

Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. xvii + 274 pp.

The concept of alienation has suffered more than most from the vagaries of fashion. Until the 1960s, it played a central role in critical social thought, but since then discussion of it has almost vanished. Jaeggi's aim in this important work is to "resurrect" it as an indispensable tool for social criticism (xx). She argues that it describes pervasive social and moral problems not comprehended by the ideas of justice and rights that have dominated political philosophy since Rawls in the analytic tradition; and it need not rest on an essentialist conception of the self, as has been standardly charged by thinkers since Althusser in the continental tradition.

As Jaeggi shows, the concept can be traced back to Rousseau and Hegel, but after Hegel, two distinct lines of thought develop. On the one hand, Marx (particularly in his early works) sees alienation as a social and economic phenomenon, whereas writers like Kierkegaard and Heidegger treat it as an individual condition of inauthenticity. Jaeggi claims to be "reconstructing the concept of alienation" from these sources (11). However, as she acknowledges, these different ideas of alienation have "different conceptual foundations" (11), and it is doubtful that she has a single concept in her sights. In any case, her focus is almost entirely on moral questions about the self and authenticity; there is hardly any discussion of Marx, or of social or economic matters.

For Jaeggi, alienation concerns the ways in which we appropriate ourselves and the world (including our relations with others), and how we fail to do so. It manifests itself as a loss of meaning and as powerlessness. These two aspects, Jaeggi argues, are connected. "Only a world that I can make 'my own'—only a world that I can identify with (by appropriating it)—is a world in which I can act in a self-determined manner" (23). However, alienation is not a purely negative condition. It is not the mere absence of relation but rather a "deficient" relation, a "relation of relationlessness" (1). It is distinct from heteronomy in that the alienated self is not merely passive; it is perpetrator as well as victim.

Alienation is a concept that has normative implications. Jaeggi argues that these can be specified without requiring an "Archimedean point" of essential needs or human nature. They are "immanent," but they do not imply the restoration of a lost unity à la Hegel. They can be spelled out in "procedural" terms (40), in terms of how we act rather than what we do.

The central section of the book elaborates and develops this account through a number of case studies of different kinds of everyday alienation, some drawn from Jaeggi's own experience, others taken from literature.

There is the case of a university teacher who gradually settles into a routine suburban life that develops a dynamic of its own and comes to feel

increasingly alien to him. This leads to a discussion of social roles (68ff.). These are often taken to be paradigms of alienation for the way in which they constrain and restrict us. Jaeggi argues, however, that the self is essentially social; roles are constitutive of it and inescapable. Alienation can be overcome only in and through social roles, not by somehow escaping from them. “The problem is not *that* we play roles, but *how* we play them” (92).

There is an illuminating and well-argued discussion of the puzzling notion of inauthenticity, of not being true to oneself. Jaeggi argues that this familiar phenomenon cannot be understood as a division of the self into “true” and “false” parts. Rather it must be seen as a failure to develop a determinate self.

Self-alienation also manifests itself when one experiences one’s own desires and impulses as alien and unwanted. Jaeggi cites the example of a feminist whose desires conflict with her self-conception, and she discusses this interestingly with reference to the ideas of Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor.

Another form that alienation can take is excessive indifference and detachment. In this connection, she criticizes stoicism as a “deficient form of freedom” (147) for seeking to achieve freedom by cultivating withdrawal and disengagement from the world. Self and world are necessarily connected. These case studies enormously enrich the more abstract philosophical and conceptual arguments of the book.

Jaeggi returns to these in the final part of the book. On the one hand, she rejects the widespread view that the concept of alienation must rest on a notion of a human “essence,” though she acknowledges the possibility that there is a natural basis of presocial instincts and impulses (79–80). The self is social all the way down, she insists, and the concepts of alienation and inauthenticity must be worked out on that basis.

On the other hand, she also rejects the Nietzschean idea of the self as a “work of art” and the celebration of “multiple identities,” which has been so fashionable recently among “postmodernists” (185ff.). Again, her conceptual arguments are illuminated by careful discussion of case studies by Sherry Turkle of the use of multiple identities on the Internet, showing that they do not support Turkle’s claims that they involve entirely new forms of self and authenticity (190ff.).

Jaeggi is a product of the continental tradition. Her point of view is profoundly influenced by the Frankfurt School tradition and Heidegger. However, she is also thoroughly at home with recent analytical philosophy, and she develops her position mainly through detailed engagement with writers in the analytic tradition, including Frankfurt, Taylor, Thomas Nagel, Richard Rorty, and others. A striking and valuable feature of book is the way it brings figures from these two, often so separate, traditions into dialogue with each other, and moves effortlessly between them. Moreover, apprehensive English-speaking readers can be assured that the book is clearly written and well argued.

A main view defended in the book is that self-relation and relation to the world (including others) go necessarily together and are “equiprimordial” (37). Alienation is therefore a social condition that can be overcome only by appropriating a shared life, not by abstracting oneself from it. Jaeggi’s initial intention, it seems, was to investigate the social causes of alienation. The original German publication (2005) included the subtitle “Zur Aktualität eines sozial-philosophischen Problems” (“A Contemporary Problem of Social Philosophy”). Wisely, this has been omitted from the English translation. The idea that there are social causes of alienation is mentioned only in passing, at the very end of the book. “The problem of alienation leads us to the question of the nature of our relations to social practices and institutions and to an account of the demands we should make on them as the social conditions that make self-determination and self-realization possible” (219). But answers to these questions are postponed to another time.

It may be that she provides them elsewhere; but I doubt it. Her criteria for self-determination and self-realization (the opposites of alienation) are purely formal and internal to the self. She describes them only vaguely and briefly in terms of the “coherence” (121ff.) and “openness” (126f.) of the self. How could external social conditions ever constrain features of the self such as these? Is it not possible to act “coherently” and be “open” in any sort of society whatever?

These are major problems for the attempt to use this sort of theory of alienation for the purposes of social criticism, as Jaeggi wishes (xx); but that is not the topic of the present book, and it would be churlish to dwell upon it here. For the book discusses the ideas that it deals with in enormously illuminating and thought-provoking ways and constitutes a real advance in thinking about ethical questions of the self and authenticity.

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Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*.

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From time to time, we are fortunate enough to be given a book that promises to transform our understanding of central aspects of a philosopher’s thought. I have in mind, among works on early modern philosophers, such acclaimed