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#### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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*The Logic of Estrangement: Reason in an Unreasonable Form*, Julius Sensat. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xi + 213 pages.

Reification describes any relation between persons that assumes the form of a social relation between things. Under religious reification – or ‘fetishism’ – the relevant ‘thing’ is the content of human thought. Very roughly, a separation between humanity and its religious thought-contents allows the latter to obstruct the self-determination of the former. In the case of economic reification, by contrast, the relevant ‘thing’ is material production: the production process somehow separates itself from humanity, which allows the former to obstruct the self-determination of the latter.

Suppose the cook, who needs to eat, owns no cooking instruments. She must, therefore, sell the only commodity she owns, her cooking ability, to the owner of the cookshop, in return for money that will buy her food. There is a separation here between humanity and its productive power: being subject to the cookshop owner, the cook cannot cook, even when she is hungry, but must cook, even when she is not. Insofar as this separation obstructs the cook’s self-determination, it involves economic reification.

Is the idea of economic reification plausible, even coherent? The shores of critical theory are strewn with the shipwrecks of those brave souls who tried, and failed, to navigate the treacherous waters surrounding this question. Like them, Julius Sensat believes that reification is a coherent notion. Unlike them, he does a good job navigating these treacherous waters. His new book, *The Logic of Estrangement*, draws on the history of critical theory – Kant, Hegel, and Marx – and on contemporary game and decision theory. The combination allows Sensat to construct much-needed micro-foundations for reification theory.

In a nutshell, Sensat thinks that reification is ‘dependence on extrinsic information’, that is, collective dependence on information that is non-deliberatively constituted. Economic organization, he argues, should be subject to co-deliberation, such that the priorities of consumption, production, and distribution are determined by conscious collective human choice, as opposed to market imperatives. The absence of co-deliberation is, in turn, a consequence of *independent agency*. If, instead of independent agency, we could somehow solve our optimization problems *together*, then there would be no room for estrangement, the economic reification that Marx dubbed the ‘religion of everyday life’.

In what follows, I first summarize Sensat’s argument and then raise some problems for its metaphysical and ethical presuppositions.

### 1. SENSAT ON REIFICATION

I begin with the idea of independent agency. An example from game theory might help. Jack and Jill must independently choose between two actions, Hi and Lo. Neither knows the choice of the other. If they both choose Hi, then each gets \$10. If they both choose Lo, then each gets \$5. But if one chooses Hi and the other Lo, then both get nothing.

		Jack	
		Hi	Lo
Jill	Hi	(10, 10)	(0, 0)
	Lo	(0, 0)	(5, 5)

TABLE 1. Hi/Lo game.

As independent agents, Jack and Jill must form expectations about each other, assign probabilities to one another’s strategy, and optimize accordingly. Jack must predict Jill, Jill must predict Jack, the solution to their reciprocal guessing provided by Nash equilibrium. If, for example, Jack assigns a very high probability to Jill’s playing Lo, then he optimizes by playing Lo, despite the prospective loss – to each of Jack and Jill – of \$5. This is a problem for the traditional individualistic account of agency: cooperation can’t be *that* hard. Following Robert Sugden, Sensat claims there is a better solution to the *Hi/Lo game*: collective agency. Here Jack and Jill ‘aim their deliberation at the construction of a joint orientation, one mutually acceptable to all as a basis of joint action. Were Jack and Jill to engage in collective agency, Jack would view himself as accountable not only to himself but also to Jill, where he understands Jill as similarly accountable to him.’ (134). When Jack and Jill succeed in acting jointly, they each perform Hi, not as part of a plan that takes the behaviour of the

other as an environmental variable, but rather as part of a single action they perform together. By removing the reciprocal forecasting, collective agency enables genuine cooperation.

Collective agency, for Sensat, involves Jack and Jill acting jointly. In order to act jointly, Jack and Jill must individually intend that they collectively perform an action. That is, the action pair  $(x, y)$  'would be a common object of collective intention if [Jack] had the intention of jointly performing  $(x, y)$  with [Jill] by performing  $x$ , while [Jill] had the intention of jointly performing  $(x, y)$  by performing  $y$ .' (135) But what does individual agency have to do with the inverted world of the commodity?

Suppose Jack and Jill need to paint a house. Jack paints this side, Jill that side. The painting is difficult, costly, and time-consuming. Jack and Jill need to coordinate their activities. One coordination device involves individual agency. It consists in Jack making Jill an offer. If Jill accepts, then Jill will paint that side, Jack will paint this side. But the bargaining between Jack and Jill will not always work so smoothly: sometimes there are too many agents, or too many walls, to allow efficient direct bargaining. No matter: all Jack and Jill need is a 'randomizing device' that generates a stable and 'self-reproducing system of expectations' (147). Call that device *Mr Walras*. Mr Walras has a unique function: to announce Jack's bids – how much Jack is willing to pay others to paint – and Jill's preferences – how much she is willing to accept for painting. Suppose Jack informs Mr Walras that he is willing to pay \$10 for painting. Mr Walras announces Jack's bid. The bid is accepted by Jill, who paints that side for \$10. Jack paints this side. Sensat thinks that this transaction involves a kind of self-vitiating agency on the part of Jack and Jill.

According to Sensat, Jack and Jill's alienation of economic control to Mr Walras implies that they are 'simultaneously treating economic matters as having an independent dynamic and thereby giving them such a dynamic through their deliberation and action ... In reifying value and capital economic agents actually give their own actions an alien dynamic.' (154) This, Sensat thinks, is because Mr Walras is not working for them; Jack and Jill are subject to his whims and power, inasmuch as their production and livelihood are dependent on these whims. Mr Walras, of course, stands for the 'social, ghostly, and imaginary' objectivity of exchange value, itself the resultant of Jack and Jill's independently invested severally productive powers and preferences. This alienation of control gives rise to the dynamic of capitalist accumulation, in which workers come to perform surplus labour, appropriated by capitalists in the value form.

Now, if Jack and Jill paint the house together, then their shared agency removes their economic alienation and therefore their inability to see the stamp of reason in their joint product. This solution is unworkable in cases of large-scale production, with many consumers and producers.

Sensat thinks that, in these kinds of cases, the producers must delegate coordination functions to Mr Walras, on condition that his activity does not vitiate their collective ability to recognize themselves as rational co-producers. The idea seems to be that it is much easier for Jack and Jill to discern the stamp of reason in their product and labour process if Mr Walras is under their joint control, such that his directives affect nothing but the mix of the relative desirability of painting tasks, as opposed to who performs them and how. This is how, for Sensat, we might come to be at home with ourselves in our walrasian otherness, as such.

I now propose the following reconstruction of Sensat's argument:

- (1) Commodity production presupposes individual agency. (the *metaphysical claim*)
  - (2) Freedom requires collective agency. (the *ethical claim*)
  - (3) Collective and individual agency are mutually exclusive. (definition)
- ∴ Freedom and commodity production are mutually exclusive (from 1, 2, 3).

## 2. THE METAPHYSICAL CLAIM

According to Sensat, joint action requires plural intentions, that is, Jack and Jill's intentions that Jack *and* Jill perform an act, each by doing his or her part. Sensat follows Searle and Bratman in thinking that these 'interlocking' plural intentions are necessary conditions for the joint act of house-painting. And since commodity production presupposes the absence of plural intentions of the relevant sort, the metaphysical claim follows.

Unfortunately, the Searle/Bratman view may be too strong (Shapiro 2013). Consider again Mr Walras, who facilitates Jack and Jill's painting by means of a pecuniary offer. Jack and Jill paint the house together, as long as they are committed to doing what Mr Walras tells them and know each other to be thus disposed. But, if this is true, then neither Jack nor Jill need have any intention to paint the house *together*; it is consistent with their joint house-painting that they lack plural intentions of the Searle/Bratman variety. Jill, for example, violates no requirement of rationality if she gets on with painting for money, all the while expecting – falsely, as it turns out – that Jack will fail to do his part. So joint action is possible without plural intentions.<sup>1</sup> But then commodity production – the generalized packaging and sale of private labours under

<sup>1</sup> Shapiro notes that the Bratmanian account of joint agency only makes sense under small-scale, genuinely cooperative superplans. If Shapiro is right, then joint agency can apply as widely as Sensat thinks only if the Bratmanian conditions are relaxed.

the aegis of Mr Walras – is compatible with collective agency. Indeed, it is *a form of* collective agency. The metaphysical claim is false.

Sensat may question this conclusion. He may argue that this is not genuine collective agency – Jack and Jill are not *really* painting the house together. But again, suppose Mr Walras gets Jack and Jill to paint the house despite their nonplural intentions. What has Mr Walras succeeded in doing? I think the answer is: he got Jack and Jill to paint the house *together*, although Jack and Jill both stopped short of intending *that* success. Commodity production manages to unite conative disunity into the joint act of painting. Again, the metaphysical claim seems false.

### 3. THE ETHICAL CLAIM

Now consider the ethical claim. Suppose there is some agent, Leon, who allocates tasks to Jack and Jill, for the purpose of painting the house. Jack and Jill have good reason to paint the house. They also have good reason to trust Leon: he knows house-painting and has the interests of Jack and Jill at heart. Having Leon decide and allocate tasks without prior deliberation, however, contradicts the ethical claim: Jack and Jill are not jointly acting *freely*. According to Sensat, there is:

a problem as far as freedom is concerned, if the situation had not been collectively evaluated. As far as independent agents are concerned, non-deliberative tendencies of action would still form part of the decision environment. Freedom needs to be self-conscious, and self-consciousness is lacking here. (155)

This is, in a nutshell, the ethical claim. But what kind of ‘self-consciousness’ is lacking in the Leon case? If Jack and Jill have good reason to trust Leon, Leon helps Jack and Jill do what they have good reason to do, and house-painting is what they have good reason to do, then why does it matter that Jack and Jill’s ‘tendencies of action’ are non-deliberatively (or non-collectively) constituted? When Jack and Jill do what Leon tells them to do, they jointly act *freely*, in spite – indeed, *because* – of their suspension of self-conscious control. Freedom is not all subjective spirit.

This conclusion has direct implications for commodity production. It is not obvious, for example, in what ways Leon and Mr Walras differ. Sure, Mr Walras is the alienated expression of Jack and Jill’s own agency. But so is Leon. In other words, Leon and Mr Walras are relevantly similar, in that both induce jointly non-deliberative joint action. And some such action is autonomous and therefore free. Nor is it true that Jack and Jill can deliberate jointly as to whether to authorize Leon *prior* to the joint act of house-painting, something they cannot do in the case of Mr Walras. Leon might just get them to do what they have good reason to

do, in a way that they will not retrospectively regret. This is how parents, coaches, teachers and doctors sometimes exercise *legitimate* authority over children, athletes, students and patients, respectively. There is, therefore, no interesting sense in which Mr Walras makes Jack and Jill unfree. What is lacking here is moral relevance: what's so special about Mr Walras acts of agency unification, as opposed to Leon's?

#### 4. SENSAT'S CRITIQUE OF RAWLS

The moral relevance problem pervades *The Logic of Estrangement*. It is best illustrated by Sensat's treatment of Rawls, which uses the collective motivation argument to criticize Rawlsian liberalism. Taking his cue from Hegel's critique of Kant, Sensat charges Rawls (1971) with a motivational individualism that makes the Rawlsian just society liable to estrangement. Sensat thinks that – despite its emphasis on moral motivation – Rawls' account of market relations allows too much economic inequality. And he thinks the same applies to G.A. Cohen's incentives critique of Rawls (Cohen 2008). That is, Sensat agrees with Cohen's conclusion – that Rawls's concessions to unequalizing incentives are incompatible with the Rawlsian well-ordered society – but disagrees with Cohen's premisses. Unlike Cohen, Sensat thinks that the incentives problem boils down to Rawls' affirmation of motivational individualism: as long as the social division of labour reflects that individualism, inequality and unfreedom reign.

Suppose ... that commodity-market dynamics determine labour allocation in a collectively desirable way. Initially, it may seem coherent to assume that decisions of private individuals could be so regarded at a meta-level that all these individuals, even those that meet with failure on the market, would count as equal partners in a collective project of labour allocation. But for them to have this status their market mistakes and successes would have to count as outcomes for which they all share responsibility. It would therefore have to be regarded as appropriate that their costs and benefits be borne equally by all members of the group. (179)

This, Sensat concludes, is precisely what cannot happen in the market system, which is about distributing benefits and burdens such that they track market success and failure. One problem with this argument is that the kind of shared responsibility Sensat mentions does not presuppose motivational collectivism. Whether Jack and Jill are collectively morally responsible for market outcomes – and recognize themselves, or each other, as such – is orthogonal to the content of their motivation. It is therefore open to Cohen, or Rawls, to argue that market costs and benefits should be shared equally between Jack and Jill, just because they are equally morally responsible for market outcomes (this is, in fact, the general tenor of Cohen 2008: Part I). If this conclusion is granted, however, then Jack and Jill *can* see the stamp of their reason-responsive agency

in market outcomes – through their joint commitment to the difference principle, appropriately construed – without seeing that commitment as issuing from collective agency. Jack and Jill’s allegiance to the Rawlsian social-democratic state may be akin to rational allegiance to the Hegelian state, in that it is individualistically motivated, all the way down. The ethical claim seems false.

### 5. A NORMATIVE FOUNDATION?

One way to buttress Sensat’s ethical claim takes a slightly different tack. It argues that, under certain conditions, Jack and Jill respond appropriately to reason just when they act jointly. There are, in other words, requirements that we do things together, such that these doings do not decompose, without remainder, into things I do and things you do. We satisfy those requirements, moreover, just when we do things together for the sake of the value in doing them together. This is how, in Hegelian fashion, our free wills might will our free wills, as such. Consider a case where you and I are walking in different directions. Your walking potentially obstructs mine. How might we act for the reasons *we* have? Suppose that each of us is disposed to pause, as each of us publicizes an intention to pass. When I pause, waiting for you to pass, or when you pause, waiting for me to pass, we might each be acting ‘for the reasons she has including the reasons she has to act consistently with the other’s acting for the reasons she has (Julius 2016: 201). This way we do not vitiate each other’s reason-responsive agency; reason assumes a reasonable form.

Like Sensat, Julius thinks that freedom is not responsiveness to reasons *simpliciter*; freedom *in itself* must also be *for itself*. That is, in order that Jill be free, she must self-consciously will free actions, as such. By the same token, free collective agency does not only require that Jack and Jill individually perform free actions in knowledge of their freedom-constituting value; they must perform these actions in knowledge of what’s good about performing them together. I act for the good reasons I have only when I intend that we do what we have good reason to do, by doing my part in that joint doing. Julius’ account therefore supports the ethical claim: freedom requires collective agency. How does this argument support Sensat’s anti-market conclusion?

It is possible that commodity production undermines our ability to jointly act freely by vitiating our ability to act for the reasons we have. Suppose Jack and Jill have a reason R to paint the house together. Then Jack and Jill jointly act freely only if, in forming plural intentions to paint, they paint *for R*. Here the mediation of Mr Walras – Jack and Jill’s alienated power in the value-form – precludes their acting *jointly* for R: even when Jill somehow manages to paint for R, and so does Jack, they are still not

painting for R *together*. Commodity production violates the independent requirement that *we* paint for R.<sup>2</sup>

Something like this is, I think, necessary to complete Sensat's argument. But then his argument is extremely demanding. For one, even if the metaphysical claim is granted, it is possible that Jack and Jill paint together freely, but for different reasons. It follows that any requirement that Jack and Jill paint for the same reason is too strong. But, more importantly, the idea that freedom requires joint action aimed at satisfying joint requirements *as such*, shows that Sensat's case against the value-form rests on a controversial and idiosyncratic account of freedom, one that requires more extensive statement and defence than his book provides.

Despite these problems, *The Logic of Estrangement* is an original contribution to critical theory, bridging the best of that tradition with analytic philosophy. Sensat provides a lucid and cool-headed reconstruction of the critique of political economy, an original account of the moral infirmities of the capitalist division of labour, and a novel approach to reification and the fetishes of capital.

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<sup>2</sup> That is, unless the metaphysical claim is false. If the metaphysical constraints on collective agency are weaker than Sensat thinks, then commodity production might satisfy them. And that would increase the urgency of explaining why Mr Walras – as opposed to Leon – undermines freedom.

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