

BOOK REVIEW

Marcus, Paul, *Psychoanalysis as a Spiritual Discipline: In Dialogue with Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 210 pp.

Paul Marcus' *Psychoanalysis as a Spiritual Discipline* articulates how Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel offer the prospect of enhancing, even revitalizing, the psychoanalytic project. That psychoanalysis requires revitalization is laid bare by Marcus in noting the aging core of its main practitioners and the decline in therapeutic practice. Marcus puts the point in unapologetic and bleak terms: "This book attempts to improve the dismal landscape of contemporary psychoanalysis by suggesting that a psychoanalysis...animated by the powerfully evocative spiritual (and moral/ethical) insights of two great contemporary, deeply religious existential philosophers, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, can help reinvigorate a discipline and profession that is in a dire state" (p. 2). Such a project speaks to Marcus' conviction both that psychoanalytic practice possesses profound wisdom—wisdom that makes it worthy of revitalization—and that such wisdom can be accessed in especially powerful ways with the philosophical orientations provided by Buber and Marcel.

The work of revitalization takes Marcus to the most basic good of psychoanalysis—"a 'flourishing' or 'good life'" (p. 5). In pursuit of what such a life may mean and in conjunction with the effort to realize it, Marcus locates the fulfilling life in a spirit of openness. This is a spirit where one transcends egotistic confines. He writes:

Psychoanalysis is a painful, deconstructive, demythologizing, and defamiliarizing process for acquiring greater self-awareness and self-understanding, especially of one's destructive unconscious emotional activity, one that transforms moral consciousness by expanding and deepening one's capacity to love (p. 10).

Marcus' reference to love turns the spirit of openness toward a communion of persons. Such a reference also speaks to the shared foundation of Buber and Marcel's philosophies—an effort to reduce one's ego so as to enter into genuine forms of human communion, which, in turn, yield other forms of communion. As Marcus puts it, "a 'loving heart'...is the starting point of [Marcel's] philosophy and my version of psychoanalysis (just as Freud advocated)" (p. 3). Flourishing is a function not merely of reducing the power of the ego in one's life but of opening oneself to a plentitude beyond the ego. It is an opening that, for Buber and Marcel, draws its strength from the experience of love and the intersubjective union of which love speaks.

Aiming the psychoanalytic project toward a spirit of openness, Marcus further explores the experience of love as well as devoting chapters to work, faith, and suffering. Such experiences speak to the way in which flourishing emerges from certain forms of communion and how these same forms make otherwise unbearable situations bearable. To illustrate both the uplifting nature of human experience and the way in which an open orientation allows one to bear suffering, this review will focus mostly on Marcus' chapters concerning love and suffering. In pursuing a Buberian and Marcelian revitalization of the psychoanalytic project, Marcus begins

by noting that Freud, Buber, and Marcel all offer a “fairly gloomy” (p. 19) assessment of the common state of the human condition. Granted such an assessment, love becomes a kind of antidote, an uplifting spirit that counters the “powerful dark forces circulating in most individuals” (*ibid.*). Whereas such “forces” turn one in upon oneself and undermine the potential for flourishing, love opens its participants to a life of plenitude.

While Marcus distinguishes psychoanalysis as a discipline in which practice is more focused on disordered loves—on understanding the ways in which healthy and mature forms of love can be disrupted—he also concedes that psychoanalysis, or at least certain approaches to it, have been unable to extricate themselves from these disordered states. Marcus draws a contrast between psychoanalytic theories of love that terminate in some type of egocentric gratification versus the approach of Buber, Marcel, and Levinas—where love is more about giving than receiving. He writes, “while analysts tend to view love in terms of the individual’s personal experience of it, a ‘spirituality of me,’ Buber and Marcel focus on the ‘spirituality of us’” (p. 44). For Marcus, Buber and Marcel can help psychoanalysis to recognize the kind of valuative attachments/worldviews needed to transcend a disordered state and ensure a flourishing life.

Marcus believes that an emphasis upon love is consistent with a psychoanalytic effort to achieve a flourishing life and with a project that does not simply identify disordered loves, but which guides individuals to healthier and more enriching forms love/life. Returning to the origins of psychoanalytic theory, Marcus notes that Freud advocated that love should be “central to the overarching goal of any successful analysis” (p. 51). Marcus then defines love in the therapeutic setting as the psychoanalyst’s engagement with the analysand in the effort to “deeply understand and help over a long period of time” (p. 31). For Marcus, the point is clear. Love is critical to successful psychoanalytic practice and Buber and Marcel’s accounts of love have something to add to this practice.

In terms of what they might add, Marcus points to their ontology. For these thinkers, a person’s most basic reality is not singular. I am as much or more a *we* than a *me*. Embracing that reality—what Buber refers to as an “I-Thou” (p. 34) relationship—counters the egotistic tendency to view reality and those within it as objects (the “I-It relation”) (*ibid.*). Others are not primarily objects to be used in pursuit of one’s individual desires and goals, but are encountered as sacred, as centers of profound dignity within which my own reality becomes intertwined. As Marcus writes, “love, for Buber, is always ‘between *I* and *Thou*’” (p. 35) and, in reference to Marcel, “love moves on a ground which is neither that of the self, nor that of the other *qua* other” (p. 39). One’s truest or highest reality is shared rather than singular, a reality one participates in rather than one which the individual controls or possesses.

A major point of Marcus’ text is that loving relationships involve an experience of the sacred. Stressing that the sacred need not be understood in theological terms and that his effort is not one of religious conversion, Marcus associates the sacred with participation in forms of life that allow for the experience of something higher, better, and deeper than that which is possible when restricted to the self. Leaving room for a secular form of the sacred is critical because Marcus’ point is to show that Buber and Marcel’s understanding of the shared nature of human existence can enhance psychoanalysis. His claim is that psychoanalysis can benefit from taking seriously Buber and Marcel’s notion of openness even if we need not commit to a supernatural source of transcendence. It is a spirit of openness that generates a flourishing life and thereby constitutes a path to fulfillment. To frame the same insight in the opposite direction, a psychoanalysis which rejects the consideration or possibility of transcendent values and experiences misses an opportunity to pursue human fulfillment.

It should be noted that leaving room for a secular form of the sacred also opens the question of whether, on Buberian and Marcelian grounds, the flourishing that Marcus seeks can actually be achieved? If an experience of God in some form remains, but now reduced to an option, can we still achieve the satisfaction that Buber and Marcel associate with love? Specific to the concerns of readers of this journal, there are numerous instances in Marcel's *oeuvre* that suggest a negative response to this question. Marcus himself references one such instance in discussing the unconditional nature of fidelity. He quotes Marcel: "[God] is the absolute ground and guarantee of our fidelity...[through which] we glimpse the promise...[of] the complete fulfilment of our intersubjective union" (p. 41). While additional examples could certainly be retrieved, Marcus would do well to further address how, utilizing a Buberian and Marcelian framework, fulfillment can be achieved absent a commitment to the Divine.

Despite the association of plenitude with love, one would be remiss not to recall the "fairly gloomy" portrait of human existence that initiated Marcus' reflection on love. A major component of both the psychoanalytic project and Buber and Marcel's philosophies is coming to terms with a reality in which one experiences limitation, injustice, and insecurity. On this view, most people harbor a kind of inner misery, and the human project involves coming to terms with that misery. Marcus references both St. Augustine and Freud and offers a portrait of "life...[as] a distress-filled existence from the cradle to the grave" (p.124). Such a bleak view would seem to annul the possibility of temporal flourishing. In response, Marcus inquires as to how one can or should come to terms with the limitations attendant upon finitude and the suffering which follows. That one *can* come to terms is the promise offered both by psychoanalysis as well as by Buber and Marcel's respective philosophies.

Still, while "helping people to endure and possibly surmount their suffering is at the heart of all versions of clinical psychoanalysis," (p. 148) Marcus contends that this support will be enhanced if we seek and adopt the spirit of openness found in Buber and Marcel. In a manner similar to his comments on a psychoanalytic approach to love, Marcus views psychoanalysis at large as too wedded to an individualistic paradigm when it comes to its conceptualization of suffering. He offers an extended analysis on Nazi concentration camps and the insufficiency of a psychoanalytic approach in the face of this kind of extreme suffering: "[I]n the camps, the issue was not how to rid oneself of one's distorted pathology," Marcus notes, "but rather, how to identify and draw from one's strengths in order to behave in a manner that enhanced physical and spiritual survival" (p. 137). The critique is that psychoanalysis pays too little attention to the role of the external world in shaping one's personality. The solution Marcel would suggest is not to "draw from one's strengths" in an individualistic or atomistic sense, but to draw from a self whose strength is a reflection of one's participation in higher, more fulfilling, and deeper realities.

A spirit of openness approaches suffering in dialogical terms. Referencing Buber, Marcus speaks of "a kind of 'suffering love'" (p. 150). This occurs when the sufferer "continues the dialogue, which is what really matters (i.e., with God, others and oneself), and thereby potentially opens up new life-affirming possibilities, maybe even for fashioning a more evolved self/other relation (i.e., one that points to greater beauty, truth and goodness)" (p. 150). Examining such openness as a response to the extremity of suffering in concentration camps, Marcus references an insightful and moving remark from Jean Améry (a concentration camp survivor): "Whoever is, in the broadest sense, a believing person, whether his belief be metaphysical or bound to concrete reality, transcends himself. He is not captive of his individuality; rather he is part of a spiritual continuity that is interrupted nowhere, not even in

Auschwitz” (p. 138). The response to suffering which allows one to draw meaning from life in the face of suffering, even the extreme suffering experienced by those in the Nazi concentration camps, requires that one bear this suffering *in union* with others, including other sources of meaning, and even the Divine.

In the opposite orientation, that of egotism, suffering leads to despair. Despair is a kind of narcissistic enclosure. Such closure leads to a sense in which reality lacks depth. Reality does not extend beyond one’s personal ambitions and the suffering attendant upon the limitations which such ambitions inevitably confront. Marcus notes, profoundly, that despair is a kind of lost belief that one’s suffering is shared with anyone or anything beyond one’s self.

Marcus has set himself an ambitious task in this work—no less than the revitalization of psychoanalysis. The judgement of whether he achieves that task should probably be left to the psychoanalysts who read and engage with his thought. However, the question of whether such a work deserves to be read is not difficult to answer nor is it difficult to see how it ought to be read by far more than those in the psychoanalytic discipline. For this book is a testament to the fact that a meaningful and more fulfilling life, a life in which one flourishes, is possible.

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