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Existence And Existents



Synopsis

As Emmanuel Levinas states in the preface to *Existence and Existents*, “this study is a preparatory one. It examines . . . the problem of the Good, time, and the relationship with the other [person] as a movement toward the Good.” First published in 1947, and written mostly during Levinas’s imprisonment during World War II, this work provides the first sketch of his mature thought later developed fully in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. This new edition marks the first time this important work has been made available in an inexpensive paperback edition. Levinas’s project in *Existence and Existents* is to move from anonymous existence to the emergence of subjectivity; to subjectivity’s practice, theory and morality; to its encounter with the alterity of the other person. He is concerned here primarily with the time of the solitary subject; time is the inner structure of subjectivity, of the movement of existing.

“Levinas’s work,” says Alphonso Lingis, “contains not only wholly new analyses of the forms of time of the present, the past, the future but also a new conception of the work of time.” Beginning with *Existence and Existents*, then, it is possible to begin tracing the progressive “alterization” of time as it unfolds across the development of Levinas’s entire philosophy. As a “preparatory” study, *Existence and Existents* introduces the major themes and concerns that occupied Levinas throughout his career. This is essential reading for understanding both Levinas’s own philosophy and the developments in philosophical thought in the twentieth century.

Book Information

Paperback: 116 pages

Publisher: Duquesne; Second Printing edition (April 26, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0820703192

ISBN-13: 978-0820703190

Product Dimensions: 5.7 x 0.4 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #204,411 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #61 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Phenomenology](#) #90 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Metaphysics](#) #97 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Reference](#)

Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

EMMANUEL LEVINAS, a major voice in twentieth century philosophical thought, died in late 1995. After studying under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the late 1920s, Levinas went on to develop a philosophical system that placed ethics at its center. His writings have influenced several generations of French philosophers, including Jacques Derrida, and have won him an admiring audience among theologians.

Writing a review of a major work of philosophy is a preposterous act of presumption. So, instead, I will simply offer a thank you. I have already recommended this book. This friend of mine is a self-taught student of philosophy who is truly exploring through this literature what Nietzsche's proclamation, "God is Dead" means to someone who is deeply committed to a spiritual practice. "Existence and Existents" is an exploration of life's upsurge, in the language of philosophy, that accepts the "irremissible" (Levinas's word) onslaught of this upsurge, while not surrendering to its being "meaningless." The book also serves as a concise counterpoint to Heidegger's mythologizing romanticism of "being." Being is a construction of the already knowing, power-seeking, war-making (as Levinas' "Totality and Infinity" makes clear) subject. Existence, in contrast, knows nothing of being, and engenders "existents" as its self-forming instantiation in its on-going surge of potency, venturing ever onward. This book therefore sets in motion, in my opinion, the terms and the notion that defines the work of philosophy in the decades ahead. We must come to see how coming forth, in instants and as hope, also yields the human endeavor among other existents and within a frame of that humans must surpass; and so it is the work of the human endeavor to take up its stance as existents always already amid the traces of all that comes and the "there is" that has already ventured beyond itself, no less the human. God is dead means that we are now taking up the conditions, means and comprehensions that shape a human endeavor at all. Being is the mirror, but look up over it and there is the Other, the infinite writings of faces, all of whom write their coming from existence from the "there is" to exist here, in the "I am." What there "is" of this, we humans must give to ourselves, to others and to all that lies in our "proximity." I recommend this book to all those who seek a new way of making it matter that the human endeavor take up its responsibility. The book requires work, thought, slow reading and reflection. It teaches us, there by, the ethic of becoming the living we are.

NOT EASY TO READ

This book is one of the earlier works by Levinas. While it is a dense read, it is very engaging and present many ideas that Levinas develops in later works. A very valuable translation.

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