

REVIEW

Mari Ruti, *A World of Fragile Things: Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), ISBN: 971-438427164

In *A World of Fragile Things*, Mari Ruti embarks on the ambitious project of explaining how we can find meaning in ephemeral lives. As she explains, the typical approach to answering this question is to focus on character development, to show how we can remake ourselves as complete individuals. Most philosophers assume that the solution to the search for meaning lies in transforming the individual into a complete person. However, as the book's title suggests, Ruti's approach is much different. She starts from the assumption that individuals are always in a state of incompleteness and weakness, a state that pervades every aspect of our lives. "We live in a world of fragile things: fragile selves, fragile psyches, fragile loves." (1) Because the quest for completeness is one that can never succeed, Ruti renounces the tradition approach to the art of living and instead focuses on how we can find meaning despite intrinsic human imperfections. This premise is central to what follows, as the conception of self assumed at the outset of this kind of project shapes its trajectory and helps to determine its conclusions.

The book's central arguments follow from an anti-essentialist concept of self. Ruti goes into great detail developing the foundation for the psychoanalytic theory of living and showing how this differs from the conventional approach. This engagement with foundational premises is essential because accepting the fragmented psychoanalytic self and reorienting our understanding of psychology is a major step in individual development. "In this sense, coming to terms with our lack might be just about the best thing that any of us can do for our psychic well-being." (51) We must give up the unachievable desire for completeness in order to start a more promising project.

Ruti attempts to make a new contribution to this old discussion by adopting a psychoanalytical perspective. This is a promising place to start since psychoanalysis played a central role in attacking the myth of the stable self and exploring psychological fragmentation. However, Ruti's approach is not as firmly grounded in psychoanalysis as she suggests, and this is to her credit. The book is an eclectic mixture of psychoanalysis and other critical approaches that support it with complementary theories. Ruti relies on several philosophers who are not usually considered part of the psychoanalytic tradition and shows how these outsiders can be reconciled with it. Foucault is only briefly considered, but he is essential to developing the book's premise. His work on the historicity of the subject and the evolution of self-care¹ helps

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

to establish Ruti's argument that we must abandon the Enlightenment notion of the self. Foucault sets the foundation for the psychoanalytic investigation by providing empirical support for Ruti's assumptions. The greatest value Ruti derives from psychoanalysis is its affirmation affirming contingency and incoherence. It allows us to reconsider the fragile life not as an unfortunate fact but as something that can be redeemed through creativity. "Psychoanalysis – at least the kind of psychoanalysis that concerns me in this book – makes a virtue out of life's contingency." (4)

Despite the rejection of a unified subject as one of the basic assumptions of her work, Ruti goes on to develop a theory of living that is heavily based in existentialism. The connection to Nietzsche is particularly strong and comes out in two of the book's central themes. First, she develops the idea that loss is a potentially beneficial experience if it leads to sublimation and an increase in creative capacity. She argues that one can gain more from tragedy and misfortune than rigid adherence to an ideal. This is, of course, something attributable to the psychoanalytic tradition as well, but it enters this discussion by way of Freud's appropriation of Nietzsche.² Given Ruti's references to Nietzsche it seems that her own thinking on the matter is more heavily influenced by him than subsequent theorists. Second, she argues that self-understanding is a dynamic process of self-creation rather than an attempt to gain awareness of something static and predetermined. Ruti's exploration of this theme is likewise distinctly Nietzschean, yet she expands on Nietzsche's work with some interesting points about how we reflectively attribute meaning to actions. Thus, "the self in many ways comes into being through processes of narrativization in the sense we have no identity prior to, and apart from, the stories that we tell about ourselves." (83)

Ruti deviates from Nietzsche and other existentialists in affirming the importance of context and the unconscious in shaping identity. She is aware that we are never entirely free to recreate ourselves and therefore does not match Nietzsche's level of faith in the process of becoming oneself.³ "Our social embeddedness, in other words, narrows down the possibilities that the future holds by connecting us to collective conceptions of what is and is not possible." (37) We also suffer from biological and psychological limitations. Unconscious motivates pull us in directions that we cannot choose, limiting our ability to change and at times derailing the best intentions for improvement. Self-creation cannot start from a blank slate, nor can the unconscious be entirely overcome. Faced with these limitations Ruti recommends "cultivating a keen awareness of how we might best stay attuned to our unconscious motivations." (86) Once again, the lesson is that in order to make any psychological progress we must first come to terms with the unalterable facts of our existence and then work with them.

The most substantial discussion, that of Lacan, is saved until late in the book. This is one of the high points in the narrative since it cogently explains Lacan's notoriously opaque work. Lacan initially appears to challenge Ruti's optimistic view of psychoanalysis, as he shows the futility of attempts to ignore or cover the individual's internal conflicts. Indeed,

² Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989) and Volney Patrick Gay, *Freud on Sublimation: Reconsiderations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992)

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Lacan portrays it as more deeply fragmented than his predecessors. Nevertheless, Ruti again shows how we can reinterpret his apparently pessimistic conclusions as something profoundly optimistic. One of Ruti's characteristic rhetorical moves is to show that what initially appears terrible can be empowering; this happens with Lacan, as she shows that Lacan's skepticism is actually constructive. "[I]f Lacan is so intent on tearing down the ego, it is only because he believes that only by so doing is it possible to release desire from the tightly woven nexus of fantasy that depletes the subject's psychic life." (92) He brings us to the same realization as Nietzsche: creativity must be destructive.

Although Ruti mentions Foucault only briefly, as a way of establishing the historicity of the self, we can draw broader implications for Foucault research. In his early writings, Foucault attacked the foundations of psychoanalytic theory.⁴ He questioned Freud's treatment of dreams, the role of symbolism, and the understanding of imagination. As his work developed, he shifted away from a direct engagement with psychoanalysis and towards a general theory of the understanding of psychological categories. Much of his most famous work on psychoanalysis deals with the concept of mental illness and its use as a mechanism of power;⁵ he avoids engaging the subject at the level Ruti is concerned with. Thus, Foucault is primarily interested in psychoanalysis as one mode by which mental life has been constructed. Of course, he was not interested in merely exploring these categories and reproducing them; his interest is critical. Foucault shows the way the categories of mental illness change over time to reflect the dominant values of the society. Ruti is engaged in much the same project, although with a much different goal. Ruti's work complements Foucault's, as she is not interested in reconstructing the particulars of psychoanalysis that Foucault attacked. Rather, she sees psychoanalysis as providing a promising view of the self, one that coincides with Foucault's. Moreover, there is no contradiction in their work because Ruti does not use psychoanalysis as a means of categorizing and marginalizing deviants; she separates it from the power discourse Foucault criticized.

A World of Fragile Things is primarily a work of synthesis. It brings together a number of influences – existentialism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism – and shows that despite their different views of the self, these philosophies emphasize individual fragility and provide ways of redeeming us as contingent beings. Ruti is insightful in the treatment of past philosophers. This is particularly helpful with opaque thinkers like Lacan. However, this is also the book's greatest limitation. It draws on authoritative voices to establish the project and start along the right path toward a new view of self-creation without introducing any significant new routes of understanding the fragile life or living it. In other words, the reliance on the great philosophers and psychoanalysts of the past century hinders the project from covering new ground. The book's greatest contribution comes from the interpreting of past theorists and uniting them in a single project, which is likely to be in facilitating a new conversation

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

about the self and serving as the basis for studies that go further in exploring the implications of this view for the individual and society.

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