

Kevin Aho: *Existentialism. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, xvii + 193 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5141-5

Kevin Aho's *Existentialism* is an introduction to this outlook on man's place in the world. The author defends its appearance not as a mere presentation of a school of philosophy, and points out the continuing relevance of what its adherents contend. He does not limit himself to discussing the philosophers that are usually associated with existentialism, and in addition includes novelists such as Dostoevsky and Camus in his analyses, and justifiably so, given that this movement was not exclusively, and perhaps not even primarily, an academic one, its influence being the result of the works of many literary figures, some of whom were simultaneously academics. Indeed, a dogmatic demarcation of 'existentialism' could easily have resulted in a procrustean presentation, a danger that Aho manages to avoid.

More importantly, though, since existentialism is anything but simple to understand, certainly if one studies the works of thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger or Sartre themselves, Aho's very accessible style and presentation are all the more commendable, even though that is of course a necessary condition for a general introduction. Fortunately, the clarity does not come at the expense of the depth of the message that is conveyed, so that an optimal balance is reached. Through elucidating examples, existentialists' sometimes convoluted views are brought to life, indicating what their relevance may be, for example through an excursion to the field of psychiatry, making sure that the intended readers will not get lost amidst the variety of concepts and theories that are brought to light. With that in mind, it is fortunate that the chapters are short, and that Aho does not waste space on superfluous biographical information, to which I would add that the chapters, while covering a great variety of issues, constitute a coherent and consistent whole.

A point of criticism I would address here is that one wonders whether the author takes a critical enough stance with respect to existentialism. True, there are four instances where he raises doubts about existentialists' claims: in Chapter 4 (57), Aho questions whether being immersed in a background of meanings by which one is shaped is compatible with self-interpretations being of oneself; in Chapter 5 (75), he mentions the lack of biological theories; in Chapter 7 (105) the focus is on the possibility of an existentialist stance vis-à-vis ethics; and Chapter 9 (141ff.) examines the criticism that may be brought forth by Marxists. In all of these cases, however, Aho defends existentialism against its critics, where a detached stance would have been more fitting. This is, after all, a general introduction, which means that the author's task consists in presenting the pros and cons of what he discusses, leaving it to the reader to decide what may be 'true'.

In addition, some problems remain. The role of religion, in particular whether religious existentialism (Kierkegaard and Marcel possibly being the main representatives) is possible, is such an issue. Is a commitment to religion compatible with authenticity and freedom, religious existentialists' dispositions presumably being (at least partially) decided or determined by religious tenets? Another is the matter of freedom, especially in connection with the sense of 'self'. Is authenticity compatible with freedom and the absence of a self (56, 60ff., 81, 97, 98) and is 'freedom' even comprehensible at all? For example, it is said "Who we are is not determined by any underlying trait or characteristic that we are born with. It is, rather, up to the individual to shape his or her own identity by choosing certain projects and taking action in the world." (Chapter 5, 63; cf. 64) and "[...] the existentialist position makes it clear that I *make myself* who I am through my free, meaning-giving choices" (Chapter 8, 135). The very *basis* for freedom and for making oneself who one is seems to be absent if there is no self from which to start; it would in fact be inconsistent to say that "the individual" can shape "his or her *own* identity" and to speak of "*my* free, meaning-giving choices" on the basis of which "I *make myself* who I am" since there cannot be an individual before he or she makes his or her own identity, nor can there be an 'I' before I am made. Only by resorting to a theory that differs widely from what existentialists envisage might a way out of this difficulty be offered (leaving the matter here whether such

an alternative would itself be acceptable). I will readily grant that Aho is nuanced in discussing these matters, especially with respect to what he says about Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (60, 74-79), but it remains difficult to see how freedom might be possible and what, if anything, a self would be; this problem is in particular prominent in Sartre's philosophy.

These critical comments are minor relative to the book as a whole and were mainly mentioned to provide a complete, balanced review. They do not derogate from the fact that the book is a valuable addition to the existing literature and may become part of academic curricula. It does presuppose some general knowledge of philosophy, and apart from that, its merits will only fully be appreciated by those who can place the work in the context of the history of philosophy and realize what is at stake in what existentialist philosophers maintain. Such readers will indeed be able to appreciate the work, and surely share my judgment that Aho has produced an outstanding book.

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