

## **Knowing Beyond Objectification: Ricoeur, Levinas, and the Phenomenology of Testimony**

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### **Abstract**

Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas both pose their accounts of testimony against Edmund Husserl's account of reflective consciousness, which posits the subject as a theorizing consciousness that transforms the exterior world into an interior object of knowledge. From their critiques of Husserl, Ricoeur and Levinas present their own accounts of testimony which disrupt the dichotomy of subject and object, lending themselves to a deeper engagement between the listener and the testifier. However, Ricoeur's account of testimony does not go far enough in challenging the framework of knowing subject and object of knowledge, while Levinas' account makes the mistake of erasing the specificity of another person in an attempt to provide an account of the unintelligible. I propose that Hans-Georg Gadamer's work on dialogue can bridge the gap between Ricoeur and Levinas' work on testimony. I will conclude that a compelling account of the relationship between the self and others should preserve the other's alterity while positioning the other as an interlocutor who has the power to shape the self's own understandings. This framework elevates testimony to a source of meaning in and of itself by acting as an entrance point into an ethical relationship with the other and by providing an opportunity for the self's own understandings to be changed in light of what the other has to say.

**Keywords:** testimony, Ricoeur, Levinas, Gadamer, dialogue

### **Introduction**

Philosophy traditionally investigates testimony - that is, a person recounting an experience or belief - as a secondary way of obtaining knowledge. Whoever encounters another person's testimony has indirect access to the first-hand experience of the testifier. Testimony is therefore only valuable in so far as it can effectively transmit information to a subject (Van Der Heiden

2022, 315). This approach to testimony positions the listener as a subject who approaches both testimony and the testifier as an object of knowledge. Applying the dichotomy of subject and object to testimony is problematic as it places the listener in the position of a subject who can impose their own understanding of the world onto what the testifier says, while robbing the testifier of their own subjectivity. This removes the possibility of a relationship between listener and testifier as co-subjects, while also making it impossible for the listener to re-shape their own understanding of the world in light of what the testifier has to say. These critiques are at the heart of Paul Ricœur's and Emmanuel Levinas' work on testimony. In his essay, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," Ricœur argues that testimony disrupts the idea of self-consciousness by exposing the ways that our understanding of the world and ourselves is shaped by the testimony of others. In "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony," Levinas argues that testimony is not found in the content of specific speech acts, but is inherent to any communication between the self and the other, where the act of speaking itself testifies to a responsibility for the other that defines the self. Both these accounts posit testimony as a source of meaning that is incompatible with a framework which treats the relationship between the self and the world as that of subject and object.

This paper will explore the ways that Ricœur and Levinas use the concept of testimony to demonstrate a deeper engagement between the self and others that extends beyond the framework of subject and object. Ricœur and Levinas both pose their accounts of testimony against Edmund Husserl's account of reflective consciousness, which posits the subject as a theorizing consciousness that transforms the exterior world into an interior object of knowledge. Both thinkers critique this framework: for Ricœur, the concept of reflection fails to capture the way that the subject is shaped by the world around it, and for Levinas, reflection reduces truth to what can be represented within consciousness. From these critiques, Ricœur and Levinas present their own accounts of testimony which disrupt the dichotomy of subject and object. However, while both thinkers point to a deeper engagement between the self and

others than that provided by reflection, Ricœur's account does not go far enough in challenging the framework of knowing subject and object of knowledge, while Levinas' account makes the mistake of erasing the specific claims that another person makes in an attempt to provide an account of the unintelligible. In response to these critiques, I propose that Hans George Gadamer's work on dialogue can bridge the gap between Ricœur and Levinas by both prioritizing the subjectivity of the other and taking the content of what the other has to say seriously. I will conclude that a compelling account of the relationship between the self and others should preserve the other's alterity while positioning the other as an interlocutor who has the power to shape the self's own understandings. This framework elevates testimony to a source of meaning in and of itself by acting as an entrance point into an ethical relationship with the other and by providing an opportunity for the self's own understandings to be changed in light of what the other has to say.

### **1. Background: Reflective Consciousness**

In their work on testimony, Ricœur and Levinas respond to Husserl's concept of reflective consciousness. Reflection acts as a bridge between consciousness and the exterior world. In the Cartesian tradition, consciousness is independent of the material world. However, consciousness is also aware of the world around it. If consciousness and the world are separate from each other, but consciousness is conscious *of* the world, then there must be something that enables this awareness by bridging the gap between external objects and the interior world (Davidson 2013, 212). Husserl bridges this gap through reflection. Consciousness is aware of the world around it through sense perception (Von Herrmann 2013, 34). This awareness is both an awareness of the information given through sense perception – i.e. what things look like, feel like, sound like, etc. – and an awareness of the value or use of the things we perceive (Von Herrmann 2013, 34). Husserl calls this the natural attitude (Von Herrmann 2013, 68). To gain a theoretical understanding of the world given to consciousness through sense perception, consciousness must step out of this

attitude and consider the exterior world as an object of reflection (Von Herrmann 2013, 68). Consciousness grasps the exterior world and transforms it into an interior object that can be reflected on. Reflection thus points to a passage from the external world to the internal, and with this, a transformation of the exterior world into objects that exist within consciousness. To bridge the gap between consciousness and the world, consciousness makes the world its object.

Understood through the framework of reflection, testimony is primarily a mode of transmitting ideas and beliefs that consciousness can then grasp as objects of knowledge. Statements about experiences or beliefs are objects that the knowing subject can grasp and reflect upon. The person who gives testimony has an experience or belief that they transmit to the person listening. The listener can then take what is said as an intentional object and incorporate it into the interior world, where testimony becomes intelligible in consciousness. Levinas argues that in this way, testimony can only bring about “indirect truths” (Levinas 1996, 100) about something. The fact that knowledge is transmitted and not directly experienced makes knowledge acquired through testimony “evidently inferior” (Levinas 1996, 100). When the world is reduced to an object of knowledge that consciousness can take up, testimony is only valuable in so far as it can transmit knowledge.

The ways that the subject of testimony is taken up in philosophy reflect a view of testimony as a mode through which knowledge is transmitted. The first way that philosophy traditionally approaches testimony is through the lens of epistemology. This line of investigation seeks to determine whether testimony can transmit knowledge to the subject and whether the subject has “rational grounds and reasons for accepting testimony” (Van Der Heiden 2022, 312). In other words, epistemological approaches to testimony consider the validity of testimony as a source of information. An alternative approach accepts that testimony is a valid source of information and as such investigates the specific “truth-claim” that is at stake within testimony (Van Der Heiden 2022, 313). In both these approaches, testimony is primarily “a report... or a transmission of factual information or specific beliefs” (Van Der

Heiden 2022, 313). According to Levinas, testimony understood this way “illuminate only by way of borrowed light” (Levinas 1996, 100). Testimony is the transmission of meaning to a thinking subject and not a form of meaning in and of itself.

## 2. The Limits of Reflection

Ricœur’s and Levinas’ work on testimony reveal the limits of reflection. Ricœur argues that the framework of knowing subject and object of knowledge fails to capture the way that the subject’s self-understanding is mediated by the world around them. Ricœur draws on Husserl’s work to explain why consciousness necessarily refers to the exterior world. However, he argues that Husserl neglects the ways that the subject understands itself in light of this world. Ricœur argues that the “ideas, actions, works, institutions, and monuments” (Ricœur 1977, 28) that the subject encounters shape the way that the subject understands itself. Ricœur’s work thus points to a limitation in Husserl’s concept of reflection: “some experiences cannot be understood through direct reflection on the object but are mediated through ‘signs, symbols, and texts’” (Davidson 2013, 221). Within reflection, the world becomes an object that is represented within consciousness. Once the world becomes an object of reflection, the subject can impose their own understanding on the exterior world. This contrasts sharply with Ricœur’s approach, where the exterior world shapes the subject’s own self-understanding, rather than the subject shaping the meaning of the world.

Ricœur’s explanation of the relationship between the subject and a text provides an illustrative example of how the subject can understand itself in light of the world, rather than imposing its own understanding on it. One way to conceptualize the relationship between a reader and a text is as the reader imposing their own understanding onto what they read (Ricœur 1977, 30). According to this account, the text is the reader’s object, and its meaning is shaped by the reader. Ricœur proposes that the opposite is true: the reader does not make the meaning of the text, but the self is instead “constituted by the issue of the text” (Ricœur 1977, 30). The reader comes to a new understanding of themselves and the world in light of what the

text has to say. Reading is therefore a process that involves “understanding oneself before the text” (Ricœur 1977, 30). This holds in a more general sense in contexts other than reading written works. Just as the self understands itself before the text, the self’s self-understanding is shaped by the world it lives in and the people, ideas, and objects that it comes into contact with.

While Ricœur argues that Husserl’s framework cannot capture the way that the subject is mediated by the world around it, Levinas argues that Husserl’s framework cannot capture anything that is not intelligible. Husserl provides a conception of consciousness that grasps the exterior world and draws it into a structure of understanding within consciousness (Levinas 1996, 98). Anything that occurs in the world must be made into an intelligible object within the interior world of the knower (Levinas 1996, 98). This framework means that “representation governs the notion of truth” (Levinas 1996, 99). Only those things that can be represented within consciousness can be true. This prioritizes “truth understood as disclosure” (Levinas 1996, 99), which means that nothing is true unless it can be made intelligible. Understanding the relationship between the self and the world through reflection means that the world is reduced to what can be represented within consciousness.

Levinas critiques this conception of truth by providing an account of what is unrepresentable to consciousness: the freedom of another person. Levinas argues that the “freedom of the other” (Levinas 1996, 101), will never be “representable to me” (Levinas 1996, 101). Here, Levinas is concerned with maintaining the alterity of the other. If the other is represented within consciousness, they lose their alterity because the other becomes an object that exists within the subject’s interior world. For Levinas, this framework can never successfully capture what the other is – that is, a being that is entirely separate from the self. By virtue of being an independent being, the other can never be represented in another’s consciousness. The other is separate from the self’s consciousness, and they will always escape the self’s will. The other therefore has a freedom that cannot be grasped and represented within reflection. The other exceeds the framework of knowing subject

and object of knowledge, because in their independence, the other is necessarily outside of the self's consciousness and cannot be reduced to an intentional object.

Providing an account of truth that exceeds what is representable in consciousness is key for Levinas project of providing an account of the self's responsibility for the other. Throughout his work, Levinas is concerned with the "every day and extra-ordinary event of my responsibility towards other humans" (Levinas 1996, 101). For Levinas, the self is defined by their ethical responsibility for other people. These people exist as separate from the self and their will. The framework of the knowing subject and object of knowledge falls short in capturing this relationship, because consciousness can never accurately capture the other in their alterity. The other does not exist as the other within consciousness, and as such reflection cannot capture the infinite responsibility of the self for the other. If only the representable is true, then there is no way to account for the self's responsibility for the other. For this reason, Levinas' project requires a notion of truth that exceeds the boundaries of the representable.

### **3. The Concept of Testimony**

By critiquing the relationship between the self and the world as that of subject and object, Ricœur and Levinas elevate testimony to a direct source of meaning. Ricœur's discussion centers on religious testimony, and as such he defines testimony as "accounts of an experience with the absolute" (Ricœur 1977, 32). This account can be a direct statement about the divine, or take the form of something that testifies to the divine without directly making claims about it, such as actions done in the name of God (Ricœur 1977, 34). Ricœur argues that if the contents of testimony are an object of knowledge that can be possessed by consciousness, then consciousness "must be the 'subject' and the divine must be the 'predicate'" (Ricœur 1977, 30). If God is an object of knowledge, then the believer as the subject is in the position of imposing their own conception of God onto the divine. Ricœur argues that the subject's self-understanding should instead be shaped by their encounters with the divine. The testimony of others is one form of this

encounter. If testimony is an object of knowledge, then the hermeneutic task when encountering someone's testimony is to impose our own understanding onto it. However, this makes revelation – which Ricœur defines as “the discourse of faith” in which the believer “seems to understand himself through a better understanding of the texts of faith” (Ricœur 1997, 2) – impossible. For revelation through testimony to occur, the self must develop a self-understanding in light of what is testified rather than imposing their own understanding onto testimony.

Ricœur argues that revelation through testimony takes place through a dual process of understanding the contents of testimony and understanding the self in light of testimony. As a form of revelation, the “hermeneutic of testimony consists wholly in the convergence of... the exegesis of self and the exegesis of external signs” (Ricœur 1977, 33). This dual exegesis involves three dialectics. The first is the dialectic between event and meaning. When the event that is testified to occurs, the event and its meaning “immediately coincide” (Ricœur 1977, 33). This is a moment of direct revelation that does not require interpretation, as meaning is given within the event. However, once the moment of encounter passes, meaning is no longer immediately given. For this reason, testimony requires interpretation for meaning to be brought to light (Ricœur 1977, 33). The dialectic of event and meaning thus gives way to the “dialectic of true and false testimony” (Ricœur 1977, 35), where the self must differentiate true and false manifestations of the divine (Ricœur 1977, 33). Through this process of differentiation, the self develops a deeper understanding of the divine by identifying it in cases of true testimony (Ricœur 1977, 35). Finally, testimony is interpreted through the life of the one who testifies. This is the dialectic of “testimony about what is seen and life” (Ricœur 1977, 34). Ricœur argues that “a witness may so implicate himself in his testimony that it becomes the best proof of his convictions” (Ricœur 1977, 34). When the witness is implicated in their testimony, they become fully committed to the truth of what they testify to. The witness' life becomes shaped by something outside themselves, calling their sovereignty into question. Through these movements, the self's own understandings transform. Here, the self is does not

impose their understanding onto God as an object of knowledge, but lets their understanding transform in light of an experience with God. In this way, testimony disrupts an account of the relationship of the self and the world as that of subject and object.

Levinas' account of testimony centers on the relationship between the self and the other, which he argues is a testimony to both an ethical relationship between the self and the other, and a testimony to the absolute. Given that Levinas' project in "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony" is to provide an account of truth that exists beyond the disclosure of being, Levinas' discussion of testimony is not concerned with the content of what a person says. The self's infinite responsibility to the other cannot "announce itself in testimony as a theme" (Levinas 1996, 105). Instead, this responsibility is testified to simply in the act of communicating (Levinas 1996, 105). Here, Levinas makes a distinction between the "Saying", or the act of communication, and the "Said", or the content of that communication (Levinas 1996, 104). Levinas argues that in approaching the other, no matter what form that approach takes, the self testifies to the infinite responsibility they have for the other: "The Saying... is the approach of the other and already testimony" (Levinas 1996, 104). Testimony thus takes place in the very act of communication.

This is possible because the act of approaching the other is a response to the call of the other. Levinas argues that the other summons the self into a position of ethical responsibility where no other person could take the place of the self (Levinas 1996, 102). It is possible to ignore this summons: Levinas likens the person who ignores their responsibility for the other to Adam hiding away from the voice of God (Levinas 1996, 103). When the self responds to the summons of the other, this action is a testimony to that summons, and thus to the infinite responsibility that the self has for the other. This response manifests through communication, when the self signals their presence to the other. Levinas argues that in speaking to the other, the self is saying "Here I am." Here, the self offers themselves up in service of the other. In doing so, the self

responds the summons of the other and testifies to their responsibility to them.

#### **4. Revisiting the Self and the World**

Ricœur's account of testimony points to a self that is completely dependent on the divine. Each movement of Ricœur's hermeneutics of testimony involves a "movement of letting go" (Ricœur 1977, 33) where the self "accepts being led by and ruled by the interpretation of external signs which the absolute gives of itself" (Ricœur 1977, 33). The dialectic of event and meaning exposes the way that the self is "absolutely dependent on certain founding events" (Ricœur 1977, 35). Part of the task of self-understanding is understanding the way that these events have formed our lives. The dialectic of true and false testimony leads to self to follow the "way of eminence" (Ricœur 1977, 35), because through discerning the divine the self also discerns ideas of "justice or goodness" (Ricœur 1977, 35). Finally, the dialectic of life and what is testified points to a complete renunciation of sovereign consciousness. When a person testifies to God through the life they live, they renounce autonomy (Ricœur 1977, 35). This abandonment does not come out of consciousness, but instead is made possible by "confessing its total dependence on historical manifestations of the divine" (Ricœur 1977, 36). Each of these dialectics exposes the self's dependency on things outside itself, resulting in a "letting go" of sovereignty and a recognition of the self's dependence on the exterior world.

Instead of painting a picture of the self's dependence on the exterior world, Levinas' account of testimony characterizes the self's relationship to others as one of complete ethical responsibility. As discussed above, Levinas views the act of communication as testifying to the self's responsibility to the other. This responsibility is what characterizes the self. For Levinas, the other is present within the self as responsibility (Levinas 1996, 102). An encounter with the other takes the form of an "accusation" (Levinas 1996, 102) that summons the self into an ethical relationship. This summons defines the self in its individuality because it is directed to the self and not to anyone else: in the responsibility of the self for the other, "no

one can stand in for me” (Levinas 1996, 102). Summoned by the other into an ethical relationship, the self is characterized by being “for-the-other” (Levinas 1996, 102). Subjectivity does not take the form of understanding the world, but as “tearing-away-from-oneself-for-the-other” (Levinas 1996, 102) and “giving-to-the-other-bread-for-one’s-mouth” (Levinas 1996, 102). This points to a giving up of the self in order to live out responsibility for the other. The relationship between the self and the other that is testified to is therefore one of complete obligation for the other.

### **5. Bridging the Gap Between Ricœur and Levinas Through Gadamer’s Concept of Dialogue**

Although Ricœur’s work on testimony calls the autonomy of the self into question, his account is ultimately still concerned with truth as disclosure. Ricœur’s account of testimony focuses on the transmission of knowledge and beliefs from one person to another. Although relationship between the self and the knowledge that testimony discloses is not the relationship between subject and object, the possibility of stepping into this framework is always present because Ricœur treats testimony primarily as a mode through which knowledge is transmitted. This is not a problem for Ricœur, who states that task is not to negate the framework of knowing subject and object of knowledge, but to “undercut [its] primacy” (Ricœur 1977, 29). People do not primarily understand the world by grasping it as an object, but this attitude does sometimes appear “unexpectedly like a ‘crisis’” (Ricœur 1977, 29). While the primary mode of encountering the world is not through reflection, the self is still able to step into this mode of apprehending the world. Reflection therefore appears throughout Ricœur’s account of testimony. Ricœur is concerned with a dual process of understanding testimony and understanding the self in light of testimony. Developing an understanding of testimony points to a knowing subject who is capable of taking testimony as an object of knowledge. This is especially clear in Ricœur’s discussion of the dialectic between true and false testimony. Ricœur argues that the “judicatory dimension of testimony” (Ricœur 1977, 33) takes place on the

“plane of reflection” (Ricœur 1977, 33) – that is, within consciousness that has grasped testimony as an object. Judging the truth value of testimony also involves an imposition of the self’s understanding onto the text. Ricœur’s account therefore does not go far enough in dismantling the framework of the knowing self and subject of knowledge – this framework is always present in Ricœur’s account, even if it is not primary.

While Ricœur does not go far enough in critiquing intentionality, Levinas’ preoccupation with providing an account of the unintelligible risks erasing the value of what a person says when they give testimony. Levinas describes a situation of sign-giving that testifies to the infinite, but that does not have any content itself. This is demonstrated by Levinas’ priority of the Saying over the Said. While this lends itself to his critique of reflection, Levinas risks giving an account of our relationship to the other that dismisses both what the other has to say and the other’s particularity. In his article “Ethics and Community,” Hans Herbert Kogler critiques Levinas for creating a universal structure that ignores the historical situatedness of the self and the other. Levinas’ other is generalized, and his account of testimony does value what the other has to say. This account is therefore successful in providing an account of what is not representable in consciousness but is unsuccessful in showing that the self has any reason to listen to the other. Levinas fails to articulate “how to address the other’s claims” (Kogler 2015, 319). For Kogler, a convincing account of the relationship between the self and the other should both posit the other as independent from the self and as a particular person who has something valuable to share. Levinas’ account establishes the other’s alterity but not the value of the contents of testimony, and thus erases the ability to respond to the other’s claims.

I propose that Gadamer’s work on dialogue bridges the gap between Ricœur and Levinas. Ricœur’s account of testimony does not go far enough in pushing against the dichotomy of subject and object, while Levinas removes the value of what is said in order to capture what cannot be captured by reflection. Dialogue finds itself between these two accounts. According to Gadamer, dialogue is a process in which

two interlocutors collaborate in order to come to a shared understanding of a subject matter (Vessey 2016, 312). For dialogue to be successful, each interlocutor must approach the other as someone who has something valuable to say. The interlocutors must be open to other's claims, and as such must recognize them as another subject. Dialogue is therefore only possible when the self recognizes the subjectivity of the other, and when the self values the content of what the other has to say (Vessey 2016, 313). While dialogue appears to be structurally distinct from testimony – dialogue implies spoken conversation while testimony is a statement or action – Gadamer argues that interpretation is itself a dialogical process. A person enters into dialogue with whatever they are interpreting by approaching the object of interpretation as something which makes a claim on them (Risser 2016, 125). In this way, when a person interprets testimony, they enter into dialogue with what is testified. Gadamer's conception of dialogue thus preserves the structure of Levinas' testimony, where the self approaches the other as a subject and responds to them, while also echoing Ricœur's emphasis on the self shaping its understanding of the world in light of what is said.

Levinas' concern with approaching the other as a being that is not representable within consciousness has echoes in Gadamer's argument against reflecting out of a relationship with the other. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer warns against encountering another person as an object of knowledge. In this form of encounter, the subject attempts to understand their interlocutor "better than the other understands himself" (Gadamer 2004, 353). This relationship between the self and the other is "not immediate but reflective" (Gadamer 2004, 353). By approaching the other as an object of knowledge, the subject reflects out of their relationship to the other and "robs his claims of their legitimacy" (Gadamer 2004, 354). In attempting to know the other, the self exerts power over the other, robbing the other of their subjectivity by transforming them into an object of knowledge. True dialogue is only possible when the other is seen as another subject who has something true to say. Only in approaching the other as a subject can the self become open to the claim that the other makes on them

(Gadamer 2004, 356). This account of the relationship between the self and the other is deeply compatible with Levinas' work. Like Levinas, Gadamer destabilizes the concept of the other as an object of knowledge, instead prioritizing the claim that the other makes on the self. The structure of Gadamer's dialogue mimics the structure of Levinas' testimony, where a person is called to respond to the summons of the other in conversation.

However, unlike Levinas, Gadamer's dialogue also prioritizes what the other has to say. In dialogue, both interlocutors must be open to the other's claims (Gadamer 2004, 355). In his essay "Language and Alterity," James Risser characterizes this openness as "the 'ethical imperative' to respect the other such that his or her truth claims vis-à-vis a subject matter are taken seriously" (Risser 2016, 316). In dialogue, the self is oriented towards the other in a way that accepts an inherent value to what the other has to say, regardless of the self's own understanding of the subject at hand. Here, the self does not impose their understanding onto the other, but transforms their understanding in light of the other's claims. Accepting the other's truth claims does not reduce dialogue to a purely formal account, as Levinas' account does, but instead establishes the priority of the content of dialogue. One person has to listen to the content of what the other person is saying in order for a common understanding of the subject matter to be reached. At this point, Gadamer's account of dialogue mirrors Ricœur's argument that the hermeneutic task is to understand oneself in light of someone else's testimony. Once the self recognizes the value of what the other person says and takes the content of what is said seriously, the self will acquire a "new self-understanding" (Vessey 2016, 313). This points to a transformative power that dialogue has to shape the self's own understanding.

## 6. Conclusion

When understood through the framework of a knowing subject and object of knowledge, testimony can only be regarded as something that transmits information. In order to view testimony as a primary source of meaning, the self must be open to the claim that another person's testimony makes on

them. This requires that the self understand the other in their alterity, while also listening to what they have to say. Ricœur and Levinas' accounts of testimony provide two halves of this puzzle: Ricœur describes the hermeneutic process of simultaneously developing an understanding of the self and what is said, while Levinas provides an account of the absolute alterity of the other that cannot be represented in consciousness. By bridging the gap between these two arguments, Gadamer's concept of dialogue effectively elevates testimony to a primary source of meaning.

The topic of testimony provides an entry point into a larger discussion regarding the relationship between the self and the world. Elevating the importance of testimony above simply transmitting knowledge disrupts an account of consciousness that views the exterior world as an object of knowledge. The relationship between people in dialogue and the ways that encounters with others can shape the way the self understands themselves and the world around them are at the heart of the topic of testimony. By taking another person's testimony seriously, the self can step into a deeper engagement with the world that cannot be captured through the framework of subject and object.

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