

BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *On Being and Becoming: An Existentialist Approach to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 320 pp.

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei's latest book is a valuable contribution to the literature on existentialism in that it is at once a study of existentialism and a work of existentialism. The author provides not only a scholarly introduction to existentialism, but also a compelling invitation to accept existentialism as a guide for navigating life. The book accomplishes this melding of genres through its wide-ranging perusal of thinkers and artists who have grappled with the challenge of being and becoming. As the title of the book and the series to which it belongs, "Guides to the Good Life," suggest, a major theme is how individuals concerned with living well face a life-long activity of becoming through the exercise of their freedom.

The book is divided into four parts: an overview of what existentialism is; a historical account of the development of existentialism; a treatment of important themes of existentialism; and a consideration of the ways in which reflections on those themes affect concrete activities and so the shape of one's life. Each of these parts contributes to the overall aim of the book, which is to present existentialism as a viable and vibrant approach to life for all individuals, no matter their position in life.

The first part, a Prologue and chapter titled "Existentialism in Style and Substance," makes the case (necessary for any book on existentialism given the disparate nature of the thought of the existentialists and that all but three of them—Sartre, Beauvoir, and Marcel—rejected the classification) that it makes sense to group the figures discussed in the book together and to label their work under a common title. Existentialist thinkers, the author argues, "validate concrete, individual experience over abstract systems," "expose the inadequacy of traditional interpretations of the meaning of life," and "promote free action on the part of the human subject toward the creation of new meaning" (31). The seriousness and depth with which the author considers the diversity of positions that share these few commitments in common alleviates existentialism of its clichés and allows for serious consideration of what the movement offers to those working out how to live well. This approach allows for a serious consideration of the recognized central figures of existentialism, but also of other kindred figures who often receive less attention, such as Shakespeare, Goethe, Richard Wright, and Miles Davis.

The second part of the book considers the development of existentialism within the context of Western philosophy but extended also to music and literature. While it is possible to trace the historical roots of existentialism, the questions and themes that existentialist thinkers address are not historical questions, but rather questions that each human being, facing his own, concrete, lived experience, encounters. Especially illuminating here, because often passed over in introductions to existentialism, is the chapter on the Romantic influence on the movement.

The third and fourth parts of the book take up the themes introduced in the first part and developed in the second part—among them the self, the other, world, earth, and being—and then

brings these ideas to bear on the living of life, especially in our contemporary context, which includes the technological development of social media. Existentialism proves a rich resource for reflecting on how to live with these developments that have so much influence on our daily lives.

It may seem strange to offer a “guide” for living influenced by existentialism, since a guide suggests that there are pre-determined paths to take, but at the heart of existentialism is the conviction that each person is free and that freedom demands that we create meaning in life by forging our own paths. A strength of the book, apparent from the first pages, is the recognition that making sense of existence and how to live well “may be anything but straightforward” (3). The plethora of positions that existentialists take, which the book lays out with clarity and nuance, makes clear just how difficult it is to work out how to live and that to live as an existentialist is not simply to imitate the way of life of one or another of its key figures and to parrot their ideas, but rather to reflect on the multiplicity of ideas and lives as a way of facing “our choices with fresh consideration.” (198). The existentialist does not imitate another’s way of life, but rather internalizes and accepts as his own those approaches he chooses. The book includes a frank discussion of the personal failings of some of the most well-known existentialists, failures which might tempt some readers to dismiss the whole movement out of hand. The author is neither heavy handed in assessing these failings nor too dismissive of these figures but offers a model of how to honestly assess failings in a thinker’s way of life without condemning either the person or their ideas.

A stated aim of the book is to make clear that, although many existentialists highlight the darkness and difficulties of life, “Yet for all its focus on suffering, existentialism is also a deeply affirmative philosophy...” (5). The author does this successfully, first through her engaging and exhilarating prose, and, interestingly for readers of this journal, often by citing the thought of Gabriel Marcel as an example of an existentialist who offers a more palatable and positive way of approaching existence. Marcel is not the only thinker to whom the author refers who offered an affirming view of life, but he may be the most frequently cited in that context. His philosophical thought is interlaced throughout the book—although his plays are not treated—especially in the discussions of intersubjectivity and of living creatively, a theme which Gosetti-Ferencei embraces and returns to often. Marcel’s emphasis on wonder, reverence, and especially on openness to being and to others because he sees them, not as a problem, but as a mystery allows for a more positive view of the project of becoming.

It is curious that there is no discussion, except in passing, of the existentialists’ view of God or religious practice or the religious dimension of human existence. This is all the more striking as Marcel is the sole philosopher, among the twentieth century philosophers discussed, who is clearly a theist and the only one who engaged in religious practice in mid and late life. Despite Marcel maintaining that his philosophical positions and religious beliefs were separate, the fact that Marcel is so affirmative an existentialist and that it is he among the existentialists who believes in God’s interaction with man in religious practice, may lead the reader to wonder whether affirmative existentialism requires also belief in God, a question that it would be profitable to consider.

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