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MAŁGORZATA HOŁDA, *PAUL RICOEUR'S CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVITY AND THE POSTMODERN CLAIM OF THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT*, IGNATIANUM UNIVERSITY PRESS, CRACOW 2018, PP. 191.

Paul Ricoeur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject, is comprised of a brief introduction, followed by three parts, each consisting of several well-defined subsections, and a concluding section. Rather than attempting to faithfully summarize Holda's argument, I will offer some reflections on what I take to be the most significant aspects of her contribution to the field.

Part One, *Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics*, lays out the basic features of Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach. But it is not merely one more general survey of Ricoeur's philosophical project. Rather, Holda's analysis here anticipates the more ambitious aims of her project concerning selfhood and the status of the subject in contemporary philosophy. Situating Ricoeur's oeuvre within the tradition of French reflexive philosophy, Holda argues that Ricoeur offers a notion of selfhood and self-understanding that is uniquely attuned to the self's fundamental vulnerabilities – vulnerabilities that stem from our embodiment, from our historicity, and from the manner in which self-reflection is always already mediated by language, symbols, etc. As Holda writes: "By locating his hermeneutics in language, in words which are of special symbolic importance, Ricoeur offsets an immensely significant turn in his phenomenological hermeneutics and philosophy of reflection; from this position stems an increasing maturation of his concept of human subjectivity." (p. 44)

Instead of viewing features of human fragility as an obstruction or impediment to selfhood, Ricoeur shows that vulnerability is constitutive of selfhood as such, and that self-understanding is

always – indeed inextricably – a risky matter. On this score, Holda’s characterization of Ricoeur’s rehabilitation of the subject as a narrative self is reminiscent of Gadamer’s rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice in light of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*): what seemed to certain enlightenment thinkers to be a barrier to understanding (whether this involves understanding texts or understanding the self as text) turns out to be the condition *sine qua non* of all genuine understanding. Our historicity and our situatedness are the very thing that makes understanding possible in the first place. And just as the presence of some historically constituted ‘pre-understanding’ is the condition of possibility for understanding as such, so too fragility and vulnerability (an exposure to suspicion and critique) turn out to be constitutive features of selfhood as such. This qualification, as Holda’s analysis suggests, places Ricoeur’s notion of narrative selfhood at arm’s length from two polar extremes: on the one hand, the pretension of the so-called Cartesian subject (i.e., the transcendental subject that would claim immediate or absolute self-awareness) is shown to be problematic, if not wholly illusory; on the other hand, the post-modern penchant for eliminating the subject altogether (or reducing the subject to *nothing but* illusion, to put the matter crudely) is equally problematic, since it mistakenly identifies the fragility of the subject as an indication of its demise rather than a constitutive feature of selfhood itself.

Holda characterizes the innovative dimension of Ricoeur’s thought as a “double allegiance,” connecting it to better known aspects of his work (such as the dialectic between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of understanding), and demonstrating how this underlying issue surfaces in his engagement with various figures and streams of thought, including Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and Habermas’ critical theory. Contrary to Gadamer’s hermeneutics of understanding and Habermas’ hermeneutic stance, which is in some sense a hermeneutics of suspicion, “readiness to suspect

and the readiness to understand equally importantly comprise his [Ricoeur's] hermeneutic sensibility." (p. 12)

Part Two, *The Postmodern Predicament – an absence of 'self'*, offers an impressively ambitious attempt to weave the principle threads of postmodern critique of the subject into a single, cohesive narrative that is as attentive to the historical origins of the modern conceptions of the *Cogito* as it is to the details and nuances that differentiate contemporary efforts to undo and rework that traditional conception. Holda contends that "contemporary thinkers respond to the Cartesian *Cogito* in fashions which crisscross, diverge, or complete one another in an attempt to account for the human paradox – the opacity of the subject." (p. 51) She explores here the various ways in which human subjectivity is re-addressed and re-constituted. She further identifies the sense of a critical moment shared by Ricoeur and other French thinkers in rendering human subjectivity and avers that "identity is regarded no longer as something given, but as shaped, steadfastly construed." (p. 106) As we come to discover in Part Three, Holda's primary assertion is that Ricoeur's reformulation of the human subject has hermeneutic, ontological, and ultimately ethical/moral advantages over those of his postmodern (and mostly French) contemporaries.

Indeed, one of the virtues of Holda's book has to do with the angle or perspective from which she approaches Ricoeur, drawing him into dialogue with a current of twentieth-century French thought that is at once immediately related to his own intellectual development and yet all too often neglected in the secondary literature on his work. This speaks, in part, to Ricoeur's rather awkward standing within what might be called the French philosophical canon which, in Holda's view, would include Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, among others.

Ricoeur's insistence on clarity and rigor, his relative impatience for profound sounding obscurities, his eagerness to learn from analytic modes of philosophical discourse which dominated the Anglo-American academy, and his favorable attitude toward both religious

and enlightenment traditions must have made him stand out like a sore thumb on Paris' intellectual stage in the 1960s and 1970s (and it is easy to imagine that this must have played some part in his decision to accept a position at the University of Chicago). But despite Ricoeur's oddball status among the theorists Holda broadly characterizes as "postmodernist," there can be no doubt that the philosophical concerns and sensibilities of this group determined the contours of Ricoeur's philosophical world, and thus exerted an incredible influence upon the topics and issues his work addressed. So, aside from offering a virtually exhaustive study of contemporary (French) critiques of the Cartesian subject, this chapter's contribution to Ricoeur scholarship is also quite significant.

The book's third part, *Ricoeur's attempt to recuperate subjectivity via the philosophical hermeneutics*, demonstrates how Ricoeur's theory of narrative selfhood "recuperates" a notion of the subject which can "survive" the various critiques outlined in the previous part of the book. Holda argues that Ricoeur's hermeneutics represents a "counterpoint [to] both the epistemological and the axiological crisis in the age of postmodernism." (p. 109) Holda, quite rightly, presents the problem in terms of the role of language plays in molding the self. Therefore, her analysis of Ricoeur's oeuvre and his explication of subjecthood in particular, is predicated on the linguistic aspect of human experience. She writes: "The discovery of who one is happens in language and via language, it is inscribed in its essential dialogic nature." (p. 112) The decision to launch her analysis by way of a reading of Bakhtin's "theory of speech as a theoretical stance" is inasmuch perplexing as intriguing. In the final analysis, the novelty of this approach does bear interesting fruit, and so her decision (while perhaps idiosyncratic) is not, in the end, unjustified.

Over the course of Part Three, Holda addresses the core aspects of Ricoeur's theory of self-narrativity and the three-fold *mimesis*, the dialectics of self and other, the relation between *ipse* and *idem* identity, etc. She also considers the ethical/moral implications of this

notion of selfhood in important subsections organized around such themes as the “demand of the other,” *phronesis*, mutual recognition, the ethics of individual and collective memory, and embodiment. She concludes that “His [Ricoeur’s] retrieval of the subject involves a reflection on memory, forgiveness, and reconciliation as bespeaking the self’s mutual concern for the good of the self and the good of the Other.” (p. 152)

Throughout the book, Holda tends to provide more thorough reference information for her secondary sources than she does for her primary sources (i.e., Ricoeur’s texts). One could argue that this is a sensible move, since readers are less likely to be familiar with, say, Erfani’s interpretation of Ricoeur than they are with the original texts by Ricoeur himself. So Holda’s book serves as a fine introduction to some of the lesser-known secondary literature. However, there are points where providing a more direct indication of the specific primary sources could prove valuable and could clear up any concerns readers might have with her more controversial and innovative interpretations. In the end, Holda is at her best when working through specific texts, drawing out their subtle implications and arranging them in ways that speak directly to her core concern—the postmodern critique of the subject. In the course of this interpretive work, she draws an ambitiously wide range of philosophical perspectives into dialogue with each other—and this is an ambition I applaud.

Overall, Holda’s defense of Ricoeur’s so-called philosophy of subjectivity as a viable and coherent alternative to the postmodern critique of the subject is itself a valuable addition to our understanding of the topic, as well as to our understanding of the place of Ricoeur within late twentieth-century French philosophy.

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DOI: 10.21697/spch.2019.55.1.31