Abstract: The question of subjectivity remains a central but contested issue in contemporary feminism. Recently, however, there have been signs that new areas of common ground are emerging across the theoretical spectrum. There has been a growing willingness to seek a more comprehensive accommodation of competing perspectival premises and themes, and calls from a number of quarters for a new attempt to think unity and diversity together. In this paper, I suggest that philosophical hermeneutics offers a more productive starting point for these concerns than does ‘postmodern philosophy’. I suggest that Paul Ricoeur’s conception of narrative identity more fruitfully deals with postmodernism’s ‘central values’ of heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference, and that his notion of the ‘conflict of interpretations’ productively addresses the epistemological concerns they raise. The narrative can reconcile identity with diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability; the idea of the ‘conflict of interpretations’ draws out the productive consequences of the impossibility of a definitive arbitration between rival perspectives.

The question of subjectivity remains a central but contested issue in contemporary feminism. The history of the concept within feminist theory has been one of dramatic reversal. Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s pioneering critique of the distortions of feminine subjectivity, the idea that the subordination of women was tied up with the cultural denial of their autonomy and agency was widely influential in the early phases of second wave feminist theory. But women’s claims to the status of subjects had barely been raised when a confluence of political and intellectual developments threw the theoretical premises and political implications of such claims into question. As social, cultural and political landscapes were transformed, the idea of the advent of a new era took hold, and existing theoretical frameworks and political projects were thrown into question. In these circumstances, the ‘postmodern’ critiques of modernist Western thought resonated widely. Representational, objective and rational
concepts of knowledge and truth were enthusiastically rejected, and synthetic modes of theorizing which sought to comprehend reality as a unified whole were eschewed. And most relevant here, unitary, autonomous and rational concepts of the subject came under sustained attack.

Against this background, the idea that subjectivity is immersed in multiple contexts, and is or should be a site for the ‘play of difference’ has found wide recognition amongst feminists. However, the general acceptance of the need for a more differentiated conception of the subject has not prevented new cleavages and disagreements from emerging. Debate over the best way to theorize a more fluid, multiple and situated subject has been variegated and vigorous. Three broad approaches in particular dominate current debates. Rival poststructuralist approaches, including deconstruction and especially Foucaultian discourse theory have been widely taken up, perhaps the most influentially in Judith Butler’s Foucaultian theory of gender as performativity (Butler, 1990). Others have turned to psychoanalysis to argue that the unity of the subject is undermined by conscious and unconscious forces that make psychic life a process of change. Along these lines, Jane Flax (1990; 1993) has attempted to connect the psychoanalytic perspective with the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference. Finally, a number of feminists have sought to incorporate a new receptivity to the idea of difference within critical theory frameworks. Theorists such as Seyla Benhabib (1992; Benhabib et al. 1995) have participated in the movement to ‘situate the self’ while remaining highly critical of what they see as the emptying out of the concepts of selfhood, agency and
autonomy within, and the political-normative force of, Butler’s work.

The multifaceted debates that have arisen within this matrix show no sign of abating, with recent interventions revealing ongoing and spirited attempts to justify each of the divergent perspectives. There have, however, been signs that some areas of common ground are emerging across the theoretical spectrum.

Two shared themes in particular stand out. The first is a growing willingness to seek a more comprehensive accommodation with competing perspectival premises and concerns (Alsop et al., 2002). This trend is most pronounced in attempts to bring together the divergent themes – and to a lesser extent premises - of discourse theory and psychoanalysis. Already in 1990, Flax (1990:210, 217) had sought to establish a dialogue between ‘postmodern philosophy’ and psychoanalysis, and in particular to bring together the contention that subjectivity is a discursive effect and the psychoanalytical notions of the unconscious, drives and the psycho-social dynamics crucial to the formation of subjects. More recently, Butler (1997:3) has set out to bring the question of the interiority of the subject into the ‘discursive’ framework; her aim is to ‘think together’ a Foucaultian theory of power and a theory of the psyche.

The second concerns a more specific issue within the theory of the subject. Commentators across a wide section of the theoretical spectrum are calling for a more nuanced response to the issue of multiplicity and difference. In recent times, theorists from a number of quarters have recognized the need to think unity and diversity
together. This trend is particularly evident in perspectives, especially those grounded in psychoanalysis, which remain most committed to the notion of subjectivity. From the ‘sexual difference’ perspective, Rosie Braidotti insists that subjectivity is a multiple, complex process, but has called attention to the need to rethink the unity of the subject in a way which links the body and mind in a new ‘flux of self’ (Braidotti, 1993). On the other hand, Flax’s longstanding caution regarding the themes of difference and multiplicity has led her to call for a re-thinking of subjectivity as ‘multiplicities which are neither fixed nor fragmented’ (Flax, 1993: 93).

These developments in the theory of the subject signal the emergence of a fertile new period in feminist research and theory. The broader parameters implied in the first case can only deepen our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of subjectivity, and a more nuanced position on the question of unity and diversity will more phenomenologically plausible and more theoretically illuminating. To date, however, both developments remain only partially developed, and the obstacles to further elucidation are significant. It is easier to assert the need for a conception of the subject which can encompass unity and diversity than it is to thematize it systematically. And the attempt to incorporate divergent perspectives raises the daunting issue of the position from which it could be effected.

I would like to suggest, however, that there are philosophical resources available that could shed light on both issues. Philosophical hermeneutics has been little explored by feminists, but we need only look to its origins, long before the advent of
postmodernism, in a critique of objectivist conceptions of knowledge and the abstract, ahistorical subject it presupposed, to get an inkling of what it might offer. In the limited space available here, I will not be able to do full justice to the theoretical resources available within hermeneutical philosophy. My treatment of it therefore will focus on the themes most directly relevant to the emerging agenda in feminist theorizing about the subject. In this regard, it is Paul Ricoeur’s development of hermeneutical philosophy that will prove most productive. First, however, I will briefly clarify this agenda through a closer look at Jane Flax’s work.

**The multiple self: soma, psyche and discourse**

As Flax sees it, despite their contribution to undermining unitary and fixed notions of subjectivity, ‘psychoanalysts and postmodernists retain or replicate aspects of these subjectivities within their own discourses’ because each ‘highlights some aspects of subjectivity while denying others’ (Flax, 1993: 98). A more adequate grasp of the complexities of subjectivity must recognize that it is simultaneously somatic, psychic and discursive. Such a move requires some adjustments or additions to the psychoanalytic framework; it must admit due recognition of the discursive dimensions of subjectivity. But equally, discourse theory must recognize that psychic and somatic processes as well as discursive ones empower, limit and constrain subjectivity (1990:100). In over-privileging language, discourse theory neglects the extradiscursive realms of embodiment, desire and emotion and produces ‘curiously attenuated accounts of human practices’ (1993:100).
Flax recognizes that the more differentiated notion of subjectivity she calls for creates an epistemological dilemma as well as theoretical opportunities. On the one hand, these contradictory elements of subjectivity are evidence of its multiplicity; but this multiplicity cannot be elucidated exclusively within either a discursive or psychoanalytical perspective, as each by definition tries to order the heterogeneous components of subjectivity within their respective master narratives or categories (Flax, 1993: 98).

However, while she can see clearly the perspectival dilemma that has been generated, her attempt to construct a dialogue between psychoanalysis and postmodern philosophy has not provided her with the theoretical means needed to respond productively to it; she has posed a crucial question, but has not fully responded to it.

Equally, while she makes a strong case that an adequate understanding of the subject must counterbalance a recognition of the ‘play of difference’ with a grasp of what holds the subject together, her attempt to develop a concept that recognizes this dependency is limited. On this issue, Flax is highly critical of postmodern perspectives. The discursive approach is to be congratulated for its critique of modernist conceptions of autonomous and unified subjects; but the unconstrained celebration of multiplicity and difference is naive and self-deceptive (1990: 210) and the attempt to ‘persuade us that we should be suspicious of self and subjectivity’ as such (Flax, 1990: 220) is to be rejected on empirical and theoretical grounds. As her clinical practice with ‘schizoid’ and ‘borderline’ patients shows, there is a darker
side to the experience of ‘multiplicity’ and ‘fragmentation’ than postmodernism admits, and far from finding the ‘egoless experience of the sublime’ liberatory, many of her patients experienced the absence of any meaningful sense of interiority or coherence as a source of profound terror (1990: 219, 1993: 105). And the postmodern hostility to strong conceptions of subjectivity is based on a false dichotomy between unitary and fragmented selves (1993:93). In fact, she insists, the coherent self and the fragmented self are mirror images of and dependent on each other (1993:93), and their dichotomization ignores the possibility of a difference between a core self and a unitary one (1990:210). And what her borderline patients have shown is that a creativity experience of fluidity, depends upon a sense of continuity and the capacity to ‘go on being’ (1990: 219).

Her attempt to elucidate a dialectic of unity and diversity, however, does not get very far. Subjectivity, she suggests, involves temporary coherences of multiple ‘threads’ which may web together into seemingly solid characteristics or structures, but which may subsequently separate and reform (1993:94). But she leaves unaddressed the questions of how the processes of formation and reformation of cohering threads happen, and what experiential form they take.

As we will see, Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy can shed light on both issues.

**Philosophical hermeneutics**
Philosophical hermeneutics came into being as a ‘from the ground up’ critique of objectivist conceptions of knowledge and the Cartesian-Kantian conceptions of the subject which they presuppose. Against the idea that knowledge is achieved when a subject correctly mirrors the external world, it starts from the idea that meaning is central to human thought and consciousness. And where representational conceptions of knowledge presume that a capacity for (universal) reason allows the subject to free her thought from its social, historical and cultural contexts, philosophical hermeneutics holds that the subject’s capacities to understand and reflect are dependent on our immersion in a shared world of meaning which precedes us.

Like much postmodernism and poststructuralism, then, philosophical hermeneutics rejects the idea that the subject is atomistic and autonomous, or unified and self-transparent. But while it too points to the social character of ‘structures of consciousness' and the historical and cultural variability of categories of thought, there are important differences in the premises and themes of philosophical hermeneutics which lead to quite different outcomes in relation to the issues of concern here. Where Derrida deconstructs the subject, and Foucault’s primary theme is subjection to power, what emerges from philosophical hermeneutics is an emphasis on a dialectic of autonomy and its contextual limits. Our immersion in a world which is always already structured by culturally embedded patterns of meaning partly shapes us, but it also enables us to partly discover and partly construct our identities, and to become speaking, acting and moral agents.
So what are the hermeneutical premises which account for this outcome? One of the most important concerns the hermeneutical understanding of language. To a large extent these premises are shared by the key exponents of philosophical hermeneutics. But Ricoeur has made the analysis of language central to his philosophical work, and it is his formulations we will consider here.

To begin, we must note that while the idea that all understanding is linguistically mediated is central to the hermeneutical perspective, Ricoeur does not ignore the extra-linguistic realm. This is particularly clear in Oneself as Another, where he develops a philosophy of the (decentred, narratively identified and dialogic) subject within the framework of a theory of action. But it was also been evident in his earliest hermeneutical writings. For Ricoeur, the starting point for the hermeneutical theory of understanding is the intersection of ‘life’ and thought, or desire and meaning, in the individual human being. In line with this, and against all versions of mind-body dualism, he insists that subjects are both bodies and selves. And against rationalist conceptions of subjectivity, he insists that all human action involves desire and emotion. The hermeneutical subject is both psychic and embodied.

A second premise crucial to the outcome of Ricoeur’s analyses of language concerns its agential dimension. Against all understandings which focus on the system of language – and his criticism applies to poststructuralist accounts as well as the structuralist one towards which it was originally directed - Ricoeur insists that system of language is only put into operation by the utterances of subjects. To use
language is to act, and demands and expresses a certain agency.

Ricoeur’s primary theme also departs from those of many poststructuralists and postmodernists. Hermeneutics shares with them an acute awareness of the inability of language to carry truth directly. But where Derrida’s focus is on the instability of language and the ambivalence of all texts, and Foucault focuses on the connection between discourse and power, Ricoeur’s main theme is the creativity of language. As we will see, this theme has a bearing on the issues of perspectival and subjective multiplicity.

The conflict of interpretations

In the first case, Ricoeur’s thematization of creativity takes off from his emphasis on the symbolic character of language. All language, he argues, is polysemic; it contains multiple meanings. Ricoeur draws out a number of inferences about agency and creativity from this observation. First, it means that the meanings carried in language are always in need of interpretation (and he insists, open to new interpretations). And this means that we cannot avoid the task of interpreting the world around us.

Secondly, Ricoeur’s analysis uncovers ramifications of the symbolic character of language that are relevant to the feminist attempt to bring together diverse perspectival premises and themes. This is because the polysemy of language has its own epistemological implications. Because language is polysemic, he argues, we are condemned not simply to interpretation, but to a conflict of interpretations (Ricoeur,
The fact that no univocal meanings can be attached to language means that no univocal theoretical perspective can exhaust the meaning of social phenomena. And any given symbolic field is therefore always open to rival interpretations.

The permanent existence of rival interpretation within a given symbolic field is highly pertinent to Flax’s project to think about subjectivity from multiple perspectives. It accounts for the fact of rival interpretations, but more importantly allows Ricoeur to justify a multiperspectival approach. Most importantly, it does so without sliding into wholesale relativism. Like postmodernists, Ricoeur stresses that there can be no appeal to a ‘true’ meaning which can arbitrate between rival perspectives. But for Ricoeur, this has a productive side. The conflict of interpretations presupposes a ‘second order’ hermeneutical framework in which the claims of rival interpretations can be fruitfully brought together. It does not resolve or dissolve the tensions between divergent perspectives. But it does legitimate it in so far as their claims to be an exclusive and definitive interpretation are abandoned.

Moreover, it legitimates what Ricoeur sees as a particularly productive methodological conflict of interpretations. He identifies two divergent but complementary genres of interpretation under the headings of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and the ‘hermeneutics of affirmation’. The hermeneutics of suspicion is a reductive or demystifying mode of interpretation that is directed towards the reduction of illusion, and Nietzsche, Freud and Marx are key examples. The
hermeneutics of affirmation, on the other hand, is ‘attentive to the surplus of
meaning included in the symbol’, and Ricoeur’s own work, along with that of
Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty are the most important exemplars. And both play a
crucial role in the philosophy of the subject, because while the hermeneutics of
suspicion can demonstrate that consciousness is not immediate, only the
hermeneutics of affirmation can explore its multiple mediations.

**Narrative identity**

The second source of creativity Ricoeur has identified in language comes from a
particular structure of language. The narrative, his monumental studies of the
narrative have revealed, has remarkable dynamic qualities, and its application to the
subject in a narrative identity creates a form of coherence over time which straddles
unity and diversity (Ricoeur, 1984; 1992).

Ricoeur’s starting point is the polysemy of identity. When we speak of identity, we
are referring to persistence in time, and one (and the most common) of its meanings is
sameness.

But when applied to the subject, Ricoeur insists, identity is not exhausted by the idea
of sameness; it has a further meaning, precisely of selfhood. The temporal coherence
of the subject consists, he argues, in a dialectic of these two forms of temporal
existence. ‘Character’ is the set of sedimented (although not immutable) dispositions
which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same. At the
other pole, however, the continuity of the self takes the form of self-constancy *despite*
change, as when we stand by a promise, however much our desires, inclinations or opinions have changed (Ricoeur, 1992: 119).

And as Ricoeur sees it, a *narrative* identity mediates between these two modes of identity. It can play this role because of some of its dynamic structure. The narrative, Ricoeur’s analyses have shown (Ricoeur, 1984), is a structure of language which synthesizes events and incidents which are heterogeneous and multiple, and the story which is unified and complete, and in this way reconciles identity with what - in the domain of sameness - is its contrary - diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability. So when we gather together the disparate elements of our lives into a narrative whole, we are forming a coherent but mutable and always provisional identity which can at any point be reinterpreted in the light of later ones.

Moreover, according to R, we construct our narrative identities by applying to ourselves the narratives that we receive from our culture, in a process which exhibits a dialectic of agency and contextualization. While the range of narratives available within a culture is an empirical question, the modern world, it is clear, contains a plurality of – dominant and contestatory - narratives. And existing cultural narratives are always open to reinterpretation and innovation in the light of new historical and intellectual circumstances. Moreover, we can ‘try on’ the different roles we see our favourite characters playing in our stories. As every foxtymoron knows, what’s not to like about that.

**References**


A notable exception is Georgia Warnke, who explored the relevance of hermeneutical political theory for feminism in her essay ‘Feminism and Hermeneutics’ (1993).