

Preface



A *warning*: If you are here to read a scholarly treatise on Gabriel Marcel's religious existentialism or on Lewis R. Gordon's Africana existentialism, then you are reading the wrong book. Please don't misunderstand me. Yes, this book *is* a scholarly text. I summarize Marcel's religious existentialism in the first three chapters of this book. I also summarize Gordon's notion of teleologically suspending philosophy in the introduction and in chapter 2. Moreover, I provide an explanation of Gordon's existential phenomenological account of antiblack racism in chapter 4. Even though this book reads like a scholarly treatise in certain places, it is actually a record of my musings on a constellation of topics I have studied for several years. These topics include Gabriel Marcel's religious existentialism, the depersonalizing forces in twentieth-century Western societies that Marcel criticized in his writings, antiblack racism, and a theism that is opposed to antiblack racism. If you find any of these topics fascinating or worthwhile, please continue reading. Otherwise, you might be better off reading a more traditional scholarly text on Marcel's thought or Gordon's thought.

This book is the culmination of several years working on three projects. The first project is a reimagining of metaphysics for the twenty-first century, inspired by the traditions of early twentieth-century American idealism, European existential phenomenology, and Africana philosophy of existence. The three philosophers who have inspired me the most with respect to this project are Josiah Royce, Marcel, and Gordon. This project has led me to the tentative

conclusion that axiology, or the theory of value, ought to be considered first philosophy. (Then again, I might not be reimagining anything here. Rather, I might be *returning* to value theory as practiced by Max Scheler in Germany and Alain Locke in the United States during the early twentieth-century.) Once axiology is considered to be first philosophy, philosophical concepts and theories become the conceptual expressions and refinements of a philosopher's prereflective presuppositions, intuitions, values, and temperaments. Yet, no philosophical system is reducible just to the intellectual self-concept of the philosopher or philosophers who advances it. Its plausibility depends, to a large degree, on how well it describes some feature or set of features of human existence and, when applicable, of the world.

Given this criterion for determining the plausibility of a philosophical system, I cannot help but be drawn to the Kantian transcendental tradition. At its best, this tradition seeks to depict faithfully the experiential dualism many Western peoples experience in their lives: namely, between viewing ourselves as things subject to natural laws and viewing ourselves as ethico-religious persons in late Western modernity. Like some philosophers in the Kantian transcendental traditions (for example, Edmund Husserl, certain readings of Emmanuel Levinas, and David Carr), I think that we should conserve this distinction because without it Western societies tend to depersonalize human existence in general and depersonalize those who live at the margins of those societies in particular. Even though Marcel is not normally associated with the Kantian transcendental tradition, I think that his reflective method fits quite well within that tradition.

The second project involves me revisiting philosophers from previous historical eras to unearth and revive some of the wisdom and insights present there. My first book, *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight*, is an example of how I seek to revisit previous historical eras of philosophy, particularly Western philosophy, for what lessons past philosophers can teach us presently. That book was about Josiah Royce's philosophy because I think his ethico-religious insight could be a means for theistic people to affirm the importance of interpersonal relationships in a social and cultural

environment that is too often governed by an impersonal, bureaucratic mindset.

Unfortunately, I no longer think that Royce's ethico-religious insight alone is an adequate response to the impersonal environment in which we currently live. His insight is too dependent on his absolutistic idealism, which obscures the phenomenological richness of his insight in a fog of philosophical postulates. Marcel had criticized Royce for this very reason nearly a century ago in his series of articles on Royce's metaphysics in *Royce's Metaphysics*.¹ Following Marcel, perhaps Royce's ethico-religious insight can be better advanced by associating it with a phenomenologically nuanced religious existentialism. That is how I was led away from studying Royce's philosophy and eventually began studying Marcel's religious existentialism, or what I will call Marcel's *reflective method*. The first three chapters of this book are the result of my study of Marcel's reflective method.

The third project involves me exploring the philosophical implications of racial identity formation and antiblack racism in a North American and global context. As I studied Marcel's reflective method, I noticed that Marcel had founded his philosophy on a commitment to combat racism in all its forms. Yet he had neglected to examine one of the most, if not the most, pernicious forms of racism existing in North American and Europe during his time, antiblack racism. This is an oversight that needs to be addressed for Marcel's reflective method to be faithful to its own foundational commitments, as I interpret those commitments. I did not know how to address this problem in Marcel's reflective method until I came across Gordon's philosophy of existence. Gordon's compatibility with Marcel's religious existentialism, his work in race theory, and his sensitivity to the Kantian transcendental tradition makes his philosophy the most appropriate means of addressing Marcel's neglect of antiblack racism.

Even though I will outline the central ideas of this book in the introduction, I might as well tell readers upfront what this book is about. It is my attempt to make sense of the following ideas and approaches to philosophy: Marcel's reflective method, the teleological suspension of philosophy, and a humanistic theism that commits its

adherents to battle against antiblack racism wherever it is found. It is also my attempt to defend the following two contentions: Marcel's reflective method can be fruitfully interpreted in terms of Gordon's teleological suspension of philosophy; and by modifying Marcel's reflective method to account for the persistence of antiblack racism in contemporary US society, it can effectively criticize and oppose antiblack racism in late Western modernity.