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Oliver Davis and Colin Davis, eds., *Freedom and the Subject of Theory: Essays in Honour of Christina Howells*. Oxford: Legenda, 2019. xiii + 216 pp. £75.00 U.K. ISBN 978-1-781887-33-2.

Review by John Gillespie, Ulster University.

This collection comprises sixteen essays written in honour of Christina Howells by a group of leading scholars, all current or former colleagues or students. Oliver Davis and Colin Davis's introduction draws attention to Professor Howells's pioneering work, and to the presence of her abiding interests--imagination, freedom and commitment--in her first book, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*. "To read the work of Christina Howells is to enter a no-nonsense zone" (p. 2). Her second book, *Sartre and the Necessity of Freedom*, which comprehensively assesses the whole of Sartre's work, is rightly judged as still indispensable for the study of Sartre. However, Howells's research interests have also included later intellectual developments in France, including *French Woman Philosophers: A Contemporary Reader*, and Jacques Derrida, despite Derrida's scorn of Sartre, in *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics*. In the latter work, Howells contends, as cited by Davis and Davis: "Derrida still seems unwilling to acknowledge that Sartre is not merely a forerunner but a real originator of much of what Deconstruction has to say on the subject" (p. 4), a position elaborated in her essay on Derrida in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*. In *Mortal Subjects*, Howells shows the range of her scholarship in dealing with the interface of death and subjectivity in Sartre, Beauvoir, Ricoeur, Levinas, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, Nancy, and many others.

The editors claim, correctly, that her work is continued in this volume. The collection, based on a colloquium held in Venice in 2017, is in four parts, each reflecting the trajectory of Professor Howells's thought through her career, and preceded by Gary Aylesworth's contextualizing overview of the way in which the concept of the subject's autonomy has evolved from Kant, through German Idealism, to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. He traces the pattern of the temporalisation of the absolute, the gradual process by which theory has worked free of metaphysics and religion, linking this progression to the death of God in Hegel and, of course, Nietzsche. He sees that the latter's claim "is not an announcement of God's revelation coming into existence, but the declaration of an act that falls upon us as our own, or rather, an act we must make our own" (p. 19). In describing how the foundation of the subject is undermined, he also introduces what becomes the recurring theme of *qui perd gagne*, a key element of Howells's theoretical analysis: "a movement of thinking is driven by its own irresolution. By the logic of 'loser wins', this irresolution is the freedom of thinking as it wanders on its way, returning us ever anew to the question: 'who?'" (p. 21).

Part one, “Freedom and the Subject in Jean-Paul Sartre,” begins with Patrick Chambers’s essay, “Iterable Praxis: Theory and Sartre’s Concept of the Practico-inert.” Chambers’s use of metaphors of football matches, deforestation, and floods, helps explain inscription onto a material field of the practico-inert in reaction to human creativity which emerges as “a shifting and transformative quasi-totality” (p. 27). Chambers links the practico-inert to the Derridean concepts of iterability and *intérêt* and examines the emergence of the *homme-machine* and the fact that “it cannot support the free creative reorganization of the world that theory as we have approached it, requires” (pp. 34–35).

Marieke Mueller’s “Sartre and the (un-) Freedom of the Reading Subject” lucidly and meticulously traces the development of Sartre’s theory of the reader from *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* to *L’Idiot de la famille*, arguing that in the latter work, the reader is liberated from the author by “the ‘inventive’ component of the character’s trajectory” (p. 44). Her view is that, behind the technicalities of reading—Sartre’s framework of text, historical reader, and phenomenology of reading—“lies the uncomfortable question of freedom, sometimes in the most adverse of circumstances” (p. 46).

Sinan Richard’s chapter on “Sartre and Lacan: Reading *Qui Perd Gagne* alongside *Les Non-Dupes Errent*” uses the formula *qui perd gagne* for subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness* and links it to the theme of “Les non-dupes errant” in Lacan. The focus is mainly on Lacan, and involves a detailed explanation of the Symbolic Order and its operation (a preliminary familiarity with Lacan’s thought would be helpful). Richards contends that Lacan’s core thesis is that we are alone, lost to ourselves and unable to “understand even the most basic features of our existence” (p. 56) and that *qui perd gagne* is a form of self-deception: “A lie we tell ourselves to stave off the hopelessness inscribed in our human condition” (p. 57).

Part two, “Freedom and Necessity in Jacques Derrida,” opens with Paul Earlie on “Stylistic Liberties: Derrida, Rhetoric, Style.” Given that he is considering Anthony Kenny’s vigorous attacks on Derrida’s rhetoric, it is interesting that his examination of Derrida’s notorious use of language is clear, well-contextualised, and well-written. Commenting on Kenny’s criticism of Derrida’s early essay on Plato, “La Pharmacie de Platon,” enables him to consider the heart of Derrida’s rhetoric, using the ambiguity of *pharmakon* (“cure” or “poison” in Greek) to emphasise the syntactical play of Derrida’s non-hierarchical structures of meaning. His extensive consideration of philosophical rhetoric, particularly in Nietzsche, focuses on the question of its undecidability, rather than unfindability, but raises the question of just exactly what degree of meaning can ultimately be gleaned.

Seán Hand’s “Inoperative Governance, or the democracy to come: Jacques Derrida’s *Voyous: deux essais sur la raison*” studies this essay written soon after 9/11. The category of the “rogue state” is considered in relation to democracy, bringing the political into proximity with the undecidability of *différance* as the “non-determinative precondition for advent of the true democracy to come” (p. 83), no matter how ethically agonising that may be. The calling in question of “cosmopolitanism’s evocation and establishment of a universal world vocabulary, in the light of a Derridean notion of inoperative governance” (p. 86), to Hand, is clear. However, to the reader, the question remains, is this higher goal indeed higher, or achievable?

Part three considers “Freedom and the Subject in Contemporary Philosophy and Theory.” Ian Maclachlan, in “The Subject, Abandoned: Jean-Luc Nancy’s Spacing of Freedom,” meticulously

outlines Nancy's account of a fundamental existential freedom that transcends existence finitely, and elaborates the concepts of *espacement* and "sharing" as the singularity of individual freedom develops free relations with others. In discussing Nancy's view of time's initiality, "a temporality of interruptive, explosive instantaneity that is deliberately at odds with models of temporal linearity or duration" (p. 100), he contends that despite its intention, it has not escaped the metaphysical.

Ian James considers the same territory in "The Experience of Freedom Revisited," starting with Kant's influence on his thought. Freedom is central to pure reason, but for Nancy it is ungrounded existence; freedom is its own essence, and in its singular plurality, relational. James argues, plausibly, that Nancy's position is ontological, and, despite Kant, realist. In a fascinating move, he then compares Nancy's position with two scientific-theoretical realist ontologies. He examines Lee Smolin's challenge to widespread mathematical Platonism, maintaining "a fully relationist picture of the universe [where] every entity in the universe evolves dynamically in interaction with everything else" (p. 110). The truth is in the universe, not outside it. The emphasis is being "without substantive or metaphysical ground" (p. 111); the laws of nature are not eternal. Roger Penrose's views on quantum theory in his objective reduction theory and its relation to Schrödinger's mortally threatened cat are extensively elaborated, and shown to be analogous to Nancy's ontology of freedom. He argues that "gravitational effects have an impact on the collapse of quantum superpositions and do so *all the time*" (p. 113) and do not last for ever, being subject to decay. Therefore, two separate positions at the same time would resolve into one, irrespective of human observation.

In "Stiegler: The Freedom of Necessity," Martin Crowley considers human interrelation with technology in helpful and extensive detail, comparing Stiegler's approach fruitfully with Sartre's practico-inert. Stiegler is concerned to link agency and individuation with collective decision-making in adopting technical forms, balancing necessity and freedom.

Henry Dicks in "From the Deconstruction of the Subject to the Clarification of the Clearing: Heidegger, Sloterdijk and the Genesis of the Clearing," seeks to answer a question posed by Howells as to whether Heidegger has succeeded in going beyond Husserl and Nietzsche regarding the deconstruction of the subject. Following evolutionary theory, he examines Sloterdijk's paleo-anthropology and the theory of the genesis of the clearing, seeing language as the "house of being" (p. 137). In his "fantastic recreation of the clearing" (p. 137) he describes the process of domestication, through deforestation and the move to an open environment leading to co-ordinated behaviour and the development of language, thus clarifying the emergence of being through the clearing.

In "The Subject of Recognition in International Relations: Alex Honneth," Jeremy Ahearne considers Honneth's doubts regarding the application of his theory of "recognition" to international relations, and the difficulty of treating states as subjects. His study shows that Honneth's theories are of value in "embedding recognitive exchanges between states" (p. 150) and in the interplay between political leaders and their "agglomerated subjects," and that although some aspects fall outside his framework, it is helpful in identifying them.

Serge Trottein, in "Franking (and) the Subject of Theory," envisages a subject, through "franking," freeing itself from the history of subjectivity. Engaging again with *qui perd gagne*, he wrestles, wittily, with the weight the history of metaphysics, and of theory, places upon the

subject, wondering how one could liberate oneself from the framework of liberty that constitutes modernity. Moving etymologically from *franchise* to philately, and referencing Kant's aesthetics, he talks not of "freedom in the modern sense, but free play and simple philatelic reflexion, already postmodern, under the condition of not constantly reintroducing, reinjecting in it and re-subjecting it to regulation, finality, systematicity, and determination in general" (p. 160).

Part four, "Theorizing Pathologies and the Therapeutics of Freedom" takes a more practical look at the outworking of subjectivity and freedom. Marc Lafrance's excellent analysis, "Taking the Body Seriously: A Critical Synthesis of Christina Howells and Drew Leder," examines subjectivity in relation to bodily fragility, vulnerability and mortality, comparing Howells' *Mortal Subjects* and Drew Leder's *The Absent Body* with reference to Sartre, Beauvoir and especially Merleau-Ponty. For Howells, "[a] conceptual shorthand, *qui perd gagne* emphasizes the paradoxes of the human condition and how useful they are for helping us to understand the basic structures of subjectivity" (p. 166). A compassionate approach to subjectivity, missing in Sartre, is present in Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment and Beauvoir's sensitivity towards old age and dying. Lafrance emphasises the fact that the body affects our perception of the world, drawing attention to Leder's category of *dysappearance*, where suffering demands our attention because it requires something to be done. Lafrance strongly contends that any dualistic approach to body and mind is a misinterpretation of their relation.

Gerald Moore's "Philosophy and Other Addictions: On Use and Abuse in the History of Life" is a rich and challenging investigation of the evolution and effects of technology on the person, again referencing Stiegler. The focus is on addiction versus liberation, or autonomy versus automation; the extent to which technology takes subjectivity and freedom captive; technology as *pharmakon*, cure or poison. His excellent historical overview and presentation of the current socio-historical and technological context identify the dangers and changing nature of automation and the technologies of addiction, even literary ones, that has a profound resonance and applicability for our contemporary world. It helpfully points out the dangers of philosophy in this regard: "Like everything else...philosophy is pharmacological, both therapeutic and toxically interesting" (p. 186).

Jane Hiddleston's chapter, "Frantz Fanon: Freedom, Embodiment, and Cultural Expression," continues the emphasis on embodiment by considering the relation of the body as self-expression, bound up with language, a kind of language that influences language: "the body is for Merleau-Ponty as for Fanon the origin of human expression, not only of perception" (p. 195). She emphasises the fact that language begins with bodily movements, gestures, or breaths, and that we need to understand human expression in language as embodied. Again, a non-dualist approach. Her survey of Fanon's philosophical, poetic, and literary influences and her overview of his key works, especially *Peau noire, masques blancs*, show the pathos and the therapeutic nature of Fanon's anti-racist anti-colonial struggle. Suffering comes in again. Fanon maintains that "the intellectual needs to implicate his own body in the struggle and immerse himself in the lived suffering of the people" (p. 202). She ends with an optimistic assertion: "The literary imagination too, alongside political and psychiatric treatment, can accomplish the liberation and self-expression of the oppressed body" (p. 204).

Robert J. C. Young, in "Fanon and the Pathology of Freedom," considers the relation of Fanon's psychiatry to his anti-colonial efforts: "For Fanon, colonialism, like madness, could be accepted as a pathology of freedom" (p. 206). He outlines the influence of Henri Ey (rather than Lacan) on

Fanon's psychiatry, seeing "[p]sychiatry as the pathology of freedom" (p. 209). Madness is a deprivation of freedom, and Fanon's therapeutic aim was always to help his patients return to it.

This summary, necessarily limited, is unable fully to do justice to the arguments and the high standards of rigour, critical reflection and scholarship of this range of essays from leading experts in their fields. Their depth and richness repay rereading and considerable reflection. Although not encyclopaedic in its coverage, this extensive collection, of consistent quality, will give the attentive reader a very good sense of the nature and scope of contemporary theory. It is not an introductory volume, and would be of most benefit to those with some familiarity with Continental, especially French, philosophy. For those for whom French theory is viewed as daunting and complex, the communication of technical concepts is mainly clear, with relatively few meanders into obtuse abstraction, and there is plenty with which the specialist can significantly engage.

The overall focus on freedom and subjectivity is maintained throughout. The subject faces life and mortality in an Enlightenment context (so many pieces reference Kant), grappling with the exercise of freedom in the context of the Death of God (despite occasional reference to theology and religion), with the influence of Nietzsche clearly evident. The process of escape from the metaphysical, the foundationless nature of being, and the elusive role of language and meaning are often given focus by the theme of *qui perd gagne*, reflecting the paradoxes of the human condition. And, paradoxically, throughout there is a humanistic thread of political values linked to freedom and compassion, and opposed to human suffering, colonialism, racism, and political oppression.

There is much food for profitable discussion and debate in this excellent collection. It is a fitting tribute to an outstanding scholar of French philosophy whose influence is clear throughout its pages.

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