

Gabor CSEPREGI, *In vivo. A Phenomenology of Life-Defining Moments*. Montreal & Kingston-London-Chicago, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 15 × 22,8 cm, x-205 p., ISBN 978-0-7735-5663-8

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This is a book about philosophy “in” life, *in vivo*, more than “of” life. It uses the gaze and resources of the phenomenological method to explore some experiences shared by many of us at one point or other in our lives.

The author, Gabor Csepregi, is a well-known Canadian philosopher and phenomenologist, who has written extensively on the body, music, play, sports, spontaneity, among many other themes¹. This book, however, seems more of a synthesis of a long phenomenological exploration of the human person, than a series of descriptions of human traits and actions. In that way, it is a marking contribution to Philosophical Anthropology.

The book is presented as a “phenomenology of life-defining moments.” Some of these moments, such as leaving one’s family and familiar surroundings, may be life-transforming in their radicality. Others, such as listening to a beautiful piece of music, although life-transforming, may still be part of “ordinary life.” In any case, an “implicit contention” of the book is that “there is, in every human life, a *possibility* of transformation and renewal” (p. 7). In addition, the book seeks to underline the “positive side of life” in spite of the difficulties sometimes involved in these life-transforming experiences.

The book addresses six “vital experiences” providing the theme of each chapter (p. 5): deciding, breaking away, immersing in a foreign culture, following a model, listening to music and acting ethically. “I believe, Csepregi writes, that the disclosure and import of all these supreme moments is one of the worthwhile aims of the philosophy of the human person.” (p. 5)

The author readily adopts a phenomenological stance used as a craft rather than a “theory.” We are thus dispensed from the development of a complex theoretical apparatus, which is there, but only discreetly. This is nothing short of refreshing – we see phenomenology in action right away, much like we appreciate a musical piece without musical training – an experience beautifully described in the book. “Phenomenology is, in this respect, a critique of the unnuanced application of some abstract categories to human existence.” (p. 11) It stays close to human experience before deploying theoretical structures. “Philosophy based on phenomenology is an effort of awakening to the wonder of the world.” (p. 11)

We are pulled in to take part in the craft of phenomenological description and analysis applied to some shared experiences. That is why the book will certainly appeal to specialists who will discover a fine application of their method. But the book also appeals to a more general audience as readers will often recognize on the pages themselves and some of their experiences. We have all felt the anxiety and loneliness of crucial decisions, the anguish and sorrow of leaving loved ones and our familiar setting. We have all been transfixed by beautiful musical compositions or performances. Hopefully, we have had models, mentors, and guides in our lives. We are always called to ethical action.

1. E.g., *The Clever Body*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2006.

Each of these experiences are given a chapter exploring their different dimensions, relying on a variety of sources. In philosophy, Kierkegaard, Scheler, Marcel, and so many others serve as our guides. Literature supplies a rich array of examples, featuring Borges, Stendhal and Tolstoy, among others. History is often called to share the stories of men and women who have faced in an exemplary way many of the experiences described in the book. Sometimes, the author shares interesting personal stories to illustrate his points. This appeal to multiple sources of understanding of life defining moments makes the book all the more captivating and enjoyable to read.

Chapter one, “Logic of Exception” examines the experience of decision making, guided by Kierkegaard. It immerses us in “the gravity and significance of the act of decision.” It insists on the solitude of decision, its difficulty and its hard apprenticeship throughout our lives.

Chapter two, “Artisan of My Destiny,” deals with the experience of breaking away. This chapter examines radical changes in one’s life, such as migration or conversion. It uncovers the passion and the resolution required in breaking away.

Chapter three, “Moments of Real Learning” addresses the experience of encountering and following a model. “A model is a man or woman, who, due to his or her perceived qualities, values, and achievements, exerts a profound and transformative influence on another person.” (p. 67)

Chapter four, “Foreigner in a Foreign Land” considers the experience of encountering, immersing, and finally, adopting a foreign culture. This chapter is especially relevant within the current discussions on immigration and integration in our society. It puts forward the cultural, philosophical and personal wealth brought about by diversity.

Chapter five, “How Can Anything Be So Beautiful?” explores our relation to music and the life-transforming experiences it communicates to us. It explores our contact with beauty that can be induced by music. It insists on the quality of pleasure and playfulness in music, and in our encounter with it.

Chapter six, “Actions Like That Make Life Worthwhile” examines ethical action. It considers genuinely ethical actions, not so much those at which we arrive after a long process of deliberation, but those that “are carried out spontaneously, without calculation, artificiality, or utilitarian considerations” (p. 154). Such actions do “something astonishing that seem the most appropriate in a situation” (p. 154).

The consideration of ethical actions leads the author to affirm a form of “reasonable optimism.” As we live in a time of great worry about the future, marked by a fear of civilizational collapse and mass extinction, this attention to our capacity for ethical action is both indispensable and timely. In spite of our propensity for unspeakable evil in history and in daily life, our interest for the good is sustained by our imagination – this “human faculty that may play a certain role in the realization of ethical action and sustain the spontaneous impulse toward the good” (p. 163). This is a phenomenologist’s gamble that we should not reject.

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