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Amazon book review of Dwayne Tunstall's Doing Philosophy Personally (2013)

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DWAYNE A. TUNSTALL, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiblack Racism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013: 176 pages.

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This book is Tunstall's second contribution to the American Philosophy series. His first contribution was *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight* (2009).

This second contribution outlines "a phenomenological metaphysical system" that attempts to makes sense of "certain ethico-religious values" (18). In particular, Tunstall values "a theism that is opposed to antiblack racism" (xi). This book was inspired by the work of three philosophers: Josiah Royce, Gabriel Marcel, and Lewis R. Gordon.

Tunstall's Preface is followed by Acknowledgments, an Introduction (1-18), and six chapters: 1—"Marcel's Reflective Method" (19-33), 2—"Transcending Philosophy by Teleologically Suspending Philosophy" (34-56), 3—"Living in a Broken World" (57-79), 4—"Lewis Gordon on Antiblack Racism" (80-100), 5—"Criticizing Marcel's Reflective Method" (101-112), and 6—"Conclusion: Imagining an Antiracist Humanistic Theism" (113-121), followed by Notes (123-153), Bibliography (155-172), an Index (173-176), and a list of thirty-seven books in the American Philosophy series (177-179).

Unlike many modern philosophical metaphysicians, Tunstall recognizes that "every metaphysical system is necessarily the construction of a metaphysician who happens to be sensitive to certain features of our being-in-the-world and neglects other features of our being-in-the-world" (17). By extending Alain Lock's view of philosophy, Tunstall conceives of metaphysical inquiry as "a systematic articulation of how metaphysicians comprehend their being-in-the-world" (17). Accordingly, Tunstall conceives that metaphysics is "less like a natural science (such as physics) and more like an artistic endeavor (such as storytelling)" (17).

Tunstall's method of "reimagining" metaphysics "for the twenty-first century" (xi) includes synthesizing Gabriel Marcel's religious existentialism and reflective method with Lewis R. Gordon's Africana existentialism, Gordon's "teleologically suspending philosophy," and Gordon's "existential phenomenological account of antiblack racism" (xi). Much of this book is appreciative description, criticism, and correction of Marcel's work. Appreciation of Marcel's emphasis upon "*person*" is indicated in Tunstall's book title—"Doing Philosophy *Personally*." Tunstall criticizes Marcel's "religious existentialism" for "neglecting one of the most prominent forms of depersonalization in the twentieth century, antiblack racism" (80). Tunstall says: "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 America 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 …" (xiii) Tunstall finds that

supplementing Marcel with Gordon is "the most appropriate means of addressing Marcel's neglect of antiblack racism" (xiii).

The problem of neglecting antiblack racism is solved by synthesizing Marcelian and Gordonian philosophies. However, in his concluding chapter, Tunstall finds that this synthesis is not adequate for solving an important theological and ethical problem. The problem is that Western theism presents a conception of God that, at best, fails to inspire ethical struggles against antiblack racism, and, at worst, supports antiblack racism by conceiving of God as the ultimate antiblack racist.

For the sake of solving this black theodicy problem, Tunstall turns to William R. Jones's *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998 second edition, originally 1973). Jones is a black religious humanist, a convert "from black Christian fundamentalism to black religious humanism" (1998 [c1973]: vii). Here Jones demonstrates that black theology's commitment to human liberation is contradicted by its commitment to the traditional Western conception of omnipotence. Where by definition 'omnipotence' means God is unilaterally wholly determinative of all events, the facts of racially oppressive events require conceiving that God *is* a white racist! So defined, omnipotence contradicts omnibenevolence and black liberation ethics. As an alternative to embracing this contradictory definition of omnipotence, Jones prescribes redefining omnipotence to mean universal "codetermining power" (1998 [c1973]: 188). Accordingly, humans and God codetermine human events. And for human contributions to the codeterminative process, humans are ultimately responsible ["*the functional ultimacy of wo/man*" (Jones 1998 [c1973]: xxviii, 213)]. This "hybrid of humanism and theism" is called "humanocentric theism" (Jones 1998 [c1973]: 186). Thus, by interpreting Marcel's philosophy and method in terms of Gordon's philosophy and method, and then by appreciating Jones's humanocentric theism, Tunstall is able to "make sense" of the idea of "a humanistic theism" that requires and inspires "battle against antiblack racism" (Tunstall 2013: xiii-xiv).

Jones's redefinition of omnipotence enables progressing from <a contradictory theology and ethics> to <a theology coherent with itself and human liberation>. This is major progress. Nevertheless, while appreciating Jones's contribution to theological and ethical progress, Tunstall is also critical of Jones's humanocentric theism.

Tunstall describes Jones's humanocentric theism as a "means of sidestepping the traditional theodicy problem" that "seeks to suspend the theodicy issue, as traditionally understood" for the sake of moving on to questions about human liberation (2013: 119). Though Jones argues for a "redefinition" (1998 [c1973]: 192) of omnipotence; Tunstall accepts the traditional understanding. He describes humanocentric theism's co-determinative deity as "not omnipotent" and "not able to work by himself, herself, or itself" (Tunstall 2013: 120) According to traditional Western metaphysics, <not able to work unilaterally> entails <not omnipotent> by definition. Tunstall's critical description agrees with the traditional definition of omnipotence.

The traditional/classical definition of omnipotence is said to be mistaken by Charles Hartshorne in *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984). Hartshorne's neoclassical correction resembles Jones's redefinition. A correct definition of omnipotence is essential to formulating an

adequate solution to the theodicy problem and to formulating an adequate account of human ethical responsibilities for liberation struggles.

For technical philosophers interested in appreciating, criticizing, and improving upon work on modern depersonalizing forces by Gabriel Marcel via constructive appeals to work on antiblack racism by Lewis R. Gordon and Josiah Royce (and others), Tunstall's book is very compelling. Moreover, aspiring scholars who have not yet studied these philosophers may find that Tunstall's summary descriptions render this book intelligible to serious study. And for scholars interested in humanist contributions to advancing black liberation theology, Tunstall's nine-page concluding attempt at "imagining an antiracist humanistic theism" (113) is very interesting. To be sure, some of us cannot resist seeing Tunstall's 2013 deliberation on William R. Jones's 1973 publication as marking its 40th anniversary.

In any event, anniversary marker or not, Tunstall's book is another important contribution to an important scholarly series.