

Michael Allen Fox

The Remarkable Existentialists.

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The enduring relevance of the philosophers of existence is the topic of this book. Michael Fox has given us a text that is clear, informed, and broad in scope. It would be very suitable for an undergraduate course in this field or for readers looking for a competent introduction to several key figures in this tradition. Anyone who teaches existentialism knows of the lasting importance these figures retain for the university students of today, as well as its relevance to a general readership. Fox pitches the book at an introductory level, making it accessible not only to students but to any non-specialist interested in several of the philosophies of existence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The book's first chapter is titled 'What Is Existentialism?'. Fox manages here to avoid the oversimplifications and easy definitions that one often encounters when this question is raised, and provides an overview of numerous themes about which the major figures in this movement of sorts wrote. As the author puts it, 'existentialism is best comprehended by appreciating what it is *against* and what it is *for*, in other words, by its attitudes of *revolt* and *affirmation*' (16). With this in mind he sets about analyzing themes, in the first category, of the Enlightenment faith in reason, the depersonalizing forces of modern society, irresponsibility and self-deception, among others, and in the second category personal dignity and individuality, freedom, honesty, finitude, and some others. Each concept or theme receives a short section, with a logical progression that gives the reader a preliminary sense of the whole before the more specific, chapter-length discussions of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. The book also includes a concluding chapter titled 'Evaluation of Existentialism and Its Legacy' and several appendices containing brief explanations of some of the more important technical terms in existential thought.

After a brief (15-page) chapter on the historical background of the existential movement, the book's third chapter, 'Kierkegaard: In Search of the Individual', introduces the movement's founding figure in 28 pages, guiding the reader through such issues as the pseudonyms, direct and indirect communication, truth and faith, and the stages of existence. Each theme is treated in a relatively brief section, with generous quotations from the primary texts and occasional references to the secondary literature. The interpretation that emerges is short on detail, of course, and in line with standard readings.

The same can be said of Chapter 4, 'Nietzsche: Reinventing Culture'. No controversial reading of Nietzsche emerges here. Instead Fox presents the basic themes of the death of God, nihilism, the will to power, the revaluation of values, the eternal return,

and so on, in logical fashion without broaching the finer points of interpretation that one finds in the secondary scholarship. The Nietzsche that emerges is less Dionysian than some would prefer, but the chapter again includes sufficient quotations from the primary texts to impart a fairly good sense of the spirit and substance of Nietzsche's thought.

The fifth chapter, titled 'A Brief Look at Phenomenology', may be the book's strongest. In 24 pages Fox presents one of the best introductory accounts of phenomenology that I have seen. Written in a style that is unusually clear and accessible to the undergraduate student or general reader, the chapter strikes a good balance between depth and breadth, and while neither oversimplifying nor, as so many such pieces do, becoming too technical and lost in minutiae. This is not an easy balance to strike on this particular topic, yet Fox's analysis of various phenomenological themes is both informed and highly readable.

One can say the same, surprisingly enough, of the book's sixth chapter, 'Heidegger: The Quest for Being'. These 40 pages cover most of the major Heideggerian themes, and again Fox manages to introduce his subject in a relatively non-technical yet non-superficial way. Fox explains a number of key terms and writes in short sections that try to show the larger movement of Heidegger's thought without the more detailed analysis that the advanced reader would expect. This allows the reader, as in other chapters of the book, to gain a broad understanding of Heideggerian existentialism and so prepares them to read the primary texts.

This text presupposes no prior acquaintance with existentialism or phenomenology and is written in a very accessible style. The book's nine chapters are of roughly even quality. One might, of course, question certain particulars in the text, including the choice of figures discussed. I would have thought, for instance, that a chapter on Karl Jaspers or Gabriel Marcel would be at least as warranted as one on de Beauvoir. One could also take issue with some assertions in Fox's critical afterwords that appear at the end of each chapter, or the decision to include the occasional cartoon, but these are relatively minor matters. The strength of the book is its clear and balanced presentation of existential phenomenology, as represented in the thought of several of its more outstanding figures. Naturally, no text of this nature substitutes for a proper reading of the primary texts, but as an introduction to the field this book succeeds in providing for students and others an overall picture of this movement that is accurate and informed.

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