

Mass Society and the Mystery of Being in Gabriel Marcel

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French existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), is one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, yet he is a thinker who is often overlooked by both Christians and philosophers. This is a great pity because the themes of Marcel's philosophy, which he develops with a blend of realism, concreteness, and common sense, have profound significance for the plight of humanity as we move into the twenty first century. It is particularly regrettable that one of the main reasons Marcel's work has been eclipsed is the continuing popularity of the work of Martin Heidegger, and also of the trendy movement of postmodernism, which Heidegger partly inspired. This is all the more unfortunate because Marcel's philosophy manages to avoid the relativism and skepticism that has tended to plague contemporary philosophy after Heidegger. Marcel is also significant because he makes an inspired effort to challenge the moral relativism and spiritual nihilism of his rival, Jean Paul Sartre.

Early Life and Conversion

Marcel was born in Paris in 1889. An only child, his mother died when he was four years old. Coming from a non-religious household, perhaps it is no surprise that Marcel went through an agnostic phase in his early life. Later, he enrolled in the Sorbonne, where he attended lectures by Henri Bergson, and earned a *licence en philosophie* in 1907. However, he never held a formal position as a philosophy professor, but worked for most of his career as an occasional lecturer, reviewer, editor, and drama and music critic.

The central ideas in Marcel's thought can be summed up under two headings. The first is his concern with the dehumanization of the human self in the modern world; the second is his effort to present an alternative and more hopeful view grounded in a Christian philosophy

of the person. In developing this philosophy, Marcel's religious sensibilities came to play a key role. Indeed, the similarity of Marcel's philosophy of the human person to the contemporary vision articulated by Pope John Paul II in some of his encyclicals is very striking. (In his book *Crossing The_Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul explicitly commends Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, two philosophers whose ideas are close to Marcel's.)

Marcel's reflections in his early works laid the seeds for his conversion to Catholicism. He came to realize that his fundamental ideas, although developed within an existentialist framework, were nevertheless compatible with (and later came to *require*) a religious view of the world. As Marcel later put it in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (1949): "It is quite possible that the existence of the fundamental Christian data may be necessary *in fact* to enable the mind to conceive some of the notions which I have attempted to analyze; but these notions cannot be said to depend on the data of Christianity, and *they do not presuppose it* . . . I have experienced [the development of these ideas] more than twenty years before I had the remotest thought of becoming a Catholic." This is a quite significant claim, given that it occurs within the context of an *existentialist* philosophy. Marcel believes that the existentialist view of the self, even though it is pursued through independent philosophical means, may still arrive at conclusions that are very close to that of the Christian view of the self. Given this result, it is hardly surprising that Marcel (like Buber) is often described as a "Christian Existentialist."

The compatibility of Marcel's vision of the human person with Christianity was soon to have a quite profound significance for Marcel's own life. For it led him in 1929 to convert to Catholicism. He was then forty years old. Although Marcel's thought had been gradually moving in the direction of Christianity, the circumstances of his conversion, and his choice of the Catholic faith, are interesting. Marcel had just published a review of a novel (*Souffrance du chrétien*) by

French Catholic writer, François Mauriac. After reading the review, Mauriac wrote to Marcel asking him whether he ought not to join the ranks of the Catholic Church. Marcel was at that point in his life enjoying "a period of calm and equilibrium," and he treated Mauriac's request as prophetic, saying "he was but a spokesman and the call came from much higher up." It was as though a more than human voice was questioning him and asking him if he could "really persevere indefinitely in that equivocal position of yours?" Marcel tells us that it was as if the voice said to him: "Is it even honest to continue to think and to speak like someone who believes in the faith of others and who is convinced that this faith is everything but illusion, but who nevertheless does not resolve to take it unto himself? Is there not a sort of equivocation here that must be definitively dispelled; is it not like a leap before which you are obliged to decide?"

During this time Marcel eschewed the label of "professional philosopher," but was still very active in the French intellectual scene where he knew and frequently met other luminaries of the time such as Jacques Maritain, Jean Paul Sartre, Charles Du Bos, and Jean Wahl. In fact, Maritain, Du Bos and Marcel used to meet weekly around this time to discuss philosophy. Marcel comments in general on these meetings that, while everyone showed good will, "the results were meager indeed,!" a judgment that is not surprising given the varied philosophical backgrounds of these thinkers!

Existentialist Approach

Marcel may be characterized as an existentialist philosopher in two important senses. First, he accepts that philosophical inquiry must begin with human experience, i.e., with the concrete lived experience of the individual human subject in the world. Marcel believes that we can identify by means of the phenomenological method the structure of human experience, and probe the implications of this structure for other issues, such as the nature of knowledge, human relationships, and moral

behavior. However, second, Marcel (unlike Sartre) does not believe that "existence precedes essence," a phrase which is often taken by many to be a kind of definition of existentialism. But the notion that existence precedes essence only makes sense within an *atheistic* existentialism, such as that of Camus, Sartre or Heidegger. Sartre's well known point, of course, in his atheistic claim that existence precedes essence, is that there is no God to ordain an essence or nature of man, an essence which every person would be obliged to try to fulfill in their moral choices on life's journey.

According to this atheistic position, we exist first, *then* we create our natures in our moral choices. Of course, the vexing problem for this position is that it seems to fall into moral relativism, a conclusion Sartre, in particular, continually struggled with in his work. Marcel holds, on the contrary, that we do not "choose" our values at all, but *recognize* them, and then act either in accordance or in contradiction with them. In this way, we discover an objective structure to human existence, which not only can function as a ground for morality, but which also can be part of an argument for the existence of a transcendent dimension to human existence. Marcel argues that Sartre's overall philosophy is primarily based on a *mis-description* of human experience, especially in the areas of human identity, human relationships and morality, and the result is an utterly implausible view of the human person.

Marcel is often at his most impressive in his description of our existential condition in the age of mass society. He suggests that we are now living in a "broken world" (*le monde cassé*, the title of one of his plays), the signs of which are all around us. Many now suffer from an "inner disquiet," which has a number of causes including the attack on objectivity and certainty in philosophy and in intellectual life more generally, the rise of mass society, dominated by bureaucracy and technology (including nuclear capabilities), and by the widespread relativism, cynicism and even nihilism of the twentieth century.

Human beings are then forced to respond to this inner disquiet by finding appropriate substitutes for religion and objective morality, such as political ideologies, causes, consumerism, drugs, and so forth, leading to an increase in alienation and loss of meaning. Mass society also leads to a self-centeredness, sometimes a lack of humility, and a kind of spiritual homelessness. It is out of this kind of anguish and sense of alienation that the negative existentialism of a Sartre easily emerges.

It is entirely possible, Marcel warns, for the depersonalizing forces in mass society, especially the obsession with bureaucracy and technology, to smother completely the spiritual dimension of human life. It is up to us to recognize this danger, and to consciously choose to respond to it. "It can never be too strongly emphasized," he points out, "that the crisis which Western man is undergoing today is a *metaphysical* one; [our] sense of disquiet . . . rises from the very depth of man's being." These depersonalizing tendencies must be countered, Marcel suggests, with the rediscovery of a certain spiritual availability (*disponibilité*) and humility. He recognizes that there can be a temptation to despair in the face of life's challenges, but the authentic response is hope and not despair. Hope involves freedom since the individual must make a choice when confronted with the vagaries of existence; this choice is also creative because we have the power to decide whether our existential situation shall be pronounced closed, or declared held open (Marcel, 2010; Godfrey, 1987). An emphasis on creativity is present all through Marcel's thought, and identifies the reality that human beings are actively creating themselves through their free choices. A careful phenomenology of human experience, he argues, reveals to us a hopeful dimension of existence that it is our job to recognize, create in our choices and indeed promote.

Problem and Mystery

Marcel was particularly troubled by what he called "the spirit of abstraction" in modern intellectual life, and the danger this tendency poses for our understanding of the human person, and for our behavior towards each other. The "spirit of abstraction" is manifested in modern intellectual life in the tendency to try to objectify and explain all human experience in conceptual knowledge, and failing this, to judge that any experience which cannot be so objectified and explained is not worthy of serious consideration. Marcel famously describes the thinking associated with this approach as "primary reflection," a type of thinking that is especially characteristic of the worlds of science and technology. This kind of thinking reduces everything to a "problem" and only has room for objective, impersonal, verifiable "solutions." The danger is that this approach tends to sever permanently the human subject from the immediacy and unity of its experiences, so that the subject too is now treated as an object, and therefore becomes an object among objects. This tendency is becoming more and more evident in modern life.

Marcel identifies a whole range of key human experiences that cannot be fully objectified in conceptual knowledge (the realm of "problems") and which will be lost if primary reflection is allowed to dominate. These experiences occur in what Marcel calls the realm of *mystery* or *secondary reflection*, not because this is an unknowable or mystical realm, but because it is a realm which cannot be *fully* captured in primary reflection. Some of the "mysteries of Being," according to Marcel, include our particular unique existential situation in the world, our experience of our own embodiment (a "mystery" overlooked by Descartes), the unity of body and mind, the nature of sensation, and the higher levels of Being: the "concrete approaches" to human experience of love, hope, fidelity, and faith. Such experiences are debased and even lost in the contemporary world, leading to corresponding loss of hope and feelings of abandonment.

Marcel introduces an important distinction between non-conceptual knowledge and conceptual knowledge, which offers us a way to do justice to, and to maintain the priority of, human subjectivity and individuality *without* falling into the relativism and skepticism that has tended to accompany such notions. His insight is that the mysteries of being mentioned above cannot be *fully* captured in concepts, but must be experienced to be fully known, known, that is, at a level which is beyond the distinction between the mind and the concept it grasps. However, these "mysteries" can be known in conceptual knowledge *to some extent*, so he is not saying that this is a totally private realm, to which no collective access is possible. He offers the example of the experience of fidelity: fidelity can be partially known in conceptual knowledge, yet in the end it exhausts and eludes conceptual knowledge and must ultimately be experienced to be fully "known." This is an insight we can all confirm in *our own experience*.

Yet, it is crucial that we recognize that the realm of conceptual knowledge is also a realm of *objective* knowledge. The move from experience to theoretical reflection (conceptual knowledge, the realm of philosophy) is objective in *two* crucial senses. First, this kind of knowledge adequately represents essential features of the objects of experience just as they are in themselves (philosophical realism), and, secondly, it represents these features *in the same way for everyone* (philosophical objectivity), regardless of each person's embodied situation in existence. This penetrating analysis by Marcel serves to criticize relativistic tendencies in modern thought which suggest that all knowledge is in some important sense *relative* to one's cultural tradition (a view often reflected in the more extreme forms of multiculturalism), or to one's gender (a view reflected in some forms of radical feminism). Although Marcel was writing before such views took hold—and became so dominant in the humanities—his insight here is a corrective to them because he insists that although one can have different subjective experiences at the existential level of one's everyday

existence, where matters of gender and culture would be significant *to some extent* (and this limitation is, of course, crucial), when we move to the level of theoretical reasoning and philosophy, this realm is not compromised by gender and culture, and so we can attain objectivity. This was a move philosophers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty could not make, because they had already relativized *reason itself* to one's existentialist situation. It is also a move postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in France, and Richard Rorty in the United States, do not wish to make, since relativizing reason is one of their main aims.

In this way, Marcel's ideas can be read as representing a challenge to contemporary materialistic and functional approaches which characterize recent attempts to understand and explain the human person. He also warns us to be on our guard against modern tendencies with regard to the self which often lead to an increase in alienation, and which can invite the kind of despair with which existentialist thought is often associated.

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