

BOOK REVIEW

Schaafsma, Petruschka, *Family and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 336 pp.

Petruschka Schaafsma's *Family and Christian Ethics* will surprise many readers. The text does not take aim at the myriad of contemporary controversies surrounding family, such as divorce, in vitro fertilization, same sex marriage, parental responsibilities, etc. It does not, as one might expect from a book with such a title, offer specific ethical guidance, Christian or otherwise, to such debates. Nor does Schaafsma take a position regarding the polarized question of whether family is a fundamental social good (conservative principle) versus a restrictive form of life that represses alternatives (progressive critique). The family exists between and within such dichotomies. While Schaafsma gives voice to representatives of each perspective, the decision not to take sides allows *Family and Christian Ethics* to pursue an ethical perspective that emerges from this open and neutral approach. Such a perspective recognizes that family, defined as a sacred good, could institutionalize destructive forms of family life, specifically for individuals and communities that do not fit within the lived reality of that life. Yet one must also avoid a fundamental suspicion of moral claims that are centered upon the value of the family. Schaafsma's approach to family ethics reminds us not to blindly trust the institution of the family as a good, while also recognizing that there is an underlying ethical value and form of good associated with family life.

Of her open and neutral approach Schaafsma explains that:

It is basic in that it asks for meaning at the fundamental level underlying different kinds of family relations and behavior, like those between partners or parents and children. It is open in the sense that we do not define beforehand what a family is, but include what people experience as family. It is neutral in the sense that it is not prompted by worries over family decline or persistence (20).

As representative of an open, neutral approach, Schaafsma frames tensions between modernity and tradition within the horizon of a past that was less stable, strictly defined, and more idealized than is commonly perceived. As a reflection on our time, Schaafsma should be commended for remaining true to the fluidity of contemporary family structures while also situating these changes in a historical account that illustrates family as having always possessed a dynamic structure.

To the worry that an open and fluid approach risks leaving family devoid of content, Schaafsma contends that there is something distinctive about family. She refers to it as the family tie and understands it in terms of mystery. Mystery becomes the master key of Schaafsma's approach. First, it is through mystery that an ethical orientation emerges. For the readers of *Marcel Studies*, the concept of mystery will be familiar. Mystery maintains the openness and dynamism of Marcel's ontology and equally serves that function with regard to family relations. Finally, mystery serves as Schaafsma's entryway to Marcellian thought.

Understanding family through mystery leads to a text that is Marcelian in disposition. Schaafsma focuses on family as a lived reality. This focus reveals characteristics of givenness and dependence that require one's participation. To understand family is to participate in givenness—a givenness that makes demands on each of its members while also pointing beyond those members to something more. As the author attests, Marcel presents a phenomenology of family that is grounded on givenness, dependence, and participation:

[T]he difficulty of naming what family might mean and...the controversial moral status of the family theme...could easily have made our project negative in nature. However, Gabriel Marcel's notion of family as mystery has provided us with a concept to express this difficulty and with the impulses to incorporate it into a constructive approach (290).

While Marcel provides Schaafsma with a conceptual framework to understand what family as mystery could mean, she also provides a service to Marcel scholarship. Her text unpacks Marcel's sense of mystery, both conceptually and concretely. Conceptually, givenness, dependence, and participation are established as foundational to mystery. They are necessary elements of mystery as well as the basis for the ethical orientation that emerges from mystery. Concretely, Schaafsma explores mystery in a way that Marcel would admire. Literature, Biblical texts, and art are resources that place givenness, dependence, and participation in lived experience. For Schaafsma like Marcel, these resources allow the concrete nature of life to be encountered in drama, as part of an intersubjective story.

In defining mystery, givenness and dependence operate in tandem. Family is a testament to the fact that one discovers oneself through a set of circumstances that one does not create. Schaafsma frames the individual as an incarnate response to the power that brought two individuals together. One discovers oneself in relation to family (even if in the negative context of one abandoned by their family). Rather than unleashing an autonomous agent, family is the living presence of a duty to which the members of the family are answerable (and this is true regardless of whether they positively respond to the calling). In this manner, familial givenness is a moral appeal. Yet givenness points beyond moral duty insofar as it harbors a surplus of meaning. This is a surplus that, when understood in both a theological and Marcelian framework, points to the given as a gift.

Family, as a manifestation of the given nature of reality, is situated in opposition to a contemporary age where givenness does not tend to be viewed in positive terms. Schaafsma provides valuable social analysis in this regard. She highlights how individualism and independence have taken precedence over givenness. Givenness thus becomes an obstacle in the pursuit of individual autonomy and a desire for control. Viewed as beneficial, givenness challenges as well as offers a worthwhile reminder to the modern paradigm, which establishes autonomy as a foundational value.

Much of Schaafsma's social analysis could also apply to the conjunction of givenness with dependence. Family is the site where "givenness" is experienced "as a fundamental dependence." Understood as a moral call, the imperative is not dependence for the sake of dependence, but a recognition that our original dependence places limits on our claim for autonomy. Family reminds us that we are all born dependent and calls forth a "fundamental trust" (286). Like Marcel, Schaafsma links a trust born of givenness to intersubjective reality. Family speaks to the shared nature of individual reality. Family speaks to the fact that we cannot understand ourselves without reference to others. Family speaks to the self as fundamentally interwoven with others.

Both Schaafsma and Marcel view the self as most truly a *we* as opposed to a *me*. Both thinkers offer notable contributions to this view of the self. Schaafsma connects the *we* to a nexus of the present, past, and future. Family involves one's participation in a heritage. It calls one to craft a present and is a promise to the future. Marcel also calls for our recognition of the expansive nature of the self. Familial love provides hope that the past lives in the immortality of the deceased, while also carrying an unconditional pledge to the future. Marcel famously declared that "to love someone, is to say to that person: 'Thou, thou shall not die.'" (See *Thou Shall not Die* (St. Augustine's Press, 2009)). We are involved, in other words, in a present that expands beyond itself. Family represents a site where the pact between humanity and life, in its fullest sense, can be experienced. We discover ourselves in a reality that speaks not only to our dependence on others, but which carries obligations to others. Schaafsma draws on the Marcelian distinction between primary and secondary reflection to make the case that family is something that can only be understood via our participation in it. One of the values of her text is illustrating how the bond of a family tie immerses us in a field of intersubjectivity that we can never fully understand and which harbors the promise of the sacred and even the Divine.

As mentioned at the outset of this review, Schaafsma offers her readers an ethical orientation rather than ethical prescriptions. Family is a manifestation of givenness and dependence. We wake up in a reality of which we are not the source and yet which carries unconditional commitments. We are not mere subjects, however, but participants in the realization of these commitments. The uneven realization of such commitments and the ambiguities associated with their realization are detailed in Schaafsma's expansive exploration of family. In addition to Marcel, she engages with the work of Hegel, Judith Butler, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Rembrandt paintings, *Hosea*, and, among others, the philosopher Schleiermacher. Throughout her exploration, mystery speaks to our involvement with commitments that expand beyond the self and which require creativity in their fulfillment.

Schaafsma exhibits intellectual dexterity in the range of figures she examines as well as her insight regarding Marcel's notion of mystery and participation. For the Marcel scholar, she draws Marcel's limited reflections on family into a broader intellectual conversation, also providing insight into how these reflections, in conjunction with the notion of mystery, provide an ethical orientation. For this reviewer, my only misgiving is a perhaps selfish or parochial desire for further interaction with Marcel's thought. Further development of Marcel's notion of creativity fidelity as well as his thoughts on death and immortality are promises of the text. One wonders about the way in which Schaafsma's insights regarding family as the nexus of the present, past, and future might be developed in light of Marcel's expansive vision of love and immortality. Specifically with regard to Marcel's drama, there is worthwhile work to be done. The idea of family as a surplus of meaning, which in its fullest promise involves the sacred, would also be interesting to develop in relation to Marcel's thoughts on love and the pleroma of being. Yet these misgivings are simultaneously a testament to the quality of the insights in this book, a text that leaves one wanting more.

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