

Interestingly, there is no attention paid to either Dewey or Davidson, two figures who become Rorty's philosophical inspiration. Nevertheless, the collection is a pleasant introduction to Rorty's early engagement with Cartesian skepticism, representationism, and metaphilosophy. These engagements are crucial to understanding the direction of Rorty's later work.

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### ***Existentialism. An Introduction.***

KEVIN AHO

Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014; xvii + 193 pp. (paper)

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An engaging and accessible overview of existentialism and its central themes, this book affirms the relevance and legitimacy of an approach to philosophy that is often dismissively caricatured and parodied in popular culture (as well as in some areas of academe). *Existentialism* is divided into nine chapters, with each chapter essentially a digestible essay on a particular aspect of existentialism. The book opens with an obligatory consideration of the question: "What is existentialism?" (ix). Aho answers this question with a brief description of seven key themes that characterize the movement: existence precedes essence; the self as a tension; the anguish of freedom; the insider's perspective; mood as disclosive; the possibility of authenticity; ethics and responsibility (xi-xii). These are the themes explored in the chapters that follow.

The first chapter outlines the general cultural impact of existentialism, providing a context and background that anchors the following chapters. A highlight is the account of the zenith of the existentialist movement in the mid-twentieth century (11-15). Not confining himself to academic philosophy, Aho traces the impact and influence of existentialist themes on a broad scale, considering a range of media (film, literature, art), figures (the Beat writers, cinema *auteurs*, painters, playwrights) and countries (providing a non-European perspective). The second chapter (19-33) discusses the received paradigm of truth as objectivity, and presents subjective truth, perspectivism, and phenomenology as contrasting existentialist approaches to the question of truth. This chapter deftly introduces Soren Kierkegaard's conception of truth as subjectivity, Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism, and Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method. The third chapter, "Being-in-the-World," (34-47) highlights the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the rejection of such classic modernist dualisms as subject/object and self/world. Aho links his discussion of the human perceptual experience of a world of relational phenomena to current topics in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, thereby highlighting the contemporary relevance of existentialism.

Chapter 4 (48-62) deals with the key concept of selfhood *vis-à-vis* the issues of substance and embodiment, stressing the notion that the self is not a 'thing' in the classical ontological sense but rather a sort of "embodied agency, shaped by our meaning-giving choices and actions" (52). The discussion draws upon seminal figures such as Nietzsche and Heidegger and more contemporary thinkers such as Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor. The fifth chapter (63-79) centres on freedom, which Aho isolates as the "core

idea of existentialism” (63). Aho offers a rich and insightful account of freedom as it operates in the work of various thinkers typically labelled existentialists. The focus on Fyodor Dostoyevsky (67-70) is particularly effective here, as is the discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of freedom (a discussion that nicely explains the notions of ‘being’ and ‘nothingness,’ the titular conjuncts of Sartre’s most famous work). The analyses of freedom in Chapter 5 directly inform the discussion of authenticity in Chapter 6 (80-104). This chapter focusses on Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence, Nietzsche’s central notion of the will to power, and Heidegger’s analysis of authenticity in *Being and Time*, which Aho suggests is “arguably the most influential in existentialist thought” (96).

The prominence of the individual in the existentialist concept of authenticity presents challenges for ethics as traditionally conceived, and it is these challenges that Chapter 7, “Ethics,” (105-122) addresses. Aho argues that, while existentialist thought does not provide anything like a traditional framework of values or morals to guide ethical behaviour, the constructs of (inter)subjectivity and responsibility— aspects of authenticity and freedom—indicate the manner in which individuals might be accountable for actions and decisions. Aho also considers thinkers (such as Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas) who are centrally concerned with how we behave towards other people (116). Levinas scholars, it ought to be noted, might be concerned with the superficial treatment of his thought in this section (for example, there is not a single mention of *Otherwise than Being*), and indeed with the very labelling of Levinas as an ‘existentialist.’ Nonetheless, Aho’s arguments for the relevance and applicability of existentialist themes to ethics are generally quite effective and illuminating.

The final two chapters of the book combine to reaffirm the contemporary relevance of existentialist themes. Chapter 8 (123-139) explores the ways in which the core ideas discussed might positively contribute to issues in the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy. In particular, Aho suggests that the existentialist themes of authenticity and moods (e.g., anxiety) as disclosive can ameliorate the problem of medicalization/over-diagnosis. Finally, Chapter 9 (140-164), fittingly titled “Existentialism Today,” offers an overview of the ongoing importance of existentialist concepts in areas such as feminist thought, political theory, and environmental ethics.

A possible drawback of the thematic organization of the book should be noted. For each theme covered, Aho draws upon a range of thinkers, so that, for example, in a discussion of self and others, we move from Harry Frankfurt to Charles Taylor to Leo Tolstoy to Nietzsche to Kierkegaard to Heidegger (to name but a few). While all these thinkers certainly deal with the theme of ‘self and others,’ weaving them together in a seamless exegetical tapestry can lead to the impression that there is a unified point of view shared by these disparate thinkers. A salient example is the following: “For Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard, the public reduces everything to the lowest common denominator and deadens our capacity for healthy and creative self-expression” (58). This runs the risk of leaving the casual reader with the sense that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have some sort of shared view of ‘self-expression.’ To be fair, Aho cautions against regarding existentialism as a monolithic system of thought (for example, in the *Preface*, xvii) and does attempt to highlight relevant differences between the thinkers he considers, but these remarks tend to be cursory (a necessity, perhaps, given the introductory nature of the discussion), and the overall unifying effect of the common theme remains.

In addition, the sheer range of references to figures both historical and contemporary is not entirely unproblematic. Indicative of great erudition and passion for the subject (and used to wonderful effect in isolated sections), these references and allusions, cumulatively, can leave the reader winded, struggling to follow out all of the threads of the discussion. While intellectually exhilarating, this feature of the book might be somewhat daunting for those new to the subject, and this is something that instructors planning to use the text in a course should keep in mind. That being said, there is no reason to insist that these complexities be absorbed on a first reading, and certainly one need not be familiar with every figure cited to appreciate the general thrust of Aho's arguments. Intrepid readers can pursue some of the helpful suggestions for further reading provided at the end of each chapter.

These minor misgivings aside, supplemented by selected primary readings, *Existentialism* could quite effectively be used as a core text in a post-secondary course on the subject. Depending on the instructional context, guided reading of selected sections might be advisable. The book's potential appeal, however, is not limited to the formal classroom; indeed, it will no doubt serve as an engaging introduction and overview for intellectually curious readers of all stripes. Furthermore, those already well-versed in the subject matter will find fresh perspectives and insights on familiar central themes. Aho's book thus succeeds in its stated goal of demonstrating that existentialism, far from being 'outdated' or 'moribund,' remains an urgent and vital philosophy for our times.

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### ***Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy: Practicing a Politics of Reading***

CHRISTOPHER P. LONG

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Political philosophy in the Continental tradition rarely fits neatly into existing conceptual schemes, and Christopher P. Long's recent work could accordingly be classified under any number of philosophical subdisciplines. Long presents fresh interpretations of six of Plato's Dialogues in order to juxtapose a Platonic politics of writing with a Socratic politics of speaking. His organization and method follows six decades of hermeneutical engagement (by figures such as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Martha Nussbaum) with classic texts from intellectual history. Accordingly, Long walks a fine line between ahistorically importing biased assumptions into each text and missing the underlying gap separating ancient and contemporary life worlds. The book's trans-historical, inter-disciplinary attempt to treat "hermeneutics... as a political activity" (127) serves both as its original sin and its saving grace.

In Chapter 1, "Politics as Philosophy," Long reads the *Gorgias* by juxtaposing Socratic political speaking ('topology') with Platonic political writing ('topography'). He continues with an interpretation of *Protagoras* in Chapter 2, "Crisis of Community," focusing on the influence of social relationships upon one's way of life. Chapter 3, "Attempting the