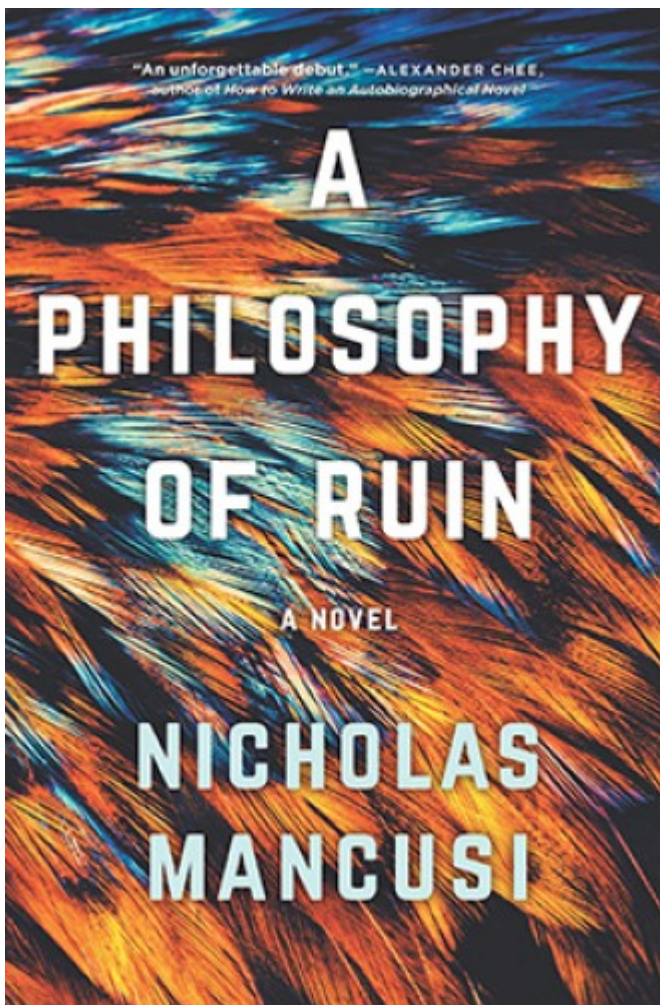


Action without agency

A philosophy professor races through a (predetermined?) action plot

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [October 9, 2019](#) issue

In Review



A Philosophy of Ruin

By Nicholas Mancusi
Hanover Square Press

Do people have free will? That's the question at the heart of Nicholas Mancusi's debut novel.

The story follows assistant philosophy professor Oscar Boatwright as he struggles through a rapid-fire barrage of miseries and mistakes. His mother dies in the novel's opening sentence. His father goes broke. His sister reveals that she's getting a divorce. Oscar mourns, gets drunk, and sleeps with a young woman. Then he discovers the woman is both his student and an aspiring drug lord. She blackmails Oscar, and he runs drugs for her.

From there, the novel crashes through the guardrails, and Oscar plunges headfirst into a life of car chases and gunfights. Each twist flings him further from his staid academic existence and, more importantly, further from his sense of self. As the plot kicks into high gear and the book starts to resemble a Hollywood action movie, Oscar's inner voice quiets. He presses forward almost as though he's outside of himself. He stops acting as the author of his story and becomes a character within it, pushing blindly forward and observing his actions from a distance.

This is both the point of *A Philosophy of Ruin* and its chief difficulty. The readers whose endorsements appear on the dust jacket laud the novel's blend of action and philosophy, but it's debatable how well Mancusi balances the two. The action is undeniable, and Mancusi hits his action scenes with his foot slammed down hard on the gas pedal. However, as the adrenaline kicks in, the philosophy sputters. The faster the novel sends Oscar from one incident to the next, the less we believe in him. It's notable that the reviews on Goodreads, which focus on themes and characterization, are less favorable than those on Amazon, which focus largely on plot.

It's likely Mancusi intended for Oscar's inner voice and personality to diminish throughout the course of events. Structurally, the book mirrors an argument for determinism—the idea that there's no real free will and that everything follows inevitably from mechanical cause and effect. This is also the argument presented by Paul St. Germaine, the self-help guru who's conned Oscar's parents out of all their retirement savings. Oscar rails against him throughout the book, calling his teaching nothing more than an amateur, ignorant nihilism.

But what does Oscar believe? Mancusi never makes it clear.

What we do know is that Oscar's sole published paper is on compatibilism, the idea that it's possible for humans to have "free will" in their subjective experiences, even though their actions are objectively deterministic. To the outsider, it looks like a fine bit of wordplay, one that creates room for the experience of free will but then promptly labels it ultimately false.

So far as we can tell, this is Oscar's position, and the idea is further supported by the fact he holds a special place in his heart for the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who espoused similar ideas.

The problem is that these points are made only through allusions. The reader must either do the homework or suffer a watered-down experience of some key moments and dynamics—such as Oscar's obsession with St. Germaine's philosophy. The novel succeeds to some degree even without this extra depth, but it does so more as an action novel than as an exploration of our shared humanity.

Mancusi shows a lot of promise in his prose, perspective, and willingness to tackle big ideas. It will be interesting to see if his future novels veer more toward the easy Hollywood action scenes or if they dig deeper and wrestle more fully with the ways we think and act as human beings.