

GABRIEL MARCEL: MYSTERY OF BEING

In the past Existentialism in continental Europe was dominated by the profound but deplorable influence of Sartre's atheistic existentialism, of which even Heidegger is known to have said, "Good God! I never intended that!" But now into a continent filled with the ideas of despair, betrayal and suicide comes hope. Sartre's famous dictum—*L'enfer, c'est les autres*,¹ "Hell is other people"—ceases to be heard, and is being replaced by the cry of Marcel—*Il n'y a qu'une souffrance, c'est d'être seul*,² "There is only one suffering, that is to be alone." Marcel shows to the younger generation that a theistic existentialism is possible. How is it possible?

The existentialist's primary concern is with material being, with physical reality. He recognizes the existence of this being but admits that it is unknowable immediately. The truth of material being must be discovered, and can only be discovered, through a concrete analysis of man's everyday encounter with this being. Sartre analyzed this being and discovered it to be nothing, hence, his philosophy of despair. Marcel analyzed this same being and discovered it to be mysterious, hence, his philosophy of hope. The concern here will not be with the nothingness and despair of Sartre, but rather with the mystery and hope of Marcel.

Marcel's philosophical search for being begins from no other existential experience than his own. His whole philosophical method derives its origin from his own personality, his love of music and his artistic vision of drama. Marcel himself is convinced "that it is in drama and through drama that metaphysical thought grasps and defines itself *in concreto*."³ Drama assumes its place with philosophy at the height of man's experience. Marcel's drama reveals the loneliness, misunderstanding and frustrated love of man while his philosophy reveals man's longing for communication through love, hope and fidelity. Man's search for being, then, becomes the "drama of communion."

His whole philosophical development, as he says, has been centered around "the exigence of being" and the "obsession with beings grasped in their singularity and at the same time caught up in the mysterious relationship which binds them together."⁴ Marcel's inquiry into exigence or urgency of being begins with the experience of the individual's "being-in-the-

world." It then becomes the duty of the philosopher to illuminate this human situation, for only the proper illumination of our human situation leads to an understanding of man's human existence. For Marcel, this cannot be achieved through any abstraction of man from his situation in the world. This is the fault of the rationalists and idealists of today who

tend towards an unconscious relativism, or else towards a monism which ignores the personal in all its forms, ignores the tragic and denies the transcendent, seeking to reduce it to its caricatural expressions which distort its essential character . . . by ignoring *presence*—that inward realization of presence through love which infinitely transcends all possible verification because it exists in an immediacy beyond all conceivable mediation.⁵

The rationalists and idealists of today try to explain away mystery through a metaphysics of abstractions, deductions and dialectical speculations. Marcel, on the other hand, rediscovers the mysterious within our experience and even the fact that experience itself is a mystery. "Being as a mystery" now becomes the cornerstone for a new metaphysics, and metaphysical thought becomes "reflection trained on mystery."⁶ Experience gains new depth; it transfers itself from the objective and incoherent chaos of external sensations, volitions and feelings and turns itself inward into the experiencing subject. Reason turns itself inwards, loses its formal, deductive and systematic approach and becomes material, inductive and unsystematic. Philosophy becomes a hunt into the realm of being, and the philosopher becomes the hunter whose duty it is to track down this being. Philosophy is an aid to discovery rather than a matter of strict demonstration in the traditional sense.

Marcel's reflections on being can only be seen in the light of ontological exigence—a need for the sense of being. The failure of man today is his failure to recognize this need. In an age devoted solely to functional and technical advances man has become so immersed in problems that he has lost all sight of and has made no room for the mysteries of life. This elimination of mystery leaves such things as birth, love and death in the category of the purely natural. It is in and through this "broken world" that this ontological need is exhausted, destroying man's personality and giving way to despair.

According to Marcel, this need for being can never be fully grasped. "Being is—or should be—necessary . . . I aspire to participate in this

being, in this reality—and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary.”⁷ When attempting to define being, Marcel approaches it in this way: “Being is what withstands—or what would withstand—an exhaustive analysis bearing on the data of experience and aiming to reduce them step by step to elements increasingly devoid of intrinsic or significant value.”⁸

Being is not merely the object of the intellect. Being is grasped through its “presence” in me. It becomes “my being.” For Marcel man is an “incarnate” being, living in an “incarnate” world. His sole freedom lies in response to his being. To deny being leads to absurdity and despair; to affirm being leads to transcendence and communion with being. From the affirmation of “my being” with “my existence” I become aware of my existential status in life and feel the urge to participate in this being. Experience now becomes an experience of subjects, of persons. It is through the encounter with other persons that Marcel finds the need of a transcendent Being. This need for transcendence has its roots in dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction with personal limitations in regard to fulfilling a personal existential situation. Marcel is quick to point out that the word “transcendent” does not mean transcending experience, “but on the contrary there must exist a possibility of having an experience of the transcendent as such, and unless that possibility exists the word can have no meaning.”⁹ This need becomes a need for “otherness.” I have a need for this being and I aspire to participate in this being. It is at this level of awareness of “my being” where the mystery lies and where metaphysical thought becomes “reflection trained on mystery.”

With the assurance of man’s need of transcendence from a situation which is experienced as basically discordant and the need of a new and concrete approach to the mystery of being, Marcel says that

it is only by way of liberation and detachment from experience that we can possibly rise to the level of the metaproblematical and of mystery. This liberation must be *real*; this detachment must be *real*; they must not be an abstraction, that is to say a fiction recognized as such.¹⁰

This liberation and detachment can only be accomplished through the act of recollection. For Marcel is convinced

that no ontology, that is to say, no apprehension of ontological

mystery in whatever degree—is possible except to a being who is capable of recollecting himself, and thus proving that he is not a living creature pure and simple, a creature, that is to say, which is at the mercy of its life and without a hold upon it. . . . The word means what it says—the act whereby I re-collect myself as a unity; but this hold, this grasp upon myself, is also a relaxation and abandon. . . . It is within recollection that I take up my position—or, rather, I become capable of taking up my position in regard to my life.¹¹

Marcel is thoroughly convinced that reflection is the only recourse in man's journey through the obstacles and limitations of this "world of problems" to the "world of mystery." Marcel distinguishes between primary and secondary reflection, a distinction which corresponds to his distinction between problem and mystery. The function of reflection in man's life can be seen at two levels:

Roughly we can say that where primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before us, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity.¹²

A problem for Marcel is an inquiry about an object which the person apprehends in an exterior way. It is "something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce."¹³ A problem deals with facts that are exterior and in a certain disorder, and it is solved when the order of the facts is established. My whole reference to the solution of the problem is objective. The area of the problematic extends over a wide range of human knowledge. It is the province of science which ultimately embodies the achievement of problematical knowledge. Primary reflection has its place in the world of science. It proceeds from human experience, setting up a dichotomy between the subject and the object. It orders, abstracts, objectifies and separates man from the immediacy of experience. All sense of participation in reality is severed.

Another type of problem for Marcel arises when all objective data is not given. This is a mystery. It is "a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem."¹⁴ Marcel cites, for example, the mystery which exists between the union of the soul and the body. This indivisible unity is expressed

through various phrases such as "I have a body," "I make use of my body," "I feel my body," etc. My body and I are so involved with one another that any attempt at analysing one or the other is impossible. A mystery involves myself to such a degree that it can only be thought of "as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity."¹⁵

This is the realm in which secondary reflection begins. It is like a reflection upon a reflection. It does not reject primary reflection, but it transcends it as philosophy transcends science. "This second reflection is recollection in the measure in which recollection can be self-conscious."¹⁶ The refusal to make this second reflection is to deny the ontological need. This distinction becomes clearer if we visualize it in terms of the soul-body relationship. Primary reflection separates me from my body. My body then becomes one of many bodies. I am unaware that this particular body is *mine*. My body is treated as a pure object. Then by the act of secondary reflection the unity between me and my body is reconquered, reseizing the unity between me and my body in its participated existence. For it is only through secondary reflection that I really have participation in my actual self and the actual world. It is at this level that I am faced with the mystery of being and find myself searching for ways to participate more fully in this mystery.

Marcel's reflections on the means of participating more fully in the mystery of being have led him to believe that

the concrete approaches to the ontological mystery should not be sought in a scale of logical thought. . . . They should rather be sought in the elucidation of certain data which are spiritual in their own right, such as fidelity, hope and love, where we may see man at grips with the temptations of denial, introversion, and hard-heartedness.¹⁷

Thought does not grasp being through abstraction but by descending into subjective experience. It is in this inner subjectivity of man's experience where the acts of love, fidelity and hope transcend man's experience and enter the realm of the mysterious.

According to Marcel, man must submit himself to being through "ontological humility." True ontological humility is man's realization of the "presence" of being within him and his inaptitude of comprehending the fullness of being. With this initial submission to the presence of being,

love becomes the only starting point for man's further elucidation of it.

Marcel has realized more and more that the "cornerstone of a concrete ontology is nothing but charity itself."¹⁸ Love opens the path wherein we are drawn into communion with being. The famous words of St. Paul, "You are not your own" (1 Cor. 6, 19), convince Marcel of the concrete necessity of participation with other beings through love. It is through love that the "presence" of other beings is laid open to man and thereby becomes the ontological basis of what Marcel calls "fidelity to being."

"Faithfulness is, in reality," for Marcel

the exact opposite of inert conformism. It is the active recognition of something permanent, not formally, but ontologically; in this sense, it refers invariably to a presence, or to something which can be maintained within us and before us as a presence. . . .¹⁹

Fidelity ultimately rests in being. With the presence of being through love, it becomes the duty of fidelity to be the active perpetuation of this presence. Fidelity reveals the uniqueness of my own mode of existence and the true mystery of being. It is recognition of the call of being. Fidelity creates me and I create "myself" in response to an invocation from a "thou."

Of all the concrete approaches to the ontological mystery, hope is the one which has the closest and most immediate relation to transcendence. Love and fidelity substantiate the presence of this being, but it is hope that reaches out in transcendence to this being. Hope is essentially an appeal to a creative power. The subject of hope is a subject in need of others. The object of hope becomes the very communion itself with others. Marcel writes:

Hope is essentially the availability of a soul which has entered intimately enough into the experience of communion to accomplish in the teeth of will and knowledge, the transcendent act—the act establishing the vital regeneration of which this experience affords both the pledge and the first fruits.²⁰

To hope is to possess that personal assurance that even though man finds himself placed in a seemingly futile situation, there always remains some path open to him. To possess a personal assurance that no situation, however intolerable it may appear, is without its ultimate resolution forms the beginning of Marcel's concept of hope. Successively, man's sense of

"absence" is replaced by a "presence," the notion of love surmounts that of suicide, denial turns into faith, and, finally, in place of despair there comes hope.

Unlike Sartre's atheistic philosophy, Marcel's human reality is not isolated within man himself. Philosophy becomes a search which finds its starting point in human reality yet transcends it and moves into the realm of the spiritual where the philosopher bows his head in awe at the weight of the mysteries before him. Metaphysics no longer is an abstraction of being-as-such, but a concrete analysis of being-in-a-situation. Being is a mystery and is only accessible through participation. To philosophize requires the whole man; it is a total act where "the frontiers are blurred between ethical reflection, metaphysics and spirituality."²¹ Man is elevated to a level where love and intelligence cannot fail to meet. As Marcel says, "who can doubt that the road which leads to holiness and the road which leads the metaphysician to the affirmation of being . . . is one and the same road."²² It becomes a question of "whether in the last analysis there exists a specifiable frontier between metaphysics and mysticism."²³ Philosophy never reaches a *terminus ad quem*; that would be the end of mystery.

Gabriel Marcel is the best among the contemporary philosophers of existence in revealing what it means to face reality as an individual. He has never revealed his thoughts in any systematic or logical order; nevertheless, he offers the contemporary philosopher many interesting and penetrating insights concerning individual human existence. His concrete approaches to the access of being tend strongly toward a "realistic" way although his treatment of being never leaves the concrete and experiential realm of being. It is precisely his stress on an experiential analysis of human existence that the metaphysics of Marcel becomes non-metaphysical in the traditional sense of metaphysics.

The silence of Marcel as he approaches the mysteries of being is his own proof of the reason philosophy is a continual journey and why the philosopher is a traveler. It is a journey which will never end because

it is a difficult road and strewn with obstacles, but it is by following this pilgrim road that we can hope one day to see the radiance of that eternal Light of which a reflection has continually shone on us all the time we have been in this world—that Light without whose guidance we may be sure that we should never have started our journey.²⁴

—Philip Mester, O.P.

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- ¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (New York, Samuel French, Inc., adapted from French by Paul Bowles, 1945), p. 52.
- ² Gabriel Marcel, *Le Coeur des Autres* (Paris, Librairie Grosset, 1921), p. 111.
- ³ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*. Trans. Manya Harari. (New York: Citadel Press, 1961), p. 26. This is a paperback reprint of the *Philosophy of Existence*.
- ⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Du refus a l'innovation* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1940), p. 192.
- ⁵ PE, 15.
- ⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*. Trans. Katharine Farrer. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), p. 100.
- ⁷ PE, 14.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*. Two volumes (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), I, p. 57.
- ¹⁰ PE, 23.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² MB (I), 102.
- ¹³ BH, 117.
- ¹⁴ PE, 19.
- ¹⁵ BH, 117.
- ¹⁶ PE, 25.
- ¹⁷ BH, 119.
- ¹⁸ MB (II), 191.
- ¹⁹ PE, 35.
- ²⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*. Trans. Emma Craufurd. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), p. 67.
- ²¹ D. M. MacKinnon, in the introduction to BH, p. 2.
- ²² BH, 85.
- ²³ RI, 190.
- ²⁴ MB (II), 210.