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BOOK REVIEW

Anthony Malagon and Abi Doukhan (eds.), *The Religious Existentialists and the Redemption of Feeling* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 271pp.

Has the tradition of existentialist thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries been significantly misrepresented and misunderstood? According to Anthony Malagon, in his introduction to this new collection of essays, the existentialist tradition has for far too long been narrowly defined not just as an approach to philosophical thinking that elevates the experience of the human subject as a source of knowledge about the world over abstract reasoning and philosophical systematizing, but also as a type of philosophizing that belongs almost exclusively to twentieth century European atheistic philosophers. Malagon argues that it is time to reconsider the definition of existential philosophy based upon two basic themes. First, existentialism rejects an objective, scientific, or exclusively intellectualist mode of philosophizing, referred to as Cartesianism, that ignores the particularity of the human subject in favor of the abstract and universal. Cartesianism is suspicious or bluntly dismissive of the affective states that in part compose our concrete lived experience and serve as a valid source of understanding about the self and the world. Second, breaking from the abstract philosophical systems thereby allows philosophical thought to explore the many facets of the embodied self in the historical world leading to a recognition that affective states, passions, and feelings are also modes of the self where truth can be accessed.

For nearly a century, existentialism has been interpreted as a movement of rebellious human subjectivity, virtually synonymous with a defiant rejection of theism and of religious experience. The core of the existentialist movement has typically been confined to Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, with forerunners in Friedrich Nietzsche and, as the exceptional religious representative, Søren Kierkegaard. This narrow interpretation of existentialism has caused a great deal of confusion about the nature and history of the movement and has unjustly excluded a great diversity of religious thinkers who challenged the dominance of abstract rationality as the sole mode of philosophical knowledge and without whose contributions to the history of philosophy the atheistic existentialism of the twentieth century may not have been possible.

Malagon lays much of the blame for this misinterpretation at the feet of Jean-Paul Sartre himself because he championed the label of existentialism and associated it with his own brand of existential phenomenology at a time when many of the other thinkers who might reasonably be described as existentialist or associated with its approach to human experience vehemently rejected the term. Another decisive moment that shaped the misinterpretation of the existentialist movement occurred when Walter Kaufmann mostly excluded religious philosophers from his seminal text, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (first published in 1956). Serving as the introduction to existentialism for several generations of readers, this book omits most of the religious existential philosophers because Kaufmann paradoxically believes that "religion is inherently existential" and because religious existentialists "have not made significant contributions to philosophy or literature" (3). Such misrepresentations, aside from simply failing

to establish the truth about the existentialist movement, has caused further difficulties for this approach to human experience; the inadequacies of these atheistic philosophical approaches—and of Sartre in particular—have led many scholars to conclude that existentialism has ended in a philosophical cul-de-sac. Malagon argues that Sartre had incompletely embraced the movement's anti-Cartesian approach of seeking truth about human existence and subjectivity through concrete experience and feeling instead of intellectualizing that experience. This is a fault Sartre inherits through his modification of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology (8). If, however, we adopt a broader understanding of the crucial theses of the existentialist movement, we will not only correct our interpretation of the history of the movement and restore the many religious contributors to the existential mode of philosophizing to their proper place in that history, but we will also avoid the dead end and will see that this mode of thinking still has much relevance to contemporary philosophy.

With this broader definition of existentialism in mind, the editors have assembled seventeen essays exploring the existential themes of a wide array of writers, including not only the religious existentialists but also some who would ordinarily not be associated with existential philosophy at all. The first group of essays examines three thinkers, Thomas Aquinas (by Stephen Chanderbhan), Dante Alighieri (Antonio Donato), and Søren Kierkegaard (Michael Strawser), who were precursors of existentialist thought because each saw that beyond the intellectual knowledge of God and creation were kinds of lived experience that revealed truths that were inaccessible to reason alone. The next group of essays gathers together philosophers and religious thinkers from several cultures whose work resonates with the primary themes of the existentialist movement. These essays examine topics like the mystical experience of selflessness and love for the world that reveals deeper truths about reality in the thought of pragmatist William James and Buddhist thinker Nishida Kitaro (J. Heremy Wisnewski); the experience of contemporary dehumanization that points the way to a new spiritual humanism that restores the integrity of the person in the work of Russian religious thinker Nicolas Berdyaev (Emiliya Ivanova); the way that the experience of shame reveals one's positive self-evaluation that requires protection in the phenomenology of Max Scheler (Marc Barnes). Two essays (by Jose Luis Fernandez and Mariana Allessandri respectively) deal with existential themes in Miguel de Unamuno; the first compares the tragic sentiment in Unamuno with Kant's analysis of the feeling of the sublime and their relation to the transcendental ideas of God and the immortality of the soul while the second defends Unamuno's views on negative feelings against the contemporary dominance of positive psychology.

The Jewish thinkers sometimes associated with existentialist thought compose the next group of four essays. Eugene Torisky's essay looks at Martin Buber's ambivalence about the role of feeling in the I-Thou relations and examines in particular the feelings of reverence elicited by the mystery of the Thou. Two essays explore Emmanuel Levinas's thought; the first (by Catherine Chalier) examines Levinas's critique of mysticism and the feeling of ecstasy as found in traditions like Hassidism while arguing the he retains elements of mystical ecstasy in his account of the ethical relationships with Other. The second, by Randolph Wheeler, argues that through his moral philosophy Levinas rehabilitates the realm of sensation dismissed by many philosophers as irrational and senseless. Herman Heering's essay on the thought of Franz Rosenzweig explores Heering's critique of reason's pretentions to absoluteness and his attempt to reconcile the necessary interdependence of faith and reason.

Anton Hugli turns to the thought of Karl Jaspers' and examines how his theory of cyphers as an experience of transcendence that cannot be absolutized has continued relevance for reintroducing religious thought into secular, post-metaphysical political life. Jill Hernandez focuses on Gabriel Marcel's belief in the prophetic call of philosophy to be the gate-keeper of the reality of human dignity in the broken world by critiquing anything that denigrates that dignity and calling for moral action to restore and preserve it. The discussion of Marcel is continued by Nikolaj Zunic who conducts a Marcelian phenomenological analysis of the experiences of detachment and alienation to arrive at an understanding of feeling as the source of unity in human life and in particular of the feeling of joy that marks the experience of the fullness of being. Margaret Hughes's essay explores how Josef Pieper's accounts of leisure and festivity describe the rich experience of and rejoicing in the goodness and mystery of being implied in Thomas's account of love and contemplation. The volume concludes with an essay by James Abordo Ong relating the transformative role of feeling in the encounter with difference in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Luce Irigaray.

Malagon and Doukhan have collected quite a few valuable essays on themes sure to interest not only scholars of existentialism but also those working in the areas of philosophy of religion and the epistemology of emotion. While Malagon's revised definition of existentialism will provoke debate about whether it is too broad and therefore unable to distinguish existentialism from related but nonetheless distinct movements like romanticism, expanding the perspective on existentialism to include religious thinkers and to be able to recognize family resemblances in writers separated by history, culture, and temperament will undoubtedly add vitality to the discussion of a movement often considered trapped in a dead-end.

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