

## BOOK REVIEW

Jill Graper Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope: Evil, God and Virtue* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 156pp.

In this book Jill Graper Hernandez effectively shows the relevance and pragmatic implications of Gabriel Marcel's existentialism for ethics. And her assessment of its relevance is far reaching, not only for personal conundrums (chapter 4), but also for the global crises of today: technology, war, torture, political unrest, civil injustice, poverty and unemployment (chapter 5). On a theoretical level, Hernandez often brings Marcel's existential ethics into dialogue with contemporary analytical ethics insofar as it is able to complement and, at times, fill in certain lacunae in the latter's basis for moral decision. Significantly, this book brings to light many of Marcel's insights which have heretofore been untapped from the unpublished manuscripts of the Gabriel Marcel Collection at the Harry Ransom Center (housed at the University of Texas, Austin).

According to Hernandez, the goal of Marcel's existentialism is the attainment of hope: an awareness of one's ontological connection to others which grounds the possibilities for a life of flourishing. Hope, moreover, is "a moral predicate" bearing practical implications capable of transforming one's actual circumstances (3)—hence his philosophy is an "ethics of hope." In this light, we might venture to say that hope, for Marcel, is both the seed ("action-guiding") and fruit of moral action ("attainable through individual action") (62–63). This essential connection between ethics and hope, moreover, points to the fact that ethics is not primarily "rule-based" (63) but is an expression of a deeper position regarding reality. One's ethics therefore contains a vision and a stance vis-à-vis hope such that "the loss of hope decays the human propensity for good actions" (5). Fundamentally speaking, for Marcel, both the moral life and hope are rooted in being, hence they are an expression of one's actual ontological condition (4).

Structurally, the book is organized into five chapters. The first three chapters argue that Marcel's existentialism should be understood as a normative theory. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the key features of Marcel's philosophy, throughout which Hernandez demonstrates how these features possess an inherently moral dimension. In chapter 1, "Evil and the Problematic Man," she explores the moral evil which stems from a commitment to materialism. "Materialism" is that "disenchanted" vision of the human person in which she is just another object in the objective world. This means that she is considered as "valuable only for the functions that she can perform" and that she "seeks to accumulate things, rather than meaning" (5). (In chapters 4 and 5, Hernandez shows how this materialism or "problematization" finds expression in our contemporary world.) The basis for her argument is that the person's actions depend upon the manner in which she understands herself (8), and her self-understanding cannot be separated from a conception of being, i.e., of the whole of reality (12). Chapter 1 examines both how one's self-understanding is constituted by one's conception of three elements of human existence: (i) the body (embodiment), (ii) one's relation to others, and (iii) one's own death, and the moral implications which ensue from an objectification (problematization) of these elements. One's self-objectification leads to a life of meaninglessness, despair, an erosion of freedom, and the loss of one's sense of dignity. Additionally, objectification has a moral impact beyond the scope

of the individual; it leads to the devaluation of humanity as a whole, to functionalized actions toward others (20–21), and thus to moral evil. Hernandez, throughout the first chapter, also (thankfully) offers us Marcel's own hope-full alternative to the "problematic man" which is the "the mystery of being" (13). She demonstrates that a meaningful existence—indeed, love and freedom—must begin by surmounting the problematic way of viewing oneself (specifically, one's embodiment) and one's being in the world. Hence, an ethical life begins with the dual acknowledgement that "*I am my body*" and that "*I am a being-with another*" (intersubjectivity).

Chapter 2, "The Problem of Evil: The Death of God and an Ethics of Hope," continues to describe how big-picture beliefs about the way things are play into one's conception of ethics. In this chapter, Hernandez discusses the ethical repercussions of one's theological commitments. Specifically, she describes how varying stances before "the death of God"—understood as the experience of God's absence from the world (42)—effects the meaning of one's life. (She addresses herself to the thought of Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus in this section.) The death of God is a "fact of our moral evolution" (48) and therefore stands at the origin of both our self-understanding (influences whether we conceive ourselves problematically or not) and of our behavior willy-nilly (51). In particular, how one deals with the problem of evil and with the possibility of hope is intimately tied up with whether or not one affirms God's existence and how one understands who God is (40–41). The possibility of hope includes recognizing that pain and suffering are not the last word on human existence, but rather can be an impetus "to turn *toward the other*" and thereby to salvage a meaningful existence within the community (52–53), whereas atheism "negates the notion of transcendence outright. Without transcendence there is no possibility. Without possibility, there is no hope" and so we are left with a limping humanism of grossly limited ethical results (42). In this way, Marcel's positive normative theory (as developed by Hernandez in chapter 3) has its origins in the question of the death of God (73). In these first two chapters, Hernandez expresses the meaning of the central concepts in Marcel's philosophy in a fresh and lucid manner, avoiding an overreliance on jargon, such that even the reader familiar with Marcel will find these pages interesting and enlightening. Moreover, she cogently shows the utter concreteness and moral nature of these concepts.

In chapter 3, "The Ethical Life," Hernandez commences her development of Marcel's positive normative theory and shows its practical applications. Thus, the concreteness of an ethics of hope begins to emerge with full force. For Marcel, "the root of evil is materialism" and thus hope (as the grasping of new possibilities) requires breaking free of materialism, specifically through the recognition of one's ontological constitution: *I am my body and I am "intertwined with others in the world"* (59). Hence, "hope creates possibilities only if there is someone for me to share those possibilities" (63). In other words, hope is constituted "through a *we* and for a *we*" (64), and thereby aids us to live through suffering and find meaning in it (68–69). Hope, Hernandez persuasively argues, is "morally efficacious" (61) insofar as it provides a guide for "which actions humans should attend to," and it enables the agent to develop virtue through struggle (73). Hope has "reality as its object" (60) and thereby places the agent in a position capable of affecting a genuine transformation of her situation. Without this grounding in reality, and independent of real possibilities, hope becomes impotent and is *a fortiori* reduced "to mere wishing" (65).

In chapters 4 and 5, Hernandez engages the task of applying Marcel's ethics to "real-world global moral problems" (73) so as to explicate the pragmatic nature of hope. Each chapter brings to light how the problematization of human life (developed most significantly in chapter 1) finds concrete expression in today's world. She deals first with "Ethics in Personal Crisis"

(chapter 4), where “ineffectual attachments to technology, possessions and to people thwart ethical life” (74). The unreflective use, or even development, of technology encourages materialism and disconnection between oneself and others (i.e., one substitutes technology for the kind of relationships with other human persons which “can actually give hope”) (74). Concretely, Hernandez addresses issues such as the threat of technological progress on the environment and the unwittingly self-centered tendency of internet social networking. As a whole, “bad attachments” to technology can derail our pursuit for a better world which can only come through the cultivation of human community (86).

Though Hernandez insists that technology is existentially benign (75) and Marcel himself notes that it is “not evil” (76), yet, there is something about “the progress of technology [which] encourages idolatry” (77). There seems to be an ambiguity here which is also found in Marcel’s thought. How are we to account for this “pull” towards materialism which technology encourages (78)? Is there a middle ground that would allow us to account for this “pull” such that technology would be neither entirely benign nor simply evil?

Nevertheless, as a remedy for the ethical pitfalls of our bad attachment to technology, Hernandez fittingly proposes Marcel’s notion of fidelity, understood as an ethical virtue which fosters both one’s commitment to others and brings about the recognition of one’s “presence” with others. The concept of “presence” in Marcel’s thought expresses the fact that one’s relationship with others is fundamentally rooted in being (ontology) (92-93). Prior to any action of my own, there is “an underlying unity which ties me to other beings” (92), and we are called to realize that this unity constitutes the ground of moral action (102). Presence, then, is the *sine qua non* for love, for the kind of relationships which both lead to the development of virtue (95) and can “sustain and give people hope through a grievous life journey” (94).

In chapter 5, Hernandez then describes some of the most pressing current global ethical crises, and the role of the philosopher in bringing about hope in response to them. Principally, she describes how the intersubjective nature of Marcel’s ethics of hope (109) is capable of bringing about real change in the world on a global scale: in relation to war, poverty and political injustice. These reflections can be of great help for us in thinking through a number of contemporary social issues, from the riots in Ferguson and the post-9-11 interrogation tactics to the current refugee crisis in Europe. The crux of the matter is that being in community with others and embracing their needs “is the activity of the moral life” (114). Hence, as a whole, Hernandez’s application of Marcel’s ethics of hope suggests a deeper sense of “change” as such, and we would do well to attend to this. Implicit in one’s attempt to resolve any crisis is an understanding of the problem, of what “change” is, and indeed of where such change begins. Marcel’s proposal is this: a simply structural, systematic (or, we might also say “procedural”) change is bound to be ineffective because it often presupposes a problematic view of the person, which regards her in isolation from others. Thus, any effective renewal of political and economic systems “requires an alternative conception of the moral significance of humanity” (133). Change, for Marcel, begins concretely—within me, within you, in our allowing that “movement to stir in us that [both] breaks the bonds that bind us to materialism” and tears down the barriers that separate us from one another (137). The movement that “opens the door to a fresh hope” (137) must make us “disponible” to others—must foster both community and an awareness of the needs of others. Only this *disponibilité* can ignite hope and bring about personal and global transformation.

Hernandez compellingly argues for the fascinating connection between existentialism and ethics by tracing that link in Marcel’s thought. Specifically, she illustrates convincingly that

“hope” is anything but impractical and ineffective, and is indeed necessary if one is to realize the full scope of human action (virtue). One could say that a heroic hope—a strong and bold vision of one’s unity with others—leads to a heroic virtue. This heroic virtue would be illustrated by the one who stands within her culture and gives herself to the task of forging deeper bonds in the human community and to bringing about change, change based on a kind of conversion of hope.

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