Being-in-the-world, again

Existentialism: an introduction, by Kevin Aho, Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA, Polity Press, 2014, £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0745651422

Reviewed by Richard Pearce, psychotherapist

My first reaction to this book was, 'Do we really need another introductory book on existentialism?' This is a point the author takes up in the preface by way of justification of the book, mentioning other noteworthy attempts. I agree in his lauding of such books by William Barrett and David Cooper, but while the author admires the two aforementioned studies, the *raison d'être* of this book, he assures us, is to furnish his review of the existential masters with reference to a wider and more contemporary literature. In fact, this objective is largely catered for by the last two chapters, where he investigates the contemporary relevance of existential thinking for psychology, the environment and current debates around determinism.

The chapters are arranged by theme, and Aho opens with a review of the context within which existentialist thought emerged, and its challenge to modernism. He refers back to the thought of ancient Greece to trace the still-dominant perception of the world that existentialism challenged, a worldview that sets humans and their context apart from the experience of 'being in the world'. This challenge, or the phenomenological critique of 'detachment and objectivity', is the subject of the second chapter. Here the author introduces us to the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, where the latter's critique of 'truth' and the 'herd' mentality that stifles individual expression leads to a discussion of the phenomenological origins of existential thought. All this prepares the ground for exploring the premise of existentialism in a chapter on 'Being in the World', stressing the primacy of existence, meaning and embodiment as encapsulated in a pre-reflective understanding of experience, a primacy that challenges the 'naturalist' view of the human condition.

This opening sequence is followed by four chapters that address typical existential themes: self and others; freedom; authenticity; and ethics. I would describe these as the 'middle' part of the book, and it is these chapters that I find disappointing. While the discussion of the self does highlight the notion of embodiment, the relational and pre-reflective character of the existential self are lost in a concern for the interaction with the 'herd' or 'they', and a superficial discussion of bad faith – subjects that might have been better left to the subsequent chapter on authenticity. Freedom, the author emphasizes, is the core idea of existentialism, but Aho's presentation of this topic does not merit this claim. Nietzsche features prominently in this chapter as in others, and while the author does engage with the debate regarding freedom and determination, his arguments are rooted in this existential antecedent rather than in contemporary debates.

Aho does distinguish between what we might call 'existential freedom' and 'situated freedom', but his arguments are confused by a misrepresentation of Sartre's thought on this topic. This chapter then leads smoothly, at least, into that on authenticity. Here, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche again feature prominently, and Heidegger's account of authenticity is also given some weight, although the emphasis on resoluteness and death would be better explained alongside reference to the 'they' already discussed in the chapter on the self. This is followed by a discussion of Sartre's notion of 'bad faith' which, although reasonably well handled, is not allowed to lead anywhere in terms of the chapter heading. In many ways these discussions of self, freedom and authenticity appear as a preface to the subsequent chapter on ethics. After a refutation of the idea that existentialists do not posit an ethical framework, using some acute observations from Heidegger and Sartre, the author moves on to what I feel is the ground for which this middle section is designed, i.e. the work of Buber and Levinas, and the more clearly presented ethical stance of the religious existentialists.

This is followed by a chapter on (existential) contributions to psychiatry and psychotherapy, which, a useful section on 'medicalization' notwithstanding, I found disappointing in its coverage. There is a sense that the author again gets bogged down in discussion of Nietzsche and the relatively arcane work of Boss, Binswanger and even Laing, while current contributions of the British School of Existentialism, and significant American authors such as Betty Cannon, Kirk Schneider and Robert Stolorow, get scarcely a mention.

The final chapter, 'Existentialism Today', is perhaps the most interesting, and is concerned with the current relevance of existentialist thought. It has three main foci: first, the political implications of an existential perspective. It is strange here that much of Sartre's work in this field is solely attributed to de Beauvoir (irritatingly referred to as 'Beauvoir'), but the general points that are made regarding the dangers of 'situated oppression' that can grow from a naturalist perspective, and the existential challenge to this thinking, are well made. The second section of the chapter refers to 'Self and Dukkha' and helpfully introduces the reader to the (potential) relationship between Buddhism or 'Eastern existentialism' and what we might describe as 'Western existentialism'. Finally, the author returns to the theme of 'Health and Illness', with a concluding note on the relevance of an existential view of health.

In reviewing this book I have to admit that I come with a particular bias. I regard Sartre as the most important and contemporarily relevant of all the existential founders, and found the author's interpretation of Sartre's thought sometimes frustrating. At the same time, Aho's book has some interesting and informative things to say, and he displays an acute knowledge of the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger (and perhaps Kierkegaard), but I believe the book fails in its overall *raison d'être* to provide a broader and more contemporary view of existential thinking, and to demonstrate its contemporary relevance. The author comes with a particular perspective on existential thought, and a book that opens with an honest declaration of this perspective, followed by an exploration in more depth of the last three chapters, might have offered a more interesting

contribution. Given that there is a burgeoning literature shaped around the (often divergent) work of individual existentialist thinkers, perhaps the time for another introductory and avowedly comprehensive text on existentialism has passed.