

Book Review

Jill Graper Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethic of Hope: Evil, God and Virtue* (London: Continuum, 2011), 176 pp.

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Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope “responds to the need for an existentialist ethics based on Marcel’s philosophy of presence...” (1). Author Jill Hernandez argues that Marcel’s existentialism is one that is essentially moral, and that this moral core is tied to the fact that the perspective of the Other functions as the basis for moral decision making in Marcel’s work (2).

Chapter one outlines the nature of the “problematic man,” the person characterized by the desire to possess rather than the desire to be. The author connects the problematic not only to a functional way of being in the world, but also to a commitment to materialism. Her aim is to suggest that this commitment to materialism is the source, or perhaps a source, of moral evil in the world (5). When we become obsessed with objects, slaves to things, it degrades our ability to be moral agents.

The problematic and functionalized way of existing is connected to the state of despair. Faced with death—the death of God and, ultimately, our own death—a world comprised of only things is, the author suggests following Marcel, a world devoid of meaning. If others and, ultimately, we are nothing more than complex objects, organic machines for performing a variety of functions, then the value of persons ceases when they are no longer able to perform their functions (17, 19). It is because “unavailability creates relationships of function rather than value, [that] Marcel equates *indisponibilité* with a crippling moral evil” (22). In the face of death and despair we cannot derive meaning from things, and can only be saved by what the author intriguingly calls the “relational turn” (12): “The most mysterious aspect of our being is our propensity to love, and it is love that can foster hope because love attempts to transcend death” (13).

Chapter two focuses on the implications of the “death of God” and its relation to moral life, problematic life, and materialism. Hernandez outlines Marcel’s engagement with three different atheists: Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus. Nietzsche’s atheism is grounded in a deep appreciation of the loss represented by the death of God. Sartre, in contrast, is someone for whom God was never significant, and so he remained oblivious to his own role in the death of God and insensitive to the existential significance of the Nietzschean proclamation. For Camus, in contrast to Nietzsche and Sartre,

the death of God was deeply intertwined with the problem of evil, particularly as evident in the suffering of children. In a sense, Camus shares some of Marcel's concern for the Other (41). This third engagement weighs heavily on Marcel, for whom the problem of evil is a genuine existential problem. The problem of evil, in turn, can lead people to a sort of spiritual numbness or death, a "lived atheism" (42) based not on propositions about God's (non)existence, but rather on lived experience (51).

If the death of God leaves us with insolvable difficulties, whether we are atheists or theists, redemption is nevertheless possible in intersubjectivity, through which we may break from problematic materialism and salvage "a meaningful existence tied to community and evidenced in a life of hope" (52).

Chapter three bridges the discussion of moral and the account of personal and communal crises in the later chapters through a discussion of hope. Hope, the author argues, is distinguished by two significant criteria. First, it is "choral"; that is to say, hope always involves others and constitutes itself "through a we and for a we" (64). Second, hope is distinct from "mere wishing" and is related to "creating possibilities" that "an agent can bring about." Thus, hope combats despair by actively creating options for the subject.

Chapter four develops an intriguing account of the role of technology in materialism, disconnection, and problematicity. Technology itself is morally and existentially benign (75), or perhaps neutral. However, there is a tendency for technology to lead to materialism and even idolatry. It can also lead people to hide from or escape the reality of relationships with other people and with non-human entities like the environment, and in so doing devalue them. This argument puts Marcel in dialogue with a lively contemporary debate about the nature, promise, and dangers of technology. Hernandez argues that, for Marcel, technology is only a tool. Our focus should rather be on an ethical life of virtue, expressed in fidelity and availability (*disponibilité*) to others, and in hope.

Chapter five continues the engaging work of chapter four by applying Marcel's ethics to global crises such as war, civil injustices, and unemployment. Professor Hernandez demonstrates that the ethical life, on Marcel's view, must be socially and politically engaged. The philosopher is called upon to create possibilities that foster change and hope in the world. Applied to social or global crises, this has to do with preserving a place for human value that will, in turn, allay fear and encourage people to act creatively (115).

Overall, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope* is a competent contribution to scholarship on a figure whose sadly ignored work could shed considerable light on a number of contemporary philosophical debates. Perhaps its most welcome contribution is the perceptive way in which it links Marcel's

philosophy of presence, availability, and hope to “applied” issues such as technology, civil rights, poverty and unemployment, and war. As Professor Hernandez notes, Marcel’s own thinking was in a sense fundamentally normative (1). Connecting the theoretical arguments of philosophy to these concrete ethical issues is certainly something worth pursuing and definitely something squarely in the spirit of Marcel’s own thinking; Professor Hernandez’s efforts in advancing this engagement will no doubt be welcome.

There are issues that could do with further clarification. For example, despite the engagement with the concrete, we never get a solid sense of what Marcel’s philosophy enjoins us, as humans or as philosophers, to do. What exactly does it mean to “create possibilities”? Are these existential possibilities, or concrete possibilities? In what sense can the subject or agent bring these possibilities about, especially possibilities of the latter sort (65)? The ability of hope to “create possibilities” is a central theme of the work, but the text is not always clear on these issues. How should the philosopher respond to the various ethical crises Hernandez engages? What does it mean to “deny, as forcibly as possible” (107), to “actively sympathize” (107), to “take an active stand” (108), to “[refocus] political and social debate back to values” (110), or to “remind people of the experiences that are left behind in memories” (120)? Near the very end of the book Hernandez suggests the philosopher might “promote activity in the community in which she lives... engaging with students, fostering dialogue, participating in non-governmental secular and religious groups” (132). However, while this is a welcome, if brief, clarification, it doesn’t sound too different from the way in which many contemporary philosophers do in fact behave: talking to students, writing op-ed pieces, participating in academic, social, and religious venues. One might suggest that contemporary philosophers could more fully embrace Marcel’s call to *disponibilité*, presence, fidelity, and hope; but since those are ways of being to which all persons are called, they don’t seem to suggest anything particular about how philosophers should concretely proceed in their social and political lives. It may be the case that Marcel’s social thought is not a full social philosophy (110), but one might hope for a bit more detail in this regard.

The introduction to the book promises to show that “Marcel’s theoretical ethics are relevant to contemporary analytic ethics” (1), but it never fully delivers on this count. As my own training is largely continental, I may have missed more subtle references; however, there are few explicit and no sustained engagements with contemporary analytic philosophy. Three examples, each very brief, include a discussion of Stephen Darwall’s ethics of welfare (101), the fact that analytic ethics has traditionally had difficulty establishing how others could be the seat of the moral permissibility of actions (105), and the mention of Amartya Sen’s work on global welfare (130).

Finally, the book does suffer from passages that are awkward or misleading. Some of these passages are the result of grammatical slips, but others are more significant and accidentally misrepresent core philosophical points, as when we read: "Nietzsche's 'beyond' becomes a 'beneath'; his way up is, in practice, a way down: not a transcendence of ordinary moral categories but, to use a word coined by Jean Wahl, a transcendence from them" (44). Here the second instance of "transcendence" makes no sense and was no doubt meant to read "transcendence," and the slip is confusing. Likewise, "Marcel thinks that mysteries are a type of problem (and so, we attempt to solve them)" leads the reader to believe the mysterious is a subset of the problematic when, in fact, Marcel insists that the mysterious is other than problematic (100). Other examples exist and, in general, one gets the impression that certain parts of the book could have been more carefully edited.

Nevertheless, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope* provides the reader with substantial food for thought, and works to expressly engage Marcel's philosophy with contemporary ethical issues. It is a welcome addition to scholarship on Marcel's lamentably neglected philosophy, and will certainly be of use to scholars interested in Marcel's work.

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