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Review Essay

Dwayne Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013)

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In his second book, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracism*, Dwayne A. Tunstall argues, with and through Lewis R. Gordon, that teleological suspensions of philosophy are imperative, which is to say that philosophers need to recognize the extra-philosophical commitments that ground their work and accept the limitations of their own disciplinary preference.¹ “For some philosophers,” he writes, “there are only arguments, but the purpose of such arguments beyond their validity is open....[One] is left at a loss to explain why philosophy without ultimate purpose does not collapse into a pseudoscience....[It] would seem that, in order to do philosophical work honestly, one has to suspend the centering of philosophy.”² And what, as a philosopher, is *his* “ultimate purpose”? What is the extra-philosophical commitment that moves *him* to decenter philosophy? There are, it seems, two, and the first is theism. Tunstall, throughout *Doing Philosophy Personally*, demonstrates a commitment to theism and, more specifically, to the belief that “the divine...is the wellspring of ethical and religious values.”³ The second (and more important) commitment is his opposition to technological depersonalization and racist dehumanization – to anything, in other words, that transforms dynamic and dignified human beings (or persons) into mere things. “As a phenomenological metaphysician,” he explains:

I am compelled to account for this experiential distinction by answering the following question: How can we adequately conserve the phenomenological distinction between viewing ourselves and our enviroing world as a collection of physical objects and events and viewing ourselves as meaning-bestowing and meaning-appreciating subjects (particularly as ethical and religious persons) in a way that

affirms the personal nature of human existence, but without negating our occasional experiences of ourselves as objects?⁴

This question is important – if not fundamental – and it leads Tunstall to the existential philosophies of Gabriel Marcel and Lewis R. Gordon, among others, whose work he tries to synthesize into a humanistic, anti-racist theism for the twenty-first century.

By far, it is Marcel who receives the most attention in *Doing Philosophy Personally*, and in chapter one, “Marcel’s Reflective Method,” Tunstall explicates the religious existentialism of the French philosopher and playwright, focusing on his “transcendentalist roots”⁵ and the distinction between primary and secondary reflection. (Not surprisingly, one of the key concepts in this analysis is personhood.) Kant makes a distinction between phenomena and noumena, Tunstall argues, and that distinction, phenomenologically interpreted, reveals the ambiguous nature of human existence – namely, that we are both *objects* and *subjects*, that we both “cognize objects in the physical world and... experience the world as one where we have a moral obligation to other persons.”⁶ For Tunstall, this ambiguity is basic, and it is Marcel who articulates it best – though hardly perfectly – in his phenomenological and anti-rationalistic “reflective method,”⁷ in which there is a distinction between primary and secondary reflection. “Whenever we view the world,” Tunstall writes, explaining Marcel’s position, “as quantifiable and objectified, we are viewing it from the vantage point of *primary reflection*. Stated differently, primary reflection is the method by which we are able to objectify ourselves and our environment for the purposes of scientific inquiry and manipulating our natural environment.”⁸ Secondary reflection, on the other hand, is when we view the world *intersubjectively*, as *co-constituted* by fellow persons “in the presence of the divine,”⁹ the “absolute Thou”¹⁰ with whom we can dialogue, however mysteriously, through prayer. For Marcel and Tunstall, it is secondary reflection that makes human (and religious) experiences intelligible – not primary reflection, which is dangerously reductionistic.

In chapter two, “Transcending Philosophy by Teleologically Suspending Philosophy,” Tunstall continues his analysis of Marcel’s “reflective method.”¹¹ He explains how primary reflection can reduce human beings, in various ways, to their “merely empirical selves,”¹² thus producing a world *without persons*, a world in which “we attempt to eliminate the mystery behind [the] momentous events in human existence.”¹³ Such a world, he argues, is populated by *problems* – by persons, in other words, from whom the non-empirical has been (tragically) excluded.¹⁴ We do not have to live in such a world, however. And why not? Because “we can transcend this level of human existence by reflecting upon our participation in being,”¹⁵ which is the very essence of secondary reflection. As Tunstall writes: “This mode of reflection is one in which we have to take ourselves in-to account. We cannot simply see the world as a

spectacle that we observe and analyze as impartial, detached analysts. We are always already participating in our environing world with other persons."¹⁶ This point is profoundly phenomenological, to be sure, and it is not surprising that Tunstall appeals to Edmund Husserl to make further sense of it. Yet it should be pointed out that Marcel, unlike Husserl and even Paul Ricoeur, the latter of whom explicitly criticizes Marcel's "reflective method,"¹⁷ is not trying to develop a rigorous scientific and/or epistemological theory in his work. Indeed, he has serious reservations about that very endeavor – reservations that speak to his extra-philosophical commitment to personalization and humanization.¹⁸ "Marcel not only questions the scientific mode of philosophic inquiry," Tunstall explains,

but also rejects any and every attempt to construct a rigorous scientific epistemology. He replaces this quest for scientific rigor with *neo-Socratism*. His neo-Socratism is a Socratic approach to philosophizing, but without the eristic dialectic wielded by Socrates in the early and middle dialogues. Marcel's neo-Socratic method allows him to examine the eidetic structures of certain personal experiences (for example, hope, fidelity, and love) and their significance in our lives.¹⁹

Of course, many of these personal experiences constitute extra-philosophical values and commitments, which brings us back to Gordon's teleological suspension of philosophy, through which, according to Tunstall, we can better understand (and hopefully appreciate) Marcel's "reflective method." After all, as he points out near the end of the chapter, "philosophic inquiry would have little to no significance apart from its extra-philosophical content."²⁰

In chapter three, "Living in a Broken World," Tunstall examines Marcel's critique of depersonalization and dehumanization, which alienate human beings from being and thus from other human beings – to say nothing of the divine, the aforementioned "wellspring of ethical and religious values."²¹ (For many readers, this is where things will get especially interesting.) As Tunstall explains: "Marcel devised his...method as a means of conserving the ontological significance of human existence in a technocratic, ideological, and bureaucratic age...one in which many Westerners have, to their own detriment, forgotten the ontological exigency for being."²² And what characterizes such an age? There are any number of examples—from the reduction of human beings to their quantifiable functions, to the regulation of virtually all aspects of human life; from the growing secularization of modern society, to the mind-numbing effects of technology. These things, according to Marcel, have broken our "sacred"²³ world, and now, as a result, "we lose the intimate sense of human experience and replace it with a sense of being a cog in a massive, social machine."²⁴ (To better understand what Marcel is criticizing, think about the dystopian film *Brazil*, directed by Terry Gilliam, and how we seem to be moving in that decidedly absurd direction.) This is what Marcel saw in

World War I, in which he was a volunteer for the Red Cross, and especially in World War II, about which he writes some very interesting – and somewhat controversial – things, most of them concerning technology and its very real dangers.²⁵ As Tunstall writes, explaining Marcel's position:

What makes this attitude of [technological] mastery so dangerous is that it causes us to forget our exigency for being and replaces it with an insatiable desire for more advanced technological devices and services. As a consequence of this forgetting of being, we do not view technology as a means for us to better commune with other persons; rather, technology accelerates the dehumanization of persons by making it easier to view ourselves as reducible to material bodies that are dependent upon technological devices and services to make their existence intelligible and meaningful.²⁶

There are countless examples of this accelerated dehumanization—some extraordinary, some mundane—and Tunstall appeals to Martin Heidegger and (neo-Heideggerian) Albert Borgmann to substantiate them, not only theoretically, but also empirically.²⁷ He then concludes the chapter with a few words about Marcel's generally “neglected...sociopolitical thought,”²⁸ the normative thrust of which is that we must, as persons, oppose depersonalization and dehumanization in the global world, but in a way that avoids *abstraction* and (what many people refer to as) *essentialism*.

In chapter four, “Lewis Gordon on Antiracist Racism,” Tunstall affirms Marcel's “reflective method” and his critique of technological depersonalization, but not uncritically. He points out that Marcel, his theoretical work on “technologies of degradation”²⁹ notwithstanding, does not say much about antiracist racism, which is, hands down, one of the most extreme (and obvious) forms of depersonalization in the modern world. For Tunstall, this oversight is glaring and barely forgivable; moreover, it must be addressed if Marcel is going to be useful at all in the twenty-first century, which is still organized by “the color-line”³⁰ in any number of ways. And who can provide an account of antiracist racism that is compatible with Marcel's critique of depersonalization? Gordon, not surprisingly, who argues that antiracist racism should be understood in terms of bad faith. As Tunstall writes:

Bad faith is an effort by human persons to absolve themselves from their responsibility in coconstituting their own lives and their social institutions....In more Sartrean terms, *individual* bad faith occurs whenever we deny our role in coconstituting the meaningfulness of the phenomena we experience. *Institutional* bad faith, on the other hand, occurs whenever we neglect to recognize how we continually co-constitute with other persons the social institutions in which we live and simply regard [them] as ready-made entities.³¹

Of course, what follows from this description is that bad faith is really a denial of freedom and thus a denial of humanity itself, as freedom is, for existentialists like Gordon, the defining characteristic of the human being.³² Antiracist racism is a form of bad faith here because it denies the freedom – the dynamic subjective life – of non-whites and reduces them to mere things, to problematic things. “The black Other,” Tunstall says, “is not a Levinasian Other (*l’autrui*) whom antiracist white racists recognize as a fellow person. For the white antiracist, the black Other is *less than a person* while the white antiracist occupies the peculiar position of regarding himself or herself as a self-sufficient and self-justifying being, precisely the characteristics traditionally possessed by the divine.”³³ This is the very essence of racist dehumanization, and this is, according to Tunstall, what Marcel’s “reflective method” needs in order to be relevant today. As he declares at the end of the chapter: “Proponents of Marcel’s reflective method...need to examine how being racially black is seen by many to be a depersonalizing thing.”³⁴

In chapter five, “Criticizing Marcel’s Reflective Method,” Tunstall investigates this unfortunate oversight in Marcel’s “reflective method” further and concludes that Marcel “accepted...a colonialist logic with respect to African persons,”³⁵ and that his “sociopolitical thought advances a weak version of antiracist racist reasoning.”³⁶ And how does he arrive at this undeniably harsh conclusion? By submitting Marcel to an uncompromising Fanonian critique. Like many French liberals, Tunstall points out, Marcel was explicitly disgusted by American racism – epitomized by Jim Crow – but not by the racism and colonial, white supremacist practices of his own country.³⁷ Indeed, Marcel takes the position that colonialism is often *beneficial*, and that the oppressive excesses of colonialism are bad, not because they depersonalize or dehumanize native peoples, but because torturous practices – in colonial Algeria, for example – are “*unbecoming* of French citizens.”³⁸ For Tunstall, these positions are deeply offensive and obviously unacceptable, but they do not render Marcel’s “reflective method” useless or somehow beyond theoretical redemption.³⁹ “Marcel is right,” he explains, “to worry about Western modernity’s tendency to devalue human personhood. However, he is blind to the fact that the conditions that he had worried would befall Western Europeans...had already been in existence *for centuries*...in the lives of enslaved and colonized African persons.”⁴⁰ To “save” Marcel, he concludes, as a relevant philosopher with something to say about our deeply depersonalizing times, it is necessary to exercise these demons from his work—through Gordon, Fanon, and even Enrique Dussel.⁴¹

Ultimately, *Doing Philosophy Personally* is an attempt to construct – or to begin constructing – a humanistic, anti-racist theism for the twenty-first century. By bringing together the existential philosophies of Marcel and Gordon, Tunstall hopes to contribute to the personalization and humanization of the world—an excellent, unabashedly ambitious goal. Is his

text successful? For the most part, *yes*. *Doing Philosophy Personally* is clearly written, well argued, and remarkably thoughtful; it is also a text with an important extra-philosophical purpose, which is not always the case. Having said that, there are some problems with Marcel's "reflective method" that are not addressed in the text, at least one of which, it seems, could easily derail Tunstall's liberatory project. The first is Marcel's (apparent) social conservatism, which comes out in his analysis of the Holocaust and in his analysis of contraceptive technology. To argue, as Marcel does, that the Holocaust was caused by secularization is a dangerous position, and the fact that racist dehumanization against non-whites existed for centuries *before* the so-called "death of God" took place demonstrates that sadism is flexible and compatible both with religious and non-religious worlds. Moreover, to argue, as Marcel does, that contraception is "degrading"⁴² is to reduce men and women – *especially* women – to their respective reproductive functions, thus preventing them from full participation in being. Could not contraception promote greater personalization and humanization in the world?

The second (and more serious) problem with Marcel's "reflective method" is his overblown fear of "sociopolitical abstractions,"⁴³ which is to say that his principled rejection of group identities is unnecessary – if not historically dangerous. He understands, correctly, that such identities can lead to fanaticism and dehumanizing violence, and his conclusion is that we should not appeal to them *at all* in our sociopolitical lives, that we should basically *abandon them all* in one fell swoop. As Tunstall explains: "This affective attachment is dangerous precisely because persons are willing to act on ill-conceived abstractions...regardless of the consequences for *actual* persons. All that matters to persons possessed by the spirit of abstraction is the realization of their abstractions at any cost."⁴⁴ Such an attitude, to be sure, is dangerous and undesirable, and Marcel is right to criticize it. But does he have to reject group identities full stop, many of which, even in recent years, have been sites of personalization, humanization, and sociopolitical liberation? Can Marcel (or Tunstall, for that matter) achieve the normative goal of a more human world – a world of intersubjective fraternity – without *solidarity*? I think not, and my worry, to conclude, is that this liberatory philosophy, for all of its normative content, does not allow for a meaningful, transformative praxis of the world.

1 His first book is Dwayne A. Tunstall, *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

- 2 Dwayne A. Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracist Racism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 10, emphasis added.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 7 Unlike most people, who address him in terms of his “religious existentialism,” Tunstall address Marcel in terms of his “reflective method.” As he writes in *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 19: “This way of describing his philosophy allows us to trace it back to its Kantian transcendentalist roots. Once we recognize the...roots of his reflective method, we can better appreciate why he performs a detailed examination of the meaningfulness of human existence through such detrimental, life-affirming, or life-altering events as the death of a loved one, religious faith, despair, communion, hope, and love: To reveal us as beings who are primarily persons.”
- 8 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 24.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 11 In this chapter, Tunstall discusses Gabriel Marcel, “Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery,” in *Gabriel Marcel's Perspective on The Broken World*, trans. Katharine Rose Hanley (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 172-196, a later work in which primary and secondary reflection are explicitly related.
- 12 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 35.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 14 Of course, W.E.B. Du Bois makes a similar point in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which the experience of antiblack racism in the United States is described in terms of ontological problematization. Unfortunately, this connection is neither addressed nor explored by Tunstall in the text.
- 15 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 36.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 17 See Paul Ricoeur, “Gabriel Marcel and Phenomenology,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel: Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 17, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (La Salle: Open Court, 1984), 471-494.
- 18 Marcel is committed to personalization and humanization, but not, unfortunately, in terms of liberatory praxis - a critical point that I will explore later in this review.
- 19 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 51, emphasis added.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 58.

- 23 As Tunstall notes in *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 65: “Marcel thinks that the sacred is more than the sense that our environing world is our home and a gift we should cherish and maintain. It is also the phenomenon underlying our sense that our own lives, other persons’ lives, and the lives of every other living creature is a gift.”
- 24 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 25 For example, as Tunstall explains in *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 61: “Marcel thinks that the Holocaust, along with the earlier horrors of the twentieth century, was made possible by many European intellectuals and professionals...who ceased conceiving of humans as creatures endowed with life by their Creator. This denial of the divine ushered in the death throes of persons.”
- 26 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 27 See especially Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- 28 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 73.
- 29 See, for example, Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regency, 1962).
- 30 Recall what W.E.B. Du Bois says in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), v: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”
- 31 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 84, emphasis added.
- 32 This is not radical freedom or pure transcendence, but rather situated freedom - freedom in the flesh, freedom in history and culture.
- 33 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 85, emphasis added.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 37 The racist hypocrisy of white liberals is an important theme in the black radical tradition - from Aimé Césaire to Frantz Fanon, from Malcolm X to Steve Biko.
- 38 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 106, emphasis added.
- 39 One could say, regarding this point, that when it comes to Marcel, Tunstall is unwilling to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. However, this begs the question: What is so special about Marcel’s “reflective method” that Tunstall is willing to commit himself so profoundly to its critical makeover and reintroduction?
- 40 Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally*, 108, emphasis added.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*, 62-63.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 73.