

Małgorzata Holda. *Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject*. Cracow: Ignatianum University Press, 2018.

*Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Death of the Subject* brings together the conscientiously navigated paths of Holda's scholarly endeavor in philosophy and literature. Her unflagging pursuit of hermeneutics reflected in the present book has been nurtured by her scholarship in literary studies and philosophy. Holding both a PhD in British literature, with a substantial list of publications on modern and postmodern fiction, and a PhD in philosophy, she fully acknowledges the indispensability of interdisciplinary thinking. Holda's trajectory of research leads from hermeneutics as an art of interpretation relating to literary texts, criticism, and theory, to studies of hermeneutics in philosophy that involve an in-depth discernment of its ontological status. As a result, the broadening of the hermeneutic horizon—hermeneutics as a mode of being—has, where Holda is concerned, entailed an opening up of new vistas. Her PhD dissertation in British literature, *Between Liberal Humanism and Postmodernist Fun: The Fiction of Malcolm Bradbury*, anchored deeply in postmodern approaches to philosophy, has provided her with an incentive to widen the scope of her scholarly enterprise and include previously unexplored facets of postmodernity.

Holda draws attention there to the gradual evolution of the author in question from his adherence to the precepts of liberal humanism to an appropriation of the tenets of postmodern philosophy. With a penchant for investigating the unfixed and fluid nature of subjectivity, Holda argues that the realist mode of expression, reflective of humanist notions of transcendent selfhood, originality, and universalism, gives way to the discontinuity and disruption of language, incongruity, and multiplicity, evocative of the postmodern prioritization of surface over depth, and plurality over singularity. With a great deal of attention paid to postmodern culture, expressive of a non-traditional conceptualization of subjectivity, Holda pinpoints Bradbury's interest in self-reflexivity, the hybridization of genres, metafictional devices, intertextual echoes, parody, humor, and irony,

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as bespeaking a departure from mimetic representation and a celebration of postmodern plurivocity and equivocality.

One thing undoubtedly confirmed by Holda's *Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject* is her involvement in comparative studies of a kind that are concerned with the affinities between philosophy, cultural phenomena, and literature. She extends the ambit of previously tackled postmodern problematics to an in-depth study of postmodern philosophy, within the nucleus of which lie works by such icons of contemporary thought as Jean Baudrillard, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson. Her research into postmodern philosophy, as reflected in the present publication, embraces new facets of the aforementioned philosophies. Her versatile conceptualizations of subjectivity and the downplaying of the metaphysics of the self in the postmodern milieu, discussed with reference to the relevant philosophers, are augmented by the inclusion of an examination of Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self," as well as other concepts of his that relate to the postmodern construction of the self.

With her carefully thought out decision to pursue her research interests in philosophy even while concomitantly maintaining a full devotion to literary studies, Holda shows the perspicacity of her twofold scholarly allegiance: literature and philosophy, substantiated by her invaluable complementary research accomplished successfully in both disciplines. *Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Death of the Subject* demonstrates clearly that the author is ready to face remarkably complex challenges and offer valuable insights regarding the hermeneutics of the self and postmodernity. It is a demonstration of true courage on the part of the writer that she allows Ricœur's main arguments to speak for themselves across all 174 pages. The book is 191 pages long, including 13 pages of bibliography, and is organized into three chapters. The introduction (11–20) situates Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self within the wider horizon of postmodern thought by presenting it as "an appealing alternative to the proclaimed demise of the human subject" (20).

In her book, Holda elaborates on the efficacy of Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics in recuperating the human "self" in the age of the "death of the subject." She argues that via the hermeneutics of the self, and especially his cutting-edge dialectics of identity—*idem* and *ipse* identity—which accounts for the identification of the self as it changes in time, Ricœur combats the postmodern disparaging of the human self. Ricœur upholds human subjectivity by deploying an extensive theory of interpretation which relies upon the analysis of discourse, metaphor, and symbol.

Such an art of interpretation, in fact, speaks for a clear belonging together (*Zusammengehörigkeit*) of theory and practice. She asserts that Ricœur, in recognizing the wellspring of human subjectivity in certain unchanging features—i.e. the voice of conscience, the body which belongs to me but is also an object in the world, and the call of the Other—discloses how the self undergoes a process of self-recognition.

Holda engages the reader in a discussion of Ricœur's conceptualization of human subjectivity in the light of the inadequacy of postmodern proposals regarding the decentered subject. She presents with exhaustive thoroughness Ricœur's argument to the effect that human life can prove intelligible once the story of the life in question has been actually told. It is the narrative of one's life that constructs one's identity. Human responsiveness to others causes the narrative of one's life to become a coherent unity. Explicating the creative, dynamic, and changing aspect of identity, Ricœur employs the expressions *concordia discors* and *discordia concors*, which convey the movement from a discordant and often highly entangled collection of elements within the narrative of one's life toward the formation of a cohesive life story, expressed in a narrative identity. A faithful response, or a failure to respond, constitutes an ethical, evaluative force in our lives. What is decisive here is that the ethical is not added to human action: to be a human being means to be an ethical being. Ethics is inseparable from ontology. With reference to Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and the polyphony of human speech (111–2), Holda recognizes the intrinsically interlocking character of utterance and response.

Revisiting Bakhtin's theory as it relates to Ricœur's notion of subjectivity, Holda reminds us that utterance is always addressed to someone and invites an answer (*Wort / Ant-wort*). It is the speaker's relation to Otherness which creates an utterance. Bakhtin's notion of "answerability," as well as his understanding of discourse as fundamentally dialogical and thus something inseparable from history, place, or community, hang together well with Ricœur's elucidation of answerability to the Other and narrative identity. The dynamic character of Ricœurian narrative identity coalesces with the dynamic nature of Bakhtin's notion of language. The story of one's life participates in the stories of others horizontally: it is part of the story of our contemporaries, but is also interwoven with antecedent stories and anticipates the stories of those yet to come. As a result, one's identity undergoes a dynamic process of alteration. Holda pinpoints the intersection of Ricœurian narrative identity with Bakhtin's recognition of the polyphonic nature of speech, where these are inherently interrelating and bespeak, respectively, the philosophical and the linguistic aspects of

a phenomenological vision, accounting as they do for the intelligibility of selfhood itself when this is construed in a marked sense as both vulnerable and context-dependent, and as conveyed by means of language with its essentially dialogical contextuality.

The three parts of the book guide the reader through, respectively, Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics, postmodern philosophical approaches to the death of the subject, and Ricœur's reclaiming of human subjectivity. Offering an elaborate study of the main precepts of Ricœur's notion of subjectivity while allowing it to confront the "death of the subject," the book manages to show that through his hermeneutics of the self, Ricœur proposes a convincing defense of the human subject. The hermeneutics of the self, he adduces, is predicated on the dialectics of the self: oneself as the Other, the voice of conscience, *Gewissen*—the second Other, one's body which belongs to the self and at the same time is an object in the world. According to Ricœur, these elements are invariable constituents of human subjectivity. Holda identifies Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self as an attempt to recuperate the self in a time of its claimed absence, dissolution, or "death." The emphasis is placed upon explicating the notion of the death of the subject as being expressive of the massive uncertainty enveloping the human subject, and of the manifold attempts to decenter or situate it. The doubt shrouding the human subject in its radical form threatens the subject's eradication. As a critique of postmodern proposals concerning subjectivity, her book makes clear that Ricœur contests the notion of the "death" of the subject with efficacy, proposing plausible ways to recuperate it. It is thus appropriate that *Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Death of the Subject* furnishes a salient voice amidst current discussions seeking to refashion and reorient our thinking about human subjectivity. It offers a hermeneutic reading of Ricœur that provides a very close examination of "the subject who is vulnerable, whose vulnerability is a constitutive trait of consciousness, and who is bound to bodily experience" (11).

Holda focuses on Ricœur's state-of-the-art notion of narrative identity—of the dialectics of identity, of *idem* and *ipse* identity—through which he grasps both the constancy and the changeable element of identity. Following Ricœur's theorization of human subjectivity, the book revolves around such weighty aspects of his hermeneutics of the self as the reflecting subject, the interpreter of human action, the capable subject, *l'homme capable*, *l'homme agissant*, and the fallibility, vulnerability and responsibility of the subject, to name the most important ones.

The three parts of the book address the problematic expressed in its title. The first part, "Paul Ricœur's Philosophical Hermeneutics" (21–48)

introduces the reader to philosophical hermeneutics and the “hermeneutic circle.” In its central section, the author delineates the specificity of Ricœur’s hermeneutics, in the sense of its two significant traits: textual hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Discussing fundamental aspects of Ricœur’s hermeneutics, this part provides a firm footing for the further elaboration of his hermeneutic discoveries that follows later: i.e. his recuperation of the self in the light of the deconstructive forces of contemporary continental philosophy, as spelled out in the third part.

The book’s first part delineates Ricœur’s deployment of discourse, distance, metaphor, and symbol, which are constitutive of his textual hermeneutics—i.e. his theory of interpretation (21–48). While adducing a meticulous description of Ricœur’s use of the aforementioned elements of textual interpretation, this part draws attention to the ways in which Ricœur builds his theory of text and interpretation to produce a workable explanation of the crux of human subjectivity. Hołda pinpoints Ricœur’s treatment of narrative and narrative structure: the threefold *mimesis* as the pivot of his hermeneutics of the self. This includes a discussion of a vital trait of Ricœur’s hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of suspicion. In raising this aspect of Ricœur’s philosophy the author without doubt reveals an understanding of the import of the hermeneutics of suspicion as a significant link with the postmodern theorizing of subjectivity and associated declarations of skepticism—an angle from which one may analyze both the postmodern crisis of the subject, and Ricœur’s recuperation of it. Ricœur’s hermeneutics of suspicion involves a discussion of the manifold displacements and new articulations of the subject in the light of psychoanalysis (“the requirements of the unconscious mind, the hidden fantasies and instincts accounted for in psychoanalysis, provide a possibility of the dispossession and a renewed constitution of the subject,” 41), structuralism, and poststructuralism. By showing an awareness of the impact of the linguistic turn on Ricœur’s philosophy, Hołda underlines the fact that Ricœur takes full cognizance of the aleatory nature of language, its arbitrariness and polyvalence of meaning—something which ineluctably generates novel findings with regard to the language of metaphor and symbol, and the very essence of his proposal concerning the dialectical nature of human subjectivity.

The second part, “The Postmodern Predicament: An Absence of the Self” (49–107), offers an involving presentation of the death of the subject, which the author dubs “the postmodern dilemma.” It discusses various postmodern philosophical positions as these relate to the announcing of the dissolution of the subject. This exceptionally popular notion has received a variety of

expressions, and in order to examine this problematic Holda selects four French thinkers, all of them Ricœur's contemporaries: Jean Baudrillard, Jean Francois Lyotard, Michael Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Deeming them to be advocates of uncertainty concerning the subject, she presents these philosophers as arguing effectively against the autonomous individual human subject, the univocality of truth, and claims to objectivity. This second part focuses on the deconstruction of an unproblematic understanding of the self as an innate entity, the postmodern refutation of metaphysics, the poststructuralist insistence on the arbitrariness of language, and the pervasive undermining of the universality of truth and ethical values.

In the four subsections of the second part, Holda raises detailed queries in relation to the central problematic of the postmodern predicament of the "death" of the subject. These delineate various aspects of the issue in question: the fragmentation and incongruity of human existence and the identity crisis entwined with it, and the incredulity displayed towards a unified, "solid" self. This part also touches upon the relationship between the predominant tenets of postmodernism and relativism, and the place of ethics and subjectivity in relation to these, while testifying to the necessity of tackling the problematics of memory, history, and historiography in postmodernism. The author ascertains the import of the pervasive plurality and discontinuity of memory as record, as articulated in postmodern philosophies, together with the inextricable interconnectedness of history and subjectivity: "The significant interest in the potentially multifarious renderings of the past is observable as a characteristic feature of postmodernity, but it is also rooted in the hermeneutic endeavor—the unearthing of meaning and interpretation" (103).

The argumentation of the book's second part begins by recurring to Lyotard's theory of the loss of faith in grand narratives. Holda draws attention to the impact of Lyotard's pointing to the postmodern disbelief in metanarratives but, equally importantly, she concentrates on another aspect of his theory, the assertion of the primacy of small narratives, the "regional" explanations of phenomena, and the significance of narrative as a device for explicating human existence, shared by Ricœur and other contemporary theories which she also touches upon. Furthermore, she discusses the ubiquitous sense of fragmentation and incoherence of human existence, the loss of univocal truth highlighted by Foucault, and Baudrillard's insistence on the impossibility of the "real." She concentrates on the various ways in which the traditional notion of the unified subject is subverted in the philosophies of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida. Thus, beginning her reasoning from Lyotard's distrust of grand narratives,

Holda moves on to an explication of the impact of Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra on the theorizing of subjectivity, the destabilization of the traditional sense of causality and continuity, the overwhelming power of the world of objects, the incessant immersion of the subject in a highly virtualized reality, hyper-reality, or, in a word, the upgrading of the object to the detriment of the subject. The author stresses the fact that Baudrillard points to a possible extension of simulacra from objects to humans: the real threat of having only copies and no originals.

Passing onto Foucault's conceptualization of the human subject, the second part of the book examines one particular facet of his philosophy: the theory of technologies of the self. Holda's presentation of Foucault's thought relating to subjectivity seems to be restricted to one specific trait connected with his re-addressing of the topic of the Cartesian *Cogito*, and in this respect her selection of that issue seems to have been well thought out. The concentration on this aspect at the expense of others, such as the interlacing character of subjectivity and power, or the interconnectedness of subjectivity and sexuality, comes across as convincing. Holda argues that Foucault's notion of the subject can be nailed down to his main contention: namely, the subject's constructedness. Foucault develops a theory of the historically and socially determined subject by insisting on self-formation or self-creation. However, for him, the subject is determined by forces of an external nature: the outside rectifies the self.

In the subsequent section of the second part, Holda proffers a discussion of Derrida's situating of the subject, in which she shows that his alleged eradication of the subject is not a conviction that can be backed up by the extant scholarship on Derrida's writings. Nevertheless, it is Derrida's decentering of the subject, as she makes clear, that bespeaks his understanding of human subjectivity, and contributes to the poststructuralist distrust of a finished, unified, "solid" self. Holda focuses on *différance* and its importance in Derrida's theorizing of the subject.

The last two subsections of the second part supplement the ideas considered earlier in interesting ways, but also tackle issues of importance in their own right. The penultimate subsection (92–96) deals with the problematic of postmodern ethics and subjectivity, whereas the final one concerns the intersections between memory, history, historiography, and subjectivity. Holda ambitiously attempts to do justice to the link between the discontinuity and plurivocity of historical accounts and human subjectivity. It must be stressed here that the vantage point from which she discusses the proponents of the dissolution of the subject in postmodern French thought is one that has been conscientiously chosen. The territory associated with

the issue is vast, and a discussion of it from all of the many possible and highly divergent angles available would far exceed the limits of a single publication. Thus, her ambitiousness is qualified by due awareness of the need for a selective approach to the issues under consideration.

This reflection on the postmodern predicament, in the sense of the absence of the subject, is followed in the book's third part by a presentation of Ricœur's attempt to revalidate the human subject: "Ricœur's Attempt to Recuperate Subjectivity via the Philosophical Hermeneutics" (109–55). This is the crux of the book, and manifests Holda's skill in rendering the analyzed material in a punctilious and methodical way. In terms of structure and content, each subsection offers a mirror image of the issues tackled in the second part, and so the author correspondingly initiates her argumentation by demonstrating that via the hermeneutic model of the narrative coherence of life, Ricœur contests the postmodern avowal of incongruity and fragmentation. According to Ricœur, narrative provides a possibility for making sense of a human existence: one's life becomes intelligible once the story of it is told. The dispersed and displaced "elements" of the story of one's life become comprehensible, the narrative bestows cohesion on an otherwise incomprehensible string of events.

Furthermore, and more essentially, Holda ascertains that the irreplaceable role of narrative in generating meaning inspires Ricœur to develop an ingenious concept of narrative identity. She maintains that via the dialectics of *idem* and *ipse* identity, Ricœur proposes a state-of-the-art solution to the impasse with regard to reconciling the innateness of the self, as an unalterable constituent, with the change that the self undergoes over time. As she notes, this point is of crucial importance in the context of the postmodern claim of the subject's constructedness by outside forces. Ricœur accentuates the dynamics of identity. For him, the subject is not a finished one: the processual aspect is of great significance. However, in the context of his proposal Ricœur holds on to those invariable constituents of the self that do not contradict, but rather accord with, the possible changes the subject may undergo. The elucidation of *idem* and *ipse* identity leads to a discussion of the ethical dimension of Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self, of such issues as the demand of the Other, responsibility, "mutual vulnerability," and indebtedness (128–42).

Holda claims that by means of a "little ethics," Ricœur arrives at the possibility of recuperating the self. According to him, the recognition of myself as a subject occurs with, and is inextricably entwined with, the mutuality of recognition: the self's response to the Other is constitutive of identity. It is the relationship of the self to the Other that is the pivot of Ricœur's mature



hermeneutics of the self. The inclusion of issues such as the mutuality of vulnerability and indebtedness means that Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self is not an illusory theory in the vein of postmodern vacillating or dissolving contours of subjectivity, but rather a philosophy rooted in praxis, drawing extensively on the tradition of phronetic wisdom. She juxtaposes the consequential interconnection between memory, history, and subjectivity in postmodernism with Ricœur's reflection on the interweaving aspects of memory, history, recognition, and reconciliation. The last subsection of the third part identifies the recuperative power of memory and forgetting in relation to subjectivity (142–52).

Faithfully adhering to her guiding thread in the form of the clash between Ricœur's notion of subjectivity and the postmodern claim of the death of the subject, Holda demonstrates effectively how Ricœur contests postmodern tenets and re-articulations of Descartes' *Cogito*. Ricœur holds to the possibility of arriving at truth: in other words, he maintains the certitude of truth, the universality of ethical values, and the innate nature of subjectivity, but does not subscribe to the humanist notion of a finished subject. It must be stressed that Ricœur's notion of the human subject is more complex than that propounded by the traditional humanist model. In a time of doubt that envelops the "presence" of the subject, Ricœur's recuperation of the subject manifests the redeeming force of philosophical hermeneutics.

In her concluding remarks (157–74), Holda stresses her argument ascribing a reductionist approach to the postmodern French thinkers she has been discussing, putting this in opposition to Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self, as well as emphasizing the disparity between the fundamental premises of their respective philosophies and the contrast between the rudimentary question posed by Ricœur in the form "Who am I?" and that posed by postmodernist philosophers, "What am I?" She isolates the latter question as a basis for the impossibility of arriving at a convincing and authentic proposal regarding human subjectivity, viewing the severance of postmodern thought from metaphysics as the source of an impasse when it comes to producing a feasible philosophy of the human subject: "Our point of interest was the theories whose predominant feature was an attempt to erode the fundamental stability of the subject, to problematize the essential, the unproblematic" (173). Contrasting Ricœur's notion of subjectivity with the proclaimed absence of the subject, she identifies the former as a cogent, all-embracing philosophy, entrenched on the one hand in the tradition of metaphysics, and demonstrating on the other an exceptional openness to the recent findings of poststructuralism and the linguistic turn. In shedding

light on the affinities between Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics and selected proponents of postmodern philosophy, she effectively underlines self-creation as an aspect discernible in, and deployed by, both the former and the latter, although differently understood in each case. Further, she acknowledges Ricœur's notion of subjectivity as a reverberating theory, both seeking and granting an answer to the question "Who am I?" in a time of equivocality, vagueness, and plurality.

Entering into a conversation on troubled matters pertaining to the death of the subject in postmodern philosophy, Hołda fruitfully addresses issues of narrative identity, which seem to be crucial for multiple philosophical discourses relating to the understanding of human beings in the world. Making a compelling case for the importance of Ricœur's recuperation of human subjectivity, Hołda's *Paul Ricœur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject* proffers a quite particular perspective: a commitment to hermeneutics as a mode of being accompanied by a possible occlusion of those angles less involving for the author. However, as there is no absolutely authoritative reading of anything, writing will always be situated within the horizon of an essential incompleteness. In Ricœur's words:

Under history, memory and forgetting.

Under memory and forgetting, life.

But writing a life is another story.<sup>4</sup>

This incompleteness is a powerful invitation to rethink again and again everything that calls for thinking. That is the true vocation of a philosopher. Only thus can we answer the call for thinking.

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4. Incompletion. Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. David Pellauer and Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 506.