

A Wittgensteinian Reassessment of “Subjective” and “Interpretivist” Epistemology

Alexey A. Nekludoff

AstraVerge Institute

Principal Researcher

Email: an@astraverge.org

ORCID: [0009-0002-7724-5762](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7724-5762)

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Abstract

The standard distinction between subjective epistemology and interpretivist epistemology is central to qualitative research. Subjective epistemology grounds knowledge in individual experience, while interpretivist epistemology claims that meaning emerges from socially shared contexts. This paper argues that the difference between these epistemological frameworks is far weaker than commonly assumed. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s conception of the metaphysical subject as “the limit of the world,” I demonstrate that both frameworks rely on the same mechanism of sense–boundary formation. “Shared meaning” is shown to be a theoretical reconstruction rather than an independently observable entity. As a consequence, the distinction between subjective and interpretivist epistemology collapses into a difference of multiplicity rather than kind.

1 Introduction

In qualitative social science, two epistemological stances are frequently contrasted: subjective epistemology, which locates knowledge in individual experience, and interpretivist epistemology, which asserts that knowledge arises from socially shared meanings. Methodological literature typically treats these positions as conceptually distinct. However, the nature of this distinction is rarely scrutinized.

This paper examines the foundations of that contrast. Using a Wittgensteinian view of the subject as a structural boundary rather than an empirical agent, I show that the distinction collapses: interpretivism merely scales the same structure across multiple loci of sense.

2 The Traditional Distinction

2.1 Subjective epistemology

Subjective epistemology grounds knowledge in the experiences, perceptions, and interpretive acts of an individual subject. Meaning is internally constituted: the locus of sense is singular.

2.2 Interpretivist epistemology

Interpretivist epistemology claims that meaning emerges from socially embedded processes: shared norms, cultural frames, and collective interpretive practices. Here the locus of sense is multiplied and synchronized across agents.

2.3 The alleged distinction

The textbook contrast is:

subjective epistemology = individual meaning-making
interpretivist epistemology = collective meaning-making

The implicit assumption is that the collective introduces a new epistemic mechanism. As I show below, this assumption is unfounded.

3 Wittgenstein and the Structural Subject

3.1 The metaphysical subject as limit

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously states:

“The subject does not belong to the world but is the limit of the world.” (Wittgenstein [1922](#), 5.632)

This entails:

- the subject is not empirical;
- the subject is not psychological;
- the subject is a structural condition of sense.

3.2 Implications

If the subject is the boundary of sense, any entity that defines such a boundary may function as a “subject.” The subject is thus structural, not biological.

4 Beyond the Human: Dissolving the Subject–Object Divide

The structural reading of Wittgenstein has a radical consequence. If the subject is a boundary of sense rather than a psychological faculty, then the classical division between subject” and object” becomes a linguistic artifact rather than an ontological necessity.

What we call “objects” (stones, trees, animals) are excluded from subjectivity only because we lack access to their internal organization of sense. But our epistemic inability does not entail an ontological prohibition: the boundary of sense may be instantiated wherever a structural differentiation of “world” from “non-world” can be coherently defined.

Thus, in purely structural terms:

- a human can be a locus of sense;
- a frog can be a locus of sense, with different sensory and behavioral parameters;
- even a stone can function as a trivial or degenerate locus of sense in a formal reconstruction.

This does *not* imply consciousness, intentionality, or cognition in stones. It implies that the concept of a “subject” loses its dependence on biological characteristics once interpreted as a Wittgensteinian limit of the world.

Stonehenge as a non-anthropocentric configuration of loci

Under this structural interpretation, even configurations of non-living entities may be treated as multi-locus topologies of sense. A structure such as Stonehenge, traditionally classified as a set of inert “objects,” becomes, in this framework, a coherent *configuration of boundaries*—a “society of stones” in the purely structural sense that each element contributes to the global organization of spatial, directional, and relational constraints.

Nothing here attributes experience to stones. The point is ontological: the classical subject–object divide presupposes that only humans (or animals) can generate the boundary conditions for a world. The Stonehenge example demonstrates that structured configurations of entities can generate *relational worlds* without invoking subjectivity at all.

Once anthropocentrism is removed, the supposed distinction between subjective and interpretivist epistemology weakens dramatically. Both become variations of the same Wittgensteinian architecture of sense—whether instantiated by a single locus or collectively distributed across multiple loci, biological or otherwise.

Archaeological Evidence: Alignment Structures as Relational Systems

This structural interpretation of non-human loci of sense gains support from contemporary archaeological research. A number of studies in cognitive archaeology and archaeoastronomy

demonstrate that megalithic sites such as Stonehenge function not merely as collections of stones but as *alignment structures*—systems whose meaning arises from the relational configuration of their elements.

Renfrew’s theory of cognitive archaeology Renfrew, [1994](#) argues that prehistoric monumental sites encode and stabilize cultural categories through spatial arrangement, independently of linguistic mediation. Similarly, Ruggles’ work on archaeoastronomy Ruggles, [2015](#) shows that megalithic complexes operate as “relational machines,” generating a structured perceptual world through alignments with solar and lunar cycles. Parker-Pearson’s analysis of the Stonehenge landscape Parker Pearson, [2012](#) demonstrates that the arrangement of stones forms a coherent system of directional, ritual, and temporal relations that existed prior to and independently of any individual subject’s cognition.

None of these frameworks attribute consciousness to stones. What they confirm is that a structured configuration of non-living entities can generate stable relational worlds—worlds defined not by subjective interpretation but by the inherent organization of elements within the system.

This aligns precisely with the Wittgensteinian idea that the boundary of sense is structural rather than psychological. Stonehenge, in this interpretation, becomes a non-anthropocentric instantiation of distributed loci of sense: a “society of stones” whose world is constituted by alignment, relation, and coherence rather than by mind or intention.

5 The Status of “Shared Meaning”

5.1 Shared meaning as an inferential construct

Interpretivist epistemology posits “shared meaning” as a social foundation of knowledge. Yet such meaning cannot be observed independently. It is inferred from:

- alignment of behavior;
- linguistic coherence;
- coordination of interpretation.

Thus “shared meaning” is an interpretive reconstruction of coordinated individual sense boundaries—not a new epistemic entity.

5.2 No new epistemic mechanism

Whether meaning arises in one locus of sense or many, the mechanism of sense-formation remains the same. Synchrony does not introduce new epistemological machinery; it merely multiplies structurally equivalent subjects.

6 Dissolution of the Distinction

6.1 Scale, not kind

We arrive at a simple structural equivalence:

subjective epistemology = one locus of sense

interpretivist epistemology = many loci of sense in synchrony

6.2 No independent criterion for collective meaning

Because collective meaning cannot be isolated from individual interpretive acts, interpretivism never escapes subjectivity; it distributes it.

6.3 Shared meaning as an inferential construct

Interpretivism treats shared meaning as foundational, but it cannot be observed directly. It is inferred from behavioral alignment, linguistic coherence, and coordinated interpretation. Thus it is a reconstruction of synchronized individual sense-boundaries.

6.4 No new epistemic mechanism

The mechanism of meaning remains subject-dependent whether the subject is one or many.

Comparative Structure of Subjective vs. Interpretivist Epistemology

Dimension	Subjective Epistemology	Interpretivist Epistemology
Location of meaning	One locus of sense	Many loci of sense in synchrony
Ontological assumption	Individual boundary of sense	Distributed boundaries of sense
Epistemic mechanism	Subject-dependent	Subject-dependent (scaled)
Status of “shared meaning”	Not applicable	Inferential construct only
Difference (classical)	Individual meaning-making	Collective meaning-making
Difference (structural)	Cardinality: one	Cardinality: many
Relation to Wittgenstein	One limit of the world	Many coordinated limits

Table 1: Structural comparison of subjective and interpretivist epistemology.

7 Phenomenon and Paradox Arising from Wittgenstein's Structural Subject

7.1 Phenomenon: The erosion of the subject–object divide

Interpreting the subject as the boundary of sense generates a significant epistemic phenomenon. If the subject is not an empirical agent but the structural horizon of the world, then the classical distinction between “subject” and “object” collapses. Both become internal articulations within a single boundary of sense, not two ontologically distinct domains.

This produces a form of *epistemic leveling*: the supposed difference between individual and collective knowledge becomes merely a difference in scale rather than kind.

7.2 Paradox: A literal reading of Nietzsche's abyss

Wittgenstein's architecture of sense produces a striking paradox. If the subject is any boundary that structures a world, then anything that constitutes such a boundary may function as a “subject” in the strict structural sense.

Thus Nietzsche's well-known aphorism —

“Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, daß er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.” (Nietzsche, 1886/1999, §146)

— in the English translation by Kaufmann—

“He who fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster in the process. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” (Nietzsche, 1886/1966, §146, trans. Kaufmann)

— ceases to be metaphorical.

The “abyss” gazes back not due to psychological reflection but because it, too, constitutes a boundary of a possible world and therefore occupies the same structural role as the human subject. A boundary of sense always “faces outward”—and whatever lies at the limits of sense participates, conceptually, in the same structural status.

This paradox formalizes what Nietzsche expressed poetically: the world's edge is not passive; it is a locus of sense no less than the human who confronts it.

8 Conclusion

The classical distinction between subjective and interpretivist epistemology dissolves under structural analysis. Both rely on the same Wittgensteinian conception of the subject as the boundary of sense. Interpretivism introduces multiplicity but not a new epistemic mechanism; scale changes, structure does not. The contrast is therefore perspectival rather than foundational.

This structural view has a deeper philosophical consequence. By redefining the subject not as a psychological agent but as a formal limit of the world, Wittgenstein implicitly prepared the conceptual ground for later physical theories in which the observer is not an entity inside the world but a structural condition for the possibility of “world” itself. Quantum mechanics, with its non-classical treatment of observation and the non-existence of a privileged observer, becomes intelligible precisely against such a background.

What disappears is not the observer, but the assumption that the observer must be human. Once the “subject” becomes a boundary-condition rather than a mind, the very distinction between subject and object collapses into a topology of sense. Under this topology, epistemology remains subject-bound—but the subject is no longer a creature; it is the structural interface through which any world becomes articulable.

Thus the alleged difference between subjective and interpretivist epistemology is a difference of cardinality, not category: one locus of sense or many. The mechanism is identical. The multiplicity of observers in quantum mechanics, the absence of a privileged standpoint, and the relational character of physical measurement all reflect the same insight that Wittgenstein articulated first: the structure of sense is primary, and the subject—whether one or many—is that structure, not an organism.

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