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to
'tear' me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same.”56 Benjamin S. Pryor asks, “What kind of experience is this that tears one away from oneself?”57 We could say that Foucault speaks of experience wherein the subject never belongs to himself; the subject himself becomes only a pure ‘possibility’ that always ‘tears’ away from himself and never comes back. Here, we can refer to Gadamer once again who also speaks of man's tearing away from himself in his reflection on aesthetic experience. However, contrary to Foucault, Gadamer’s subject returns to himself. Gadamer writes, “The works of art would seem almost by definition to be an aesthetic experience [ästhetischen Erlebnis]: that means, however, that the power of the work of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence… An aesthetic Erlebnis always contains the experience [die Erfahrung] of an infinite whole.”58

Foucault shows us that the postmodern deconstruction of objectivity goes hand in hand with the deconstruction of subjectivity. In reaction against the modern rational ‘controlling subject’ who places everything outside himself as the object of his experience, postmodernism blurs the line between the subject and object to such an extent that the subject as such disappears. Therefore, what we have in a postmodern definition of experience is the ‘experiencing subject’ on whom external power structures impose themselves, pressing him into subordination and constituting his self-identity. In this view, human experience can never be other than the effect, the passive result of historical discourse. It is in this sense that postmodern definition of experience is called the ‘experience without the subject.’

Conclusions

The historical overview shows that the question of experience is fundamentally related to the question of anthropology. We have shown that under the influence of the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, modern philosophers tend to depersonalize experience by reducing it either to sense-data or a mental construction. In other words, experience does not engage the whole person. Moreover, neither empiricists nor rationalists have overcome the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy. That is to say, the separation of the experiencing subject and the world as the experienced object remains unsolved. As a result, philosophers tend to reduce experience either to a passive sensual receptivity of the objective reality or to a ‘self-produced’ experience of the cognized world (this conception tends to reduce experience to ‘experiment’). Such conceptions lack the dynamic, relational character of experience (as the phenomenologists rightly argue), that is, either the experiencing subject remains passive with respect to the experienced object, or the experienced object remains passive with respect to the experiencing subject. Finally, after postmodernism – in its challenge to the modern free, rational, autonomous subject – proposes the subject as merely a social, cultural, linguistic construction, the notion of human experience is also reduced to a socio-cultural, linguistic production, which is unstable, inconclusive, ambiguous, and fragmented.
REFERENCES

1 For instance, an American feminist activist, Sonia Johnson, claims, "Feminist analysis, more than any other analysis of the human situation, has its origins in direct experience. All feminist theorists first observe and draw conclusions from their own lives; all feminist theory results from the transformation of that experience and observation into principle." Johnson S. Going Out of Our Minds: The Metaphysics of Liberation. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press. 1987. P. ii. See also, Kruks S. Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press. 2001.


6 Mouroux. L’expérience. P. 19: “Il n’est rien, certes, de plus difficile à définir que l’expérience. Les philosophes nous offrent, tantôt un chaos de définitions contradictoires, tantôt une absence de définition...”


10 See Descartes. Discourse on Method. 32.

11 Descartes. Meditations on First Philosophy. II, 27. See also, Descartes. Ibid. III, 36, 78; Discourse on Method. 33.

12 Descartes. Meditations on First Philosophy. II, 34.


17 Mouroux. L’expérience. P. 20: “Une conception empiriste de l’expérience, comme s’il n’y avait expérience que des ‘chose’, et comme si la passivité subjective pure était le critère même de l’expérience.”
Mouroux. Ibid. "[L']expérience n'est que l'expression de l'activité immanente, indépendante et absolute de l'esprit."

Ibid. "[C]es deux conceptions sont également infidèles à la personne, parce que la première tend à en faire une chose; et la seconde, une activité close et impersonnelle."


Merleau-Ponty. Ibid. P. 271. "...les aspects sensoriels de mon corps...sont immédiatement symbo- lique l'un de l'autre parce que mon corps est justement un système tout fait d'équivalences et de transpositions intersensorielles."


Ibid. "Je pense donc que plus nous nous élevons vers la réalité, plus nous accédons à elle – plus elle cesse d'être assimilable à un objet posé devant nous sur lequel nous prenons des repères..."


Marcel. Le Mystère de l'Être. Vol. 1. P. 116. "Mon corps est mien pour autant que je ne le regarde pas, que je ne mets pas entre lui et moi d'intervalle ou encore pour autant qu'il n'est pas objet pour moi, mais que je suis mon corps."


Merleau-Ponty. Ibid. P. 165. "...il n'est pas seulement une expérience de mon corps, mais encore une expérience de mon corps dans le monde."

Ibid. P. 235. "Le corps propre est dans le monde comme le cœur dans l'organisme: il main continuellement en vie le spectacle visible, il l'anime et le nourrit intérieurement, il forme avec lui tient un système."

Ibid. P. 97: "Le corps est le véhicule de l'être au monde..."

Mounier. Le Personnalisme. P. 28: "Je ne peux pas penser sans être, et être sans mon corps: je suis exposé par lui, à moi-même, au monde, à autrui..."


Marcel G. Philosophy of Existentialism. P. 128.


44 Foucault. The Order of Things. P. xxiii. At the end of his career, Foucault declares that his ultimate project has been not so much to study power, but rather the construction of the subject itself. He says, “the goal of my work <…> has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our [Western] culture, human beings are made subjects.” Foucault M. The Subject and Power // Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics / ed. H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1982. P. 208.


48 Foucault. Ibid. P. 241. See also, Gutting. Ibid. P. 74.

49 Ibid. P. 241.


53 Gadamer. Ibid. P. 338.


55 Jay. Ibid. P. 7.

56 Foucault. How an “Experience-Book” is Born. P. 32.


58 Gadamer. Wahrheit und Methode. P. 66. [Emphases added].

LITERATURE AND SOURCES


37 REDUCTIONIST INTERPRETATIONS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE: FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY


Vilma ŠLIUŽAITĖ

ŽMOGIŠKOSIOS PATIRTIES REDUKCIONISTINĖS INTERPRETACIJOS: NUO MODERNYBĖS IKI POSTMODERNYBĖS

Santrauka


PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: žmogiškoji patirtis, santykis tarp patiriančio subjekto ir patiriamo objekto, „patirtis be subjekto“.

KEY WORDS: human experience, the relationship between the experiencing subject and the experienced object, “experience without the subject”.


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