

Unveiling the Lived Body: Gabriel Marcel's Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Among the many phenomenologists, Gabriel Marcel has a minuscule contribution to phenomenology, and yet it is well known that his contribution makes him stand apart from all other philosophers. Marcel's life, his early orientations, as well as artistic and dramatic skills are among the few things he was known for. The descriptive approach of phenomenology is used to describe Marcel's philosophical approach. Being influenced by Edmund Husserl, his rejection of Cartesianism and his emphasis on the world of concrete experience make his thought unique. His phenomenological understanding of the being is uniquely developed and studied in this paper. The paper will first present Marcel and his philosophical understanding, followed by explicating the concept of phenomenology. It will then proceed to show the connection between Marcel and Phenomenology and conclude with Marcel's outlook on the human body.

Gabriel Marcel and His Philosophy

French philosopher, writer, and Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) studied the essence of existence, the function of faith, and the significance of human dignity. On December 7, 1889, Marcel was born into a nonreligious household in Paris, France. He received his education at the Lycee Condorcet and the Sorbonne, where he majored in literature and philosophy. Gabriel Marcel's philosophical beliefs are best understood in the context of his own experience. He lived through two world wars, the rise of fascism and communism, as well as the atrocities of modernity. His worldview mirrored these experiences, and

he was deeply concerned about the condition of mankind in the face of current issues.

Marcel turned to philosophy after the war and started to create his own philosophical framework. He eschewed the conventional Cartesian notion of the self as an autonomous, solitary individual in favour of highlighting the significance of society and connections in human existence (Marcel, 2002, 12). Marcel's Catholic religion had a significant impact on his philosophy, and he held that people had a transcendent component that could not be reduced to material or factual reality. He looked into the character of God, the issue of evil, and the place of religion in life. He wrote extensively about human dignity as well, contending that it was based on our capacity to look beyond ourselves and form connections with others.

The idea of 'brokenness,' which describes the sensation of alienation and separation many individuals experience in contemporary society, is one of Marcel's best-known themes. He believed that modernity has caused the experience to be fragmented and that individuals today frequently feel cut off from themselves, others, and their surroundings. In stark contrast to the subject of idealism, Marcel places a great deal of emphasis on the part that the broken world plays in the experience of the living, concrete, existential subject (Marcel, 2002, 23).

The philosophy of Marcel addresses issues like hopelessness, suicide, the loss of loved ones, loneliness, faith, faithfulness, and prayer. Instead of being referred to as a 'Christian existentialist,' he wished to be termed a concrete philosopher (Marcel, 1949, 1). Ultimately, Marcel's philosophy is a profoundly existential and humanistic approach to comprehending the difficulties of contemporary living.

Throughout the course of his career, Marcel authored a large number of books and essays. *Being and Having*, *The Mystery of Being*, and *The Philosophy of Existentialism* are some of his best-known books. He also garnered many intellectual honours, like the Grand Prix de Literature of

the French Academy in 1948, the Goethe Prize in 1956, and the *Grand Prix National de Lettres* in 1958. He was associated with Moral rearmament, which he discussed in *Fresh Hope for the World: Moral Rearmament in Action* (1960). He also delivered the Gifford Lectures, entitled ‘The Mystery of Being, for the 1949–1950 academic year at the University of Aberdeen and the William James Lectures at Harvard for 1961–1962. His focus on connection, embodiment, and transcendence still rings true today, and philosophers all around the world continue to read and discuss his writings.

The focus Gabriel Marcel places on the nature of existence and the human experience is well known. According to Marcel, the human experience is more than just a collection of impersonal ideas or thoughts; it is an embodied and lived experience. According to him, the idea of a problem stands in stark contrast to the notion that the human experience is mysterious. He maintained that, rather than starting with abstractions, philosophy should start with actual experiences. To this purpose, he frequently uses instances to help ground the philosophical concepts he is analysing.

Marcel defined a problem as anything that can be handled through logic and rational analysis. According to Marcel, “working...up from life to thought and then down from thought to life again, so that [one] may try to throw more light upon life” (Marcel, 1951a, 41). For Marcel, a mystery is anything that cannot be fully understood or described using only reason. According to Marcel, a sense of mystery is necessary for human existence and calls for a different way of looking at the world than the one used to solve problems.

Marcel aims to address the issues of man and human connections, human circumstances in the world, the issue of treating people like mere tools, as well as the lack of dedication to the growth of a person’s concrete life. His life’s mission was to increase awareness of the importance of

tolerance, economic and political unification, and mutual understanding in all walks of life.

The foundation of Marcel's philosophy is a profound inner experience that must be continually replenished and strengthened via intense discipline and receptivity to the waves of Being that converge inward towards us. He acknowledges that it comes to an end when one sees the eternal in one's intimate connections and shared experiences with others.

Concept of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical method for comprehending human experience and awareness. It was first introduced in the early 20th century with the work of Edmund Husserl, but has since been explored and built upon by a large number of other philosophers and academics.

Husserl did not coin the term 'phenomenology' on his own. In reality, it was Lambert, Herder, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel who introduced it to philosophical literature for the first time in the eighteenth century.

The Oxford English Dictionary presents the following definition: "Phenomenology. a. The science of phenomena is distinct from being (ontology). b. That division of any science describes and classifies its phenomena. From the Greek *phainomenon*, appearance, the term is used in the first sense amid debates of theory and methodology. In physics and the philosophy of science, the term is used in the second sense, albeit only occasionally.

'Phenomenology' originally referred to the idea of appearances essential to empirical knowledge, particularly sensory appearances, in the 18th century. Christoph Friedrich Oetinger coined the Latin phrase 'phenomenologia' in 1736. Johann Heinrich Lambert, a disciple of Christian Wolff, later adopted the German word '*Phänomenologia*.' The phrase was occasionally used by Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte in their writings. G. W. F. Hegel published *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in 1807 (usually translated as *Phenomenology of the Spirit*). By

the year 1889, Franz Brentano had used the phrase to describe what he called ‘descriptive psychology.’ Edmund Husserl used the phrase for his novel science of consciousness from that point on, and the rest is history.

Regardless of field, inclination, or time period, most phenomenologists agree on five key characteristics.

(1) Phenomenologists frequently use evidence—awareness of a topic as exposed in the most distinct, sufficient, and clear manner feasible for anything of its kind—to support cognition. (2) According to phenomenologists, it is possible to demonstrate and, thus, know about ideal things such as numbers and even conscious existence itself in addition to those found in the natural and cultural realms. (3) According to phenomenologists, research should concentrate on what may be described as ‘encountering’ when it is aimed towards things and, consequently, ‘objects as they are encountered.’ (4) Phenomenologists frequently acknowledge the need for universal, a priori, or eidetic description before an explanation using causes, goals, or reasons. (5) The usefulness and viability of what Husserl refers to as the transcendental phenomenological *epoche* and reduction are frequently disputed by phenomenologists (Embree, 1997, 2).

Phenomenology is defined as the study of ‘phenomena,’ which are the appearances of things, things as they seem in our experiences, or the ways we experience things. These experiences give rise to the meanings that things have for us.

Phenomenology basically investigates the organisation of many sorts of experiences, including perception, thinking, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition, as well as physical awareness, embodied action, and social engagement, including language activity. What Husserl termed ‘intentionality,’ or the directedness of experience towards objects in the world, or the attribute of consciousness that it is an awareness of or about something, is often a component of the structure of various types of experiences. According to traditional Husserlian

phenomenology, only certain concepts, thoughts, ideas, pictures, etc. may be used to represent or 'intend' certain objects in our experience. They separate the items they display from the meaning or content of the encounter (Smith, 2013).

The idea of 'horizons' is a key component of phenomenology. This is meant to convey the notion that our experiences are always embedded inside a wider framework or horizon, which affects how we view the outside world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 43). For instance, our cultural background, personal history, or the specific circumstances in which we meet an object may all have an impact on how we see it.

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy that places a strong emphasis on the value of exploring our conscious experience in order to learn more about who we are and what the outside world is like. It has been used to shed light on a variety of phenomena, from mental illness to the connection between the body and consciousness, and has been utilised in a number of domains, including psychology, anthropology, and literary theory. Despite setbacks and obstacles throughout the years, phenomenology's emphasis on analysing the structure of experience continues to be a useful and pertinent strategy in modern philosophy.

Gabriel Marcel and Phenomenology

The defining feature of Marcel's phenomenological approach was its focus on the value of interpersonal connections and community in the human experience. He held that our connections with others influence our sense of self and identity and that these interactions are essential to our conception of the universe. In addition, Marcel highlighted the significance of spirituality and religion in human experience and worked to make sense of phenomenology and Christian theology.

Marcel helps provide a better understanding of how we relate to others and what it means to view someone as a subject. He realised that it is possible to think that another person is a conscious entity but still fail to recognise and feel them as such. He asserts that when one feels them as

fellow beings, one actually experiences them as subjects. With his story, Marcel explored both the meaning of experiencing someone else as a subject as well as the meaning of being perceived by someone else as a subject. However, Marcel's contribution is intriguing because he asserts that intersubjectivity is fundamental, even more so than self-awareness, which goes against the conventional Cartesian view of the mind (Malbois, 2019, 1).

Marcel States,

The other, in so far as he is other, only exists for me in so far as I am open to him, in so far as he is a Thou. But I am only open to him in so far as I cease to form a circle with myself, inside which I somehow place the other, or rather his idea; for inside this circle the other becomes the idea of the other, and the idea of the other is no longer the other qua other, but the other qua related to me; and in this condition, he is uprooted and taken to bits, or at least in the process of being taken to bits (Marcel 1949, 107).

According to Marcel, when two subjects are available to one another and are in a relationship where they both view one another as subjects, intersubjectivity occurs. Even if he thinks the other is a sentient creature, he does not perceive them as subjects if one of them is not available (Marcel, 1950, 177).

Marcel developed his own method, which he called 'reflection.' His understanding of reflection included a certain withdrawal from the urgency of doing and living in the moment. However, it also implied a return to the immediateness of lived experience, albeit at a higher level. Reflection really poses a threat to the spontaneity of this experience in its first form as objectivating analysis (Spiegelberg, 1971, 435). 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" (Marcel, 1950, 114). Marcel attributes the ability to reclaim the lost concreteness of present experience and the feeling of ontological wonder to just a second of reflection. He also states that the secondary reflection "manifests itself

by a refusal to treat primary reflections' separation of this body, a sample body, somebody or other, from the self that I am, as final" (Marcel, 1950, 114). The development of Marcel's idea of this second, or restorative, reflection must be viewed in the context of his interest in phenomenology. Marcel suggests that existence and Being are fundamentally different from one another. Being, as opposed to existence, requires the choice of the individual who voluntarily preserves and recreates his true oneness (or communion) with the outside world, with himself, with others, and with God. Other than our desire for Being, Marcel is not concerned with demonstrating anything about Being. Rather than integrity, presence becomes the core concept in Marcel's philosophy and a more basic category. Presence, creativity, fidelity, interiority, mystery, and death emerge as among the principal categories of Marcel's thought (Murchland, 1959, 352).

Gabriel Marcel and Human Body

It may appear that Gabriel Marcel's concept of mystery has two meanings: adherence to my body and adherence to existence. Gabriel Marcel's statement explicates his difficulty in understanding the body; he states,

In fact, what is this body, of which I am at once master and slave? Can I, without folly or insincerity, relegate it to the huge foreign empire which eludes my grasp? But I cannot completely include it, either, in that subject realm where my own decree gives me the power to discount any of its contents. It seems to me equally true to say that I am and am not responsible for these bodily fluctuations: both assertions seem accurate to me and both ridiculous (Marcel, 1951b, 45).

Marcel's idea of mind-body needs to be reviewed in the larger context of non-Cartesian ideology. Descartes viewed the mind and body as distinct from each other. For him, the body is essentially divisible, and the mind is essentially indivisible. For Descartes, the mind (or self, or soul) and the body are two distinct and separable substances that exist together in a 'substantial union'. The Non-Cartesian view holds that 'I am my body,'

which alters the Cartesian idea of the body. If I am my body and I want to learn more about being, I must understand that being is a philosophical puzzle that needs to be explored rather than a challenge that has to be overcome. The existential self might change his focus from debating the relevance of his own existence in and of itself to debating how he is linked to his body once he realises that the self is not something that is owned. It is against the dualist idea of body and soul. Marcel agrees with Descartes that the mind cannot be reduced to the body, but he argues for its inherent oneness with the body. He opposes realism, which regards the body as an object among things. The body does not have an instrumental use for Marcel, nor is it merely a component or extension of the ego. The self, on the other hand, cannot be removed from the body. The self cannot think of the body in any manner other than as a distinct entity identified with the self (Marcel, 1970). This understanding is achievable through a sort of introspection in which the subject sees himself as a being among beings rather than an object, through secondary reflection. This reflection not only enables the subject to perceive the body as his own but also enables him to respond to others as embodied, perceptive, creative, and participatory beings, really initiating engagement with others. The participatory subject is capable of shifting from self-as-body to self-as-being among beings because it is guided by the distinctively Marcelian ideas of reflection, participation, receptivity, and availability. In Marcel's reflections, the body conveys presence as an incarnate being, as a manifestation, and as a sense of being. A sense of embodied human presence is experienced.

According to Marcel, connections between individuals and their own bodies are not often ones of 'ownership,' and as a result, any philosophy that seeks to cast doubt on the reality of human embodiment, such as Cartesian thought, will find it difficult to accomplish so. Therefore, it is incorrect to understand embodiment in terms of ownership or to say that people 'possess' their bodies as tools. It is more accurate to say that 'I am my body,' which is what Marcel meant when he said that one cannot

look upon one's body as an object or as a problem to be solved because the logical detachment required to do so cannot be achieved. In fact, the moment I think of my body as an object, it stops being 'my body,' as conceptual thought demands objectivity from the subject of the inquiry. I also can't think of my experiences as a body as being the entirety of my existence (Sweetman, 2022). Marcel states, "Between me and all that exists, there is a relation (the word is quite inadequate) of the same type that unites me to my body" (Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*, 274).

Critique of Marcel's Phenomenology

Many criticise Marcel's phenomenology as excessively individualised and subjective. Marcel held the opinion that the human experience is characterised by a feeling of alienation and detachment from the world outside of ourselves, and that this sense of alienation results from the fact that we are always attempting to comprehend the world via our own subjective experiences. The emphasis on subjectivity, according to critics, overlooks the objective truth of the world and fails to take into consideration how social and cultural forces impact our experiences.

The idea of the self as presented by Marcel has drawn criticism. Marcel had the opinion that how one interacts with others and the environment around them profoundly defines who they are. However, detractors contend that this viewpoint disregards the significance of personal autonomy and agency.

Marcel's emphasis on introspection and subjective experience could overlook how language and society influence how we perceive the world.

Being a devoted Catholic, Marcel's beliefs had a significant impact on his writing. While there's no denying that this influence plays a significant role in his philosophical outlook, some detractors contend that it restricts how far his views may be applied.

While Marcel's emphasis on the significance of introspection and subjective experience is unquestionably beneficial, some detractors

contend that it can result in a lack of critical engagement with the environment in which we live.

The criticisms of Gabriel Marcel's phenomenology as a whole draw attention to certain significant limits and probable flaws in his theoretical foundation. But it's also critical to acknowledge his significant contributions to phenomenology, notably his emphasis on introspection and subjective experience.

Conclusion

Gabriel Marcel made an important addition to phenomenology, and his work has had a considerable influence on the philosophical debate. The importance of Marcel's work in phenomenology has received widespread acclaim. His work has had a significant effect on the growth of phenomenology and existentialism as well as how we think about the human experience. In today's increasingly complicated and linked society, where we struggle with concerns of alienation and detachment, Marcel's idea of the shattered world is still pertinent. Phenomenology by Gabriel Marcel made a profound impact on philosophy, especially in the fields of existentialism, ontology, and ethics. We now have a better knowledge of the human experience and the role that connections, emotions, and community play in influencing how we see the world. This is thanks to Marcel's emphasis on subjective experience and personal reflection. Thus, Gabriel Marcel's phenomenological method of philosophy is the basis of his comprehension of the human body. According to Marcel, the body is an essential component of the human experience rather than just an external object. The body, according to Marcel, is where we interact with the outside world and other people, and it has a significant impact on how we see the world.

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