

## BOOK REVIEW

Margaret Mullan, *Seeking Communion as Healing Dialogue: Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy for Today* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 167 pp.

The thought of Gabriel Marcel seems to offer a limitless catalogue of theoretical opportunities such that his ideas can be employed to address questions that arise in disciplines other than philosophy. Margaret Mullan's recent book provides one such illustration of the uniqueness of Marcel's philosophy. A professor trained in communication studies, Mullan finds in Marcel a decisive stimulus for developing a theory of communications that she believes is capable of surpassing the problems that accompany living with technology today. She argues that Marcel, decades ago, had correctly identified technology as a perennial problem for interpersonal dialogue. By joining his philosophy to contemporary theories of communications, Mullan focuses on how Marcel's approach to technology affects our understanding of, and participation in, the social world (8). She argues that Marcel's existentialism provides a highly perceptive reading of the risks and failures associated with a technological paradigm that has come to permeate social life today (9).

Mullan's argument can be traced along two major threads: firstly, the problem of technology and, secondly, its potential resolution. The first thread follows Marcel's ideas concerning the staging of our social environment as a technologically informed reality. In this way, Mullan locates Marcel's philosophy within a context of the increasing presence of technology seen, for instance, in rising levels of industrialization and bureaucratization. Marcel's fundamental question, as she observes, is "do technics principally improve or degrade human living?" (21). While some techniques, so to speak, can provide effective avenues for improving standards of living in one area; they can prove to be hindrances in others. The underlying issue here, argues Mullan, is that technology as a form of artificial improvement tends to disconnect us from social environments of lived experience. While some techniques might bolster the creativity of the person, others degrade it; moreover, they disrupt our rhythm of life on an interior level, that is, within the sphere of the life-world. In short, according to Mullan, technology can offer a false promise of redemption in which we wrongly presume that our problems can be resolved by means of material corrections, meanwhile ignoring the spiritual life of the person. So, as she asks, how did we arrive at this point?

Our inability to properly understand the subtle distinction between technology that helps versus technology that hinders arises in what Mullan describes as a problem of uneasiness. The reason we cannot fully grasp the problem at hand is because, in the spirit of Heidegger's hermeneutical project, we no longer understand how to ask the question and parse its layers. Doing so requires shaking up our interior life on an affective level (49-51). Here, she invokes Marcel's notion of a mystery as a category for understanding the interior, lived dimensions of the problem of technology. What is necessary is an ontological reawakening by way of our attitudes towards technology such that we can go beyond its manifestations in politics, economics, engineering, social media, etc., and penetrate more deeply the spiritual risks at stake (55-58). While acknowledging that we cannot turn back the clock with regard to technology, Marcel notes that

the fact of the matter is that the spiritual tension is “already there” and we can feel it on an affective level before we reflect on it. The question then becomes how to resolve this tension. This brings us to the author’s second major thread.

Mullan’s emphasis on a pre-reflective awareness of technology is centered on her development of Marcel’s philosophy of the body as a basic building block for understanding collective life. By starting with the carnal, she hopes to uncover what grounds and awakens consciousness as it comes to terms with the multifaceted play of human existence increasingly permeated by technological devices. Our ways of feeling, hearing, touching, and sensing our environments contain within themselves a hermeneutic of their own that technology is incapable of replicating or even advancing. As Mullan suggests, our bodies communicate and process meaning differently than technology. The body, unlike technology, retains and projects meaning on a level of lived experience; encounters are between embodied subjects not simulations. Moreover, by displacing this attitude, we also supplant the grounds for existence by which we can make an appeal to other human beings who also undergo circumstances and tribulations of their own. In other words, interpersonal problems are relegated to a sphere of virtual relations rather than relations *in concreto*. Indeed, our first relation with the Other occurs not through technology but in and through our bodies. In feeling the presence of the Other, this felt relationship opens a line of dialogue and demonstrates that alterity (or otherness) is neither remote nor a façade.

The question of alterity naturally brings us to the theme of intersubjectivity. For Mullan, who is keen on constructing bridges of communication, the essential hurdle to overcome concerns her observation that we are in great danger of no longer maintaining contact *with* others. Here, she draws from Marcel’s distinction between “being” present versus “having” a presence. In the latter case, we might take up spatial-temporal dimensions alongside another, but we are not *present* to them as one human to another. Contradistinctively, it is in the case of being present that we make ourselves fully attentive to the needs of the Other such that we acknowledge them beyond mere material relations. In this way, the social world unfolds into a nexus of ethical questions in which we become more aware of the Other as the Other. We read the interpersonal signals available to us such that we furnish a metaphysics of “we-ness.” Mullan calls this approach a communication of presence; it is a modality of collective life that is *de facto* open and not closed, thus, calling for an ethics of communication (113-114). To do otherwise—to ignore the presence of the Other as a presence—is equal to rendering their existence null and void (95-97). Communication requires (and indeed leads to) ethics.

In sum, Mullan accurately depicts the relationship between technology and the person so as to make apparent what a healthy dialogue that heals—not hurts—ought to look like. In this way, Marcel’s existential philosophy is a necessary and compelling guide to orient a study of contemporary communication ethics. While some philosophers might fault her for lacking interpretive depth in her reading of Marcel and his fellow continental interlocutors, we cannot fault her for her overall thesis that the most authentic and humane form of communication occurs as a first-person communion of selfless presence. Indeed, echoing Marcel, if our goal is to create a more integrated social life, then we must remain steadfast to a vision of open dialogue in all areas of practice. Marcel scholarship should benefit greatly from Mullan’s study, an illuminating twenty-first century interpretation of questions that were profoundly important to Marcel himself more than half a century ago.