

Reviews

Alienation

by Rahel Jaeggi.

Translated by F. Neuhouser and A. E. Smith. Edited by F. Neuhouser.

Columbia University Press, 2014, hbk £24.00, ISBN: 9780231151986, 304pp

by Robert Froese

Philosophy has long been obsessed with the relationship between X and the possible meaning(s) this X may acquire. From Aristotle's acorn to Heidegger's hammer, the question is always constructed within the tension between inherent content and contingent possibilities. Rahel Jaeggi's new book *Alienation* not only attempts to make its own contribution to this conversation, but is, in and of itself, somewhat of an object lesson. While much has been made of the 'death' or 'de-centering' of the subject, the 'determinate content' of this philosophical insight is far from obvious. With philosophers like Heidegger and Althusser, it became central to a critique of liberal individualism and 'bourgeois' humanism (though even here, this shared insight leads, famously, to drastically different political consequences), while in the hands of Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida and Butler, the death of the subject signified the creative possibilities embedded within structures and discourses, which are always incomplete, fluid and contradictory. The question we are left with, and to which we will return, is, does the abandonment of the (Cartesian, essentialist, humanist, atomistic, pre-social, etc.) subject have any inherent content or does it simply create a kind of theoretical vacuum in which one can simply place the content of their choosing - perhaps even content resembling that which was initially purged?

With Jaeggi's new treatise on alienation, we have a further contribution to what ethical and political implications may follow from a theory of a subjectless subjectivity. The form of the argument is as ambitious as it is unique, as she weaves together a concept of alienation through a complex constellation of theorists, juxtaposing and appropriating philosophies from traditions so diverse that they have been conventionally thought to lack the sufficient common ground to even establish proper disagreements (let alone possess any basis for a productive dialogue). Here she continually breaches the sacred continental/analytic divide as she not only engages the usual suspects from German idealism, Marxism, critical

theory, psycho-analysis, phenomenology and existentialism but also those traditions either not typically associated with, or outright hostile to, the concept of 'alienation,' such as structuralism, liberalism, communitarianism, American pragmatism, and postmodernism.

With these extensive resources she attempts to conceive of a subject malleable enough to be free from the fetters of essentialism and atomism, while robust enough to resist the siren song of postmodern relativism. To this end, her argument is in constant negotiation between a seemingly infinite series of tensions¹ in order to express how the subject is, on the one hand, always constructed within overlapping social fields, and yet, on the other hand, how a subject proper may still emerge to the degree that it can appropriate its context in such a way that it creates a life it can (reflectively) call its own. Of course everything rests on what exactly is meant by each of these 'it's, and moreover, how these moments relate to each other.

In her attempt to find this philosophical middle ground, Jaeggi proceeds by first tearing down the subject in order to build it back up again. She begins by severing the 'authentic subject' (another term she chooses to resuscitate) from the 'essentialism' of earlier alienation theorists like Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. While Jaeggi appropriates key insights from many of these theorists, she claims that the common error of this legacy is the presupposition of a substantive essence - whether it be a human nature, a prior more idyllic relation, set of essential capacities, or solitary pre-social subject - which becomes distorted in a given social, political or economic order. Echoing long established critiques from post-structuralist and liberal thought, Jaeggi states that, so long as alienation implies 'the separation of things which naturally belong together' or a sense of 'harmony' (25) with one's essence, it will be irredeemably susceptible to the pitfalls of 'paternalism,' 'objectivism,' and 'perfectionism' (28-30).

To counter this position, Jaeggi goes to great lengths to annihilate any sense of the pre-social or unchanging 'self.' Here, utilizing metaphors of actors, theatres and clothes hangers, Jaeggi argues that there is no 'true' self which can be found 'deep inside' or abstracted from its social context; it is through, *and only through*, embodied activity that a self emerges at all (95). It then follows that, if we only acquire our determined character through our inherited, acquired, and continual taking up of various roles (student, friend, mother, worker, citizen, etc.), the self 'knows no offstage' (75).

While the umbrella indictment of 'essentialism' often obfuscates more than it illuminates (and at times a slight of hand, or oversimplification, is required to differentiate Jaeggi's position from those she criticizes²) it is here, where Jaeggi articulates the relationship between society and the individual, where her argument is most successful. Through a series of philosophical

vignettes, Jaeggi effectively weaves insights from Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger, together with thinkers like Plessner and Simmel, to present a sustained analysis of how the subject is always and already embodied within a social world, filled with other people, language, desires, roles, and institutions. This general trajectory - that society is the positive condition for individuality - is well appropriated against many theorists within liberal, existentialist and postmodern traditions, and reaches a particular highpoint in her critique of Rorty. Rorty's fetishization of 'private autonomy' and living out 'idiosyncratic fantasies,' as Jaeggi astutely points out, relies on a contradictory and self-defeating understanding of how the individual relates to society; by positing the (somehow 'worldless') individual in contrast to society, Rorty's romantic individual can only 'prove her own uniqueness' through (negatively) referencing society, and as such, this 'self-referentiality precisely increases dependence on others because it has no standard outside this relation to others' (213). The obvious question now facing Jaeggi is, if alienation does not describe a pre-given essence, relation, or sphere of private autonomy that becomes *distorted* (views which apparently lead to either totalizing or atomizing theoretical and political conclusions), to what loss or estrangement does the concept refer?

Jaeggi's answer is paradoxical: because there is no pre-given subject to lose, it is subjectivity as such that is at stake. With the same force as she eschewed the essentialist subject, Jaeggi also wants to distance herself from the 'postmodern' position of a multiple, fragmented, un-sutured subject. With this in mind, Jaeggi argues that if there is indeed no pre-existing 'self,' if the subject is unable to make itself into something that it can - retrospectively - recognize as a 'self,' then we are left, not with an inchoate essence unable to express itself, but with, literally, nothing; the complete absence of a subject. Alienation is thus defined by Jaeggi, not as the *estrangement from*, but rather the total *inability to create* a self at all:

If we first take on a specific shape, even for ourselves, within roles, then alienating roles not only force us to conceal or mask ourselves, they inhibit us already in the construction of our identity. If it is not only before others that we express ourselves in roles, then in alienating roles *we actually lose ourselves*....we cannot develop into someone in the roles in question...there is nothing left over behind these roles...what results from alienation in roles, then, is less a distortion of, or a coming away from, the true self than an inner void. (95, my italics)

The philosophical purchase of the concept of Alienation for Jaeggi primarily

expresses the concern for how social dynamics, while a prerequisite to the expression of individuality, can rigidify in ways that make individuals feel as if possibilities (which must both be realistic and desirable) are obscured, or that they don't have a proper stake in their life. Therefore, living a life in a non-alienated way refers to 'a way of carrying out one's own life and a certain way of appropriating oneself - that is, a way of establishing relations to oneself and the relationships in which one lives' (33). It is here, where the force of Jaeggi's initial emptying out of the subject is not only brought to a standstill but propelled in the opposite direction, where we experience the foundational tension within her argument most acutely.

This imperative, to 'develop into someone,' so as not to 'lose ourselves,' has a descriptive and normative dimension. The former is a question of, if there is no self unless 'we' create it, who is this 'we' which is not yet 'authentic' yet capable of becoming so? The latter question is, from what perspective must this 'we' be viewed so as to count as 'authentic'? Regarding the first concern, Jaeggi primarily appeals to the concept of 'interpretive sovereignty,' which expresses that, regardless of how fragmented one's life may be, we may speak of a singular 'unity-creating self that appropriates its various possible roles and dimensions, as well as its attitudes and desires, and works through and integrates conflicting experiences' (191). The abandonment, according to Jaeggi, of such a 'reference point,' is not only 'counterintuitive' but also has 'grave consequences,' as it would simultaneously abandon any standard against which 'the success or failure of such acts of integration' could be judged (191-2). While one may doubt the descriptive validity of 'interpretive sovereignty,' even if we accept it as a constituent element of our subjective experience, the question still remains as to why this specific phenomena (and not others) should be elevated to *the* standard against which actions are measured.

While it is difficult to imagine a completely satisfactory answer to the age old question of where to locate a normative foundation (and indeed any such foundation should be critiqued with the same fervour with which it is posited), Jaeggi's response is extremely brief, dismissive and ultimately exposes the deep contradictions which underlie the various traditions she is drawing upon:

The objection that this conception of critique (and with it the diagnosis of alienation) is culturally relative is not without merit. In comparison to the universalistic content of a theory that takes a view of human nature as its starting point, the scope of alienation critique, as I reconstruct it, is limited. Even when it relies on methods of deep interpretation to point out internal

contradictions or failings, its domain is always limited to a specific shared form of life; its reach does not extend beyond its immediate context. It is not immediately clear, though, how much weight this objection carries. One might be tempted here to follow Joseph Raz, who, untroubled by such an objection, makes the following claim about the value of personal autonomy: 'The value of personal autonomy is a fact of life. Since we live in a society whose social forms are to a considerable extent based on individual choice, and since our options are limited by what is available in our society, we can prosper only if we can be successfully autonomous.' (41-2)

While many of Jaeggi's interlocutors are praised for their ability to subvert the classical notion of the solitary subject, we now begin to see that the concept of a subjectless subjectivity is invoked not to problematize the liberal ideals of freedom and autonomy, but instead to ensure their survival. Jaeggi at once implores us to abandon the illusion of the solitary subject while finding a way to retain the traditional accoutrements associated with the liberal subject, such as the unquestioned priority of autonomy, individual freedom and self-determination. The many crucial philosophical insights notwithstanding, Jaeggi's 'authentic subject,' which takes shape along the way, appears less as a synthesis of diverse philosophical traditions and more as a *deus ex machina*, invoked to save the ego-centric subject from its apparent fate. Given the obvious constraints, this claim will be explained by briefly addressing two problems which result from Jaeggi's socially produced, but individualistically focused, subject, before pointing to an alternative path latent within Jaeggi's own argument.

The first problem with this articulation of alienation is that it would seem to inoculate 'our' current 'form of life' (along with the corresponding self-centred expressions of subjectivity) from the force of many of the critiques invoked by Jaeggi. In the absence of a transcendent or metaphysical 'Archimedean point' (2) from which to challenge a given form of life, Jaeggi essentially concludes that, while the autonomous self may be a kind of theoretical illusion, we live in a 'form of life' which solicits us to prioritize and actualize this ideal, and, as such, we will be counted as 'authentic' to the degree that we conform. Thus, while we must recognize that the 'self' is always a project which involves appropriating the external world around us, from Jaeggi's formulation it is not all together clear why 'individually appropriating a shared vocabulary' (219) should not subordinate and instrumentalize others in the service of this enterprise.

Locating the self at the centre of this confluence of swirling external

forces is made possible by two theoretical moves. First, like many of her philosophical predecessors (Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Lacan, Althusser, to name but a few³), Jaeggi fails to adequately distinguish - and ultimately prioritize - between the generic other and the concrete other. While Jaeggi goes to great lengths to stress how the self is intersubjectively constructed, this often invokes the generic sense in which the individual relies on society in the abstract (language, culture, roles, symbolic orders, etc.), which in turn tends to subordinate the role of concrete individuals who give expression to each particular life. While 'others' are mentioned in Jaeggi's formulation, they are never represented as theoretically important, aside from the fact that they are the necessary fodder through which a self must be constructed. This dynamic is evident in quotations such as this:

The 'selves in the making'...become something by making themselves into that something; at the same time, they are not fully free in forming themselves but are confronted with both the obstinacy of their material...and *the obstinacy of the social processes*. As selves in the making, they are subject to an inexhaustible process of interaction with others and with 'the other' more generally. (189, my italics)

This brings us to the second move. As intimated in the above quote, while the 'self' does not precede social processes, the generic and concrete others can only be considered 'obstinate' if viewed, retrospectively, from the already formed subject. Viewing the subject to subject relation (which, Jaeggi herself admits, precedes the relation I have to myself) *from the vantage point of the reflexive self*, in effect functionally re-instates the *normativity* of the previously critiqued solitary liberal subject, who from the start holds a metaphysical passport with which it can justify its position and given velocity. So, while Jaeggi is seemingly critical of the liberal conception of subjectivity, 'which legally regulate individuals' "passing by one another" (xxii), she seems largely indifferent to the kinds of questions which obsessed thinkers like Hegel and Marx; regardless of what one makes of their answers, once one accepts the deep intersubjective nature of freedom, it seems insincere to avoid the fundamental question of the social basis of freedom, and moreover, one's *responsibility* to others.

This leads to the second problem: Jaeggi's tendency to treat society as an undifferentiated ontological totality. This is, in part, congruent with her attempt to put forth a 'formal' or 'procedural' theory of alienation, which tends to take society as an abstract snapshot and thus de-emphasizes both history and the larger structural nodal points in a given society. The basic

logic is that, because everything is constructed within already existing social processes, there is no impetus or normative standpoint from which to interrogate a 'form of life' generally, or the specific relations of power which operate within a given shared horizon - except, of course, in those rare moments where our sense of individuality (which is first given to us by our form of life as our normative reference point) has been violated. This is exemplified in Jaeggi's consistent appeal to a vague notion of 'modernity' which, according to Jaeggi, has delivered the ideals of freedom and individuality, and which stand beyond reproach. Of course this abstracts from the actual history of 'modernity' including how such ideals are implicated in complicated ways with the legacy of colonialism and the development of capitalism.

This disavowal of both history and the systemic features within a given socio-political paradigm is evident in her concrete examples of alienation. It never occurs, for example, to the man who feels like his life has slipped away from him after his move from the city to the suburbs, that it is not just arbitrary (and mostly benign) social 'conventions' (like the belief that such a move is 'better for the children') that obfuscate the choices available to him, but these 'conventions' are the product of larger social forces. For example, if this man lived in, say, Detroit, over and above his personal feeling of malaise, it might be relevant to a theory of alienation that such a common-sense notion of 'doing what is safest and best for the child' is not just part of some universal or generic process where conventions, though necessary for the expression of individuality, tend to rigidify, but part of a specific economic and political history (85). As scholars like Loic Wacquant have shown that, in the context of Detroit, the 'mass exodus of whites to the suburbs' was a reaction to urban riots and racial tensions and further abetted a political cocktail of neoliberal and 'tough on crime' policies, and that this exodus exacerbated the implosion of inner city ghettos, already reeling from the economic crisis of the 70's and the post-industrial shift from manufacturing to service-based industry (Wacquant, 2010). So while Jaeggi is quick to point out that an analysis of institutions is beyond the scope of her theory (and I, in fact, find no problem with this omission), the specific *way* she frames the social world gives us little motivation and few theoretical tools with which to analyze not only the historical processes which engender a 'form of life' but also the specific constellation of forces (class, race, gender, heteronormativity, etc.) that reside within.⁴ In fact, one could argue that, despite its commitment to establishing the social roots of subjectivity, Jaeggi's theory of alienation actively dissuades individuals from considering larger socio-political questions, or taking part in collective expressions, as the subject is implored to search for its authentic expression by conforming

to the most basic norms (autonomy, self-determination) generated by our 'modern' horizon.

Here, Jaeggi would no doubt object that, in order to critique a 'shared form of life,' one must appeal to already precluded 'external' or 'metaphysical' references, and, moreover, this would risk handing over the individual to the community. Here I would like to conclude with the claim that this need not be the case, and, in fact, in certain fleeting moments, Jaeggi points to such a possibility. In her most forceful critiques she states that the experience of subjectivity presupposes a 'constitutive internal division that precedes all possible unity' and a 'relation to the outside or to others' (78, my italics) which, in turn, 'problematizes what is "one's own" rather than presupposing it' (40). Here Jaeggi seems open to the possibility that there is something that precedes the authority of self-consciousness and is more basic than one's form of life. While it must, for the time being, remain nothing but an open door, what this could point to is a theoretical orientation which is focused not on the authority of my autonomy but instead on the priority of my relation with, and responsibility to, others. Here others would appear as more than just a point in a theoretical circumnavigation, where they occupy a position of mediation between my point of departure and my arrival. To quote Emmanuel Levinas, 'It is the other who is first, and there the question of my sovereign consciousness is no longer the first question' (Levinas, 1998, 112). Here, we can follow Jaeggi in her attempt to radicalize the insight that the subject has a relation to others which precedes its relation to itself, and it is *this* moment which can provide the normative motivation to interrogate both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of a given 'form of life' without appealing to an Archimedean point, or a trans-historic or essentialist view of human nature. Moreover, such a concern for others would certainly stress the necessity of collective action, but would also be equally acute to the impossibility of finding a group, movement, program or concept capable of exhausting the uniqueness of the individual. In a paradoxical way, the value of the individual may only be preserved if it finds its centre not in itself, but in others. In sum, at its best, Jaeggi's theory of alienation brings us close to something akin to Adorno's call for a 'second Copernican turn' (Adorno, 2005, 249), or Levinas' plea to make ethics 'first philosophy' (Levinas, 1961, 304). However, unable to fully embrace the normative weight of what lies exterior, we are left with an 'authentic subject,' which, like a king returning from exile, is more assured than ever of its rightful place at the centre.

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Endnotes

¹ Rigidity/flow, manipulation/self-determination, heteronomy/autonomy, structure/agency, objectivity/possibility, and so on.

² While it would take far more room than we are permitted here to analyze Jaeggi's charges of 'essentialism,' one of the more egregious examples of a 'straw man' argument is when Jaeggi, describing a father who feels like his life slipped away from him after a move to the suburbs, states that this scenario would be interpreted by an essentialist, or, 'core model' theorist, as a situation where 'he has missed his essence—his authentic self, his inner character—in going from being a bohemian city dweller to being a suburban father. He is, according to this conception, alienated from himself in the life he leads to the extent that there is a discrepancy between what he does and what he—authentically—is.' (Jaeggi, 2014, 157). I know of no philosophy or philosopher which would, given this situation, conclude that the 'alienated' father is, at his core, a 'bohemian city dweller.'

³ Of those in this list, it should be mentioned that some are more apt at distinguishing between these two 'others,' but, obviously, such an analysis is beyond the parameters of our present concern.

⁴ While Jaeggi does (very) briefly mention the need for historical analysis in order to 'rule out manipulation,' it is only in a very superficial and myopic

perspective of history that only takes into account those immediate desires and conventions which the subject might find overly constricting (120).