

BOOK REVIEW

David W. Rodick, *Gabriel Marcel and American Philosophy: The Religious Dimension of Experience* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 139pp.

In *Gabriel Marcel and American Philosophy*, David Rodick does something that has to this point received little attention in Marcel scholarship: explore Marcel's engagement with American philosophers. Rodick focuses his study on three American thinkers: Josiah Royce (1855-1916), William Ernest Hocking (1873-1966), and Henry G. Bugbee, Jr. (1915-1999). Investigating Marcel's relationship with each one through a specific theme in Marcel's thought, Rodick's overarching purpose is to illuminate Marcel's understanding of the religious dimension of experience.

The theme common to Royce and Marcel is idealism. By some accounts, Josiah Royce was the last and greatest American spokesperson for absolute idealism, the view that all elements of reality, even those which appear to be fragmentary or even contradictory, are ultimately unified in the thought of an all-encompassing consciousness. For a time, early in his intellectual development, Marcel embraced a form of idealism and also showed interest in Royce's idealism. (His book *La métaphysique de Royce* was held in high regard by Hocking as an astute treatment of Royce's philosophy.) Rodick explains Marcel's interest in idealism as stemming from "the omnipresent sense of a 'broken world'." Idealism, he says, "offered a salvific repair to this feeling of fracture" (p.1). But idealism, of the sort described here, finally lost its appeal for both Royce and Marcel. In the latter part of his career, until his death in 1916, Royce, although not entirely abandoning idealism, turned his attention to ethical considerations such as loyalty and community without which, Royce believed, human life would lack meaning. (Royce, 1913: "My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community.") For his part, Marcel abandoned idealism because, although he initially valued the security it provided, he came to experience that security as too confining, too restrictive. Rodick notes that, Marcel found "the security derived from idealism . . . something akin to a prison of immanence closing out the native air of the real" (p.1). From their respective idealist stances, both philosophers gravitated to positions that took better account of intersubjective lived experience. Thus, for example, Royce moved toward an understanding of loyalty as "a *lived* act of participation between the self and the concrete order." But in the end, argues Rodick, Marcel thought that Royce remained too much in the idealist camp. Marcel, he says, "exhibits increasing lack of patience concerning Royce's inability to free himself from the architectonic of Absolute Idealism—a failure to 'substitute the unpredictable richness of spiritual development, for the over-rigid unity of a system'" (p.6).

Rodick examines Marcel's engagement with William Ernest Hocking through the theme of intersubjective experience. Hocking had been a student of Royce at Harvard. But even during his student days, and particularly in his Ph.D. dissertation (completed in 1904), he rejected key elements of Royce's idealism. Royce, the idealist, regarded intersubjective experience as a mediated (and therefore indirect) relationship. (Royce often but not exclusively referred to the mediating principle of unity as the Absolute.) By contrast, Hocking rejected the view that intersubjective experience must be mediated, arguing in his dissertation for the possibility of direct encounter of one person with another. It was this commitment to the possibility of direct encounter

that appealed to Marcel. In Rodick's words, "Hocking's stress upon the experiential givenness of intersubjective encounter offered Marcel a compelling alternative to Royce" (p.2).

Rodick draws on one of Marcel's mature themes, *l'exigence ontologique* (ontological exigence), to explore the relationship between Marcel and Henry Bugbee. He correctly notes that Bugbee described *l'exigence ontologique* as a "moving center" of Marcel's thought, implicating us in a process of "becoming beyond ourselves." For Marcel, *l'exigence ontologique* expresses itself both as a need for some measure of cohesiveness and unity in the world and as a desire to make sense of our place within the world. At the level of intersubjective relations, *l'exigence ontologique* can be understood as a need to respond to the claim of another human being on one's attention, time, or resources.

Although Bugbee clearly recognizes *l'exigence ontologique* as central to Marcel's philosophy, it is equally clear that something like that theme is evident in Bugbee's own work prior to encountering Marcel's thought. We see it implicitly, for example, in Bugbee's 1953 essay "The Moment of Obligation in Experience" (*Journal of Religion* 33.1 (1953): 1–15), in which he discusses the dynamics of how moral obligation may supervene upon us—an event which is characterized less by constraint and internal conflict than by openhandedness and welcoming of the other.

Marcel's relationship with Bugbee was rather different than his relationships with Royce and Hocking. In the first place, Marcel was younger than both Royce and Hocking, and his philosophical views were quite in the formative stages when he encountered their writings. In his introduction to Bugbee's *The Inward Morning* (University of Georgia Press, 1999; first published 1958), Marcel says, "When I read Hocking's *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* for the first time [in 1913], I had as yet published almost nothing. This book helped to turn me in the direction of a new realism, very different indeed from traditional realism." Clearly, Marcel saw himself as the junior scholar, the mentee. In his relationship with Bugbee the roles were reversed. He first met Bugbee in 1955, when Bugbee was still an assistant professor at Harvard. At that point it had been forty-two years since he first read Hocking. In the interim, his life's work had taken definitive form: "Between these two dates, 1913-1955, the bulk of my work has taken place," he notes in the same introduction. The junior scholar was now the senior colleague; the mentee now the mentor. In the second place, Marcel had long since abandoned his early interest in idealism, and unlike Royce and Hocking, who retained vestiges of idealism in their respective philosophies throughout their careers, Bugbee was never enamored with idealism.

But there is a third and philosophically more important difference in Marcel's relationship with Bugbee than the relationships he had with Royce and Hocking. Marcel, it seems, was always attracted to what Rodick calls the religious dimension of experience, so much so that he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1929. Although he insisted that his philosophical views were distinct from his religious commitments (compatible but distinct), there is no doubt that his deeply held religious convictions figured prominently in his interest in the work of the American philosophers under consideration here. Rodick makes this point clear: "Marcel's relationship to these American philosophers is not coincidental; it is the philosophical expression of his Christian faith . . ." (p.2). But whereas Royce and Hocking both had strong and lasting interests in religious experience, as is evident in their professional activities and publications, the same cannot be said of Bugbee.

Bugbee was not religious—at least not in any conventional sense of the term. It is true that he had a deep and abiding interest in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as well as the sacred writings from other traditions. But it is not true that his interest in these sacred writings was

motivated by anything that could accurately be described as a creedal or confessional perspective, or even one broadly understood as religious. Unlike Royce and Hocking who had longstanding personal and professional interests in religious experience, Bugbee's interests centered not on religious experience *per se*, but on the more general question of how things and people are capable of claiming our concern. Thus, in his 1963 essay "A Way of Reading the Book of Job," Bugbee says, "Three elements are bound to be powerfully related to what may need to be said here: a certain style of life, closely related to the second—a certain region, a place, in which that style of life is nurtured; and a certain company of thinkers and friends." Among the thinkers and friends are people like the anguished artist Vincent Van Gogh and the secular poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose elegies and sonnets spoke to Bugbee's concerns. Neither God nor any cosmic purposes figure prominently in Bugbee's reading of the book of Job. What is at issue is Job's understanding of his own place in the world and his relationship to persons and things in the natural order. Bugbee's conclusion is that: "His [Job's] belief in *raison d'être* is strangely and wonderfully both controverted and confirmed: *L'être-même, c'est 'la raison.'* But therefore: no *raison d'être*."

Rodick correctly calls attention to Marcel's observation that he and Bugbee inhabited the same land and also to Bugbee's statements that Marcel spoke to his condition and helped him find his own voice. But the ways in which these statements are true do not easily fit into the framework of the sub-title Rodick has chosen for his book, *The Religious Dimension of Experience*. If it is true that Marcel and Bugbee inhabited the same land, it is also true that they inhabited that land on the basis of significantly different assumptions. Marcel remains the committed Christian. Bugbee is fundamentally moved by the natural order, without reference to any other transcendent being or purposes: *L'être-même, c'est 'la raison.'* But therefore: no *raison d'être*.

David Rodick has written a compelling book that merits our attention in several ways. While it is unlikely that we will see a resurgence of interest in the forms of idealism once espoused by Royce and Hocking, serious reconsideration of Marcel's engagement with the thought of these two American philosophers will lend perspective to Marcel's own short-lived embrace of idealism and his journey away from it. Marcel's engagement with the thought of Henry Bugbee is of a different order. Reconsidering the conversation between Marcel and Bugbee has the potential to stimulate new ways of thinking about Marcel's theme of ontological exigence. Finally, Rodick's book will also provoke some of us to consider anew whether Marcel's salient themes—ontological exigence, transcendence, mystery, fidelity, availability, hope—are as distinct from his theological commitments as he says.

Michael D. Palmer

Regent University