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THE PHILOSOPHY OF GABRIEL MARCEL

Presented to
Dr. R.A. Coppenger
for
Honors 491
Special Studies

Mark Coppenger

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The first contact I had with the writings of Gabriel Marcel was in his book, Being and Having. The book had the effect of cooling me toward Marcel because so often I really had to struggle to get what he was saying. Next, Homo Viator came a little more easily but was still difficult, especially the parts about hope and Rilke. Finally, I read the two-volume work, The Mystery of Being. The first volume was a lot clearer than the first two books, but in the second volume, I really started to get the feel for his writings. The result is a growing interest and enthusiasm in a man, for whom I originally had little feeling.

Ernst Breisach describes Marcel's father as a "typical nineteenth-century agnostic whose truth, in the new knowledge of the social and biological sciences, knew no limit."¹ His mother died early and he was raised by a Jewess with strong Protestant leanings, who contributed most of his early religious influence. His first great philosophical interest was in the work of Schelling, the German. Briefly, the shattering effect of World War I attacked his interest in speculative philosophy. The final formative influence of note was his conversion to Roman Catholicism and the experience of what he calls "grace". Here is how he describes his experience--

I have no more doubts. This morning's happiness is miraculous. For the first time I have clearly experienced grace. . . I am stammering childishly. . . this is indeed a birth. Everything is different. Now, too, I can see my way through my improvisations. A new metaphor, the inverse of the other--a world which was there, entirely present, and

at last I can touch it.²

With World War I as a large influence, Marcel came up with the idea that this is a "broken world". In fact, this serves as the title of the second chapter of the first volume of The Mystery of Being. In this chapter, Marcel quotes from one of his plays, which he does not name. The heroine, a fashionable lady who is masking an inner grief, speaks thusly:

Don't you feel sometimes that we are living. . . if you can call it living. . . in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just to look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear, and you don't hear any ticking. You know what I'm talking about, the world, what we call the world, the world of human creatures. . . it seems to me it must have had a heart at one time, but today you would say the heart had stopped beating.³

This, of course, is one of the themes that leads to classifying Marcel as an Existentialist, the recognition of a lack of order and a presence of absurdity in the world. This label, Existentialist, is misleading, however, and will be discussed later.

Also in accord with most Existentialists, he claims that the objective and technical processes have "emancipated themselves from the ends to which they ought normally to remain subordinate, and have staked a claim to an autonomous reality, or an autonomous value."⁴ He bemoans the confusion of the true personality as a result of the various classifications the state and other agencies give each person. As a Red Cross worker during the first

World War, Marcel was often responsible for reporting casualties to families. In this job, he developed a revulsion toward any attempt to treat human beings as data on a filing card or as statistics.⁵ He also notes that in this "broken world", such words as liberty, person and democracy have lost their meaning in becoming slogans.⁶ He speaks of these words as losing the trust of the people, and as depreciating as does currency. Thus he paints a picture of a broken world.

In the existentialist vein of thought, Marcel is very much concerned with existence and being. As a starting point, we will use what Marcel calls "the question on which, really, all the other questions hang."⁷ It consists of asking the basic question of who I am and probing into the basic meaning of myself. With that in mind, we will move to his methodology.

It is very possible that Marcel's methodology is more important than what he actually says. This methodology is the reason why Being and Having can be such a frustrating book to read. I found it next to impossible at times to understand what he was trying to say. This book is in the form of a diary and records his existential and metaphysical thoughts from day to day. You are forced, if you keep reading, to follow the thought processes, however varied and vague they are, as they are formed and experienced. Instead of thinking out the answers and then presenting them in an ordered work, Marcel takes you with him in his thinking. It is a search, an open-ended one. He speaks with contempt

of a methodology in which an answer is put forward and then a search tries to confirm this. He holds that this distorts the process and that "this type of research involves furthermore a notion or a pre-notion bearing on a certain working and the certainty that the operations (mental or material) entailed are within the capabilities of anyone."⁸ In other words, it is merely going through the motions. He then says that the origin of philosophic research is "a certain disquiet--a certain exigence"⁹ In dealing with the "only metaphysical problem," that of "What am I?", we are motivated by two feelings, an out-looking curiosity and an in-looking uneasiness.¹⁰ Sourred on by these two factors we start an unassuming and honest journey to find a way of dealing with this uneasiness and answer our questions. The philosopher, according to Marcel, is one who has very urgent inner needs.¹¹ The world misunderstands, discredits, and gathers itself together against these urgent needs. He says that "all of us tend to secrete and exude a sort of protective covering within which our life goes on."¹²

Therefore, we must respond to our uneasiness and curiosity, break out of this covering, and start on this journey, which is both a search and life itself. Hence, he names one of his books, Homo Viator, "Man in the Way". It is a journey without pre-notion, an honest and courageous journey.

Marcel spends a good deal of his writing on epistemology. He does very detailed writing concerning it and speaks of reflection, contemplation, and many other terms which

sometimes overlap. I have chosen to deal with only a few of these themes, the ones with which Marcel spends the most time.

First, he attacks objective and scientific knowledge as do all existentialists. He speaks of our "Having" objective knowledge. When we know something objectively, we possess it, and it ceases to be an active entity. It is crystalized in our minds and has no new thing to offer to us. In the technical world, such having is necessary, but "the seat of suffering certainly seems to be the point at which Having flows into Being."¹³ By robbing Being of its vitality, Having takes over our real self and replaces it with a false self. Marcel asks, "Could not Having be thought of as somehow a way of being what one is not?"¹⁴ He concludes this discussion with the statement that our possessions eat us up.¹⁵

On this level of Having we present ourselves with problems. Concrete, understandable obstacles, which can be dealt with like an equation. We are comfortable in this realm and attempt to reduce the other category, mystery, to the level of problem. Marcel says simply, "We are tempted to turn mystery into a problem."¹⁶ Later, he says, "Traditional philosophy has tended to reduce the mystery of evil to the problem of evil."¹⁷ This mystery, which stands in opposition to the problematic, is described as follows:

". . . something in which I am myself involved, and it can, therefore, 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."¹⁸

It "transcends every conceivable technique."¹⁹

Corresponding to these two categories of knowledge are two levels of reflection, primary and secondary. Speaking of the body, Marcel says, "Primary reflection is therefore forced to take up an attitude of radical detachment, of complete lack of interest, towards the fact that this particular body happens to be mine."²⁰ On the other hand, secondary reflection "manifests itself by a refusal to treat primary reflection's separation of this body, a sample body, some body or other, from the self that I am, as final."²¹ Hence, the primary reflection is akin to objective knowledge and Having while secondary reflection is transcendent or more deeply involved. It is in the realm of secondary reflection that such things as hope, love, and faith exist.

As a vehicle for such thoughts man needs a body and this is the subject of some of Marcel's Discussion. Of course, he puts a great deal of emphasis on feeling as a part of living--"to feel is merely to receive but on the express condition that we restore to the notion of receptiveness a positive value of which philosophers have generally sought to deprive it."²² This is the Existentialist in him talking. In the first few pages of Being and Having and throughout some of his other works, Marcel asserts that he is his body. He speaks of his body thusly: "I mean that it somehow transcends its being my instrument. I am my body. . . whereas I am not my spade nor my bicycle."²³ A theme in his writing is the incarnation of the spirit in the body of Christian

men. This tends not towards degradation of the spirit but towards glorification of the flesh.²⁴

When it comes to speaking of God, Marcel does not spend much time describing God. He speaks of Eternity as a mystery and says it can be nothing else. Furthermore, the Eternal is like a sea into which all rivers, mysteries, flow.²⁵ As far as communion with God or God's promises go, Marcel has this to say--

In reality, immortality cannot be thought of as the immortality of a thing or a simple image; it is that of a bond; that is why it is beyond the reach of curiosity or demonstration.²⁶

He speaks of prayer by saying ". . . it is nothing if not a certain very humble and fervent way of uniting oneself with . . . --." ²⁷

As a sort of combination of comment on religion and epistemology, Marcel defines opinion, conviction, and faith.²⁸ Opinion gives evidence of ignorance or what one does not know. It is caught between impression and affirmation. Conviction appears as unshakable and definitive, but lacking in the power to justify these characteristics. Thirdly, faith moves from the closed (opinion and conviction) to the open. To believe is not to believe that, or believe in, but merely to believe. One thereby opens oneself to a personal or supra-personal reality. This faith is on the level of mystery and secondary reflection. In another place, Marcel calls faith "the force of invisible truths."²⁹ It involves the whole being of a man and can also be defined as "unceasing attestation."³⁰ But Marcel holds

that ". . . there cannot be faith without fidelity."³¹
 So here we have a new and important word, fidelity.

Speaking on a common Existentialist term, freedom, Marcel says,

But what is the price of freedom?
 Nothing less than a complete renunciation
 of all claims to master my life. For
 mastering my life is in effect subordinating
 it to some principle.³²

Elsewhere he states that

in the end there must be an absolute commit-
 ment, entered upon by the whole in myself,
 or at least by something real in myself which
 could not be repudiated without repudiating
 the whole.³³

Furthermore, he holds that ". . . all life is a service."³⁴

Starting with the paradox on freedom and ending with the principle of a life of service, we start to get an idea of what he means by fidelity. This fidelity is the moving and freeing force in life. Much could be written about fidelity, but to sum it up, it is the open, creative, and transcendent allegiance to and hope in something. Marcel says that it cannot be separated from the idea of an oath, meaning that it implies the consciousness of something sacred.³⁵ Fidelity cannot be unconditional except when it is in the form of faith but it aspires to unconditionality.³⁶ Finally, it is creative in that it transcends the prescriptions of human limits.

Following is discussion of several of Marcel's main themes. The scope of this paper make it impossible to do this discussion justice, because Marcel's concepts do

not lend themselves to easy definition and listing. Rather, he develops an attitude in the reader toward these themes which are very difficult to communicate objectively. The themes include those of the spirit of fidelity, the spirit of truth, hope, love, faith, disposability, autonomy, value, and indefectibility.

Marcel says that the spirit of truth and the spirit of fidelity are different names for the same thing. At the same time that they stand for the honesty of Sartre's "good faith", they go farther; this spirit demands of us an explicit refusal, a definite negation of the death of those we love.³⁷ This means that we constantly think the immortality of loved ones. This is an unknowing and unprovable position, and, therefore, is pure in intention. This spirit is also tied in with love since "there is no human love worthy of the name which does not represent for him who exercises it both a pledge and a seed of immortality."³⁸ This love is centered on a Thou rather than an It, in accord with Martin Buber's concepts. This persistence of memory in love concept was due in great measure to the influence his mother had on him. She "remained present" with him despite her death when he was four, and gave rise to an "awareness of hidden polarity between the seen and the unseen, which he regards as a major influence in his writings."³⁹

This spirit of fidelity deals not only with love and immortality, but with a day by day replying to life's trials with assurance and relative serenity. The degree

of dedication or fidelity to something outside of oneself determines one's degree of disposability. Disposability corresponds to a high degree of disregard for self and a subjugation to a transcendent goal or fidelity. The more a person holds on to himself, the less disposable he is and the farther away from the spirit of truth and fidelity he is. The farther away from the spirit of truth he is, also the more "autonomous" he is. This state of being autonomous and indisposable is due in large measure to pride, which Marcel calls "a source of blindness."⁴⁰

Though the boundaries between terms are indistinct, if not non-existent, we should certainly bring out the theme of hope. Marcel spends a great deal of time on the subject, hope. His book, Homo Viator, is subtitled, Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope. This hope is neither hope in nor hope that, but merely hope. In the second chapter of Homo Viator, hope is variously spoken of as "a response to trial", a mystery rather than a problem, "an answer to despair", "an exchange", an offering to us, a transcendence of desire, "availability", and "communion".⁴¹ In my words, hope is the spirit of truth put into effect by the practice of assured and open communion with the center of all mystery. This of course, is really cheating Marcel, but his concepts of hope and faith cannot be put down simply without leaving a lot of the meaning out.

Marcel's philosophy is one for a man who is brother

to all other men. In examining the ego, he says this--

I concern myself with Being only in so far as I have a more or less distinct consciousness of the underlying unity which ties me to other beings of whose reality I already have a preliminary notion.⁴²

Furthermore, he equates hope with communion with the Thou, both in fellow men and in Eternity. Accordingly, he equates solitude with despair. He spends a chapter in Homo Viator speaking exclusively on the importance and sacredness of the family and the formula of hope is presented--"I hope in Thee for us."⁴³ This constitutes an open communion with God and fellow man.

As far as a witness to this spirit of truth goes, Marcel discounts the value of an oral witness, a set group of words. He says that this witness is subject to the alteration and crystallization coincident with Having. He also maintains that spiritual experience cannot be effectively communicated verbally. He says rather that the believer needs "to progress from a certainty which he is always tempted to look on as a possession, to a certainty that he is a testimony."⁴⁴ He goes on to say that since this testimony lived is transcendent to both the objective and the subjective, it is creative. This word, creative, is the key to the life of faith and hope, in Marcel's opinion. It is characterized by the absence of Having and the openness to Mystery. This ends my short analysis of Marcel's thought, however incomplete and unjust it may be. Perhaps a paper on Marcel would be a synthesis rather than an analysis, because it attempts

to put together a thing with form where often, form is totally lacking.

I did not read any of his plays since our library has none, but I found some of what Marcel says about his drama and drama in general. He agreed with one student who said that there was more material in his plays than in his speculative writings that could be used for the working out of a doctrine of truth.⁴⁵ Marcel said, "The role of the drama seems to be to place us at a point of vantage at which truth is made concrete to us, far above any level of abstract definitions."⁴⁶ It has been said,

His theatre is not tributary to his philosophical thought; the bond between them is simply the bond of the similar exigence from which they spring, and to which they are independent responses.⁴⁷

His drama does not proceed to illustrate anything; it simply proceeds. It is akin to the creative life in that Marcel is open when he writes it. Hence, it is often difficult to understand.

As far as other Existentialists go, (and he discarded the label, Existentialist, because of the implications that those such as Sartre gave to the word) he is, in many ways, in accord with the German poet, Rilke, his themes of death and change. The last two chapters of Homo Viator are given to a discussion of Rilke. On the other hand, he condemns the pessimistic and atheistic Existentialism of Camus, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Jaspers. He says that courage for the sake of courage has no value.⁴⁸

To close this paper, I quote from Marcel, and feel that this sums up the direction and meaning of his philosophy:

I agree that all I have said does not reach as far as revelation, properly so called, and dogma. But it is at least a way of approaching it; 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.⁴⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹Ernst Breisach, Introduction to Modern Existentialism, (Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1962), 150.

²Gabriel Marcel, Homo Viator, (Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 15.

³Gabriel Marcel, The Mystery of Being, 1. Reflection and Mystery, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1960), p. 27.

⁴Ibid., p. 26.

⁵David E. Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, (Oxford U. Press, New York, 1957), p. 279.

⁶Marcel, 1. Reflection and Mystery, op. cit., p. 42.

⁷Ibid., p. 103. ⁸Ibid., p. v. ⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Marcel, Homo Viator, p. 138.

¹¹Marcel, 1. Reflection and Mystery, op. cit., p. 26.

¹²Ibid., p. 79.

¹³Gabriel Marcel, Being and Having, (Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1965), p. 144.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 147 ¹⁵Ibid., p. 165. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 172. ¹⁸Ibid., p. 117. ¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Marcel, 1. Reflection and Mystery, op. cit., p. 114.

²¹Ibid. ²²Ibid., p. 145.

²³Gabriel Marcel, The Mystery of Being, 2. Faith and Reality, (Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1960), p. 30.

²⁴Carl Michalson, Christianity and the Existentialists, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1956), p. 95.

²⁵Marcel, 1. Reflection and Mystery, op. cit., p. 269.

²⁶Marcel, 2. Faith and Reality, op. cit., p. viii.

²⁷Ibid., p. 115. ²⁸Ibid., p. vi.

²⁹Marcel, Being and Having, op. cit., p. 22.

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

- ³⁰Ibid., p. 211. ³¹Ibid. ³²Ibid., p. 195.
- ³³Ibid., p. 45. ³⁴Marcel, Homo Viator, op. cit., p. 126.
- ³⁵Ibid., p. 132. ³⁶Ibid., p. 133. ³⁷Ibid., p.147.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 152.
- ³⁹Roberts, op. cit., p. 277.
- ⁴⁰Marcel, Being and Having, op. cit., p. 236.
- ⁴¹Marcel, Homo Viator, op. cit., pp. 13-28.
- ⁴²Marcel, 2. Faith and Reality, op. cit., p. 19.
- ⁴³Marcel, Homo Viator, op. cit., p. 93.
- ⁴⁴Marcel, 2. Faith and Reality, op. cit., p. viii.
- ⁴⁵Marcel, 1. Reflection and Mystery, p. 71.
- ⁴⁶Ibid.
- ⁴⁷Kenneth T. Gallagher, The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel,
(Fordham University Press, New York, 1962), p. 96.
- ⁴⁸Marcel, Homo Viator, op. cit., p. 209.
- ⁴⁹Marcel, 2. Faith and Reality, op. cit., p. 210.

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