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## REVIEW

**Mari Ruti, *Reinventing the Soul: Posthumanist Theory and Psychic Life* (New York: Other Press, 2006), ISBN: 978-1590511237**

*Reinventing the Soul: Posthumanist Theory and Psychic Life* deals with a familiar topic in an unconventional way. The search for the good life is a central theme in western philosophy, appearing in many of the canonical works. However, the subject has fallen out of favor in the past century as anti-essentialist philosophers have shown the subject's emptiness and challenged notions of personal autonomy. Mari Ruti hopes to revive the discussion of the good life, and to do so without returning to the old ways of approaching the issue. Her goal is to introduce "a provocative point of departure for further debate." (25) Her unconventional approach is to create this new starting place from the works of posthumanist philosophy that are usually seen as challenging the search for the good life.

The introduction and first chapter are devoted to explaining how constructivist theory clears away essentialist barriers to self-creation. Ruti uses Nietzsche to show how a constructed subject introduces immense creative possibilities. When we free ourselves from the search for an intrinsic identity and accept that none can be found, we are free to become artists, creating our own lives. However, not every form of constructivism reaches the same conclusion. Judith Butler challenges the Nietzschean view by arguing that hegemonic discourses produce the subject. This makes individuals passive, forced to accept the way they are defined, rather than able to freely choose an identity. The comparison between Nietzsche and Butler highlights Ruti's central disagreement with posthumanist theory. Constructivists tend to describe the subject's emptiness as enabling oppression, while Ruti thinks that a lack of essence is empowering.

In chapter two Ruti continues her critique of poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and clarifies her own position. Although she is generally supportive of Butler's work, Ruti objects to Butler's theory of performativity, which reduces the subject to a mere product of the society. Ruti is also unwilling to accept the existentialist position, as it pays too little attention to the limits of individual autonomy. Ruti explains her own view by juxtaposing Marcuse and Willett, who exemplify the two extremes in the debate. Marcuse has an optimistic view of individual power, as he thinks that it is possible for dissidents to subvert dominant narratives no matter how powerful they seem. Willett criticizes Marcuse for this and counters by proposing that individuals are products of their society. Ruti's solution is to reject both positions in favor a more complex theory of the self that accounts for each of these forms of construction in a non-reductionist way.

The third chapter shifts the books' focus to psychoanalysis and specific problems. Lacan is the central figure here. The subject he describes is empty, defined by its lack. Initially, this seems to put Lacan at odds with Ruti's project, since an empty subject has nothing that can drive it to action. Lacan's theory of language also seems to support Butler's argument that identity is imposed rather than created. However, the subject's lack turns out to be a source of motivation. The empty subject is open to new possibilities; its lack is affirmative. (136) Ruti uses Heidegger's theory of language to support her argument. Heidegger and Lacan agree on many points, including the belief that language reshapes the subject. The difference is that Heidegger is more explicit in describing the creative power of language. Nevertheless, the difference in emphasis does not prevent the theories from supporting similar conclusions. Lacanian psychoanalysis can affirm self-creation, as Heidegger does, once the signifier is freed from the social discourse and allowed to realize its poetic potential. (141) Thus, language turns out to be empowering rather than hegemonic.

The fourth chapter continues the discussion of psychoanalysis, this time analyzing the subject's relation to the past. As Kristeva shows, reflection on the past often produces melancholia. This problem is similar to the lack discussed in the previous chapter, but melancholia is not simply absence. It is produced by the loss of something important or results from desires that cannot be fulfilled. Whereas absence can be satisfied by new content, melancholia is a psychic barrier that must be overcome with sublimation. Kristeva even makes melancholia seem desirable because it is a prerequisite for creativity. As Ruti sees it, Kristeva's point is that "art emerges only when the sorrow that triggers it has been repudiated and overcome." (167) Melancholia can only be overcome in this way and will plague those who are incapable of expressing their feelings. (171) This reaffirms the value of clinical psychoanalysis because many people need something to help them understand the power of sublimation.

In the final chapter, Ruti returns to Nietzsche. This time she focuses on Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*. As with lack, and melancholia, Ruti argues that pain presents us with an opportunity for creativity. If we embrace our fate, including the pain that comes with it, as Nietzsche argues we must, we can find hope in life's inevitable difficulties. The chapter ends without giving any specific guidelines for living the good life. Given its purpose, the book may seem surprisingly short of guidelines. Yet, this fits with Ruti's goal. She discusses only some ways of finding the good life, but leaves the reader to fill in the details.

Ruti's has an impressive ability to find new interpretive possibilities. She employs the same strategy with many of the theorists she discusses at length. First, she briefly discusses how the theorist is conventionally interpreted as limiting the subject's creative and power. Then, Ruti shows how that theorist can be understood affirmatively, as providing key insights that make the search for the good life possible. Alternative perspectives are invariably plausible, as Ruti does not misrepresent anyone to make them fit her argument. Finally, she discusses the psychic and theoretical benefits of her interpretation. By using this strategy, Ruti avoids challenging other philosophers' arguments directly. Instead, she questions the widespread tendency of focusing on the limits of subjective potential when the opposite conclusion can be reached just as easily. As she says of constructivism in general, "I am baffled by the fact that this theory has focused so strongly on what the subject cannot do – that is, on what it can neither effect nor affect at the level of discourse." (49)

Parts of *Reinventing the Soul* reintroduce conventional interpretations. Ruti's discussions of Nietzsche in chapters one and five are good examples of this, as they deal with frequently discussed themes in Nietzsche scholarship. Yet, the way these parts of the book fit into the larger narrative gives them new life. In a way, the Nietzsche sections serve as bookends. They appear in the first and last chapters and help to make Ruti's point clear by exploring the book's theme in familiar terms.

Most of Ruti's analysis also covers new ground. Her reading of Foucault's theory of power is one especially promising challenge to conventional views. Initially, Foucault is contrasted with Nietzsche. The theory of omnipresent power seems to challenge Nietzsche's belief that we control our own development. Foucault's theory of power might even be taken as a decisive objection to Ruti's goal of encouraging individual creativity. Of course, Ruti is determined to show that the theory is more nuanced than this by reversing the apparent contradiction and arguing that Foucault's theory of power is actually empowering. Far from preventing the subject from realizing its potential, it shows that we can always mobilize power to support self-creation. "Power, in other words, is not merely what censors us, but also what mobilizes and motivates us, and what enables us to act in the world." (60)

This interpretation receives its strongest support in Foucault's third volume of the *History of Sexuality, Volume 3: Care of the Self*, in which Foucault explains that in the Greek world, self-care was a form of self-defense. It was associated with protective withdrawal from the world, but it was also an active form of resistance. The Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics illustrate this use of power, as adherents of each philosophy withdrew from the world by creating new ideas. Ruti thinks that Foucault's history of people being able to withdraw from the world to create their "ethics of pleasure" shows that power can be used affirmatively. "What interests me about Foucault's care of the self is that Foucault presents a subject who is not merely passively molded by power, but able to dynamically participate in the fashioning of its own subjectivity." (64) Thus, she concludes that "Foucault is as much a theorist of potentiality as he is of subjection and hegemonic power." (65)

Throughout the book, Ruti rarely allows a pessimistic conclusion to appear without showing the hidden creative possibilities that emerge from it. This is problematic, as such an approach sometimes seems to deny that anything can truly damage the subject. It is possible that Ruti endorses this view, but it seems unlikely. Schopenhauer's brief appearance shows that she is sometimes willing to take apparently skeptical arguments at face value. Nevertheless, the question of what sorts of experiences, if any, are beyond redemption is left open. This is unfortunate, but not enough to detract from this valuable contribution to contemporary philosophy.

Marcus Schulzke  
State University of New York at Albany  
USA  
[ms155136@albany.edu](mailto:ms155136@albany.edu)