

BOOK REVIEW

David Kyuman Kim, *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 208 pp. Hbk. \$65.00. ISBN 0195319826.

Today, we can no longer appeal to the concept of freedom in ethics, politics, or religion. Anxiety about alienation has replaced delight in freedom, and the disenfranchisement of those marked by “difference” has further discredited freedom. In the contemporary world, we must turn from freedom to a new concept: “Agency is born from the absence of freedom” (142).

From this starting point, David Kyuman Kim explores the implications for ethics, politics, and religion of the concept of agency. Along the way, he addresses a range of hot-button issues, from subjectivity to modernity to cultivation of the self. In addition to sustained critical engagements with the work of Charles Taylor and Judith Butler, Kim invokes a range of theorists, from pragmatists to Romantics, from Max Weber to Stanley Cavell. Published in the American Academy of Religion’s “Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion” series, *Melancholic Freedom* is the revised version of Kim’s dissertation, directed by Cornel West (West’s provocative but opaque categories, such as “the tragicomic,” “the prophetic,” and “the Socratic,” make cameo appearances).

A sense of loss, which Kim describes as melancholia, inflects how both Taylor and Butler understand agency. Taylor’s genealogies of secularization and of alienated modern life show how women and men today have lost touch with the “constitutive goods” that provide a moral framework for their lives. Taylor’s critical project of examining this lost connection is complemented by his constructive project of pointing towards ways to get in touch with the moral frameworks which make possible our identities and our flourishing. Kim shows how Taylor locates agency in the way that human beings can link themselves to a vision of the good life (one link, Taylor suggests, involves the expressive, disclosive power of language which Kim associates with the sublime).

While for Taylor the loss that inflects agency has to do with a lost connection to constitutive goods, for Butler this loss has to do with the effects of “difference”—race, gender, sexuality, etc. Blacks, women, and homosexuals can only become subjects by accepting dominant social norms. These norms treat everyone as white, male, and heterosexual, resulting in a forced loss of difference. Like Taylor, Butler suggests ways to exercise agency in light of loss. We can take advantage of the inefficiency of norms, the way that they underdetermine our behavior, in order to put them in question through unconventional speech and action. For example, women can wear men’s clothing and homosexuals can call themselves “queers.”

Kim's exploration of the parallels between the work of Taylor and of Butler is the most powerful and convincing part of his book. Less convincing is Kim's claim that Taylor and Butler's understanding of agency has something to do with religion. He makes this claim in two related ways. First, he writes, "The religious imagination is the faculty that envisions and enables a willingness to risk conceiving of life chances and possibilities for the self under conditions in which these chances and possibilities are neither fully evident nor apparent" (7). Agency understood as melancholic must involve the religious imagination because the loss on which it is premised, whether that loss relates to secularization or to difference, makes it so that the possibilities of human action are no longer fully apparent. Second, Kim argues that Taylor and Butler's constructive accounts of agency suggest that they are committed to "human flourishing" beyond present conditions of purposeless and powerlessness—and that this is an essentially religious commitment. Without going into detail, it is difficult to comprehend how religious concepts deflated to this extent can still be called religious unless the word "religious" is simply being harnessed for its rhetorical force.

In the final chapter of the book, Kim develops his own conception of agency as a "vocation." A discussion of Weber on vocation allows Kim to introduce piety, commitment, and integrity as components of his account of agency, while also allowing him to continue standing between secular and religious vocabularies. In the book's closing pages, Kim associates himself with the melancholic account of agency that he has found in the work of Taylor and Butler, emphasizing the role of love in their work. Taylor urges us to return to love of the good; Butler urges us "to love openly and freely" (this is a puzzling and dissonant characterization of Butler's position). Agency as a vocation turns out to be about love, about aspiration, and about ideals.

Kim's primary ambition is to tweak the understanding of agency in theory. It remains unclear what, if any, implications this new understanding might have for practice—either for outsiders trying to understand religious or simply social practice or for insiders participating in such practice. At times it seems as though Kim is advocating (for insiders) the normative position that we ought to stop lamenting the loss of freedom and instead we must find ways to return to engagement in the social world. But, if this were the case, shouldn't Kim be talking not about melancholia but about mourning—where the former relates to interminable dwelling in loss and the latter relates to how we can return from loss to life (and is the subject of Gillian Rose's wonderful little book, not mentioned by Kim, *Mourning Becomes the Law*)?

What is most frustrating about *Melancholic Freedom* is that it extols the virtues of risk-taking, but it doesn't take risks. Kim fails to make the sort of penetrating but controversial claims that would be falsifiable, or even arguable. His account of agency proceeds by association rather than by analysis. For example, by putting a discussion of Weber's writings on vocation next to a discussion of Taylor and Butler's writings, he concludes that agency must have something to do with commitment and piety, but he doesn't examine what could be meant by "commitment" or "piety," or how these could be related in any substantive way

to what Taylor and Butler say (although surely he is correct that they are related, being correct is not enough). Despite his professed allegiance to Socrates, Kim often seems closer to the Sophists, putting together words that sound agreeable to the ear without engaging in the difficult intellectual labor of investigating the meaning of concepts.

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