I would like to thank Maeve Cooke, Antimo Farro, Kevin McDonald and James Jasper for their insightful commentaries and for their contributions to the development of the debate on the topic of subject, subjectivity and subjectivation. I will briefly reply to the suggestions of each contribution, attempting to connect them, and to expand on the exploration of these theoretical concepts.

Indeed, the four commentaries cover common ground in the considerations on subject, subjectivity and subjectivation as relational issues. In spite of their different perspectives and theoretical approaches, all the commentaries have drawn attention to the issue of ethical subjectivity in situated contexts of social relations, and the need to reflect on our contemporary idea of subjectivity as a ‘universal’ process. The commentaries highlight public space and especially social movements as privileged empirical fields in which we can search for new combinations of ethics and autonomy; this is possible only if these movements are able to overcome the dream of complete autonomy and total transparency – as in the ideal of direct democracy – in addition to the individualistic instrumental defence of exclusive interests and identities.

Maeve Cooke emphasizes the topic of ethics as the core element of subjectivity, as the human capacity to pursue ideas and practices of a good life not only for oneself but also for other human beings, as well as for animals and the natural environment. We must not conceptualize this capacity as a transcendent moral quality, but as a political and practical issue, related to the positions, the experiences, the expectations and the imagination of single subjects. I agree when she claims that political theorizing should take ethical subjectivity seriously, avoiding any form of ‘epistemological authoritarianism’, but also avoiding the opposite reaction of the simple privatization of ethical concerns. As Habermas writes (Habermas, 1996), hyper-realism and any sort of natural determinism are at the basis of such authoritarianism and of its inability to acknowledge the role of discussion in public spaces.

A situated idea of ethics and justness is certainly important in the theoretical reflection on subjectivity and subjectivation and it is also present in the debate on autonomy and emancipation as central elements of action and subjectivation processes. Ethics is not grounded in the subject as an isolated metaphysical entity, but in the individual as subject involved in situations, in social relations, in communication with the social and natural environment. We are not ‘monads without windows’ as Leibniz said, but always related to other living entities.

Still, the inevitability of social relationships is in tension with the modern idea of autonomy and independence of the subject from power relations. Traditionally the idea of autonomy has not been developed as a generic struggle against constraints, but as a struggle against the power of some subjects over other subjects or as emancipation from ideology, mystification, and everything that keeps an individual in the Kantian condition of ‘self-incurred immaturity’. This interpretation of the autonomous subject has been exacerbated by the critical approach of poststructuralism, whose focus on the necessity of liberation has left the issue of ethics as a complement of
freedom in the shadows. As a consequence of the mistrust in any form of power, the search for autonomy and emancipation of the subject has often been theorized as a solipsistic and immanent process, as it is in the interpretation of Michel Foucault. In this vein, a radical idea of the autonomous subject is in contrast with ethics because of a distrust of social relationships and mutual recognition. Here the autonomous individual does not believe in the transparency of sociability, on the contrary, as Sartre said (1944), he/she believes that ‘l’enfer c’est les autres’.

Yet, this interpretation is unable to meet the need for ethical subjectivation in democratic action, and it is kept in permanent tension between the topics of justice as fairness and critical thought as emancipation. If I am correct, this is the core point of Cooke’s observations on a good society and a good life for human beings, as a potential in human relationships. Subjectivation in the political sphere is not just related to power constraints, but also to aspirations, expectations and inspirations for better conditions. This means to go beyond the cognitivist ‘ideal speech situation’ designed by Habermas, as a core element of democratic public space, and at the same time this implies looking beyond the contingencies of everyday life. The capacity to imagine and to aspire needs to be rooted in practices and actions – otherwise it can have only a fictive and idealist character – but cannot be reduced to a temporary performance (Appadurai, 2004). Attention to immanent processes – and not a celebration of contingency – is necessary to avoid an idea of emancipative struggle is necessary in order to construct a democratic public space.

In contemporary democracies, the interpretations of the good life for human beings are permanently open to contestation, but we cannot imagine an ethical subjectivity reproducing new forms of ‘epistemological authoritarianism’. The reconciliation between context and transcendence, between contingency of action and normativity of values, highlighted by Maeva Cooke, as well as by Seyla Benhabib, is related to the possibility of imagining both an ethical subjectivity and an autonomous agency in the democratic space, perhaps with the help of emancipative social movements (Rebughini, 2010).

Whereas overcoming the tension between a solipsistic contingent idea of autonomy and a more relational idea of ethics is at the centre of contemporary reflections on the processes of subjectivation, the critique of modernity developed during the 20th century is centred on this ambivalence. This topic is likewise at the centre of Antimo Farro’s commentary. An individual’s pursuit of autonomy and liberation is related to the same search engaged in by other individuals, who are likely to be affected by the same constraints. Individuals can consider themselves rivals or partners in their search for autonomy, and this aim goes far beyond the simple satisfaction of needs and interests. Yet, because the processes of subjectivation are not merely solipsistic, and they are linked to an environment and to social relationships, there is always the opportunity to recognize the mutual search for autonomy and respect for one’s uniqueness as an ethical resource. Here, we can emphasize the role of social movements as possible spaces for mutual and dialogical recognition of the subjectivation processes. In this case, the classical Kantian capability to recognize one’s autonomy as related to the search for the autonomy of other subjects can become a space of ethical action of participatory experiences.

The commentaries of Kevin McDonald and James Jasper are also related to the topic of social movements as the main empirical field in which we can observe the processes of an ethical subjectivation. Both commentaries are focused on the distinction between the Anglo-American and the continental definitions of such processes and to their conceptualizations.

Kevin McDonald starts his comment with an interesting analysis of the American definition of the notion of character understood as the ability of the actor to morally self-direct’. Indeed, the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy has been at the centre of the pragmatic and empirically based interpretations of identity and subjectivation in the US. The dissolution of the Self in mass society, in the crowd, in conformist behaviour was understood as the absence of autonomy, an essential element of a society in need of independent and creative individuals. Hence, a faulty autonomy was considered the responsibility of the single individual and not the result of anonymous pervasive powers and structured dominations. In the American pragmatic tradition the subject is not an individual engaged in a historical struggle for the emancipation from the sovereignty of the king, of the state or of the market. Autonomy and self-reliance, instead, are qualities necessary to a dynamic environment of organized capitalism and based on contingency, variability and continuous social change (Wright Mills, 1959).

In the American sociological tradition, the issue of mass society as producer of heteronomy has been associated with the problem of irrationality, and contrasted with a radicalized idea of rationalized autonomy and independent choice. Instrumental rationality is not considered a perversion of the Enlightenment’s Reason – as in the European tradition of critical theory – but an element of an efficient
and organized society. In the Anglo-American contractual tradition, the enemy of an autonomous subject is less a pervasive form of institutionalized power, than the risk of irrationality and blind conformism.

In his comment McDonald also addresses the issues of individualization and neoliberalism and their relations with equality and social justice in contemporary democratic contexts. Indeed, the neoliberal societal type has had a considerable impact on the conceptualization of an ethical and autonomous subject. Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ (2004), the idea of ‘counter-democracy’ proposed by Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) or that of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ proposed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) highlight from different perspectives the ambivalences of the conceptualization of subjectivity in neoliberal democratic contexts. Such ambivalences reflect the tensions between difference and redistribution, uniqueness and sameness, freedom and fairness, and they are related to the difficulty in analysing creativity of action as the expression of both an ethical and autonomous subject.

In pluralist democratic contexts, equality is no longer related to a unique ‘universal’ model or to a purely material and arithmetic measure, but to a more ‘personalized’ and situated idea of justness. In this situation, as Rosanvallon suggests, an ethical subject is someone capable of thinking of solidarity in an age of singularity, of imagining equality as a social relation and not as a measure, of practising autonomy as a form of participation and not as a request for direct democracy to represent oneself without mediation. Nevertheless, in the present context, an autonomous action has also to take into account the ambiguous imposition of uniqueness and independence coming from the neoliberal pattern, as a new form of self-surveillance.

All these ambivalences challenge the American pragmatic interpretation of autonomy and creativity as the responsibility of an individual – acting always in a changing and uncertain environment – as well as the idea that autonomy is first and foremost uniqueness and self-distinction from conformism.

In connection with this discussion, James Jasper underlines, on the one hand, that also the topic of emotions should be considered a central element of subjectivation, and not a residue of irrationality of the modern subject; and on the other hand, that the American approach to the issue of the social actor has never been purely theoretical and based on an abstract idea of the autonomous subject. Indeed, American pragmatism, from Emerson to Dewey, has been an evasion of philosophy as search for ontological truth (West, 1989).

Hence, if there is not a ‘model’ or a solely analyti-
reality, which does not mean accepting it or passively adapting ourselves to it. On the contrary – as Arendt said, bridging American and continental approaches – love for the world is rooted in the never-ending critical understanding of the environment in which we live. This is exactly what fanativisms and totalitarianisms of all kinds are unable to do, because for them ‘facts and experiences are useless’ (Arendt, 1954).

Still, the effort to reconcile ourselves with the world puts us into situations of tension, struggle, improvisation, transformation and judgement. Our actions are compelled to take into account the understanding of our dependencies and the lack of total self-sufficiency, our differences and the need to connect uniqueness and similarity, the inevitability of becoming and our capacity to be accustomed to a changing environment. This also involves the understanding of our vulnerability – not solely in reference to our material extension but also to our emotions and sensibilities – and the condition of vulnerability is the basic common element of all living beings. Indeed, this ethical understanding of subjectivity was already present at the origins of modern thought, for example it is at the centre of the different philosophies of Hobbes and Spinoza, even though the idea of the modern subject that we always bear in mind is rather the Cartesian one (Turner, 2006).

The necessity to think of the subject, subjectivity and subjectivation in a relational way – not only in the sense of inter-subjectivity but in the wider sense of an open relationship with the environment too – is also related to what I have called the search for a ‘light ontology’, as an attempt to overcome the old dichotomies of a purely nihilist or foundational idea of the subject, deconstructionist or strong definitions, logocentric or materialist approaches, between transcendent idealistic ideas of the subject or its conceptualization as immanent to the action. A reconciliation between the subject and the world is based on the understanding of our conditions of action and life in this world. Now we know that the struggle against alienation, to be ‘the author of one’s experience’ – as Alain Touraine says (2013) – cannot be a moral or voluntarist injunction, the result of an instrumental approach, or associated with the refusal of inclusivity in the name of autonomy. The self-referential version of the modern autonomous subject needs to be historicized and contextualized. This is not just a scholastic question or an academic curiosity, but an urgent realistic concern about our contemporary democracies.

References