

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas C. Anderson, *A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being* (Milwaukee, WI.: Marquette University Press, 2006), 200pp.

Thomas C. Anderson's deep familiarity with the works of Gabriel Marcel enriches his commentary on Marcel's central and significant two-volume work, *The Mystery of Being*. In his preface, Dr. Anderson explains the origin of this work, the 1949 and 1950 Gifford Lectures delivered by Marcel at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland during the political tension of the Cold War. The commentary follows the chapters of the volumes, *Volume I: Reflection and Mystery* (MB I) and *Volume II: Faith and Reality* (MB II) and adds a helpful "commentator's summary" of each volume.

Dr. Anderson clearly states the methodology he follows in the commentary. He notes that Marcel's writings "are often not easily understood by even his most attentive and sympathetic readers" (8). Although Marcel did not ignore logical reasoning, he preferred an exploratory style rather than a systematic one. Marcel often alluded briefly in one work to something discussed in more depth elsewhere, so that the compressed remark in isolation appears obscure. Dr. Anderson frequently uses other Marcel texts to expand on such remarks in MB I and MB II. As a commentator should, he presents "the often unexpressed logical connections among [Marcel's] thoughts" (8) and focuses on the major ideas and arguments given by Marcel. Dr. Anderson points out that MB I and MB II present "the most orderly, comprehensive and unified presentation by Marcel of his philosophical endeavors" (9). Certainly these lectures include Marcel's major concepts and many of their relationships, although other texts often give better explanations and Dr. Anderson selectively refers to such explanations in the course of his commentary. The end of each chapter lists "pages in other works that treat material in this chapter" which provides valuable information to the interested reader. These references also illustrate Dr. Anderson's comprehensive knowledge of Marcel's work.

In addition, the commentary is written for a general educated audience and therefore omits the secondary literature. This is a good decision because it leads the reader of the commentary to remain focused on Marcel's path of thinking. Dr. Anderson also judiciously employs the French edition to clarify the English translations (there is a different translator for each volume), and points out where he has done so and why. Although Dr. Anderson attributes the differences between the French edition and the English translations to Marcel himself rather than the translators, he accords preference to the French version. Again, this is a reasonable decision. (References to MB I and MB II here and in the commentary are to the 2001 St. Augustine's Press reprinting of the 1960 Henry Regnery Press edition.)

The following remarks will highlight some specific features of the commentary that are especially valuable and will point out, in a spirit of exploration, some passages that appear to be relatively problematic.

Some of Marcel's concepts that Dr. Anderson clarifies by providing his own explanations and/or material from Marcel's other works include truth and light (37), subject and intersubjectivity (77ff), depth (85ff), fullness (120ff), fidelity (133ff), freedom (150ff), purification (159ff), and love and eternity (169). He adds examples of everyday experiences to

illustrate my prereflective unity with my body (46). These well-chosen amplifications strengthen the commentary, not only by showing how MB I and MB II are related to Marcel's other writings, but also and more importantly by making Marcel's ideas more accessible to the reader.

Dr. Anderson reminds us, "Since the word being does not come with some built in or canonical meaning, the important thing for us is to uncover the meanings Marcel himself attaches to the term" (103). This advice applies to reading the work of any philosopher and it previews Dr. Anderson's analytical interpretation of Marcel's text. He unfolds and clarifies three meanings of being for Marcel in his commentary on MB II (see 109, 188) and emphasizes their importance: being as foundation, being as fullness, and being as presence of a Thou. This is one of the most interesting and helpful features of the book.

Dr. Anderson does not hesitate to pose difficulties for Marcel. For example, he objects to Marcel's description of the "indissoluble unity" of existence and the existent in MB I chapter 5. Present existence is indubitable, but its contingency—the fact that it came to be—shows that existence and the existent are not indissoluble. He does not suggest a response on Marcel's behalf, but if Marcel were to reply successfully, it would have to be along the lines of presence and immortality for a Thou, not for an existent in general. Another difficulty raised is a contradiction about the contingency or noncontingency of the empirical self (64-65), which Dr. Anderson resolves with an argument in Marcel's favor that distinguishes between the permanent self and the empirical self.

When Dr. Anderson explains the difference between "my being" and "my life" for Marcel, he does so in terms of the notion of an ideal self (66ff, 114-115). This concept is helpful in some ways. "Who I really am" for Marcel is (at least) *both* my permanent self (my center or the I who persists through my changes) and my ideal self (who I am called to become). When I grasp myself as a unity in the act of recollection, this is grasping the difference between my being (who I am) and my life (what I do). Recollection is "bound up with the presentation of a reality...which founds me as myself" (MB II, 31). And, Marcel says, "there is always a gap between me and my being" (MB II, 31) in the sense that I am unfinished; I cannot coincide with my being. Thus my being can be *both* a foundation (as gift) and a goal (for example, becoming more available [*disponible*]). If we think of the ideal self in terms of fulfillment of my being, this is an aspect of being as fullness, the goal of my ontological exigency (188). Perhaps the differences among the three meanings of being identified by Dr. Anderson are less significant in this case than the ways in which they overlap.

He also raises the criterion problem for Marcel's notion of unconditional fidelity in MB II chapter 8, asking whether Marcel can distinguish between the true believer and the fanatic (163). In this case he suggests that Marcel's views in *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond* provide a solution in terms of community and ontological humility. However, a community of fanatics can believe they are humble before God, so the problem is not so easily settled.

Dr. Anderson expresses an issue with Marcel's discussion in MB I, chapter 3 of transcendence within experience. Marcel argues against the views that consciousness is material and that consciousness is merely awareness of its own states. He describes several levels of consciousness: the non-reflective consciousness of things other than the self, the conscious self who is aware, and reflective self-consciousness. Consciousness cannot be either a "mere mirror" of the body or locked within itself because of the double transcendence of the self: toward the world in awareness of things and beyond itself in self-awareness. Dr. Anderson states a concern that the second form of transcendence may imply a misleading duality of self, but then he points out that Marcel views the self as a single lived reality (30) and that the context of Marcel's

argument is the rejection of epiphenomenalism. These comments are reasonable, because the beginning reader could misunderstand the phenomenological framework Marcel provides (MB I, 51) and become concerned about dual selves, and the activity of consciousness in self-reflection demonstrates that consciousness cannot be only a passive state of the body. It is worthwhile to observe that Marcel's discussion in this chapter includes a subtle and profound dialogue with modern philosophy beyond the scope of an introductory commentary; Dr. Anderson provides a couple of notes in that direction (28).

Dr. Anderson may have been concerned to demonstrate that his treatment of Marcel was not overly sympathetic, for his comments sometimes fail to give Marcel the benefit of the doubt. He catches Marcel in "apparently contradictory assertions" (70) about transcendence that turn out to be easy to reconcile, which leads one to wonder why he would describe them in such negative terms. In another example, Marcel describes a garden which was destroyed but in a certain sense continues to be, and not just in memory (MB II, 28). Dr. Anderson says this makes sense to him only in terms of memory (113). The kind of subsistence Marcel is talking about is neither a physical trace nor a memory, so what else could it be? Perhaps it could be the changes in oneself (enrichment of one's being?) resulting from contemplation in the garden or from the peacefulness of the garden (the garden as gift?), because Marcel says "pictorial ways of looking at the matter must be altogether rejected" (MB II, 28). Marcel's evocative style does require supplementation, which Dr. Anderson is willing to supply in other contexts.

In some cases Dr. Anderson's critique appears to be based on impatience with Marcel's exploratory method (118, 122, 123, 143, 166, 171). For example, in referring to MB II chapter 4, he says, "After spending over half of it engaging in a technical discussion about the legitimacy of 'substantifying' being, Marcel suddenly realizes that the notion of substantification itself is 'faulty' [II, 60]" (123). However, Marcel was quite willing to engage in such apparently fruitless discussions when they revealed something false but interesting, in this case that thinking of being as a thing or object is erroneous (126). This results in an explicit criticism of Sartre's being-in-itself as well as an affirmation of the link between being and value. It is more likely that instead of "suddenly realizing" the difficulties resulting from substantifying being, Marcel deliberately explored that path with his audience to show that it was defective.

Dr. Anderson also remarks in passing that Descartes' *cogito* was known through an inference: "Descartes expressed that reasoning process in the well known syllogism: I think, *therefore* I am" (45). However, Descartes also says simply "I think, I am, I exist" and his argument requires the immediacy of the *cogito* just as Marcel requires the immediacy of "I am" or "I exist." Marcel's text (MB I, 90) is not clear on this point, which is really about the interpretation of Descartes rather than Marcel.

One could wish that the commentary, in its summary of MB II, did not end on a negative note. Although for Marcel, the possibility of rejecting rather than affirming my participation in being (and ultimately participation with God through religious experience) remains a possibility, my very being or "I am" is an affirmation of participation on many levels. It is indeed a betrayal to use my freedom to dismiss or reject the mystery of being. In his plays, Marcel portrayed such betrayals, particularly of intersubjectivity, but he also portrayed the healing that begins when people make themselves available (*disponible*) and open themselves to the presence of others. Faith, hope, and love are motivated by our being, and Marcel closes MB II with positive remarks about journeying on a pilgrim road under the guidance of a Light. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that negation remains a permanent possibility for Marcel.

As a companion to *The Mystery of Being*, Dr. Anderson's commentary succeeds in bringing out the major concepts and arguments, using other Marcel texts for clarification and providing helpful cross-references. The commentary can stand on its own as an introduction to Marcel's thought.

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