

Book Review

Farhang Erfani, *Aesthetics of Autonomy: Ricoeur and Sartre on Emancipation, Authenticity, and Selfhood* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

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Farhang Erfani, *Aesthetics of Autonomy: Ricoeur and Sartre on Emancipation, Authenticity, and Selfhood* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

Postwar philosophical discourse is replete with funeral announcements of the death of the subject, the death of politics, and even the death of philosophy itself. Various autopsies have linked the cause of death to a decentering that brought into these categories fatally subversive elements. With respect to our subjectivity, it has become obvious that we are defined by forces that seemingly belong to us yet are beyond our control, such as language, the conditions of capitalist production, and our unconscious drives. And despite our aspirations to objective and universal judgment, we have been unable to ground our perceptions and evaluations in any higher principles of truth or goodness. The Enlightenment and humanist idea that we can control our destiny, making conscious choices in accordance with principles dictated by our own rationality, has thus been displaced. What has died is the possibility of our individual and collective autonomy, and everything linked to it.

Erfani maintains that “the de-centered subject is nonetheless a subject, with an identity” (1), and he suggests that a new concept of the subject, which “does not deny the lessons of heteronomy and the failures of the Enlightenment self” (134), might proceed from the idea that subjectivity is a creative achievement rather than a presupposed foundation. Through self-creation, we obtain a “sense of being our own – achieving autonomy” and a crucial mechanism in this “creative, aesthetic endeavor” (3) is narrative, because “through narratives, we gain personal and collective accountability; to narrate is to give an account for, after all” (1). Erfani’s project, holding that our self-restoration in the face of the decentering of our subjectivity is both an ethical and an aesthetic task, resonates with those of two prominent messengers of the subject’s death, Foucault and Deleuze. But he works out the parameters of self-creation in a quite different manner, putting Ricoeur and Sartre into conversation in order to build on their common and explicit dedication to the subject. Sartre’s appearance in this endeavour is certainly unexpected, as his thought is often still dismissed as a relic of a bygone era that still held on to the old ideals of authenticity, autonomy, and the intellectual’s role as the defender of higher values. Erfani argues that the Sartrean self is largely misunderstood, and he sets out to correct the common view by showing that Sartre’s self is also a decentred one. But he also argues that Sartre’s development of this decentred self never loses sight of the value of freedom and comes increasingly to appreciate the impact of material circumstances and the need for *praxis* to create and sustain it. Erfani’s turn to narrative, made through Ricoeur, also stands out, given that narrative remains a favourite tool of communitarian political theorists aiming to secure traditional forms of identity through appeal to shared histories and cultures, rather than, as Erfani aims, to construct new identities across divergent communities and states. To Sartre’s insistence that we choose and create ourselves through action, Erfani adds Ricoeur’s analysis of language, narrative, and the dialectic between sedimentation and innovation, the latter being the key to subjectivity. And using Sartre and Ricoeur together, Erfani traces the role of narrative and the play of sedimentation and innovation at a collective and political level.

Erfani maintains that no radical break occurs between the early phenomenological and existentialist Sartre and the later Marxist one, but rather a deepening appreciation of the role of *praxis* in human freedom. Disputing the view that the Sartrean self is simply a variant of the modernist subject, Erfani turns to *The Transcendence of the Ego*, which is notable, in part, because Deleuze bases his own positive engagement with Sartre around it, particularly in *The Logic of Sense*. In this early essay, Sartre disputes the idea that the unity of consciousness requires an ego or “I” standing behind it, holding instead that this “I” appears only when consciousness divides itself in an act of reflection and looks upon its activity as if from outside. An ineliminable gap exists between the consciousness that thinks and the consciousness that declares, “I think,” so that, “in the act of reflection, consciousness does not catch itself fully; it does not reach plenitude or self-coincidence” (14). The subject, the “I” that thinks or acts, thus derives from an activity whose structure “has moved beyond the subject-object split” (14). Erfani goes on to identify a crucial division Sartre makes between pure and impure reflection, the latter attributing to the “I” permanent states and qualities, such as pre-reflexive emotions that are never fully part of reflective consciousness. The division between pure and impure, Erfani notes, anticipates Sartre’s later division between the authentic and inauthentic, as impure reflections “only solidify the double escape [of consciousness] from itself and the world” (17). Nevertheless, Sartre’s critical analysis remains limited to consciousness, ignoring its embeddedness in the world and its relations to others. Drawing an amusing and provocative image, Erfani writes: “His [Sartre’s] early phenomenology is much like a great action-film poster. Consciousness stands tall and heroic in the foreground and though the supporting cast of otherness, historicity, and even *praxis* are present, they stand in the background, with little detail or focus” (11). This neglect continues in Sartre’s later work, although his development of the idea of consciousness as positional and related to others in a situation, and his conception of *praxis* as the negation and transformation of a sedimented “practico-inert,” allows Ricoeur to complement Sartre’s project insofar as “narrative identity is helpful for understanding existentialist authenticity” (65).

Whereas Sartre only late on comes to appreciate the dialectical relationship between the self and its situation, Erfani holds that Ricoeur’s entire corpus represents “a relentless attempt to understand the dialectical relationship between sedimentation and innovation” (39). This back and forth relationship, which sees both “the displacement of the subject and its retrieval” (40), matures through the various stages of Ricoeur’s work. His early studies of the symbolism of evil and of Freud demonstrate the displacement of the conscious self by both language and the unconscious, along with the overdetermination of symbols, which requires a choice as to their meanings, and the centrality of narrative in both the organization of meanings and the genesis of thinking. Narrative itself has a dual status as a “mix of sedimentation and innovation” (48). It makes us what we are, while being outside of our full control, but it is also allows us to create, and as such, “it also points toward the possibility of innovation – the second order of meaning – within the sedimented given, which is the first order of meaning” (48). On this basis, Ricoeur criticizes structuralism for overemphasizing sedimentation and dismissing historicity and time, and criticizes Gadamerian hermeneutics for emphasizing the belongingness created by language’s relation to the world and ignoring the “distanciation” that language also institutes, particularly the distanciation of the author from his text, and thus from himself. Erfani holds that Ricoeur’s dialectic of sedimentation and innovation, belongingness and distanciation, displaces the narcissistic self, but in such a way that a larger selfhood is ultimately retrieved. Nevertheless, it also “tries to maintain a gap between full objectivity and pure subjectivity” (59), and thus

navigate a way between modernity's emphasis on the detached and masterful subject and postmodernity's dissolution of the subject.

As Erfani proceeds, he brings Sartre's and Ricoeur's reflections into productive conversations with others, including Kierkegaard, Beckett, and Orwell. Self-creation, he maintains, involves "bringing together – through emplotment – disparate elements of a temporal life to give it coherence and unity" (66). Nevertheless, there are narratives that fail because they do not recognize "the aesthetic necessity of alterity to narrative identity" (66). Drawing on the characters of Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea* and Johannes in Kierkegaard's "Seducer's Diary," Erfani argues that the lesson of these stories is that "life indeed requires us to become authors, it requires us to create our own narratives" (77), but these stories slip into inauthenticity in the absence of ethical reciprocity and recognition: "unless we include ethics – otherness – in our projects, we can never find narrative unity" (78). Later bringing Ricoeur into conversation with Beckett on the theme of friendship, Erfani maintains that "only in bad faith do we seek solipsistic narratives," whereas friendship must develop in light of "the need for recognition and the impossibility for true reciprocity" (79). Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* illustrates how recognition is achieved not through a demand that calls for sameness, but through a mutuality that remains cognizant of the asymmetry between self and other. This mutuality can simply be a shared project, as the characters of Didi and Gogo make clear: "However futile waiting for Godot seems to be, at least this is what they do. Each brings something to this project; each is capable of certain things. But together they have a common narrative, grounded in the past, in memory...and in the future – in their promise" (86).

From this, Erfani proceeds to argue that narrative's ethicality is ultimately found in the capacity to receive and imaginatively reconfigure narratives, which affirms both embeddedness and freedom, sedimentation and innovation: "Plots are not exclusive to fictions. They represent – mimetically – the world, which is at first given to us in a prefigured way. Plots configure the prefigured and, due to their symbolic nature, subject-agents continually refigure them" (92). Re-narration and reconfiguration, however, are certainly not straightforward; indeed, they pose political problems. On the one hand, a collective's ability to act autonomously and innovatively is challenged by the way it always remains fragmented by struggles over interpretations. Ricoeur's political naïveté, for Erfani, appears in his assumption of a people's pre-political harmony, and Sartre's valuable contribution in this regard is "to problematize the very idea of a collective" (105), showing the need for a mediating "third party" dimension in order to make collective identity possible. On the other hand, at a social and political level, received narrative takes the sedimented form is ideology, serving as both "a common language, a common understanding that conserves society" (112), and a mechanism to "conserve the *status quo*" (112). Resistance to ideology, Erfani argues, requires imaginative utopian thought, which calls for something new even if this is ultimately impossible, but this utopian promise must emerge from within ideology, through the identification of ideology's internal contradictions and failures.

It is on this last point that "Sartre and Ricoeur need each other most" (121), the latter for his appreciation of the power but also the value of sedimentation and institutions, the former for his relentless calls for action in the name of freedom along a model of "authentic reciprocity" (123). Ultimately, "Ricoeur's utopia as a paradigm explains Sartre's commitment to change in all of its inconsistencies; Sartre's *praxis* in its imaginative and aesthetic qualities provides a better way of struggling against the sedimented ideologies that Ricoeur diagnoses so meticulously" (123). In his conclusion, Erfani examines these tasks in light of the dominant narratives of

globalization, arguing that while most current theories continue to base political agency on the nation-state and much of contemporary continental thought remains Eurocentric, an aggressive narrative on the right of the US political scene harks back to a time of unity that never was and relentlessly blames whatever can be characterized as an enemy of this unity for its absence. It is not enough, Erfani argues, simply to battle these narratives with “a dose of reality” (139). There must also be a new collective politics able to combat the disempowering forces at work today. But this requires that “we cease to define ourselves in merely one way, as citizens of a given nation-state, for the purposes of political agency,” and in order to do this, we need “a richer plot. We must figure ourselves afresh, must reshape our identities to accommodate both local and global agency” (140). From this innovative narrative, “we can begin to think of institutions capable of enabling this new kind of agency” (141).

Erfani’s text is philosophically rigorous, but it is more than just a work of philosophy, as it stretches into literature, political theory, and contemporary culture and politics. Nevertheless, the questions I have for him are primarily philosophical, and they come from the “poststructuralist” perspective that Erfani finds dismissive of action and subjectivity. The first question, concerning narratives, can be put as follows: can there not be narratives that on Erfani’s terms are both authentic and ethical and that neither preserve established identities nor create new ones, but instead, to use Deleuze’s term, “deterritorialize” identity? The examples I have in mind come from Deleuze’s analyses of Michel Tournier’s *Friday* and Fitzgerald’s *The Crack Up* in *The Logic of Sense*. Fitzgerald’s narrative, and indeed his entire work for Deleuze, exposes a “silent crack” in the self that, opening the self to multiplicity, provides a necessary condition for the transmutation of resentment into affirmation. Tournier’s narrative, a retelling of the Robinson Crusoe story, affirms the ethical requirement of a relation to the other, as Friday is indispensable to Crusoe’s transformation in the book. Yet, for Deleuze, this transformation is one that achieves a “desubjectification” of Robinson, rather than a recovery in the manner Ricoeurian narrative might offer, and this, in turn, introduces an ethic of perversion that subverts the dominant order of desire. If authentic and ethical narrative is configured along these lines, it seems to me that it could provide an understanding of self-creation that is as valuable as the narrative that leads to subjectivity, and perhaps is even more appropriate in globalized context. That said, Erfani could respond that political empowerment still requires a narrative that more forcefully and overtly restores a sense of individual and collective subjectivity.

But the second question I would put to Erfani concerns this very issue of subjectivity. Put simply: does subjectivity or the consciousness of one’s agency really require a subject with a sense of identity? Sartre himself holds in *The Transcendence of the Ego* that once the presupposition of the ego is removed from phenomenology’s analysis of consciousness, it becomes clear that consciousness’s agency does not need to take the form of a subject at all. And Foucault, when reflecting on the Iranian Revolution, puts aside the question of how revolt occurs – i.e., how subjects are created – and instead holds that what matters is simply the fact that people do revolt, and that in doing so they bring genuine subjectivity into history. It seems to me that this issue of whether subjectivity requires a subject is what is at stake in the differences between the projects put forward by Foucault and Deleuze on one side and Erfani on the other. And it is also, more generally, at stake in a number of contemporary political theory debates that draw from various continental perspectives. The space for this subjectivity without subjects arises in Erfani’s own text, I think, in the way he seems to elide the difference between self and subject, often treating them as interchangeable terms. That the decentering of the subject still

implies a self seems clear; that this self is a subject, or ought to be restored in the form of a subject, strikes me as an open question.

All this simply means that there is a debate to be had over how to approach the political possibilities and dangers we face today. *Aesthetics of Autonomy* lays down many of the central issues that must be addressed, and presents an intelligent, reflective, and intriguing way to work through them. Erfani's work shows us that despite the commonly held view that they are obsolete, the ideas of autonomy, authenticity, and narrative can still be important resources for dealing with the political tasks we face. He adds a welcome new voice to the growing literature that is attempting to tackle these problems.

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