Reviews

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism (2nd ed.) by Jack Reynolds, Ashley Woodward, and Felicity Joseph (eds.), (Bloomsbury, 2024).

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It's passé to regard existentialism as passé. This is what the revised edition of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism* strives to communicate to scholars and students. Offering entirely new chapters on gender, technology, (dis)ability, analytic philosophy, race, 'Mexistentialism', an updated chapter on 'Existentialism and Cognitive Science', as well as an overdue mini-chapter acknowledging Frantz Fanon's status as a canonical existentialist, it looks set to succeed. In what follows, I'll gauge the extent that it does.

The 'Introduction' provides an engaging romp through the history of existentialism, covering its relationship with phenomenology and liberatory politics. It also attends to the tendency of professional philosophers to accept existentialism as a gateway into philosophy but dismiss it as a serious research paradigm. The editors argue that this tendency results not from substantive arguments against existentialist philosophies but historical prejudices, fuelled by clichéd images of the moody, fabulous, turtle-neck-sporting, chain-smoking, nonchalance associated existentialist movement during the post-WW2 era. To this end, their definition of existentialism as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept is helpful. By listing eight 'major overlapping thematic concerns' among existentialists (p. 3), they overcome the problem that even the philosophers typically labelled *classic* existentialists can resemble a motley bunch of thinkers with no shared principle or agenda. Less helpful, though, is the omission of recent scholarship redefining existentialism and questioning who belongs on the list of existential philosophers (e.g., Gordon, 2020; Pattison and Kirkpatrick, 2018; Priest 2019; Webber, 2018). Citing only Maurice Friedman's *Worlds of Existentialism* (1964) on the debate about what existentialism is (p. 5) gives the impression that it's stale, when, as Thomas Meagher's brilliant contribution on Fanon points out, having no predetermined essence is precisely the source of existentialism's ability to adapt to serve twenty-first-century problems (pp. 339–41).

Of course, it's the volume as a whole that's tasked with communicating the vibrancy of state-of-the-art existentialism, so let's turn to

the chapters best placed to do that: the new ones. The first is Marilyn Stendera's chapter, 'Existentialism and Gender'. As the only new addition to the Part on 'Current Research and Issues', it appears as a corrective to the first edition insofar as the topic was as significant in 2014 as it is now. Although Marguerite La Caze's insightful 'Existentialism, Feminism, and Sexuality' featured in the first edition, its concentration on the gendered dimension of sexuality in Jean-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's work means that the need for an existentialist treatment of gender more broadly was unfulfilled there. Stendera's chapter fulfils it in this edition. Moving from Sartre's theorisations of embodiment and contingency, to Beauvoir's analysis of the limitations of women's situation, to Fanon's exposition of the gendered components of racialization, it provides a neat demonstration of existentialism's capacity to scrutinize the scope for choice in the face of oppressive social forces. It also provides a timely overview of Fanon's contested status as a gender theorist, showing how some ostensibly sexist remarks in *Black Skin, White Masks* can be read as contributions to intersectional feminism. While it touches on the relation between sex and gendered embodiment, Judith Butler's queering of *The Second Sex*, and some problems that gender-based oppression present for loving relationships, at just nine pages, it reads rather short.

Dominic Smith's 'Existentialism and Technology' is the first new chapter in the Part titled 'New Directions'. It provides a fresh take on the existentialist contribution to philosophy of technology by relegating Martin Heidegger to the background and placing Søren Kierkegaard, Ortega y Gasset, and the existential-adjacent philosopher Hannah Arendt in the fore. This rich chapter updates Hubert Dreyfus's Kierkegaard-inspired study of online education and communities, *On the Internet* (2001), by showing that Kierkegaard's attention to our tendency to treat abstractions as stable, concrete entities anticipates new, technologically facilitated forms of vulnerability that Dreyfus's study didn't. Then, it contends that Ortega's concept of 'supernature' has advantages over Edmund Husserl's better-known 'lifeworld' in virtue of its recognition of the artefactual nature of the human existential predicament. Finally, it shows how Arendt's concepts of 'earth alienation' and 'world alienation' can disambiguate between the key forms of alienation operative in technologically advanced, late capitalist societies, before closing with a provocation to think about the behaviour of several rich, powerful men in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic under the subtitle 'Existential Risk'.

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The next chapter by Ada Jaarsma argues that '(dis)ability' is an existential term by emphasising human *inter*dependence against the normative prescription of *in*dependence, disability as a part of the human condition, and the context dependence of abilities, as well as advocating for an existential shift from '*noun* to *verb*' in our characterisations of people: i.e., to regard ourselves as open-ended becomings that cannot be limited by categories (p. 254). It draws on Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* and Elif Batuman's Kierkegaardian-inspired novel *Either/Or* (2022) and, unfortunately, continually refers to epigraphs from these texts which have been cut from the volume. This creates a needless barrier to understanding this important chapter, although the dedicated reader can still push through to discover fruitful areas of overlap between existentialism and critical disability studies on society and the self, attitudes toward embodiment, and how pain inflects the experience of time.

'Mexistentialism' is the topic of the next chapter by Carlos Alberto Sánchez. Spanning four pages in total, it offers a pithy sketch of the history of Mexican existentialism and its key characteristics, which complements Roberto Domingo Toledo's more extensive study, 'Existentialism and Latin America' in the previous Part. The impact of existentialism on the Anglo-American tradition is the topic of Pierre-Jean Renaudie's 'Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy', which supplies an unorthodox history of the relationship between these two disciplines by stressing the convergences between them. It explains how Rudolf Carnap's famous dismissal of Heidegger's metaphysics as 'meaningless' obscures these thinkers' shared aim to reject the speculative systems that traditional metaphysical theories drew on, before attributing the view of existentialism as an enterprise 'opposed' to analytic reasoning largely to the enduring influence of A. J. Ayer's 'less nuanced and well-informed' version of Carnap's critique of Heidegger and, later, of existentialism more broadly (p. 277). The alleged opposition between these two disciplines is thus construed as a product of oversight and polemic exaggeration, and the chapter closes with a discussion of how inquiry into the meaning of scepticism and the status of practical knowledge are instrumental in initiating a reappraisal of existentialism within the analytic tradition.

While the previous chapters illustrate, in different ways, how existentialism addresses fundamental concerns that unite us, Helen Ngo's chapter, 'Existentialism and Racism', shows that it also provides a productive framework for analysing structures that divide us. Building on Fanon's exposition of the modalities of racialized experience and embodiment, Ngo describes how the racialized subject's

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lived reality often inverts the existentialist tenet 'existence precedes essence' since their body, in its meaning, appears to be predetermined and ahead of them (p. 298). Ngo construes the anguished relation to self that characterises the existential stress of the racialized subject as a coping skill, without downplaying the harm it does by placing the subject in a state of 'anticipation and defence' and depriving them of the opportunity to *be* in the present (p. 301).

As Jack Reynolds and Ashley Woodward note in their chapter on existentialism and poststructuralism, existentialism has evolved to fill the gaps in understandings of agency poststructuralism left in its wake. In their updated chapter, Michael Wheeler and Ezequiel A Di Paulo describe how a similar phenomenon is occurring in cognitive science, where dominant representational and computational models of the mental encounter difficulties in accounting for the human capacity to think and act with fluidity and flexibly in response to varying, context-sensitive relevant factors. It then shows how the works of existentialists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Hans Jonas (via Dreyfus, Shaun Gallagher, and Francisco Varela, among others) are continually generating new understandings of the enactive and embodied dimensions of cognition.

'Recent Developments in Scholarship on Key Existentialists' includes Meagher's new mini-chapter, which supplies an excellent starting point for future research on Fanon's existentialism and comes with an extensive, up-to-date bibliography. Other mini-chapters on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Beauvoir, by William MacDonald, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Laura Hengehold respectively, remain valuable resources, despite not having been updated. Peter Gratton's one on Sartre stresses Sartre's status as a postmodern thinker *avant la lettre*, the overlooked significance of his later work, and his influence on postcolonial projects, but its bibliography is not reflective of major recent developments in Sartre scholarship on themes such as embodiment and interpersonal relations. Andrew J. Mitchell's Heidegger piece concentrates on exposing ideas from the *Contributions to Philosophy (from Enowing)* (1999) on the grounds that it has 'shaped all recent developments in Heidegger scholarship' (p. 321). Be that as it may, a discussion of Heidegger's Nazism is conspicuous by its absence here. Although David Sherman's un-updated chapter 'Existentialism and Politics' offers a fine treatment of it (pp. 59–62), the question of whether and how Heidegger can be interpreted as an existentialist in light of recent research indicating that his philosophy is embedded in a fascist ideology – most notably, Wolin (2022) – deserves close attention in a volume such as this.

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There isn't space to discuss the other, un-updated chapters on phenomenology and method (Felicity Joseph and Jack Reynolds), metaphysics and ontology (Christian Onof), psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (Douglas Kirsner), ethics (Debra Bergoffen), literature (Colin Davies), emotions (Suzanne Cataldi Laba), and authenticity and the self (Christopher Macann). It must suffice to say that each remains relevant and makes a vital contribution to the volume. Together with the new chapters and the final 'Resources' chapter, which includes a glossary of key terms and an annotated guide to further reading (which partly remedies some of the noted oversights in the mini-chapters on Sartre and Heidegger), they provide those who are new or returning to existentialism with an invaluable overview of some of the most important developments in the field in recent years.

However, the editors' framing of the volume is too humble in my estimation. Existentialism is not merely 'no longer passé' – it's having a renaissance. In the decade that's transpired since the publication of the first edition, it has been reinvigorated by scholars', practitioners', and activists' recognition of its capacity to shed new light on various intersecting forms of social and political injustice, as well as its aptitude for confronting the kinds of crises we face in a globalised, overheating, war-torn world. A recent retelling of the story of modern existentialism (Bakewell, 2016) has been awarded Book of the Year by multiple mainstream media outlets, a celebrated philosophical biography of Beauvoir has been translated into over a dozen languages (Kirkpatrick, 2019), and retailers were unable to keep up with the demand for Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947) during the pandemic. Indeed, as the chapters collected on this volume indicate, existentialism may be *the* philosophy best equipped to deal with our most pressing concerns today.

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Modern Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to Kant by Stephen Darwall (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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Modern Moral Philosophy is the first volume in a two-volume project which will extend from Hugo Grotius to late twentieth-century moral philosophy. The first volume traces the development of the metaethics of right and the nature of normative reasons, oughts, and normativity itself (p. 172) from Grotius through natural lawyers and British moralists to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. It is insightful, original, and well-argued – as one would expect. Some of the themes and most of the characters are familiar from Stephen Darwall's much-discussed work in the history of ethics over the past thirty years. But in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Darwall engages anew with the authors and themes and to his great credit with much new secondary literature which includes criticisms of his earlier positions.

Darwall notes in the 'Acknowledgments' the great influence Jerome Schneewind had on his work. The subtitle of Schneewind's *Invention of Autonomy* (Schneewind 1998) is 'A History of Modern Moral Philosophy', and autonomy plays a central role in organizing an enormous quantity of philosophy from Montaigne to Kant. The works which Darwall engages with are far more restricted: Hugo Grotius, Samuel Pufendorf, Benedict de Spinoza, G. W. Leibniz, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (very briefly), Immanuel Kant, and a host of British philosophers. One might think that this is a similar but more restricted work. But it is very different.

Sidgwick rather seems to me the central influence on Darwall's approach in *Modern Moral Philosophy*. Sidgwick drew extensively and critically in *The Methods of Ethics* on the distinctively modern concepts he understood to have arisen in the works of Joseph Butler, Richard Price, John Stuart Mill, and many others in hopes of presenting a more defensible philosophical ethics. Darwall notes in the 'Preface' that he undertook a research project on Fichte and Hegel in the late 1990s which simultaneously spurred his much-discussed