



## Review of Gabriel Bianchi's *Figurations of Human Subjectivity: A Contribution to Second-Order Psychology*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

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Over the last few decades questions concerning the nature of human subjectivity have become the subject of intensive research interest. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in the rapid expansion of fields such as neuroscience, cognitive science, phenomenology, and the philosophy of mind. A particularly complex phenomenon, subjectivity has been explored by several different fields in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

The new book by Gabriel Bianchi, *Figurations of Human Subjectivity: A Contribution to Second-Order Psychology*, can be seen in the context of this recent surge of interest. The author, a leading social psychologist and pioneer in sexology in Slovakia, has spent a lifetime exploring questions about sex and intimacy.<sup>1</sup> In this book he brings together a wealth of knowledge on the topic based on his research over many years. The book naturally reflects the author's area of specialization in the field of psychology, but it also has an important philosophical goal of offering insight into the nature of human subjectivity in general. It thus represents an interdisciplinary study that will be of interest to philosophers as well as social scientists.

The somewhat surprising point of departure for the book (presented in the initial chapter) is the claim that psychology, the discipline that is dedicated to examining the human psyche, has neglected the question of subjectivity. Despite the many studies on various aspects of human behavior in the field, the author claims that there has been “no direct reference to a theory highlighting the central essence of the human subject as a psychological entity” (Bianchi, 2022, p. 2). The idea here is that while

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<sup>1</sup> Readers will be familiar with his previous studies, for example, Bianchi & Rosová, 1992; Bianchi et al., 1997; Bianchi et al., 1999; Bianchi, 2003; Bianchi et al., 2007; Bianchi, 2010; Bianchi & Luha, 2010; Bianchi & Fuskova, 2015; Bianchi, 2019; Bianchi, 2020.

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psychology has of course studied the processes of the mind and the forms of human behavior, this has rarely been framed in the context of a broader theory of subjectivity. Bianchi's goal is to correct this neglect of subjectivity and to explore the issue from a psychological perspective. The work is motivated by the belief that the field of psychology would benefit from a focus on subjectivity.

Bianchi draws inspiration from work in philosophy and other fields. He rightly notes that the older positivist conception of subjectivity as a straightforward monadic unity has been long criticized. He proposes instead an approach that explores the diversity of subjectivities that constitute each of us as human beings (Bianchi, 2022, p. 23). It is likewise noted that subjectivity should be regarded not as something static and given but instead as something continuously being created by individuals (Bianchi, 2022, p. 22).

The second chapter examines the question of values as a central dimension of human subjectivity. The model of human values used is that developed by Shalom Schwartz (Schwartz, 1992, 1999, 2012), with whom the author cooperated (Schwartz et al., 2000, 2014). Here the author draws upon the results of his previous research on values in Slovakia after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. This research constituted a part of a larger comparison of values in Eastern and Western European countries (Schwartz et al., 2000). The hypothesis was that life under communism and authoritarianism in Eastern Europe resulted in, for example, respect for hierarchy and undermined values such as autonomy and personal initiative. The investigation confirmed this to be the case (Bianchi, 2022, p. 31). Interestingly, there was no significant change in these views in the data first collected in 1992 and then again in 1997. The basic differences in values between the countries of Eastern and Western Europe remained. An account is also given of a study on the correlation between personal and political values (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 34 ff.).

The third chapter looks at the sexual dimension of subjectivity. At the outset, Bianchi poses the question of the concept of sexual subjectivity. He writes, "I propose that we accept that sexual subjectivity is understanding the sexual self—*our* sexual-selves and *others'* sexual-selves" (Bianchi, 2022, p. 42). An informative historical overview is given of how scientific studies on human sexuality got their start in the nineteenth century after the topic had long been regarded as taboo. Bianchi believes that even to this day we are still victims of some of the prejudices of the early researchers in their understanding of sex. He presents the results of a number of his previous studies on the topic (Bianchi, 2020; Bianchi & Fuskova, 2015, 2018). In one such study he examined views of sexuality as they are articulated in discourse (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 51 ff.). There are different kinds of discourse about sex in different contexts, such as science or religion. These forms of discourse shape people's perception of sex and their different attitudes towards it in their own lives. Another study explores the different conceptions of sexual satisfaction (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 61 f.) and perceptions of the meaning of one's sexual debut (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 62 ff.)

Chapter Four is concerned with the question of collective subjectivity, that is, how individuals identify themselves as members of larger groups. In many ways this chapter is a natural continuation of the previous one since the question of collective subjectivity is explored by means of issues concerning intimacy and gender identity. Here the author again gives brief accounts of some of his numerous studies on

these subjects.<sup>2</sup> It is claimed that “intimacy has now become the source of a person’s identity in society” (Bianchi, 2022, p. 76). Here intimacy is understood as being perceived by others in a way that gives rise to a sense of self-identity. The variety of sexual orientations and gender identities is explored with an eye to their significance for subjectivity (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 82 ff.). This chapter gives the reader a good sense of the complexity of the manifold of sexual subjectivities.

Chapter Five presents a discussion about methodology in the study of subjectivity. Here the advantages of Q-methodology as a form of discourse analysis are discussed (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 90 ff.), based once again on the research results of previous studies that the author has led or participated in (again, concerning attitudes towards sex) (Bianchi et al., 1999). Q-methodology is a method for examining quantitative psychological data designed explicitly to study subjectivity. It involves both means for data collection and statistical analysis of the data, which ultimately produce information about people’s subjective views and opinions. The chapter also suggests a series of other methods for investigating human subjectivity that might in the future prove fruitful in psychology (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 106 ff.). What the author refers to as “design-systems-dynamic-modelling” (Bianchi, 2022, p. 111) is particularly intriguing. This involves finding solutions to social and behavioral issues by means of modelling that allows for the planning of desired outcomes.

The final brief chapter discusses the concept of liminality, which refers to key transitions in the lives of individuals that involve shifts and reconfigurations of different elements of subjectivity. The notion of a liminal hotspot concerns moments of such transitions where individuals become stuck and are unable to move forward to the completion of the transition (Bianchi, 2022, pp. 122f.).<sup>3</sup> The work ends on a skeptical note, raising the question of whether it is even in principle possible to know the subjectivities of other people. This can be seen as an extension of the problem of other minds in philosophy.

What is presented here is not an organic whole or a single monolithic theory of human subjectivity. Instead, it is a series of individual explorations that give insight into different aspects of subjectivity, primarily, the value-related dimension and the sexual dimension. This is completely consistent with Bianchi’s rejection of the idea of a singular monadic human subject, and indeed given his view about the plurality of subjectivities, this is probably the only way to go about exploring the issue. While some readers might find it a fault that no single broad theory of subjectivity is given, this is to miss the point. It is one of the great strengths of the work that it shows that subjectivity cannot be reduced to any one of its many dimensions. Subjectivity is a complex phenomenon that resists any fixed determinate definition or clearly circumscribed sphere. The author clearly states that the desideratum for psychology is “to grasp human subjectivity in its diversity, plurality, self-generativity and livedness” (Bianchi, 2022, p. 117). It is thus necessary to resist the urge of common sense for a single simple, neat theory.

Bianchi’s highly informative book raises a broader question about the nature of the interdisciplinary field of subjectivity studies in general. The term “subjectivity” is

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Bianchi & Láštíková, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See the author’s earlier work Bianchi & Fuskova, 2018.

used in many ways in the various contexts, as researchers from different disciplines try to tackle the issue. As Bianchi's study shows, many different approaches and methods are employed in this undertaking. With the heritage of the older, ontologically-based theories of a monolithic, static subject, there is a reluctance in theories today to commit to a clear definition of subjectivity. This problematizes the field significantly since one wonders whether scholars, while using the same term, are in the end talking about the same thing or if they are not instead really exploring different phenomena. An example of this issue can be found in the Bianchi's illuminating account of the use of the Q-methodology discussed in Chapter Five. This method purports to be a way of investigating subjectivity. It allows researchers to study the views and dispositions of people on different subjects (for example, on sex or personal values). In philosophy, however, subjectivity is taken to be a much broader issue than simply a question of people's views and dispositions (on sex or anything else). For example, phenomenology explores the rich realm of human experience, which goes well beyond what people might happen to think and what opinions they hold. It tries to sketch our precognitive experience of being in the world. This is evident when one considers, for example, Heidegger's phenomenology, which is not interested at all in things such as personal opinions yet gives a brilliant account of subjectivity. With its rich content and use of different methodologies, Bianchi's book helps us to think further on this issue.

This work purports to illuminate certain "figurations of human subjectivity," which it does very effectively. The book shows how important interdisciplinary work is for an understanding of subjectivity, and it offers a wealth of information that should significantly contribute to discussions of the subject in philosophy. The empirical dimension of this work will be particularly welcome to philosophers interested in subjectivity research. It is impossible to do justice to all the interesting individual studies that the author presents here. After studying this book, readers will be keen to hear more about the author's research on the different subjects presented. I am confident that the work will indeed serve its desired function of helping readers to think more deeply about the complex constellation of issues surrounding the amorphous phenomenon or set of phenomena called subjectivity.

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