

Transcending Objectivism, Subjectivism, and the Knowledge In-Between: The Subject in/of “Strong Reflexivity”

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Abstract. This paper addresses the *problématique* of the subject and the subject-object dichotomy from a post-objectivist, reflexivist perspective informed by a “strong” version of reflexivity. It clarifies the rationale and epistemic-ontological requirements of strong reflexivity comparatively, through a discussion of autoethnography and autobiography, taken as representatives of other variants of reflexive scholarship. By deconstructing the ontological, epistemic, and reflexive statuses of the subject in the auto-ethnographic and auto-biographical variants, the paper shows that the move from objectivism to post-objectivism can entail different reconfigurations of the subject-object relation, some of which can lead to subjectivism or an implicit positivist view of the subject. Strong reflexivity provides a coherent and empowering critique of objectivism because it consistently turns the ontological fact of the social situatedness of knowledge into an epistemic principle of social-scientific research, thereby providing reflexivist scholars with a critique of objectivism from within, that allows them to reclaim the philosophical, social, and ethical dimensions of objectivity rather than surrender them to the dominant neopositivist tradition.

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Introduction:

Anti-Objectivism, Reflexivity, and the *Problématique* of the Subject

The ‘reflexive turn’ announced more than two decades ago as an urgently needed development in International Relations (IR)¹ has now evolved into a sustained disciplinary concern and turned reflexivity into an explicit feature of Critical, Constructivist, and Feminist research in the discipline². Recently, Patrick Jackson identified reflexivity as a distinctive ‘philosophical

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¹ Mark Neufeld, ‘The Reflexive Turn and International Relations Theory’, CISS Working Paper #4 (1991).

² Mark Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Stefano Guzzini, ‘A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations* 6(2) (2000), pp. 147-182; Xavier Guillaume, ‘Reflexivity and Subjectivity: A Dialogical Perspective for and on International Relations Theory’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 3(3) (2002) Art. 13, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0203133>, 2010, March 1; Anna Leander, ‘Do We Really Need Reflexivity in IPE? Bourdieu’s Two Reasons For Answering Affirmatively’, *Review of International Political Economy* 9(4)

ontological wager' that can claim an equally legitimate place alongside other cognitive approaches in IR ('neopositivism', 'critical realism' and 'analyticism'), within an open, pluralist conception of social-scientific research³. Reflexivity, however, can be understood and performed in very different ways⁴, which represent different kinds of 'reflexive wagers' for IR scholars. This paper promotes one particular kind of reflexivity, namely, "strong reflexivity." It clarifies the characteristics of its posture and the challenges it faces, comparatively, through an analysis of autoethnography and autobiography as different reflexive variants that provide an especially useful framework for thinking about the subject in/of reflexivity. Because strong reflexivity opposes objectivist approaches on both epistemic-ontological *and* political-ethical grounds, it enjoins us to consider the issue of pluralism from a different angle. Some clarifications on the position of strong reflexivity within IR's larger debate on positivism are therefore in order.

The concept of "strong reflexivity" is used in Feminist Standpoint Theory, where it refers to an epistemic-methodological commitment that follows from the acknowledgment of the situatedness of knowledge as an established sociological fact. As Dorothy Smith puts it, '[i]f sociology cannot avoid being situated, then sociology should take that as its beginning and build it into its methodological and theoretical strategies'⁵. The value of this statement is restricted neither to Sociology, nor to "standpoint" theories as such. As IR's own literature, debates, and concerns for reflexivity show, it is just as relevant to our discipline's critique of neopositivism, objectivism, and empiricism. However, the strong reflexivist 'wager' does not sit comfortably in a 2X2 analytical table as the one proposed by Jackson⁶, especially in relation to neopositivism.

Firstly, strong reflexivity implies a lack of tolerance for neopositivism *qua* 'wager', which it views as both epistemically flawed and ethico-politically biased in favour of dominant power positions and interests; this point has sufficiently been demonstrated in IR and the social sciences to justify taking it as a starting-point for IR research rather than a perpetual discursive strategy of opposition. Secondly, strong reflexivity is superior to neopositivism in the sense that it can produce a meta-discourse that objectivates neopositivism itself as a form of knowledge (that is, recognise, deconstruct, and explain its social situatedness), whereas neopositivism can neither objectivate itself nor other forms of knowledge; Jackson's two-dimensional table flattens out the meta-epistemic level that would make this distinction visible and meaningful as a classificatory

(2002), pp. 601-609; Steve Smith, 'Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11', *International Studies Quarterly* 48(3) (2004), pp. 499-515; Petr Drulák, 'Reflexivity and Structural Change', in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.) *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his Critics* (New York: Routledge, 2006); J. Ann Tickner, 'What is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions', *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005), pp. 1-21 and 'On the Frontlines or Sidelines of Knowledge and Power? Feminist Practices of Responsible Scholarship', *International Studies Review* 8 (2006), pp. 383-395; Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'The "Problem of Values" and International Relations Scholarship: From Applied Reflexivity to Reflexivism', *International Studies Review* 13(2) (2011), pp. 260-288; Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, 'Advancing a Reflexive International Relations', *Millennium* 39(3) (2011), pp. 805-829.

³ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴ For an overview of reflexivity in the social sciences, see Malcolm Ashmore, *The Reflexive Thesis: Wrighting the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Michael Lynch, 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(3) (2000), pp. 26-54. For reflexivity in IR, see Eagleton-Pierce, 'Advancing' and Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, Reflexivity, Reflexivism: IR's "Reflexive Turn" – and Beyond', *European Journal of International Relations* (2012) DOI: 10.1177/1354066112437770.

⁵ Dorothy E. Smith, 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology', in Sandra Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 28.

⁶ Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, p. 37.

and political standard. Thirdly, because it embraces the political dimension of knowledge that follows from its social situatedness, strong reflexivity entails a strategy of confrontation on neopositivism's own turf, rather than one of withdrawal into a self-assigned margin that might or might not survive within a pluralist IR. More specifically, strong reflexivists argue that the type of objectivity that is promoted by neopositivism, objectivism, and empiricism is a 'weak objectivity' that fails to achieve its own purposes of understanding "the world as it is," and equally fails to detect its own biases as a socially constructed and politically active view of the world. Strong reflexivity is therefore associated with a 'strong objectivity' that reclaims the cognitive, social, and ethical values of social science rather than surrenders them to neopositivism⁷.

Like any other social field structured by relations of power, an intellectually pluralist IR does not necessarily provide marginal or dissident approaches with an equal standing in the discipline or an equal chance of being both visible and efficient in their opposition to objectivist ones⁸ – in asymmetrical structures of power, nominal pluralism usually benefits the dominants. While many dissident scholars have become understandably less interested in speaking to the "mainstream" and perpetuating what appears to be inconclusive and ineffective disciplinary debates, strong reflexivity provides a convincing rationale and feasible strategy for promoting dissident perspectives more radically and more efficiently.

These are the intellectual and disciplinary considerations that underscore and frame this paper, which presents the epistemic-ontological position of strong reflexivity through a discussion of autoethnography and autobiography, both of which have recently emerged as an interesting and appealing form of anti-objectivist, reflexive scholarship in IR. The paper focuses specifically on the core problem that opposes objectivists and anti-objectivists, namely, the subject-object dichotomy. From an anti- or post-objectivist view, this dichotomy is analytically flawed and empirically misleading, and the relation of subject and object therefore needs to be redefined within any reflexive approach. The first purpose of the paper is to show that a move from objectivist to post-objectivist, reflexive scholarship can take us in very different directions, and that in performing this move, reflexivist scholars should be equally wary of the danger of subjectivism. Strong reflexivity entails transcending both objectivism *and* subjectivism, by redefining, rather than abandoning (to neopositivism) the notion of social-scientific objectivity. The second purpose is to delineate strong reflexivity as a distinctive reflexive variant grounded in a consistent view of the subject that carries the situatedness of knowledge at both the epistemic-ontological and political levels.

To do so, the paper first starts with an overview of autoethnography as a critical, reflexive anti-objectivist mode of representation that offers a compelling argument for reintroducing the subject of knowledge into scholarly narratives. This overview also serves to reformulate the problems associated with objectivist modes of representation. The paper then presents an analysis of the status of the subject that results from this move away from objectivism; it focuses specifically on the autobiographical component of autoethnography and offers a critique of it from the perspective of strong reflexivity. A deconstruction of the ontological, epistemic, and reflexive statuses of the subject in autoethnography and autobiography highlights the challenges that the *problématique* of the subject poses to post-objectivism generally, and to reflexivity specifically. It also provides an analytical narrative for unpacking the internal logic and requirements of reflexivity, thereby highlighting the specificity of the strong reflexivist approach as opposed to

⁷ Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', pp. 81-101 and Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"', pp. 127-142, in Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Reader*.

⁸ David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, 'Introduction' in Arlene Tickner and David Blaney, *Worlding Beyond the West, Volume 3: Claiming the International* (New York: Routledge, Forthcoming).

these other variants, as well as their incompatibilities. In my concluding remarks, I suggest that while strong reflexivity operates within the limits of Western modalities of knowing, it nonetheless offers reflexive IR a more empowering and efficient path to (self-)critique as a political praxis.

Autoethnography as Subversive Scholarship: The Critique of Objectivism

The rejection of objectivism's subject-object dichotomy has naturally led to a reflection on what a post-objectivist view of knowledge would entail. In Ethnography, the problem was addressed as pertaining to both the methodology and the writing of ethnographic representation. Post-objectivist ethnographers called for the development of 'critical ethnographies' that could acknowledge and explore the viewpoint of the researcher *in context* and in her *interaction* with her object of study, and that could also be communicated to others without succumbing to the authoritative framework of the *realist* text⁹. Autoethnography is one such type of 'critical', 'alternative ethnography'. According to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, the term was coined in the second half of the 1970s and a wide range of ethnographic studies/texts have since developed that are considered as sub-types of autoethnography or as including autoethnography as a sub-type¹⁰. The genre is in fact extremely difficult to define, and its experimental, innovatory nature makes it impossible to either pin down all of its core characteristics, or identify those that most autoethnographers would agree on:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition¹¹.

As 'a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts'¹², autoethnography can be characterised as a 'balancing act' that 'works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis. Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement – between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates

⁹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); George E. Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999[1986]).

¹⁰ Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject', in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000), p. 739.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Tami Spry, 'Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis', *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(6) (2001), pp. 706-732, p. 710.

charged moments of clarity, connection, and change'¹³. The reflexivity that is entailed in autoethnography is also claimed to be a critical one: '[a]utoethnographic writing resists Grand Theorizing and the facade of objective research that decontextualizes subjects and searches for singular truth'¹⁴. Many autoethnographers specifically argue that to undermine the epistemic "view from nowhere" that underscores this objectivist ideal of truth, the text is to be understood as 'performance':

The evidenced act of showing in autoethnography is...an act of critically reflecting culture, an act of *seeing the self see the self through and as the other*. Thus, as a form of performance ethnography, it is designed to engage a locus of embodied reflexivity using lived experience as a specific cultural site that offers social commentary and cultural critique¹⁵.

As such, autoethnographic texts can be said to have two political purposes. On the one hand, they aim to 'democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power'¹⁶. Inasmuch as they are successful in doing so, they also aim to break the illusion of the 'master narrative' that is 'the dominant, hegemonic, way of seeing or thinking the world [as it] is or should be, the narrative that often guides and undergirds social, cultural, and political mandates'¹⁷. While the 'master narrative is an artillery of moral truth,' the 'personal narrative defixes the truth'¹⁸ and therefore extends representation to a pluralistic realm of multiple subjectivities that claim equal legitimacy in describing the world as a complex reality.

It is not surprising that IR would eventually come to autoethnography in the critique of its own 'master narrative', especially in relation to such concerns as the knowledge-power nexus and the ethics of scholarship. The attempt to include accounts of an autobiographical type was made in the past, but these remained secondary and separated from their authors' scholarly writings, like footnotes that could be read as postscripts to the (IR) text rather than *as* the text¹⁹ – in the same way that ethnographers used to dismiss their field notes from the "official" ethnographic experience' and publish them as independent 'personal' accounts²⁰. It is only recently that such

¹³ Stacy Holman Jones, 'Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political', in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), p. 764.

¹⁴ Spry, 'Performing', p. 710.

¹⁵ Bryant Keith Alexander, 'Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture', in Denzin and Lincoln, *ibid.*, p. 424.

¹⁶ Mark Neumann, quoted in Holman Jones, 'Autoethnography', p. 765.

¹⁷ Alexander, 'Performance', p. 424.

¹⁸ Fred C. Corey, 'The Personal: Against the Master Narrative', in Sheron J. Dailey (ed.), *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions* (Annandale, VA: National Communication Association, 1998), p. 250.

¹⁹ Joseph Kruzel and James Rosenau (eds.), *Journeys through World Politics: Autobiographical Reflections of Thirty-Four Academic Travelers* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989); Ken Booth, 'Security and Self Reflections of a Fallen Realist', Occasional Paper #26, York University, Centre for International and Strategic Studies, 1994. See also Fred Halliday, Justin Rosenberg and Kenneth Waltz, 'Interview with Ken Waltz', *Review of International Studies* 24(3) (1998), pp. 371-386, and *Theory Talks*: www.theory-talks.org.

²⁰ Leigh Berger, 'Inside Out: Narrative Autoethnography as a Path Toward Rapport', *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(4) (2001), pp. 504-518, p. 506.

personal narratives have become a more salient component of IR scholarship, and the discipline seems to be now converging with the experience of other social sciences like History²¹, Economics²², Anthropology, and Ethnography itself.

The introduction of personal narratives in IR is indeed explicitly inspired by autoethnography²³. The recent articles in the *Review of International Studies* that addressed the value of autoethnography for IR²⁴ and the publication of *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*²⁵ suggest that autoethnography is an appealing disciplinary move, and that scholars interested in developing reflexivity within IR should engage its authors and their anti-objectivist concerns. Common among the proponents of autoethnography is the idea that the subject of knowledge needs to be (re)introduced so as to break the ‘fictive distancing’ of scholarly research²⁶ and reveal, or expose, the personal element as a necessary vehicle of knowledge that should no longer be disciplined, silenced, and excluded by the established disciplinary *doxa*²⁷. Autoethnography is therefore expected to bring about a more reflexive scholarship whereby representation is shown to result from the dynamic embeddedness of the self in the world that is otherwise warped by the objectivist illusion.

Insofar as autoethnography challenges the discipline’s objectivist paradigm of representation, it performs a political role, that of transgressing, and hence subverting, the existing disciplinary *doxa* as well as the tacit and explicit criteria that support its reproduction and disciplining efficacy. As Richard Rorty noted, criteria are ‘temporary resting places constructed for specific utilitarian ends’. A criterion becomes a criterion ‘because some social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done’²⁸. By violating the established system of meanings that govern and regulate IR’s academic culture, autoethnographers tell us that the road of inquiry needs to be reopened, because the lessons of the critique of objectivism have not been sufficiently translated into research *practice*. The first of these lessons is that if the objects of the social world are ‘constituted in virtue of representation’

²¹ Pierre Nora, *Essais d’ego-histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987)

²² Roy E. Weintraub and Evelyn L. Forget (eds.), *Economists’ Lives: Biography and Autobiography in the History of Economics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)

²³ Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Ethics of Researching War: Looking for Bosnia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and Voice in the Writing of Academic International Relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17(2) (2004), pp. 377-392; Naeem Inayatullah, ‘Something There: Love, War, and Basketball in Afghanistan: An Antidotal Memoir’, *Intertexts* 7(2) (2003), pp. 143-156 and ‘Falling and Flying. An Introduction’, in Naeem Inayatullah (ed.), *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁴ Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, ‘Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), pp. 779-798; Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘The Ethics of Autoethnography’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), pp. 799-818; Oded Löwenheim, ‘The I in IR: An Autoethnographic Account’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), pp. 1023-1045; Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Autoethnography – Making Human Connections’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), pp. 1047-1050; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Autobiography, Ontology, Autoethnography’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010), pp. 1051-1055.

²⁵ Inayatullah (ed.), *Autobiographical*.

²⁶ Inayatullah, ‘Falling’, pp. 5-6.

²⁷ Dauphinee, ‘The Ethics of Autoethnography’.

²⁸ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xli.

rather than ‘pre-existing our efforts to “discover” them’²⁹, then the *process* of representation and the ways wherein we constitute our objects have to become a focus of inquiry.

This changes significantly the status, place, and role of “methodology” in the research process. The “how (we know)” becomes constitutive of the “what (we know).” Given the wide variety of methods – and the absence of a definite methodology – used in IR autoethnographic texts, it is impossible to offer a general narrative on how this is done. Some scholars rely on memory, introspection, confession, testimony, while others move back and forth between classical ethnographic fieldwork and the deconstruction of the frames of seeing they mobilise therein. What is common among (most of) them is a *situating* of the subject of research along cultural, social, political, geo-epistemic or other lines, and a corollary *resituating* of the subject as object among other objects, who are thereby addressed as subjects among other subjects.

This anti-objectivist practice is incomplete if it is not also communicated as such. In the words of another critical ethnographer, the anti-objectivist stance has important consequences for the way we *write* scholarly accounts, and necessarily translates into a rejection of the realist text:

The conventions of the realist genre encourage the unproblematic and unhesitant singular interpretation of text, the unreflexive perception of a reported reality (subject/object) and the essentially uninteresting character of the agency involved in the report’s generation... the text is a neutral medium for conveying pre-existing facts about the world...An important corollary of this position is that the text’s neutrality excepts it from consideration as a species of social/cultural activity. The text is thought to operate at a different level from the world “about which” it reports³⁰.

The ‘neutrality’ that is potentially violated by autoethnographic accounts is plural. It is at once the neutrality of *representation* that rests on the epistemic privilege of the scholar; the neutrality of *position* that endows science with its social authority; the neutrality of *consensus* that masks the politics of science; and the neutrality of *disinterestedness* that posits the scholarly viewpoint as axiologically indifferent to, and disengaged from the world. Autoethnography therefore appears to pursue IR’s “critical” project more explicitly and practically, at the methodological level.

It is difficult, however, to convey or narrate the subversive power of autoethnography in IR. These texts have to be read, not least because the reader is asserted as a constitutive element of the text, invited to reflect on their own subjectivity, experience, location, positioning, and frames of seeing and thereby to question their own viewpoint. If the reader is a student of IR, autoethnography can potentially be turned into a subversive, critical teaching tool as well. But beyond these common characteristics, autoethnography in IR is still too young and too experimental to provide us with clear guidelines. *Autobiographical International Relations* is a good example of the variety of ways and styles through which self-narrative can be deployed as a form of writing and a means of communicating knowledge to others. In this volume composed of 16 essays, some authors reflect on how their personal experiences and social path led them into their scholarship, and how they shaped their journey, language, and political consciousness³¹. By telling their stories they sometimes also show that the international looks quite different when viewed from the perspective of lived experience, rather than abstract modelling and theorising.

²⁹ Steve Woolgar, *Science: The Very Idea*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1993[1988]), p. 83.

³⁰ Steve Woolgar, ‘Reflexivity is the Ethnographer of the Text’, in Steve Woolgar (ed.), *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Sage, 1988), p. 28.

³¹ Stephen Chan, ‘Accidental Scholarship and the Myth of Objectivity’; Jenny Edkins, ‘Objects Among Objects’; Narendran Kumarakulasingam, ‘Stammers Between Silence and Speech’ and Khadija El Alaoui, ‘Scenes of Obscenity: The Meaning of America under Epistemic and Military Violence’, in Inayatullah (ed.), *Autobiographical*.

Other authors only (or barely) hint at how these personal experiences, memories and life stories have shaped their identity and agenda as scholars, and leave it to the reader to reconstitute these links³².

These and other autoethnographic accounts are not similar autoethnographic texts, or even equally auto-ethnographic *tout court*. This seems to be partly intrinsic to the nature of autoethnography: '[a]utoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)'. Consequently, '[d]ifferent exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes'³³. These differences are nonetheless important. In what follows, I explore the intrinsic tension that seems to be inscribed in autoethnographic accounts, between their 'auto' and 'ethnographic' components. By unpacking the ontological, epistemic, and reflexive dimensions of this tension, I wish to demonstrate why subjective reflexivity, of which autobiography is the exemplification, cannot be an effective and critical medium for moving from objectivism to a reflexivist post-objectivism.

Autoethnography and the Challenges of (Reflexive) Representation: Thinking/Writing the Subject of/in Research

I am not a novelist. It is critically important to clarify this. There are two main reasons why this is so. The first reason is that I don't intend for my scholarship...to be dismissed this easily. The second is that, if I am a novelist, then I must be in the business of training a generation of novelists masquerading as social scientists behind me. And this is not the case. I want to guard against a generation of novelists just as I want to guard against the positivist tradition that entrenched an orthodoxy of knowledge production that works (unsuccessfully, in my view) to deny all traces of the self in scholarly writing and to discipline the others it encounters into rigorous categories that don't work and never did.³⁴

It is always difficult to write about the subject in a post-positivist, post-objectivist mode. The difficulty lies in the fact that the transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy turns the subject into both an epistemic and ontic category, which in the case of autoethnography is also strongly grounded in the realm of the phenomenal and experiential. Doubtless, the value of autoethnography lies precisely in the promise that the subject could be written and expressed in all its complexity, not merely as an ontologically multi-layered existence, but *simultaneously* as a multi-sited and evolving source of knowledge that can tell a more interesting and valuable story about the world. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, this second part will first deal with the ontological and epistemological statuses of the subject separately in order to unpack the issues pertaining to the writing of the subject in autoethnographic research, before they are reassessed in conjunction with each other in accordance with reflexivity. While the conceptual and theoretical tools I use in this analysis might be viewed by autoethnographers as alien to their own cognitive framework(s) and to their scholarly and political purpose(s), and hence as manifesting yet another attempt at "disciplining" them through the imposition of exogenous standards, I see no way out of this possible dilemma: because autoethnography does not provide any clear standards along which it can be performed or assessed – indeed, such standards are often strongly rejected³⁵ – the only

³² Rainer Hülse 'I, the Double Soldier: An Autobiographic Case-Study on the Pitfalls of Dual Citizenship' and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Three Stories: A Way of Being in the World' in Inayatullah, *ibid*.

³³ Ellis and Bochner, *ibid.*, p. 740. See also Deborah Reed-Danahay, 'Introduction', in Reed-Danahay (ed.) *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

³⁴ Dauphinee, 'The Ethics of Autoethnography', pp. 803-4.

³⁵ Arthur Bochner, 'Criteria Against Ourselves', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2) (2000), pp. 266-272.

meaningful standards are those that follow from the purpose of the assessor. In this case, my purpose is to identify those features that can be viewed as problematic for strong reflexivity specifically. What follows is therefore less intended as a criticism of autoethnography – although I hope it will be relevant to at least some autoethnographers – than as an exercise aimed at demonstrating the shortcomings of subjective reflexivity as a reflexivist alternative to objectivism, and hence simultaneously at identifying the challenges facing strong reflexivists.

*The ontological I:
Thinking/writing the self as other*

Insofar as autoethnography includes a narrative about the self, it relies on a given ontology of the subject. Contemporary social science theory and practice define two antagonistic conceptions of the subject³⁶: the first is a modern, ‘Humanist’ notion that ‘rests on Enlightenment ideals of coherence, centering, singularity, and authenticity’; the second is a post-modern, ‘post-Humanist’ notion that ‘emphasizes fragmentation, multiplicity, contingency and partiality’³⁷. According to its pioneers, autoethnography owes its existence to the move from the former to the latter. As Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln put it, ‘the time of the fiction of a single true, authentic self has come and gone’, and is now replaced by a ‘reflexive self’ that is made of multiple, conflicting identities that autoethnography draws on³⁸.

This, at least, is what autoethnography adheres to originally and in theory. Elizabeth de Freitas and Jillian Paton have investigated empirically how conceptions of the subject/self actually play out in autoethnographic research, and their conclusions suggest that ‘autoethnographic texts enlist a notion of the self which often goes unexamined’.³⁹ To investigate the underlying ‘notion of the self’ that informs autoethnographic research, they asked young autoethnographers to answer a set of questions pertaining to the(ir) self and their writing of the self in their work, including questions about the humanist and post-humanist notions of the subject. Important for the present discussion is their finding that ‘[d]espite the postmodern rhetoric that emerged intermittently in the [participants’] autoethnographic [work], we were surprised by the continued affirmation of a unified and potentially transparent self in many of the question responses’⁴⁰. While the participants in this study had used an ‘arts-based paradigm’ to frame, think and write their autoethnographies, the narratives they sustained outside of the autoethnographic text were very much in line with ‘realist notions of the self’, revealing ‘their passionate attachment to a stable and coherent ideal-I’⁴¹. This duality is interesting because it shows that autoethnography can be consciously performed within one ontological paradigm, but unconsciously driven by its opposite, thereby reducing the novelty and anti-objectivist dimension of autoethnography to its form only, rather than expanding them to its content. This has important consequences for the *effects* of autoethnography as well, insofar as the explicit ‘disclosure’ that it performs in order to break the

³⁶ Mark Freeman, ‘Identity and Difference’, *Narrative Inquiry*, 13 (2003), pp. 331-346.

³⁷ Elizabeth de Freitas and Jillian Paton, ‘(De)Facing the Self: Poststructural Disruptions of the Autoethnographic Text’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(3) (2009), pp. 483-498, p. 484.

³⁸ Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘The Seventh Moment: Out of the Past’, in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook*, 2nd edition, pp. 1047-1065, p. 1060.

³⁹ de Freitas and Paton, p. 484.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

figure of the ‘authorial’ self might in fact be the very medium through which this realist self tacitly imposes its power on both the writer and their audience.

How does this play out in autoethnographic IR texts? Well, one difficulty is that the ontology of the subject in which they are grounded remains opaque to the reader, because the text itself rarely explains the methodological posture or procedure used to construct the self as other. Given the more or less explicit rejection of definite methodological standards for writing autoethnographies, this difficulty might in fact be unavoidable. It should be possible through content- and (critical) discourse-analysis to induce these modalities of the subject from the autoethnographic texts, but without pre-established standards to measure this ‘decentering’, this analysis would be arbitrary. Autoethnographic IR texts do display different degrees of engagement with the multiplicity of the self, but it is difficult to determine the extent to which this multiplicity represents a ‘post-Humanist’ or other kind of decentering or de-reification of the subject. Is it enough, for example, to write the self as a multiple social self – child, parent, citizen, scholar – or as a multiple cultural identity, or as a succession of positions in time and space, in order to successfully perform this decentering? And if so, is this enough for this multiplicity to also ground the autoethnographic research in a *process* of simultaneous *constitution* of the self through research? There is an obvious multiplicity displayed in these texts, which is represented by the writing of the self as both ordinary social agent and as scholar, but as I will argue later, this feature can very well be contingent only rather than intrinsic and reflexive – it might simply follow from the fact that the authors just happen to be scholars.

Another interesting observation made by de Freitas and Paton is that ‘asking [the participants] to consider the ear of the reader and the issue of audience caused them to trouble the comforting notion that the self is transparent to the self’ and thereby shift their narrative from the humanist notion to a ‘more complex understanding of the nature of self study’⁴². This point suggests that the mixing of the ‘realist’ and ‘artistic’ modalities of self-writing, which correspond respectively to the modern/humanist and post-modern/post-humanist ontologies of the subject, is not a technical flaw that might or might not appear in given autoethnographies, but rather an intrinsic feature of autobiographical writing as involving forms of ‘confession’ and ‘disclosure’. According to scholars who have analysed and/or written autobiographical texts, the ‘ear of the reader’ is a constitutive element of the writing of self-narratives, not least because the author’s own ear is the first ‘other’ that appears in the process, thereby constantly shifting the locus from which the self thinks and writes itself.

On the one hand, this translates into the voicing and enactment of a multiplicity of selves, which serve and illustrate autoethnography’s anti-realist stance quite well. Responding to the question of whether he was *the* subject of *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes exemplifies the celebration of this multiplicity by stating that ‘[t]he subject that I am is not unified. This is something I feel profoundly. To then say “It’s I!” would be to postulate a unity of self that I do not recognize in myself’⁴³, for in the text thereby written ‘I never resemble myself’⁴⁴. On the other hand, this begs the question of the relationship between the act of writing the self and the existence of the self. According to Jacques Derrida, the very nature of autobiographical writing constantly displaces the self-as-other: the ear of the self-as-reader shifts the locus and voice of the self-as-writer, so that ‘[e]ven if I confess myself,...I am confessing another one. That’s the

⁴² Ibid., p. 493.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 305.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 9.

structure of confession. I cannot confess myself⁴⁵. Autoethnographers who reflect on the production of their autoethnographies do identify this ‘other’ as their own creation: ‘[t]here is a sense in which we create texts inside of which we are simultaneously born’⁴⁶. For Barthes, this performativity is not only inevitable, but is a positive intrinsic component of the process of writing:

The modern writer is born at the same time as his text; he is not in any way endowed with a being that would precede or follow his writing; he is not in any way the subject of which his book would be the predicate; there is no time other than that of the enunciation, and every text is written eternally *here* and *now*.⁴⁷

An ontological realist might ask whether the subject who emerges in the process of writing – and writing is the core *method* of autoethnography – is “the same” as the subject who exists independently of it. This question would swiftly be dismissed by anti-realists, who reject, as Barthes does, the existence of a unitary, static subject that would constitute the default setting of “being.” But there is another question worth asking that does not succumb to a realist notion of the subject: if the performance of autobiography is itself performative of the self, then in what specific sense does autoethnographic research reveal hidden modalities of the self, including of the self’s embeddedness in the world? More precisely, is what is being revealed something that is originally intended to be investigated, or is the object of the investigation created as the investigation proceeds, simply because it cannot be “imagined,” conceptualised, or even “lived” prior to the start of the autoethnographic inquiry?

The performative effect of autobiography raises a related question on the nature of the autoethnographic account *qua* scholarly account. The proponents of autoethnography – including in IR – speak of the desire to break or transcend the ‘science vs. art dichotomy’⁴⁸ and hence ‘move towards a kind of artistic’⁴⁹, ‘art-ful’⁵⁰ or ‘poetic’⁵¹ (social) science. However, it makes quite a difference whether this artistic component is restricted to the form of a self-narrative, or whether it affects its content as well. The question pertaining to the relationship between the performative nature of autobiographical accounts and the ontological nature/status of the subject is therefore necessarily about the relationship between “fiction” and “reality.” Paul de Man addressed this specific point in his essay on autobiography:

Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does...But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture depends on its

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, quoted in J.D. Caputo and M.J. Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 25.

⁴⁶ Bronwyn Davies, Jenny Browne, Susanne Gannon, Eileen Honan, Cath Laws, Babette Mueller-Rockstroh, and Eva Bendix Petersen, ‘The Ambivalent Practices of Reflexivity’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(3) (2004), pp. 360-389, p. 366.

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘La mort de l’auteur’, in Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 63-69, p. 66; my translation.

⁴⁸ Doty, ‘Autoethnography’, p. 1050.

⁴⁹ Inayatullah, ‘Falling’, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Ivan Brady, *Anthropological Poetics* (Savage: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).

⁵¹ Bochner, ‘Criteria’ p. 269.

model? We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?⁵²

De Man's own conclusion is that 'it appears...that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable'.⁵³ From a poststructuralist perspective, this undecidability is not so problematic insofar as the "real" does not exist as such, or never independently of knowing subjects whose being is performed through acts of thought and language. But this certainly deserves to be explored further, especially if one is operating outside of a poststructuralist framework. As far as autoethnography is concerned, this suggests at least that some distinction should be made between modalities of thinking/investigating the self and modalities of writing the self: if writing is the essential method of autoethnography, and if writing creates a "reality" that is equally relevant to that which pre-exists the writing process, then autoethnography might be producing the same kind of ontological performativity that post-objectivists accuse positivist methodologies of. This might be unavoidable given the constitutive value of the "how" for the "what we know," but this constitutiveness needs to be identified if it is to be reflexive.

This point is especially important for reflexivist scholars who consider reflexivity as intrinsically and purposively "critical": if the point of social critique is to unmask the factors, structures, and processes that constitute subjects and subjectivities as social constructs (not least those associated with relations of power), then the ability to perform this unmasking is primordial. It, in turn, entails the ability to analytically and empirically objectivate the subject as a *social* product *independently* of the subject-driven creative process that necessarily accompanies the autobiographical writing of the subject and thereby turns it into a moving target constantly (re)created by the act of unmasking. This point is also intimately related to the epistemic status of the subject.

*The epistemic I:
Thinking/writing the self as subject*

If the ontology of the subject is a complex investigation, its complexity is exacerbated by the fact that the autoethnographic subject, *qua individual* subject, is at once known and knower. The status of the self in autoethnography raises epistemic questions pertaining to the nature and limits of self-knowledge that all reflexivists should consider. As was the case with the "ontological I," these questions are related to the autobiographical component of autoethnography, which again seems to flirt with two opposite paradigms. On the one hand, autoethnography's anti-objectivist stance translates into a dynamic understanding of the subject as a multi-layered self that evolves through its interaction with other selves. This implies that the knowing subject is constituted in the very process of social-scientific investigation. On the other, the more autoethnography relies on

⁵² Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN*, 94(5) (1979), pp. 919-930, p. 920.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 921.

autobiography, the more it is informed by and displays a classical understanding of the unitary self as a/the primary source or starting-point of knowledge. As Douglas Macbeth notes, this '[positional reflexivity] shows some striking continuities with foundational projects and Descartes' especially. Centrally, both...situate knowledge' in a 'reflexive agency' that 'assigns a distinctive task and authorization to the singular analytic ego: the deconstruction of the possibilities of knowledge by the interrogation of the analyst's positional *cogito*'⁵⁴. One could go further and ask whether the assumption that underscores the autobiographical self-narrative is not fundamentally antithetical to anti-objectivism – and even properly positivist – in the sense that it takes the subject of knowledge as it finds it, as a datum that is *given* and that can hence be known and used *immediately* rather than through the necessary mediation of a given epistemic or methodological procedure.

The problem, then, is that the ontology of the subject that sustains autoethnography's anti-objectivist epistemic stance is undermined by the ontology of the subject that autobiography necessarily channels through its reliance on lived experience, which is always an experience of a realist, unitary self⁵⁵. As far as reflexivity is concerned, this is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it grounds autobiography – and by extension, and to different degrees, autoethnography – in a 'philosophy of the immediate' that takes the risk of reversing the epistemic order of sociological inquiry, for insofar as 'consciousness is not the first reality that we can know, but the last one', we should then 'come to it, rather than start from it'⁵⁶. The epistemic status and role of individual consciousness exemplifies the tension between the modern and postmodern modalities of (self-)knowledge, because '[t]o attempt to deconstruct one's own work is to risk buying into the faith in the powers of critical reflection that places emancipatory efforts in...a contradictory position with the poststructuralist foregrounding of the limits of consciousness'⁵⁷. This 'contradictory position' remains whether one adheres to poststructuralism's view of the subject or not, as long as one adopts an anti-objectivist view of the individual subject. The contradiction results from a partial adherence to post-objectivist assumptions about the subject: while autobiography reinstates the subject in its epistemic prominence, it does so without necessarily 'desituating' or 'resituating' it. As Derrida notes,

[t]o deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, "operations" or "effects" of subjectivity. This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it says it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence...⁵⁸

Secondly and consequently, the acceptance of the subject as an immediately (subjectively, experientially) referential source of knowledge is problematic for those post-objectivists who aim

⁵⁴ Douglas Macbeth, 'On "Reflexivity" in Qualitative Research: Two Readings, and a Third', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(1) (2001), pp. 35-68, pp. 39, 40.

⁵⁵ Tom Barone and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, 'Interrupting the Sign: The Aesthetics of Research Texts', in J.A. Jipson and N. Paley (eds.), *Daredevil Research: Re-creating Analytic Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 1977), pp. 83-107.

⁵⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 318; my translation.

⁵⁷ Patti Lather, 'Fertile Obsession: Validity after Poststructuralism', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4) (1993), pp. 673-693, p. 685.

⁵⁸ Quoted in R. Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 125; my emphasis.

to *redefine* objectivity rather than *abandon* it altogether: it simply turns the post-objectivist stance into a pre-objectivist one. For if the subject is to impose itself in all its immediacy, wouldn't reflexive social-scientific research fall back into a type of pre-sociological 'psychologism'⁵⁹ or an uncritical 'spontaneous sociology'⁶⁰? The challenge for reflexivist scholars who consider that reflexivity leads to a stronger, more critical objectivity is to reassert the epistemic prominence of the subject without losing this critical edge. And this necessarily means that the subject-as-knower has to be treated like any other social construct.

Pierre Bourdieu *et al.* outlined basic rules of anti-objectivist research that can help strong reflexivists avoid the epistemic problem of subjective reflexivity. According to these authors, the understanding of social reality should follow the 'epistemological hierarchy of scientific acts', whereby social-scientific facts are 'conquered, constructed, constated'. Facts should first be 'conquered against the illusion of immediate knowledge', because 'the sociologist's familiarity with the social universe constitutes the epistemological obstacle par excellence, for it continuously produces fictive conceptions or systematisations *while simultaneously producing the conditions of their credibility*'⁶¹. The first step of an understanding of the self is therefore to operate an 'epistemological break' with the illusory familiarity of the self with the self – admittedly the greatest familiarity there is. The fact is then 'constructed' because 'an object endowed with social reality' is not naturally 'endowed with sociological reality'. Without this construction, sociological understanding is reduced to the simple '*designation* of social groups or problems perceived by the common conscience at a given moment in time'⁶². While this applies to social categories such as the family, the class, or gender, there is no *a priori* reason why it should not apply to the subject as well, which as Michel Foucault has convincingly shown is also a historical-cultural construct whose emergence can be located in the time and space of a specific *episteme*⁶³. In fact, for reflexivists, the epistemic construction of the object should *a fortiori* apply to the subject of knowledge. It is only after these two steps have been appropriately undertaken that one can move to the adequate empirical study of an object of knowledge that is thereby no longer approached as a *given-as-social-datum*. These considerations suggest that strong reflexivists need a coherent epistemic position on the subject-as-knower, itself based on a coherent anti-objectivist ontology of the subject as social construct, and that autobiographical reflexivity is inadequate for this purpose.

The other stake of this discussion is properly political but intrinsically bound to the epistemic problem. If the subject is not 'de/constructed' along poststructuralist, constructivist or other epistemic-methodological lines, 'subjective reflexivity' is likely to become 'a trap that too easily reproduces normative conceptions of the self, agency, gender, desire,...sexuality'⁶⁴ and so on, especially because of the stubbornness of 'realist' ontologies of the self, as explained earlier. Incidentally, the careful investigation of the subject-as-knower that a strong reflexivity requires would not in any way contradict the political purpose of autoethnography itself, because

⁵⁹ Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999[1895]).

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le métier de sociologue. Préalables épistémologiques* (Paris: Mouton, 1983[1968]).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27; emphasis added; my translation.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 53, footnote 2.

⁶³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1984[1966]).

⁶⁴ Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), pp. 221-222, quoted in Davies et al., p. 367.

[t]o refuse to assume...a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory⁶⁵.

The reflexive I:

Thinking/writing the epistemic self as other

Speaking of Oded Löwenheim's article 'The "I" in IR: An Autoethnographic Account', Iver Neumann comments that it

comes across as a very nice exercise in situation. The data he uses, however, is not ethnographical, but is culled from memory. Memory work is certainly a legitimate and apt data collecting method, but I cannot see why it should be referred to as autoethnographical, not least because there was no writing (cf. Gr. *graphein*, to write) going into the data collection. Ethnography entails not only writing up, but also writing down, while in the field. Not least due to his writing, he also succeeds in his aim of making me 'feel IR'. I'd say that this is a successful exercise in IR autobiography. There is a cost. Foregrounding the 'I' backgrounds the 'you'. Placing the reflexive ontological wager invites illuminating your own experience and leave everybody else's in the dark. This is where placing the analytical ontological wager comes in as an alternative⁶⁶.

Whether one agrees with the different claims Neumann makes or the assumptions that underscore them, this excerpt raises a series of important points. I will address some of them from the perspective of reflexivity specifically.

Firstly, the reference to '*the reflexive ontological wager*' is both a misleading simplification of the significant diversity of reflexive approaches in the social sciences, and a premature closure on the ongoing attempt to develop reflexivity as an epistemic, political and praxical scholarly stance. While reflexivists should certainly welcome the acknowledgment of reflexivity as a legitimate concern for IR scholarship (now a recognised 'wager' in its own right!), it is ironic that such a move would simultaneously serve to reject it as fundamentally useless in illuminating anything beyond one's personal experience. One should rather recognise that the emergence of the *problématique* of reflexivity in the social sciences (including IR) is intimately related to the epistemic and political critique of positivism, *and* that its appeal lies precisely in the fact that it promises a powerful social-scientific alternative to objectivist, positivist epistemology.

Secondly, the important question is how one defines 'experience', what and how experience matters, and what cognitive role one assigns to it. Autobiographical accounts are accounts *about* the life experience(s) of an individual subject or about those of a group viewed from the perspective of an individual; they are also accounts that are grounded *in* personal experience. These two elements should be distinguished.

That an individual experience is associated with a 'situation' is certain. What makes such an experience valuable for *social science* is the extent to which the situation that produces it is social and collective, rather than singular and individual. A sociological, ethnographic or anthropological analysis of individual experiences can show that some are *shared* and are therefore properly social. To objectivate such personal experiences *is* to illuminate the situation of

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 4, quoted in Davies et al., p. 363.

⁶⁶ Neumann, 'Autobiography', p. 1055.

a “you” beyond the “I,” that is, the experience of a “we” (and by contrast, simultaneously of “others”), defined by a common social situation, whether it be that of a social group (gender, class, profession, religion, culture), or of a social position (the oppressed, marginalised, or disenfranchised). The question is to what extent and how autobiographical and autoethnographic accounts do so, through their portrayal of the experiences of both their authors and other subjects.

The problem of reflexivity emerges once this social ‘situation’ is acknowledged as specifically relevant to the production of knowledge, however broadly or narrowly defined: the situatedness of ordinary knowledge is at the origin of social constructionism⁶⁷; the situatedness of scientific knowledge has informed several “standpoint” theories – not least within Marxism⁶⁸ and Feminism⁶⁹, but some Post-Colonial approaches as well⁷⁰ – and is a central focus of post-positivist philosophy of social science, of the sociology of knowledge and science, and of most of so-called “continental” philosophical and sociological traditions – ‘critical constructivism’ in IR is an especially illustrative synthesis of these developments⁷¹. To consider these reflexive ‘wagers’ as sociologically insignificant would be odd, to say the least. The question for autobiography and autoethnography is whether and how their reliance on the lived experience of the individual subject of knowledge illuminates the social situatedness of knowledge, and not only for those who share their authors’ social situation.

Thirdly, a strong reflexivity entails that the two previous points be embraced conjointly, that is, that the ontological situatedness of knowledge be turned into an epistemic principle of social-scientific research: whatever applies to (the knowledge of) the individuals and groups that the subject studies equally applies to the subject herself as well as to her scholarship as one instance of situated knowledge. The separate treatments of the “epistemic” and “ontological I” in the two previous sections of this paper were thus meant to provide some analytical narrative for unpacking what is necessarily a “whole” from the reflexivist viewpoint. Far from being a mere logical loop or a formal standard of symmetry, strong reflexivity entails a ‘causal symmetry’ that puts a clear epistemic-ontological emphasis on the social nature of subjects, subjectivities, and everything else associated with them, including experience as such. This point constitutes the core principle of strong reflexivity as defined in Feminist Standpoint Theory:

...the fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge. We should assume causal symmetry in the sense that the same kinds of social forces that shape objects of knowledge also shape (but do not determine) knowers and their scientific projects⁷².

⁶⁷ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. (London: Penguin, 1991[1966]).

⁶⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: The Merlin Press, 1971[1922]).

⁶⁹ Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*; Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14(2) (1988) pp. 583-590; Patricia Hill Collins, ‘Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought’, *Social Problems* 33(6) (1986) S14-S32.

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation’, *Framework* 36 (1989), pp. 68-82.

⁷¹ Ted Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, *International Security* 23(1) (1998), pp.171-200; Guzzini, ‘A Reconstruction’ and ‘The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33(3) (2005) pp. 495-521.

⁷² Harding, ‘Rethinking’, p. 133.

Consequently,

...how our knowledge of the world is mediated to us becomes a problem. It is a problem in knowing how that world is organized for us prior to our participation as knowers in that process...It is not possible to account for one's directly experienced world or how it is related to the worlds which others directly experience who are differently placed by remaining within the boundaries of the former.⁷³

In other words, the very reasons for rejecting objectivism entail a simultaneous rejection of subjectivism. This position is exemplified in Bourdieu's version of strong reflexivity, which highlights the limits and problems of autobiographical reflexivity for IR scholars interested in developing the strong variant.

Bourdieu's starting-point is the antinomy between objectivism and subjectivism. While objectivism 'sets out to establish objective regularities (structures, laws, systems of relationships, etc.) independent of individual consciousnesses and wills', and hence 'introduces a radical discontinuity between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge'⁷⁴, subjectivism 'cannot go beyond a description of what specifically characterizes "lived" experience of the social world, that is, apprehension of the world as self-evident, "taken for granted" *because it excludes the question of the conditions of possibility of this experience*'⁷⁵. If the subject is a socially constructed system of dispositions (habitus) and cannot, as such, be understood independently of the social environments (fields) within which they are produced and which they simultaneously reproduce or transform through conformity or heterodoxy, then taking the subject as an epistemic starting-point is to succumb to the social illusion that subjectivity is independent of the social order – an illusion that is itself the product of that order.

This epistemic principle is the corollary of a specific ontology of the subject. To understand the subject is to understand it *relationally*: '[t]o speak of habitus' is 'to posit that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective'. The habitus, in other words, is 'a socialized subjectivity'⁷⁶ – it is 'history turned nature'⁷⁷. This has significant bearing on the specific discussion of biography as representation. One of the effects of this 'forgetting of history' that results from the unexamined social status of the subject is the 'biographical illusion', which rests on the commonsense notion that 'life is a [hi]story, and that a life is inseparably the sum total of the events of an individual existence conceived as a [hi]story and the account of this [hi]story'⁷⁸. Consequently,

⁷³ Smith, 'Women's Perspective', p. 31.

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990[1980]), p. 26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6, my emphasis.

⁷⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive* (Paris: Libre Examen/Seuil, 1992), p. 101.

⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Paris: Seuil, 2000[1972]), p. 263.

⁷⁸ Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 81. I use '[hi]story' as a translation of the French term 'histoire', which can mean either 'history' or 'story', both of which have relevant connotations in Bourdieu's statement.

the attempt to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events linked only by the association to a “subject” whose constancy is probably nothing else but that of [her] name, is about as absurd as the attempt to make sense of a subway trip without taking into account the structure of the network, that is, the matrix of objective relations among the different stations⁷⁹.

Bourdieu’s proposed alternative is that to make sense of an individual life *sociologically* is to reconstruct it as a ‘social trajectory’, that is, as the ‘series of successive *positions* the same agent...has occupied in a [social] space that is itself...subject to constant transformations’. And this entails that one should start by (re)constructing the successive states of the field wherein this social trajectory has developed. ‘To understand’, therefore, ‘is first to understand the field with which and against which [an agent] has been formed’⁸⁰. Bourdieu showed, in two important works, the difference this relational approach makes to the analysis of individual lives, and why it is a compelling alternative to biography. The first offered a sociological analysis of Flaubert⁸¹ against Sartre’s subjectivist (existentialist) account; the other of Heidegger⁸² against Adorno’s objectivist (Marxist) one. This alternative is of course grounded in Bourdieu’s own sociological theory, but the point of strong reflexivity remains unaltered by the adoption of a different post-objectivist theoretical framework.

If the signifier “autobiography” is to be taken seriously – that is, if it is not a misnomer – then what is to be considered from the perspective of reflexive scholarship is whether it is possible at all to extract auto-biography from its constitutive biographical mode of representation. And if one is to take the signifier “autoethnography” equally seriously (which is what Neumann does when he refers to ‘writing down’ as a fundamental component of auto-ethnography), then auto-ethnographic research is expected by definition to provide an antidote to this problem – and this expectation explains why some of us might be confused when what appears to be an autobiographical account is labelled as an autoethnographic one. While one may or may not agree that the biographical mode of representation is a problem in the first place, what is important to consider within a strong reflexivist framework is that reflexivity entails a “bending back” of representation on the subject of knowledge, so to speak. Insofar as a reflexive knowledge of the world is the knowledge of a subject who is of and in the very same world she speaks of, then the critical quality of reflexive knowledge depends on the critical quality of its representational view.

Therefore, and as Bourdieu’s own self-socioanalysis illustrates⁸³, the rejection of biography as representation logically leads to a rejection of *auto*-biography as reflexive knowledge. Turned into ‘the ideologue of her own life’, the autobiographer adopts an introspective posture whereby a series of ‘significant’ life events are selected and brought together under a ‘retrospective and prospective’ logic of self-explanation⁸⁴. As a representation of the self,

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007[2004]), p. 4.

⁸¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998[1992]).

⁸² Pierre Bourdieu, *L’ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1988).

⁸³ The opening sentence of the book, which is prefaced ‘This is not an autobiography’, is especially illustrative of Bourdieu’s efforts to methodically apply his theoretical framework to himself: ‘To understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed. That is why, at the risk of surprising a reader who perhaps expects to see me begin at the beginning, that is to say, with the evocation of my earliest years and the social world of my childhood, I must, as a point of method, first examine the state of the [French academic] field at the moment I entered it, in the 1950s...’⁸³ Bourdieu, *Sketch*, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*, p. 82.

autobiography simply reproduces the ‘biographical illusion’ as an epistemic one, without providing any real reflexive insight into the opaqueness of the socially constituted self. In order to move beyond the ‘bending back of thinking thought [*la pensée pensante*] that is largely associated with the idea of reflexivity’ (namely, autobiography), Bourdieu proposes to replace introspection with a rigorous, non-objectivist ‘objectivation of the objectivating subject’. This objectivation is not an end in itself, but an epistemic and methodological requisite of reflexive social-scientific research. It entails the methodical unmasking of the hidden assumptions of the subject of knowledge taken as an object of knowledge, namely, those she owes to the position she occupies in the social space, to her specific social trajectory and to her socio-cultural identity (gender, class, education, etc.), and those she owes to the *doxa* that is specific to all the relevant social fields that have shaped her habitus (including the scholarly *doxa* as a socio-politically situated one)⁸⁵. Bourdieu thus demonstrates that a reflexivity which does not succumb to the social illusion of subjectivity *does* illuminate ‘everybody else’s’ experience when it does one’s own, because it addresses the subject as a collective, rather than an individual construct, and thereby ‘situates’ him/her within the commonality of social existence rather than its singularity. This simultaneously challenges the peculiar idea that one can ‘understand [oneself]’ independently of, or as opposed to, understanding ‘social and political reality as such’⁸⁶.

Undoubtedly, some autobiographical accounts by IR scholars do in fact contain such more or less explicit (conscious?) unmasking that conveys much more than a bio-graphical account of one’s life experiences. And those accounts that do so are especially successful in illuminating the “you”/“we” beyond the “I.” But strong reflexivity entails a systematic method for doing (and showing) so that does not rely on the individual talent, sensitivity, or purposes of the autobiographer. Systematicity is certainly not a glamorous standard, and is undoubtedly less conducive to the type of aesthetic and literary creativity that powerful (auto)biographical narratives offer their readers. While strong reflexivity does not in principle exclude the possibility of writing creatively, it might be wise to postpone the question of the unity of form and content to a later stage when the gains of reflexive research could allow such bold(er) investigations. As I suggest in the Introduction, the project of developing strong reflexivity in IR is a politically urgent one for which reflexivists might have to sacrifice, for now, some of the very interesting research paths that (some) autobiographers are currently exploring. In the meantime, the literary and aesthetic power of autobiographical accounts should not distract from their content. It is arguably easy to identify the unreflexive nature of a self-narrative (such as Kenneth Waltz’s reflections on how his life experiences have not in any way impacted his scholarship⁸⁷) if it is presented in an indifferent, matter-of-fact fashion; but an aesthetically powerful account that purposively offers self-explanatory statements is more likely to get the reader to uncritically buy into the writer’s ability to illuminate her own understanding introspectively.

Fourthly, if reflexivity is necessarily a cognitive posture that takes as its starting-point the questioning of the conditions of possibility of one’s knowledge, then the starting-point of strong reflexivity is the questioning of the conditions of possibility of one’s social-scientific knowledge. The reflexive subject of social science in general, and IR in this case, is not just any social agent (whose reflexivity would be manifested and performed in other ways), but specifically the scholar *qua* scholar. This does not mean that scholarship is a social identity independent of all others, quite the contrary. It does mean, however, that the social ‘situation’ of scholarship (what it is,

⁸⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 2003[1997]), pp. 24-25.

⁸⁶ Löwenheim, ‘The I’, p. 1025.

⁸⁷ Halliday *et al.*, p. 372.

what it does, especially in the realm of power) becomes central. The question, then, is what makes an autobiographical account an ‘IR autobiography’ (as Neumann identifies Löwenheim’s) rather than an autobiography *tout court*, apart from the fact that it is written by a scholar (and published in an IR journal/series). From a strong reflexivist perspective, that the author of a reflexive account is a scholar cannot merely be a contingent fact, but a necessary one. Otherwise, one should perhaps accept that the life experiences of IR autobiographers are no less, but no more valuable *for IR* than those of other social agents, who should then be given an equal chance and voice to offer their perspectives on the world, with equal social, cognitive, and moral authority, and an acknowledgment of their equal scholarly worth.

Autoethnography appears to combine both elements: as a type of ethnography, it is necessarily the account of a scholar, and its proponents are interested in reinstating the perspectives of social agents whose voices are silenced in traditional scholarship. Elizabeth Dauphinee, for example, sees autoethnography as ‘a reflexive awareness of the self as a perpetrator of a certain kind of violence in the course of all writing and all representation’⁸⁸. She shares this perspective with Roxanne Lynn Doty, who sees in autoethnography a way of ‘writing differently’ that ‘has the potential to create spaces that challenge the *status quo*, make our work more interesting, and connect in more meaningful ways to our subject matter and the human beings that inhabit the worlds we write about’⁸⁹. Autoethnography therefore seems to provide an interesting option for strong reflexivity. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which autoethnographic accounts in IR rely on, or simply are, autobiographical ones. The use of the label “autoethnography” in the discipline is already causing some confusion, especially when compared to the large literature of/on autoethnography that Ethnography has generated. To the extent that autobiography is a central component of autoethnography, the concerns raised above apply to it equally from the perspective of strong reflexivity. However, insofar as autoethnography contains an ethnographic component, a strong autoethnographic reflexivity is possible, but would require that the experiences of both the author *and* her subjects be addressed as collective, rather than individual ones. As mentioned earlier, this is an essential point that follows from the acknowledgment of the situatedness of knowledge, which in the case of strong reflexivity cannot be merely equated with the singular or idiosyncratic ‘viewpoint’ or ‘perspective’ of individuals⁹⁰, but with a *shared* experience that is specific to a given social ‘situation’, which generates specific practices, ways of seeing the world, and values. Therefore, the scholarly viewpoint that autoethnography emphasises as problematic in its objectivist modality needs to be objectivated as a social construct, and strong reflexivity requires that this be done without replacing the objectivist view of the scholarly self with a subjectivist one.

Finally, and consequently, strong reflexivity (whether autoethnographic or otherwise) necessarily requires that the sociology of knowledge/social science inform social-scientific research, including IR research. Within this framework, autobiographies are of great value. Notwithstanding the problems associated with autobiographical writing (especially the fact that these accounts are not spontaneous but crafted through intense reflection), they are not different from the material social scientists collect through interviews. They are therefore valuable as a type of datum to understand how different modalities of the subject play out in different settings and conditions, and how they are affected by a wide range of social factors and ‘situations’. From this perspective, it would make sense to use the autobiographical accounts of IR scholars as one

⁸⁸ Dauphinee, ‘The Ethics of Autoethnography’, p. 806.

⁸⁹ Doty, ‘Autoethnography’, p. 1050.

⁹⁰ Sandra Harding, ‘Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate’, p. 8 and Smith, ‘Women’s Perspective’ in Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, p. 29.

particular instance of autobiography, which could be compared to other autobiographical narratives in order to illuminate what the scholarly subjectivity owes to the specificity of the academic position and scholastic habitus (the *skholè*⁹¹), but also how scholarship affects the construction of subjectivity itself. This would allow us to ground our anti-objectivist assumptions about the knowing subject in a social-scientifically robust demonstration of the contingencies that subtend the scholarly standpoint⁹².

Concluding Remarks

This instrumental view of autobiography follows from my argument against its epistemic adequacy for strong reflexivity. This argument does not, however, preclude the (paradoxical) possibility that autobiography could lead to a different kind of strong reflexivity, one that operates on the basis of a completely different transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy, that is, a different mode of conceptualising the social in the subject. ‘You are not the drop in the ocean. You are the mighty ocean in the drop’. I use Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi’s phrase as both a powerful metaphor for this alternative concept of the subject, and an indication of its strangeness to Western modalities of knowledge – even critical knowledge. It manifests a reversal of the inside-outside dichotomy, and therefore an altogether different way of transcending it, whereby introspection becomes the path to knowing the world. As attested by the traditions of non-Western mysticism such as Sufism, this introspection is neither spontaneous, nor im-mediate. To attempt to inscribe it in language is to annihilate it. It can neither be written, nor narrated. Its method is “against method” and its truth “against truth.” The word “introspection” cannot even capture the posture that constitutes it. In fact, none of the concepts available to us in the languages through which and in which the Western *episteme* has produced itself (whether English – allegedly the language most suited for analytical thought – or French/German – dialectical thought) is appropriate to denote such an alternative path: neither “world,” “knowledge,” “self,” nor even “reflexivity” can grasp its alternative meanings. For this alternative autobiography, “autobiography” itself is an inadequate signifier.

It might be conceivable to transcend the very *episteme* that shapes at once our language, our thought, our view of the world and our critique of them, and explore this alternative transcendence of the subject-object. In the meantime, the strong reflexivity this paper promotes can be viewed as limited to the Western modalities of critique but not powerless within them. It rests on the belief that we can indeed objectivate the system of meanings and taxonomies that are at once the conditions of possibility of our thought and its constitutive matrix – those ‘unthought [*impensées*] categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine what is thought [*le pensé*]⁹³ – and do so recursively and correctively as our understanding of knowledge develops. Strong reflexivity therefore exploits, in a positive, empowering way, the tension that is inscribed in our critique of objectivism. The situatedness of knowledge is a ‘scandal’ for the subject-object dichotomy, in the way that the incest prohibition appeared to Claude Lévi-Strauss as a ‘scandal’ for the nature-culture dichotomy: ‘something which no longer tolerates the nature/culture opposition..., something which *simultaneously* seems to require the predicates of nature and

⁹¹ Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, pp. 24-25.

⁹² Interestingly, Feminist Standpoint Theory, which stresses the idea that a ‘standpoint’ is different from a ‘viewpoint’ or ‘perspective’ and hence only starts from shared experience in order to construct it into a cognitive standpoint, also uses ‘autobiographies’ and ‘ethnographies of women’ as experience-illuminating data. See Hilary Rose, ‘Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences’, p. 75; Hill Collins, ‘Learning from the Outsider Within’, pp. 103-126; and Harding, ‘Introduction’, p. 6; in Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

⁹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Leçon sur la leçon* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), p. 10.

culture'⁹⁴. To acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge is to reject the subject-object dichotomy; to deploy the strong reflexive posture is to critique objectivism from *within* and hence deploy critique as a political praxis, until a fully articulated reflexivist modality of knowledge can replace the old universe of meanings and their associated concepts. To critique from within

consists in conserving all [the] old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used. No longer is any truth value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces. This is how the language of the social sciences criticizes *itself*.⁹⁵

In this epistemic-political act is simultaneously resolved another problem:

Without any distance between subject and object, modern scientific knowledge looks deeply damaged. But things can get even worse in the case of critical tasks. While most critical traditions assume the so-called “*critical distance*” as a necessary condition for critique, the confusion between object and subject roles erases such a distance. The modern, that is, Kantian, foundation of critique on the subject-object opposition does not work anymore.⁹⁶

In the simultaneous act of rejecting the truth-value of the subject-object dichotomy and of instrumentally exploring the tension inscribed in it, strong reflexivity reconfigures the very possibility of critique that the critique of objectivism annihilates. Without this distance, the *enunciation* of the “bending back” and the “scandal” is no longer possible. Both metaphors need to be preserved if reflexivity is to achieve the epistemic *and* discursive dimensions of critique as a political praxis: opposing and shaming. Strong reflexivity makes it possible to do so in the language that neopositivism can understand, and can therefore not ignore.

⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 283.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁹⁶ Fernando J. García Selgas, ‘Feminist Epistemologies for Critical Social Theory: From Standpoint Theory to Situated Knowledge’, in Harding (ed.) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 293-308, pp. 294-295.