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978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The work of the German philosopher Manfred Frank has profoundly affected the direction of the contemporary debate in many areas of philosophy and literary theory. This present collection brings together some of his most important essays, on subjects as diverse as Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, the status of the literary text, and the response to the work of Derrida and Lacan. Frank shows how the discussions of subjectivity in recent literary theory fail to take account of important developments in German Idealist and Romantic philosophy. The prominence accorded language in literary theory and analytic philosophy, he claims, ignores key arguments inherited from Romantic hermeneutics, those which demonstrate that interpretation is an individual activity never finally governed by rules. Andrew Bowie's introduction situates Frank's work in the context of contemporary debates in philosophy and literary theory.

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Frontmatter

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MANFRED FRANK is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, Germany. His many books and articles include studies of the problem of time in early German Romantic philosophy and literature, and a study of Schelling, Hegel and Marxist dialectic. His major work on contemporary literary theory appeared in English in 1989 as *What is Neostructuralism*. He is an editor of the *Revue internationale de philosophie* and has published widely in German and English language journals on both philosophical and literary topics.

ANDREW BOWIE is Professor of European Philosophy at Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge. His books include *Aesthetics and subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche* (1990), *Schelling and modern European Philosophy: an introduction* (1993), *F.W.J. von Schelling: on the history of modern philosophy* (1994), and *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: the philosophy of German literary theory* (1996).

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978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# THE SUBJECT AND THE TEXT

*Essays on literary theory and philosophy*

MANFRED FRANK

*Edited, with an introduction by*

ANDREW BOWIE

*Translated from the German by*

HELEN ATKINS



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Contents

<i>Introduction by Andrew Bowie</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 The text and its style: Schleiermacher’s theory of language	i
2 What is a literary text and what does it mean to understand it?	23
3 The ‘true subject’ and its double: Jacques Lacan’s hermeneutics	97
4 The entropy of language: reflections on the Searle–Derrida debate	123
<i>Manfred Frank: bibliography of main works in German and English, and English translations</i>	190
<i>Index</i>	197

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction**Andrew Bowie*

## THE ROOTS OF LITERARY THEORY

'Literary theory'<sup>1</sup> has long since ceased to be of importance only to those concerned with the study of literature. The growth in the importance of literary theory might, however, seem somewhat surprising, given that it is predicated on an assumption which had already informed American 'new criticism', namely that the aim of recovering the intended meanings of the author could no longer form the main basis upon which literary texts were to be interpreted. Attention to the 'verbal icon' in new criticism did lead to considerable controversy. It did not, though, as literary theory has, set in motion a whole series of new research projects which affect nearly all areas of the humanities. What really helped bring home the key change of methodological perspective now associated with literary theory was the radicalisation and dramatisation of anti-intentionalist assumptions, in the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and others, which crystallised in the idea of the 'death of the author'. This radicalisation made visible formerly hidden links between theoretical reflection on literary interpretation and central issues in modern European philosophy. In the light of these consequences literary theory also

<sup>1</sup> By 'literary theory' I mean the work of those theorists who have had the most noticeable influence on the humanities since the 1960s, such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Gérard Genette, Paul de Man and others. This is clearly a largely arbitrary designation, but its significance will become apparent in the focus of Frank's essays and from the contexts in which I discuss it here. Frank himself refers to 'French textual theory' in relation to what I term 'literary theory'. This is in many ways a more apt designation, as many positions in literary theory tend to exclude the very notion of 'literature', in favour of the idea that there is no reason for privileging particular texts by honouring them with the label of literature.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Introduction*

began to play a controversial role in mainstream European and analytical philosophy.

The ‘death of the author’ was the perceived result of the ‘subversion’ of the intended meaning of the author – and, by extension, of any language user – by the workings of a language which the author did not invent and over which he or she had only limited control. Roland Barthes claims that it was Mallarmé who was ‘the first to see . . . the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner’ (in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory*, London and New York: Macmillan, 1988, p. 168).<sup>2</sup> In conjunction with the assimilation into the study of literary and other texts of ideas from Saussure’s linguistics and from a variety of other theoretical sources, such as the work of Freud and Heidegger, this view of language and the subject became a central assumption in many areas of what now goes under the name of ‘literary theory’. Along with the supposed demise of the author went a related suspicion of the very notion of interpretation, as well as of the idea that literary texts have a special aesthetic status that other texts lack (see e.g. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). Debates over the effects of this incursion of such theories into the study of literature continue, as do the philosophical debates over the validity of the work of Derrida and others. The point of the present selection of translated essays is to make available some new perspectives that have often been ignored in these debates, perspectives which, furthermore, widen the scope of the discussion to include the most important areas of contemporary philosophy.

Manfred Frank is at present Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, having studied philosophy and German studies at a variety of German universities and been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Geneva. Frank’s work is initially

<sup>2</sup> Whether Mallarmé was really the first is at least open to doubt. Novalis maintains, for example, that ‘The artist belongs to the work, and not the work to the artist’ (Novalis, *Band 2 Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl, Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1978, p. 651), as well as maintaining that ‘a writer is really only one who is enthused by language [*ein Sprachbegeisterter*, which has the sense of one who is “in-spirited” by language]’ (*ibid.*, p. 439): the context makes it plain that we are in certain ways subject to language. Novalis does not go so far, though, as to invert the roles of subject and language as Mallarmé can be said to do: this will be significant in Frank’s appropriation of the Romantic position represented by Novalis.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xi

significant in the context of debates over literary theory because it is directed both against the idea of the ‘death of the subject’, and towards a revaluation of hermeneutics which gives a central role to aesthetics. Unlike Jürgen Habermas, whose criticisms of post-structuralism (e.g. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, English translation: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) have sometimes betrayed a lack of hermeneutic sympathy which leads him to misinterpretations of Derrida and others, Frank’s critical responses to Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and others are all the more telling because of his partial sympathy with and concern to do hermeneutic justice to what he criticises. The lack of an adequate response – or, indeed, any direct response at all – on the part of the main proponents of post-structuralism to many of these criticisms can suggest just how telling Frank’s criticisms are. However, although it is sometimes critical of contemporary literary theory, Frank’s work does not constitute a regression to the unreflective approach that still dominates many areas of literary study even today.<sup>3</sup>

Frank’s theoretical work emerged from two essential sources in post-war German philosophy that played a major role in his earlier academic career: the tradition of hermeneutics associated with Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the tradition of research in German Idealism associated with Dieter Henrich. Frank has mobilised, combined and adapted ideas from these traditions for a wide variety of purposes. As well as the work in philosophy and literary theory presented here for the first time in English (the essays are taken from Manfred Frank, *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare. Studien zur deutsch-französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie*, Erweiterte Neuauflage (first edition 1980), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), he has written major works on: the problem of time in early German Romantic philosophy and literature (*Das Problem ‘Zeit’ in der deutschen Romantik. Zeitbewußtsein und Bewußtsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung*, Paderborn, Munich, Vienna and Zurich: Schöningh,

<sup>3</sup> For a – in more ways than one – particularly crude example of this approach, see T.J. Reed’s reply to my ‘The Presence of Literary Theory in German Studies’, in *Oxford German Studies* 20/21, 1992.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

1990 (first published 1972): this was his PhD dissertation); Schelling's critique of Hegel (*Der unendliche Mangel an Sein. Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975); Schleiermacher's hermeneutics (*Das Individuelle-Allgemeine. Textstrukturierung und -interpretation nach Schleiermacher*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977); themes in modern German and European literature such as the 'endless journey' (*Die unendliche Fahrt. Ein Motiv und sein Text*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979; *Kaltes Herz. Unendliche Fahrt. Neue Mythologie. Motivuntersuchungen zur Pathogenese der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); mythology in modernity (*Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie I*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982; *Gott im Exil. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie II*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); post-structuralism (*Was Ist Neostrukturalismus?*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984, English translation: *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); the philosophical question of individuality (*Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität. Reflexionen über Subjekt, Person und Individuum aus Anlaß ihrer 'postmodernen' Toterklärung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986); Lyotard and Habermas on the question of argument (*Die Grenzen der Verständigung. Ein Geistergespräch zwischen Lyotard und Habermas*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); early German Romantic aesthetics (*Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); the philosophy of time (*Zeitbewußtsein*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1990); and style in philosophy (*Stil in der Philosophie*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992). He has also produced an edition of Ludwig Tieck's *Phantásus*, perhaps the most densely allusive text in early German Romantic literature (*Ludwig Tieck, Phantásus*, Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), and new editions of Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutik und Kritik* ('Hermeneutics and Criticism') (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) and Schelling's 1841–2 lectures on the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* ('Philosophy of Revelation') (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). One aspect of Frank's most recent work consists of a continuing engagement with that side of the contemporary analytical philosophy of mind (Roderick Chisholm, Hector-Neri Castañeda, John Perry, Thomas Nagel, etc.) which, in contrast to contemporary physicalist accounts of the subject in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xiii

analytical philosophy, shares key arguments with the post-Kantian philosophical tradition of reflection on subjectivity (*Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis. Essays zur analytischen Philosophie der Subjektivität*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991; *Selbstbewußtseinstheorien von Fichte bis Sartre*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991; *Analytische Theorien des Selbstbewußtseins*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994). Frank is also engaged in an ongoing project to rewrite and assess the history of German Romantic philosophy (see 'Philosophische Grundfragen der Frühromantik' in *Athenäum* 4. Jahrgang, Paderborn, Munich, Vienna and Zurich: Schöningh, 1994).

Throughout his work Frank has been concerned to combine ideas from different theoretical traditions. After focusing initially on an agenda still largely set by the dominant historical and hermeneutic philosophical tradition in Germany, he soon became concerned to increase communication between German theory and contemporary French thought – this was one reason for his move to Geneva. Having in some ways become disappointed by the failure of many French thinkers to engage in serious dialogue with other traditions, he has recently been concerned, increasingly successfully, to promote dialogue between the concerns of German Idealism and Romanticism, and contemporary American analytical philosophy.

The essays in this volume deal with figures like Derrida and Lacan (and many others) who are familiar to those working in literary theory, with the analytical philosophy of John Searle, and with figures from the past, like Schleiermacher, who have been largely ignored by literary theorists, let alone by analytical philosophers. To facilitate access to the selection of Frank's work translated here, I want, instead of rehearsing the arguments of the essays, to give a brief account of some of the philosophical heritage upon which this work is based, relating it to contemporary theoretical concerns. This heritage has remained largely unknown in the English-speaking world.<sup>4</sup> Had it been better known, some of

<sup>4</sup> For an account of some aspects of it see Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, reprinted 1993; Schelling and *Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1993; *From Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997. The only major work of Frank's previously to be translated is *Was Ist Neostrukturalismus?*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

*Introduction*

the more questionable positions in the literary theory that emerged with post-structuralism might never have gained the dominance they did in some circles, and key debates in analytical philosophy would have gained a vital new dimension.

In the new afterword to the republished edition of his doctoral dissertation, *Das Problem 'Zeit' in der deutschen Romantik* ('The Problem of "Time" in German Romanticism'), Frank remarks: 'In retrospect I am aware that the . . . seeds of all my later publications were sown here and that, even when on the most apparently distant thematic paths, I was always and still am engaged in an inner dialogue with early Romanticism (including Solger and Schleiermacher)' (Frank, *Das Problem 'Zeit'*, pp. 499–500).<sup>5</sup> Why, then, should the philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, which has not played a significant role in the English-speaking world since the time of the English Romantics – if it played any role at all<sup>6</sup> – have become so important for a contemporary philosopher writing on questions of interpretation? The simple reason is that the insights of early German Romantic philosophy already prefigure many of the arguments raised by literary theorists against received assumptions both in literary criticism and in certain influential areas of hermeneutic and analytical philosophy. The further reason is that some of the arguments of the Romantics, as Frank was probably the first to show in a convincing manner, are demonstrably superior to those in influential areas of contemporary literary theory and analytical philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> The stress on 'early German Romantic philosophy' is to distinguish the cosmopolitan and rational nature of this philosophy from later nationalist and reactionary versions of Romanticism, of the kind that appear, say, in the worst aspects of Richard Wagner, or in the early Nietzsche.

<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher's influence as a theologian, as opposed to his influence as a philosopher, has, of course, been considerable; Schelling has had far more indirect influence, for example via the effect of his early and late work on Nietzsche, and on American pragmatism, than has usually been realised (see Bowie, *Schelling*, F.W.J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, translation and introduction by Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On the whole, though, the main Romantic philosophers have never been taken as seriously as Hegel, not least because some of their key texts were not published until this century, some appearing only after the Second World War. The contents of these texts did, though, filter through to a wide audience via lecture notes and word of mouth.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xv

The major points of theoretical orientation in the literary theory associated with French structuralism and post-structuralism have been the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, and certain aspects of the tradition of German philosophy inaugurated by Kant, that are continued in the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger. The vital aspect of this tradition for literary theory is the rejection of what Hilary Putnam has termed ‘metaphysical realism’. ‘Metaphysical realism’ presupposes an ultimately knowable ‘ready-made world’ which pre-exists our descriptions of it, and which it is the task of the natural sciences to describe.<sup>7</sup> The sciences are seen in metaphysical realism as aiming at an ‘absolute picture’, a true representation of the world in itself. Frank rejects the ‘metaphysical realist’ view, but he does so, as we shall see, in often unfamiliar ways. One way of approaching his work is to see how each of the central figures in the accounts of post-Kantian philosophy upon which much literary theory has relied has a counterpart in Frank’s revision of the history of philosophy. In place of Hegel, the representative of a totalising ‘metaphysics of presence’, Frank concentrates on the arguments of Schlegel, Novalis and the Schelling of the Hegel-critique, which challenge the very basis of Hegel’s thinking;<sup>8</sup> in place of Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical hermeneutics, Frank concentrates on a new interpretation of Schleiermacher’s startlingly radical hermeneutics; Husserl and Heidegger play a less important role in his work than does Sartre, who is read in terms of his parallels with Fichte and Romanticism. Frank’s work is not least important, then, because it leads to a new understanding of the history of philosophy, in which many of the assumptions about the nature of modern philosophy in both literary theory and analytical philosophy are shown to be questionable. Underlying Frank’s attention to these neglected figures is a vital assumption about the course of modern philosophy, the explication of which will form the basis of this introduction.

<sup>7</sup> Aspects of the work of both Hegel and Husserl can be understood in realist terms, but the influential aspects of their work for literary theory are not the metaphysical realist aspects.

<sup>8</sup> On Schelling’s critique of Hegel see Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein*; Bowie, *Schelling*; Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The crucial moment in modern philosophy for Frank is what he terms the ‘becoming non-transparent of the Absolute for reflection, from which both the turn towards aestheticism and to the philosophy of language emerged in early Romanticism, in one and the same movement’ (Frank, *Stil in der Philosophie*, p. 65; see also Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*, ‘Philosophische Grundfragen der Frühromantik’). To understand what is meant by the perhaps rather opaque terms in which Frank couches this assertion we need, then, to look at the relationship of positions in early German Romantic and Idealist philosophy to some of the main philosophical influences on recent theory.

## SUBVERSIONS OF THE SUBJECT

It is a commonplace both within literary theory and – although the issue is couched in less emphatic terms – in much analytical philosophy that the self-conscious I has been ‘subverted’ by the fact that the language it speaks is, initially at least, external to it. One version of this subversion is the source of the idea of the ‘death of the author’. The issue of the subject and language is, though, highly complex. Habermas refers to the ‘paradigm of subjectivity’, in which the truth about the object is regarded as based upon the constitutive role of the thinking subject, and he assumes that this is the dominant paradigm in modern European philosophy from Descartes onwards. The move away from this paradigm towards a paradigm based on language as the medium of intersubjectivity is, however, not necessarily the liberation from the aporias of modernity as which it is often presented.

One particular link of analytical philosophy to structuralism and post-structuralism can suggest why. At the beginning of analytical philosophy Frege’s ‘driving of thoughts out of consciousness’ is directed, as is the early Russell’s critique of Idealism, against any role of the activity of consciousness in the establishing of truth, in Frege’s case in the name of a Platonic ‘third realm’ of timeless truths, and in Russell’s case in the name of the absolute certainty of particular empirical propositions in the sciences. Truth in this view resides in language, in the form of what Bernard Bolzano had termed ‘objective representations’, not in the contin-



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xvii

gencies of the minds of its users.<sup>9</sup> That truth cannot just depend on the contingencies of my subjective experience is unexceptional: the real question is how self-consciousness is to be understood in relation to intersubjectively constituted truth and meaning. The nihilistic implications of the positivist view that developed from the early analytical conception, in which only verifiable scientific propositions are deemed worthy of truth status and all forms of intuitive human wisdom are rejected, is a reminder that the exclusion of the subject in modern philosophy can take very questionable forms. Not all of these forms chime with the suggestion in some literary theory that this exclusion is a liberation which enables the ‘free play’ of textual meaning, as opposed to locating and fixing meaning in terms of its origin in the subject. A radically externalist view of language is, for example, perfectly compatible with the worst kinds of behaviourism. It is against the tendency towards a disguised positivism which is often present in literary theory and which still plays a significant role in many areas of analytical philosophy that Frank’s defence of a philosophy of subjectivity is directed.

What, then, is the real point of the move away from the ‘paradigm of subjectivity’ in parts of two major modern Western philosophical traditions? One answer lies in the way meaning relates to the subject *qua* language user. Barthes claims: ‘Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*’ (Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, p. 169). In much analytical philosophy self-consciousness becomes reduced, in a related manner, to the ability to apply the rules governing the use of the word ‘I’ correctly. Self-consciousness must in these terms be understood propositionally, and thus intersubjectively, via the rules for converting deictic expressions between the ‘he’ and the ‘I’ perspectives, which allow us to identify a person, including ourselves. It is therefore not to be understood via the epistemological problems concerning the

<sup>9</sup> As J. Alberto Coffa, *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 shows, this idea, which is the essential idea that initiates what Coffa terms the ‘semantic tradition’, was already developed by Bolzano in the first half of the nineteenth century. See Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, chapter 5, which shows that Schleiermacher employs the same notion, though to different ends.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

*Introduction*

'intuitive' nature of self-knowledge or 'inner evidence' (see Ernst Tugendhat, *Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976, English translation: *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy*, trans. P.A. Gornier, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; Tugendhat, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstbestimmung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, English translation: *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, trans. Paul Stern, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).<sup>10</sup> Because communicable meanings, which rely on intersubjective rules for the use of language, cannot be assumed to be constituted in the interiority of consciousness, the subject supposedly ceases to play any active role in the constitution of meaning at all. As Frank will suggest, however, this approach does not explain how the individual subject relates to intersubjectively constituted meanings, not least because it gives no way of explaining new initiatives of meaning of the kind that are most obviously apparent, of course, in literature.

The attempts to remove the subject from the centre of philosophy are most convincing when they are seen as a result of problems inherent in the notion of 'representation', which is where the problems with metaphysical realism become most obvious. Richard Rorty captured the essence of these problems in his critique of the notion of the mind as the more or less adequate mirror of external reality in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.<sup>11</sup> The basis of Rorty's conception is, along with the work of the later Wittgenstein, the account of 'Western metaphysics' developed by Heidegger from the late 1920s onwards. Heidegger saw Descartes as the initiator of a process of 'subjectification', in which the truth of the world comes to be located in the representation of the world to itself by the self-conscious subject. The simple problem with the notion of the 'I' as the locus of the true representations of objects, as

<sup>10</sup> The basic idea is derived from the later Wittgenstein's rejection of the notion of a private language; the question for Frank is whether the referent of the term 'I' can be understood as being of the same status as other kinds of referent (see, in particular, Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis*, and below).

<sup>11</sup> Rorty suggests that most analytical philosophy must also be understood in terms of representation: "Analytic" philosophy is one more variant of Kantian philosophy, a variant marked principally by thinking of representation as linguistic rather than mental, and of philosophy of language rather than "transcendental critique", or psychology, as the discipline which exhibits the "foundations of knowledge" (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 8).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xix

the ‘mirror of nature’, is, though, that there is no place from which the representation and its object can be compared. Judging the adequacy of a representation requires a position from which both the object and its representation can be apprehended. This position is, however, bought at the price of a regress, because the position from which the adequate representation is established must itself be an adequate representation of the relationship between representation and object, and so on. One perceived way out of this dilemma is to change the relationship of the ‘I’ to truth and meaning, by locating truth and meaning intersubjectively, in the forms which make communication possible, as Habermas does in the wake of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. At the same time, as opposed to the dominant assumptions in much analytical philosophy, which still aims at a version of a representationalist theory, true propositions are no longer seen by Heidegger, Rorty and Habermas as corresponding to a ready-made reality, because this merely repeats the problem of representation in another form.<sup>12</sup> The crucial question, then, is how this change in the conception of the ‘I’ is understood: Frank’s work is not least important for the way it shows that the critique of representation is not coextensive with the critique of subjectivity as the basis of the intelligibility of language.

The fundamental move in the decentring of the subject takes place, then, when the Cartesian ‘I’, which is supposed to be transparent to itself in the immediate act of reflecting upon itself in the *cogito*, gives way to an ‘I’ that is subjected to its dependence on the language through which it speaks. Nietzsche suggested in this connection that the ‘subject’ is really a function of the subject–predicate structure of language itself. From Nietzsche to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Habermas, Derrida, Lacan and many others the ‘I’ is no longer seen as ‘present to itself’ in relation to an opposed world of objects which it attempts to represent, because its very status as ‘I’ depends upon a language which originates in the world, not in the interiority of consciousness. The further correlate of these positions, as we have already seen, is that the question of self-consciousness ceases to be the central issue for philosophy,

<sup>12</sup> For the critique of the older analytical position see Putnam, *Realism and Reason. Philosophical Papers Volume III*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 in particular, and any of his more recent work.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

*Introduction*

because the problems posed by self-consciousness are now located in the *intersubjective* realm of language, rather than the *intrasubjective* space of consciousness. It is the way in which this further move against the subject is carried out which Frank questions, with consequences that affect many positions in analytical philosophy, the theory of communicative action, hermeneutics and literary theory.

## FICHTE'S INSIGHT: RESTORING THE SUBJECT

The initial theoretical impulse for Frank's questioning came from the initiator of what has been called the 'Heidelberg School', Dieter Henrich, who was perhaps his most influential teacher. In a seminal essay on J.G. Fichte, *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967, English translation in Christensen, D. (ed.), *Contemporary German Philosophy. Vol. 1*, University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1982), the implications of which he has been developing ever since, Henrich suggested a way of approaching the issue of self-consciousness in modern philosophy which offered an alternative to the dominant perspectives deriving from both Heidegger and analytical philosophy. By following up this alternative approach as it is manifested in the philosophy of German Idealism and Romanticism, Frank arrives at arguments which avoid some of the implausible consequences of the notion of the subversion of the subject while not regressing to the notion of the wholly self-transparent subject of the Cartesian tradition.

A lot of work in literary theory has actually shown little serious awareness that the major theoretical questions about the interpretation of texts involve issues that form the very substance of modern European philosophy, as opposed to the idea that they involve a completely new beginning beyond what both Heidegger and Derrida term the 'language of metaphysics'. In consequence, the extent to which the understanding of subjectivity in literary theory has depended upon the contentious story of modern philosophy told by Heidegger is often ignored. The aim of Henrich's revaluation of Fichte is to demonstrate the existence of an important alternative conception of the subject in modern philosophy. This conception severs the link between self-consciousness and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxi

self-preservation, in which the subject is ultimately understood as that which preserves itself against what would deprive it of its existence. Henrich sees this link as beginning with Hobbes and its essential consequence as the notion of the subject as lord over internal and external nature which Heidegger regarded as characteristic of Western metaphysics. Using Fichte to open up such an alternative conception might, however, seem perverse: Fichte is generally known as the philosopher of a subject whose power, like that of the God of the ontological proof, is wholly contained within itself, as *causa sui*. Importantly, the parallel of such an understanding of Fichte's conception with conceptions questioned by literary theory is easy to suggest: the author as absolute authority over the meanings of his or her own text plays a similar role to God in the ontological proof, and to Fichte's 'self-positing' subject.

What, though, makes Fichte's arguments so significant for Henrich, and, by extension, for Frank? Fichte arrives at his initial conception of the subject via the realisation that Kant's transcendental subject – the prior condition of possibility of objective knowledge – cannot ground its account of its own existence, which is just assumed by Kant as a 'fact'. Fichte argues that the 'I' cannot be an object of knowledge, because, *qua* subject, it is itself the necessarily prior condition of the very possibility of the world's intelligibility and thus of the objectivity of knowledge. Objectivity is established for Kant in judgements, in which the subject synthesises recurrent appearances given to it from the world of nature by subsuming them under categories and concepts. The vital point is that the 'I' cannot be subject to anything else in the manner of the causally determined nature which is its object of knowledge, because if it were the freedom evident in practical reason and in the 'I's ability to step back from itself and reflect upon itself in philosophy would become incomprehensible. The centre of Fichte's philosophy is therefore an emphatic notion of freedom, which gives the subject a status that is inherently immune to description in terms of what can be said about the world of knowable objects. It is this conception of freedom which is, of course, the source of the hyperbolic aspect of Fichte, which regards the object world as 'posited' by the 'I'. The fundamental fact about the 'I' is, then, that in some sense it cannot, even in its purely

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxii

*Introduction*

cognitive operations, be objectified.<sup>13</sup> In Heidegger's view Fichte's 'I' is one of the culminations of Western metaphysics, which reaches its apotheosis in Nietzsche's theory of the 'will to power', the motivating ground of the appearing world that mirrors itself to itself in all the conflicting manifestations of the object world, including in the 'subject' itself. Heidegger links this conception to the growing dominance of nature by modern science and technology. Henrich, on the other hand, wants to show that there is another side to Fichte, one still connected to a conception of the freedom of the subject, which is not susceptible to the account given by Heidegger. It is this conception which leads in the direction that has been essential to much of Frank's work.

The central issue here is 'reflection', in which the 'I' splits itself into an objective and a subjective self, a self that is thought about and a self that does the thinking.<sup>14</sup> In line with Heidegger this act is seen by Lacan, Derrida and others as the founding moment in modern metaphysics. Henrich summarises this conception of the subject in Kant's predecessors as follows:

they held that the essence of the Self (*Ich*) is reflection. This theory begins by assuming a subject of thinking and emphasises that this subject stands in a constant relationship to itself. It then goes on to assert that this relationship is a result of the subject's making itself into its own object; in other words the activity of representing, which is originally related to objects, is turned back on itself and in this way produces the unique case of an identity between the activity and the result of the activity. (Henrich, *Contemporary German Philosophy*, p. 19)

This structure of reflection is clearly the basic structure of a subject

<sup>13</sup> What is often forgotten is that the object world for Fichte is the world of knowledge constituted by the spontaneous aspect of the subject in judgements, as it is in Kant, not the world of immediate unconceptualised sensory data given in receptivity (see also John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, who makes much the same point, and Bowie, 'John McDowell's *Mind and World*, and Early Romantic Epistemology', in *Revue internationale de philosophie* issue on 'Romantic Philosophy', Autumn 1996). For a good interpretation of how Fichte can be understood without entailing some of the more bizarre arguments attributed to him concerning the absolute status of the 'I', see Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. See also Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* for a more detailed account of the move from Kant to Fichte. Those familiar with the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* should recognise the proximity of Fichte's argument to Sartre's view of the subject.

<sup>14</sup> For a brilliant critique of Descartes' version of this issue see Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, pp. 42–61.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxiii

which is understood to be ‘present to itself’. Derrida, in line with Heidegger, seems to regard this as the only notion of the subject in Western metaphysics. Fichte’s ‘insight’ was into the consequences of the inherent circularity of this model of the subject. *Some* sense of the identity of reflector and reflected is evidently fundamental to self-consciousness, otherwise I would have no way of thinking about my thoughts as *my* thoughts. It was this fact which led Descartes to make the reflexive identity of the self the one point of absolute certainty, the *fundamentum inconcussum*, which escapes the problems involved in knowledge of the unreliable world of appearances. The problem Fichte shows comes about when the whole structure of self-consciousness is to be explained in terms of the ‘I’ reflecting upon itself.<sup>15</sup>

Frank, following Fichte, often uses the metaphor of looking in a mirror to show why reflection is an inadequate model for the explanation of self-consciousness. If I look in a mirror in order to see myself as an object I will only recognise myself, as opposed to a random object or person, if I am already aware that it is myself that I am to look at *before* the reflection. The external image in the object world cannot itself provide the criterion which allows me to see the reflected *object* as myself, as the *subject* that is looking at the image. Sidney Shoemaker sums this idea up in the dictum that: ‘Perceptual self-knowledge presupposes non-perceptual self-knowledge, so not all self-knowledge can be perceptual’ (Sidney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne, *Personal Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984, p. 105). The idea is underlined by the fact that I am capable of seeing what is really myself as not myself, as in the famous story of the philosopher Ernst Mach, who saw a ‘shabby pedagogue’ climbing on to a tram in the mirror at the end of the tram, only to realise that this was actually himself. Instead of the model of reflection being able to explain the nature of self-consciousness, it must either presuppose the phenomenon it is supposed to be explaining, or it would have to deny the existence of the phenomenon itself, which would be incoherent.

<sup>15</sup> For the textual evidence of Fichte’s questioning of the reflection model see Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, chapter 3. On the whole question of ‘reflection’ see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror. Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1986, and my critique in Bowie, *Schelling*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxiv

*Introduction*

The detailed consequences of this insight for Fichte cannot concern us here, but one point is fundamental. Fichte is led to the realisation that his initial attempt to suggest that the subject is that which ‘posits’ itself, because it is the only case of the immediate identity of subject and object, must give way to a conception in which the subject depends, as Henrich puts it, on

an active ground existing prior to the active Self (*Ich*), a ground which explains the equiprimordial unity of the factors in the Self [the self as subject and as object], but is not itself present in the Self. The term ‘Self’ refers not to this ground, but only to its result. For ‘Self’ means to be for oneself. However, the Self does not focus explicitly on what makes its unity possible, even though this latter is its source. (Henrich, *Contemporary German Philosophy*, p. 30)

The crucial factor is that Fichte undermines the structure of reflexive self-presence, which entails a split between two aspects of oneself, by showing the dependence of that structure on a necessarily prior unity which cannot be accounted for in reflexive terms.

We can, therefore, only understand the nature of self-consciousness by realising that, unlike in the case of knowledge of states of affairs, where we can synthesise concept and intuition in seeing the initially indeterminate object determinately as ‘x’, the self’s relation to itself cannot depend on such a synthesis, because it must already be familiar with itself for reflexive self-identification to be possible at all. This is summarised in Frank’s recent contentions, with regard to the analytical philosophy of mind, that ‘all knowledge (of something) is propositional’ – because it has truth-value potential (Fregean ‘*Bedeutung*’) – ‘except of that which is present in *self-consciousness*’ (Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis*, p. 408), and that ‘Knowledge of myself *as* of myself does not depend on classification. But it also does not depend on identification [on ascribing a mental predicate to a singular term which stands for myself, so that ‘I know that I  $\phi$ ’] – for how should I identify an object which *could* not be anything but myself?’ (*ibid.*, p. 407). The fact is that propositions can be false and identifications can be mistaken: this cannot be the case in relation to my immediate self-consciousness. The self, then, always already presupposes its own ground in any reflexive act. This dependence of self-consciousness upon a ground which transcends



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxv

its reflexive acts will recur in important ways in Frank's account of the 'becoming non-transparent of the Absolute for reflection' in Romanticism.

We might by now seem to be rather far from the concerns of literary theory. It should, though, be clear that the Fichtean insight into the problem of self-consciousness is not taken account of in the critiques of 'self-presence' that Derrida and others see as the central issue in the deconstruction of Western metaphysics. This deconstruction can, as we saw above, be understood in terms of the subversion of the author's function as the transparent origin of the meaning that is to be recovered in interpreting the texts of that author.<sup>16</sup> It is the relationship of Fichte's argument to Hegel's philosophy of 'absolute reflection' which can most readily make manifest the link of the issues in Fichte to deconstruction. 'Absolute reflection' is, of course, one of the most frequent targets of post-structuralist attempts to deconstruct metaphysics.

At the end of his essay on Fichte Henrich suggests that Hegel failed to see the problem which Fichte had revealed: 'Hegel conceives the unity of opposites only dialectically, in terms of what results from their opposition. However, the phenomenon of the Self requires that this unity be interpreted as original and primordial' (Henrich, *Contemporary German Philosophy*, p. 52). Hegel's system is completed by the subject's realisation, at the end of its development, of its identity with what initially seemed other to it, the object world, via the explication of the 'identity of identity and difference'. The truth of the world turns out at the end to be the world's thinking itself – hence Hegel's dictum that the 'substance is subject'. In Hegel's 'absolute Idea' thought and the world are shown to reflect each other in the moving structure of what he terms *Geist* ('spirit' or 'mind'), which has the structure of 'self-reflection': in the same way as the object only becomes determinate via its relation to the subject, the subject can only come to its own truth via its relation to the objects with which it engages.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See also Derrida's remarks about the kind of interpretation, which he wishes to avoid, that: 'seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin that escapes the play and the order of the sign, and lives the necessity of interpretation like an exile' (Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris: Points, 1967 p. 427).

<sup>17</sup> This conception has recently received an interesting contemporary revival in McDowell, *Mind and World*: see Bowie, 'John McDowell's *Mind and World*', for a view of McDowell from the Romantic perspective.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi

*Introduction*

Derrida suggests that in Hegel: ‘The concept as absolute subjectivity thinks itself, it is for itself and next to itself, it has no outside and collects up, while effacing them, its time and its difference into its self-presence’ (Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Minuit, 1972, p. 60). Fichte’s insight can be used to show that the structure of self-presence depends upon an *initial* grounding unity which cannot appear in reflection and which cannot, therefore, as Hegel thinks it can, be only a result of the subject’s ‘collecting up’ of its differing moments into ‘self-presence’ at the *end* of the system.<sup>18</sup> Fichte’s idea thereby suggests a different account of the metaphysics of subjectivity, which, because it is not dependent on self-presence, escapes Derrida’s fundamental objection. This different account informs key aspects of the Romantic philosophy which is Frank’s central point of orientation, for which, along with Kant and F.H. Jacobi, Fichte was the crucial influence.

## THE ROMANTIC ABSOLUTE

The roots of early Romantic philosophy have yet to be adequately understood: for too long Romantic philosophy has been interpreted in the light of Hegel’s and Kierkegaard’s critiques, which obscured many of its most significant insights.<sup>19</sup> It is evident from recent work by Frank, Henrich and others that the basis of Fichte’s ‘insight’ was already implicit in other areas of late eighteenth-century German philosophy. One constellation is increasingly clear in this respect, which sheds remarkable light on subsequent philosophy. In the 1780s, during what became known as the ‘Pantheism controversy’, a controversy over the theological implications of Spinoza’s determinist understanding of nature, Jacobi claimed in discussing Spinoza’s notion that ‘all determination is negation’ that ‘we remain, as long as we grasp things conceptually [*begreifen*], in a chain of *conditioned conditions*’ (in Heinrich Scholz (ed.), *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit zwischen Jacobi und Mendelssohn*, Berlin: Reuther and Reichard, 1916, p. 276; see Birgit

<sup>18</sup> It is, as Frank has shown, Schelling who first explicitly uses this structure against Hegel (see Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel*; Bowie, *Schelling*; and ‘The Schellingian Alternative’, *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, 30, Autumn 1994).

<sup>19</sup> E.g. in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, and in Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxvii

Sandkaulen-Bock, *Ausgang vom Unbedingten. Über den Anfang in der Philosophie Schellings*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990; Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, and 'Re-thinking the History of the Subject: Jacobi, Schelling and Heidegger', in Simon Critchley and Peter Dews (eds.), *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, New York: SUNY Press, 1996). There is therefore no way of arriving at a conception of that which is 'unconditioned', the '*Unbedingte*', the ground of what we try to understand by reason. There can be no further condition of this ground, which Jacobi terms '*Seyn*', 'being'. 'Being' cannot be an object of knowledge, because that would make it relative to a condition: it is 'that which cannot be explained: the indissoluble, the immediate, the simple' (ed. Scholz, *Die Hauptschriften*, p. 90). For Jacobi this ground – which he interpreted theologically – was what prevented acceptance of the 'nihilist' conception of modern science inherent in Spinoza's reduction of knowledge to the principle of sufficient reason, which leads to the 'chain of *conditioned conditions*'.

Even without the theological consequences he draws from it the structure of Jacobi's argument – which was well known to the key thinkers of the time, from Kant to the Romantics – prefigures at the level of ontology the structure of Fichte's insight into the need for a non-reflexive ground in self-consciousness. The identity of each moment in self-consciousness depends on its not being the other moments, but that is not enough to ground *self-consciousness*, which must be able to connect the differing moments on the basis of an identity which does not appear in reflection. In an analogous manner each particular truth that is arrived at via application of the principle of sufficient reason leads into a chain which makes the particular truth relative to other truths, leaving the question unanswered as to the relationship of the whole, which gives rise to the particular truths, to its relative parts. Schelling sees one consequence of this when he asks:

how can a series of cognitions be knowledge when no point of that series is anything absolute/unconditioned [*etwas Unbedingtes*]; the single link in the chain has a value, but it has it via another link, which in turn has it via another link, etc., into infinity; the value of each single element is therefore conditioned by an infinite series, which itself is not any thing [*ein Unding*] and will never really be. (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxviii

*Introduction*

Schelling's *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling, 1 Division vols. 1–x, 11 Division vols. 1–iv, Stuttgart: Cotta 1856–61, 1/iv p. 343)

What is meant by the 'Unding' corresponds to Derrida's 'transcendental signified', and Schelling's development of the structure in question is one source of Heidegger's conception of 'ontological difference', the difference between the fact that things in the world are disclosed at all, and determinate propositions about specific entities (see Bowie, *Schelling*).

The structure Jacobi identifies and which Schelling adopts underlies a whole series of issues in modern philosophy which also recur in literary theory (see Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*). The Spinozist structure of negation recurs in Saussure's conception of the sign, in which the signifier depends for its determinacy upon other signifiers, there being no positive terms in language. Derrida radicalises this thought, and thereby echoes Jacobi's insight, when he claims that the signifier can never, therefore, be present as itself because it is inseparably linked to the temporally occurring traces of other signifiers, which defer any final meaning in the process of *différance*: 'philosophy lives *in* and *from* *différance*, blinding itself to the *same* which is not the identical. The same is precisely *différance* (with an *a*) as the detour and equivocal passage from one different element (*différent*) to the other' (Derrida, *Marges*, p. 18). Just how Derrida's 'same' is to be understood is the vital question, though it should already be clear that its structural role is much the same as that of the 'Unbedingte' in Jacobi and Schelling, or, in some interpretations, of Heidegger's 'Sein'. The basic idea of the Romantic tradition of which Derrida forms a part is that philosophy cannot claim to establish the nature of the relationship of thought or language to the world, thus to have access to a 'transcendental signified' which would be the ground that rendered that relationship finally transparent.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This tradition is not merely an abstract construction on the basis of a structure which is coincidentally repeated in a series of otherwise disparate thinkers. Its historical basis is the following: Jacobi's insight was developed, with the help of Hölderlin, by Schelling in his critique of the early Fichte and also later used in his critique of Hegel. Schelling's Hegel-critique has extensive parallels in the work of Heidegger who, though he does not discuss it, was clearly familiar with it; the critique also was central for the work of Franz Rosenzweig, who, along with Heidegger, was a major influence on Levinas, who, also along with Heidegger, was one of Derrida's most significant influences. On this see Bowie, *Schelling*, and *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

xxix

Frank's work connects the Romantic development of this idea to the attempt to understand subjectivity in the manner implied by Fichte's insight, and considers a whole range of subsequent theories in the light of the results. A crucial factor which differentiates Romantic philosophy from post-structuralism is that, while involving conceptual structures which parallel aspects of post-structuralism, Romantic philosophy also sustains conceptions of the subject which are not open to the critique of Hegelian self-presence we considered above. The power of the Romantic conception becomes apparent when it is realised how many motifs from Romantic philosophy have re-emerged in the most diverse areas of contemporary philosophy. Before looking at some of Frank's use of the insights of Romantic philosophy it is, therefore, worth briefly indicating one contemporary example of the recurrence of a central issue in that philosophy.<sup>21</sup> The underlying issue is the problem of the 'Absolute' we have just seen revealed in Jacobi's critique of Spinoza.

In Hegelian 'absolute idealism', as we saw, the opposition between subject and object leads to the overcoming of the relative and changing status of particular knowledge via the revelation that subject and object are the necessary complement of each other in the structure of *Geist*, which culminates in the 'absolute Idea'. Contemporary notions of the Absolute, on the other hand, tend to be 'materialist' or 'physicalist' conceptions,<sup>22</sup> in which the results of physics are the absolute point of reference. This absolute basis is supposed to move us beyond the relativity of our culturally bound conceptions of the world. For such a strong conception of physics to hold, though, it must be maintained that scientific investigation, as Hilary Putnam puts it, 'converges to a single true theory, a single explanatory picture of the universe' (Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a*

<sup>21</sup> Other examples are the recurrence of ideas from Romantic hermeneutics in the work of Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam and others (see Andrew Bowie, 'Truth, Language and Art: Benjamin, Davidson and Heidegger', in Graham Bartram (ed.), *New Comparisons* 18, 1995; and *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*); the concern in the philosophy of mind with the problem of whether self-consciousness has a propositional structure (see Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis*); the parallels of 'anomalous monism' with Schelling's version of the Absolute in his identity theory (see Frank, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbsterkenntnis*, Bowie, *Schelling*).

<sup>22</sup> In the period of the Romantics such positions, like that of Spinoza, were usually referred to as 'realism': many of the contemporary objections to physicalism were repeated in the Romantic period against 'realist' conceptions.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56121-1 - The Subject and the Text: Essays on Literary Theory and Philosophy

Manfred Frank

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxx

*Introduction*

*Human Face*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 170), which is the view put forward by Bernard Williams. The very notion of an absolute *conception* of the world is problematic, though, for reasons which were central to the Romantic tradition. Putnam claims against Williams, and in line with the Romantic tradition: 'It cannot be the case that scientific knowledge (future fundamental physics) is absolute and nothing else is; for fundamental physics cannot explain the possibility of *referring to* or *stating* anything, including fundamental physics itself' (*ibid.*, p. 176). The reasons for the failure of such an account of an absolute conception to give an account of intentionality are precisely what leads one back to the problems which concerned the Romantics.

Frank has shown that questions about the structure of the Absolute are fundamental to Romantic philosophy:

two incompatible demands are contained in the thought of the Absolute: in order really to be absolute it must exist in itself, i.e. without any relation to an other; on the other hand the Absolute as the highest principle of philosophy must be thought of as self-conscious [Putnam would say it must involve 'intentionality'] (consequently as dependent on consciousness). (Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik*, p. 239)

The very structure of an absolute *conception* inherently involves problems of circularity, as various strands of modern philosophy have shown. Any attempt to encompass a totality must either adopt a perspective outside the totality, and thus include the totality in itself as only a relative totality, or face the problem that totalities cannot describe themselves as totalities, because the description would then have to include a description of the description and so on *ad infinitum*. The claim that a particular kind of explanation is converging to the absolute conception must *already* know what that conception is, as otherwise it would have no way of recognising that the true conception had been reached. But what sort of knowledge would that be, given that it must be immediately available from the outset, as it would otherwise itself be relative to other knowledge, and therefore not absolute? This is, as Frank shows, exactly the objection Schelling made against Hegel's conception of the Absolute, which claimed not to presuppose anything