

The Uniqueness and Continuing Relevance of Gabriel Marcel



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Tudor Petcu: I would like to start this dialogue by addressing to you a very simple question: What are some reasons for saying that Marcel's thought is unique?

Brendan Sweetman: Although Marcel is often neglected today, and his thought has been somewhat eclipsed by later movements of structuralism and postmodernism, his work contains a number of themes which remain of profound relevance for contemporary times. He emphasizes a number of ideas that have been influential in contemporary thinking in both philosophy and theology. These include the attempt to safeguard the dignity and integrity of the human person by emphasizing the inadequacy of the materialistic life and the unavoidable human need for transcendence; and the inability of philosophy to capture the profundity and depth of key human experiences, and so the need to find a deeper kind of reflection. He also draws attention to the importance of the experience of intersubjectivity, which

Marcel believes is at the root of human fulfillment, and which also finds expression in the transcendent dimension of human experience. He believes that this transcendent dimension cannot be denied without loss, and that it is by means of it that some of our most profound experiences find their deeper meaning. I think also that Marcel is one of the few contemporary thinkers who manages to do justice to the individuality of the human person, while at the same time avoiding the relativism and skepticism that has tended to accompany these notions, and that has plagued contemporary philosophy after Heidegger. We should also remember his effort to challenge the moral relativism and spiritual nihilism of his French rival, Jean Paul Sartre, and of other representative existentialist philosophers. He also argues for a “theistic existentialism,” as an important counterpart, and indeed corrective, to the strident, hedonistic secularism of recent times.

Tudor Petcu: As we know, Gabriel Marcel was influenced by some major religious traditions. He was born as a Protestant. He received from his mother's side an education influenced by what we can call the liberal Judaism, and in 1929 he has chosen the conversion to the Catholic Church. Not least, some years later he declared and expressed his love and respect for the Orthodox theology and in this way we can talk about a real and strong ecumenical experience that Gabriel Marcel knew. How in your view did his entire spiritual journey influence his philosophy?

Brendan Sweetman: Marcel was not brought up in a particularly religious way, and it is probably accurate to say that he was not involved in institutional religion to any extent. However, he clearly had a religious sensibility, which is evident in his early work as well. This is illustrated by his open-mindedness to religious questions, particularly concerning the nature of the transcendent, the openness to Being, and the way that profound human experiences, such as fidelity and faith, can point to something significant about the nature of man that needs to be explained.

You do not see any of the close-minded attitude in him that is so evident in modern secularist writers who try to deny these aspects of the human condition, and who sometimes appear as if they are rationalizing their own denials. In addition, the direction of Marcel's thought made it possible for him to come to the point where a conversion to Catholicism made sense for him. He has told us in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* that he had worked out his ideas before he had the remotest thought of becoming a Catholic; later he came to the view that these ideas were consonant with the Catholic religion, even if they did not presuppose it and were not inspired by it. I suppose he was quite Orthodox (judging by our standards rather than those of his time), but I think he was not much impressed by fads, or attacks on theology or morality inspired by more liberal attitudes. He regarded liberal Protestantism as leaving one in an “ambiguous position,” as he tells us in his autobiography, *Awakenings*. He strikes me as being quite careful in his approach to theology, and shows an honesty in his reflections that is also evident in his philosophy.

There is also quite an ecumenical spirit in his work, which you allude to, which no doubt came from his experiences with different denominations growing up, and he is quite critical of the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. He also has great affinity with the work of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and their occasional dialogue reveals a shared sensibility toward religious themes, which is not hampered by denominational differences.

Tudor Petcu: What would be the most important role that philosophy has played in Marcel's literature and theatre? On the other hand, do you think that there would be any similarity from a philosophical point of view between Marcel's literature and Dostoevsky's?

Brendan Sweetman: Marcel's work in philosophy and his work in theatre complement each other. I would not say that his philosophy plays a role in his theatre but rather than he uses theatre, as he has explained many times, to further work out, and sometimes to illustrate, ideas that are present in his philosophical work (see his *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, where he discusses this topic at length). A key theme in Marcel's work is that there is a realm of human experience that is very difficult to capture, to describe, in philosophical analysis. This is the realm of mystery. It is a realm of a range of experiences that are a real and objective part of human life, yet when we attempt to describe them in an abstract, philosophical way, even with our best phenomenological efforts, something is lost in the description.

This realm includes the relationship between body and mind, the experience of our own embodiment, our concrete, personal contextual situation, and the "concrete approaches" involving experiences of fidelity, hope and love. Marcel believed that art and drama could help us to further reveal these experiences when dramatized in concrete situations, and so good drama can reveal something of the human condition beyond the level of conceptual knowledge. But philosophy too can give a description of, for example, fidelity; it is not an adequate description but it can help us to understand something of the experience. In this way philosophy and theatre complement each other. This is why in his philosophical work Marcel will often turn to discuss a scene from his plays to illustrate a point. My colleague in the *Gabriel Marcel Society*, K.R. Hanley, now retired from Le Moyne College (Syracuse, New York), has published several editions of his plays, and I am working on a new publication of several unpublished plays which will appear next year. We feel that it is important to put his plays before the world as a complement to his philosophical work. Unfortunately, many of them have been seldom or never performed, and this may be in part because they are a bit too philosophical!

I do think there is some similarity between Marcel and Dostoevsky in this sense: both of them are exploring philosophical ideas through literature, though Dostoevsky with considerably more literary brilliance and intensity than Marcel. But Dostoevsky is a novelist with a clear philosophical bent and his attempt to explore deep religious questions in his work, as well as to portray individuals who are confronted with intensely difficult moral experiences and choices, is similar to some of what Marcel is doing, especially in his plays. Dostoevsky, being a novelist, is not as interested in deeper philosophical questions, such as the relationship between experience and reflection, or between the body and mind, as Marcel is.

Tudor Petcu: Considering that Gabriel Marcel was influenced mainly by Kierkegaard and Bergson, how could we highlight the complementarity between these two philosophers and the Christian tradition in Gabriel Marcel's thinking?

Brendan Sweetman: Yes, this is a very interesting question. There are themes in both philosophers that are similar to Marcel's, though the influence of Kierkegaard on Marcel is not clear. Marcel does say that he had worked out most of his ideas before he had read Kierkegaard, and so he was not significantly influenced by him. In fact, Kierkegaard and Marcel are often thought to be opposed to each other in their general approaches to the question of God and religion. This is because although Marcel does not espouse the Thomistic approach to God, and does not focus on proofs of God's existence, or on the rational case for believing in God, he does emphasize the reasonability of the Christian worldview. This is often thought to differ from Kierkegaard who seems to place more emphasis on the commitment to what one believes than on the truth of what one believes. On this question I want to draw your attention to a new article on the relationship between Kierkegaard and

Marcel that appears in our new on line journal, *Marcel Studies*, and I recommend that your readers take a look if they wish to explore this question further.

I do think that Marcel was quite influenced by Bergson's distinction between experience and conceptual knowledge, especially the idea that conceptual thinking forces discreteness on experience, but that experience itself is not discrete. Unlike Bergson, Marcel would not say that time is necessarily in a flow; rather he developed the view that in the act of conceptual abstraction something is lost, that which makes our experience personal, and that which situates the self in a concrete context in existence. In this sense, there are no abstract objects; there are only particular subject's objects, i.e., objects that are involved with particular human subjects in concrete situations. I think Bergson helped him to arrive at this way of thinking about human experience and its relationship to reflection, and he does note that Bergson freed him from "the spirit of abstraction."

Marcel in general is very influenced by the Christian tradition in that many of his themes are those that concern the Christian view of the human person in one way or another, especially his focus on the transcendent as a key part of experience. He has always stressed this point right from the beginning of his work, many years before his conversion to Catholicism. One way he illustrates the transcendent dimension is in his analysis of human relationships and how they contain a transcendent dimension that not only helps to explain them but that makes them possible.

Tudor Petcu: Which would be the best philosophical understanding of the "metaphysical journal" written by Gabriel Marcel?

Brendan Sweetman: This early work of Marcel's is an unusually interesting philosophical text. It introduces us to Marcel's early inchoate thoughts and philosophical probings relating to most of his main concerns; indeed most of what were to become the major themes for which he is best known are introduced in these early attempts at philosophical reflection. A second reason the book is engaging is that it is written in a diary format, covering the period 1914–1923 of Marcel's early career, when he was first working out his ideas in philosophy. The entries range across the days and months of this time period, and provide a rare glimpse into a philosopher in action as he wrestles with a number of questions. Indeed, it is uncommon to see a philosopher's ideas published in this form. Yet there is some price to pay for exposure to Marcel's thoughts expressed in this cursory, tentative, and suggestive manner: a lot of excavation and reconstruction of his main claims and general position is required, and one can understand that some readers might not have the patience for this task. The book offers us an unusual insight into a philosopher at work, a philosopher thinking out loud as it were, in the same way we might watch a painter or a sculptor at work, and we should regard this as an opportunity perhaps rather than as a challenge.

It is here that Marcel first develops the distinction between experience and reflection, though he tends to explain it more in terms of the distinction between existence and objectivity, where existence describes the concrete situation of the individual, and objectivity refers to the attempt to explain this, and indeed to give primacy to conceptual knowledge. Marcel describes existence as "indubitable," and so it cannot be put into question, and he goes on from this basic theme to develop a strong critique of the approaches of Cartesianism and of idealism that splits the mind off from the body, and from the world, and then has a terrible problem getting them back together again. For Marcel, existence is prior to all conceptual thought, and so it is not possible to place it under any kind of doubt, and so therefore idealism, skepticism, and anti-realism all crumble. Existence is the very condition of any thinking whatsoever. He went on then to offer a very interesting account of sensation which rejected a standard scientific approach that tried to explain sensation as the reception of a message. Marcel offered a

critique of this view and argued that sensation testifies to our participation in existence, and that it cannot be explained in scientific terms because the scientific account always presupposes an underlying realm of sensation. The rest of his work is an elaboration of these key themes.

Tudor Petcu: Which were the main contributions of Gabriel Marcel to the evolution of French philosophy of the 20th century and how important would he be for some contemporary philosophical approaches?

Brendan Sweetman: I think that Marcel was quite an important thinker in the development of not only French philosophy, but European philosophy more generally, even though his work is somewhat neglected today because it does not fit in with the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary European intellectualism. He is perhaps best known for a number of key distinctions: mystery and problem, being and having, primary and secondary reflection, existence and objectivity, that capture something fundamental about the human condition, and that still have great relevance today. His work is a challenge, for instance, to the scientific view of the human person which is gaining ascendancy: the temptation to think that all human problems must have a scientific solution. His work is also a challenge to analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American world, a reminder that it is a mistake to think that all aspects of the human condition can be analyzed and understood in conceptual abstractions. At the same time, he is very keen to avoid subjectivism, irrationalism, and a kind of epistemological and moral relativism. This is one of the reasons his work will remain relevant in the 21st century.