

## **Mystery and Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy**

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The term mystery is commonly used to stand for something which is inexplicable. One seeks to go into the recess of that which is shrouded in mystery. It may assume the form of an unanswered question. The term mystery implies that which is beyond human comprehension.

Philosophy or the love of wisdom, as Aristotle stated long ago, begins in wonder. Plato felt the language and symbolism belonging to the process of initiation. He was able to use the language of initiation as a means for expressing his own philosophy. In the *Symposium* what is described as the path to Beauty through an undergoing of "the lesser and greater mysteries of love", is in the *Republic* paralleled by the account of the stages of education, culminating in the vision of the form of the Good.

A noticeable development of the concept of mystery is that in which mystery is associated with a metaphysical doctrine. This may be exemplified by various doctrines in the Hebraic-Christian tradition. The prime meaning of mystery that belongs to this tradition is associated with the conception of God as the ultimate source of all being, the creator of the world and of man. Mystery is so to say grounded in faith.

The Scholastics as well as followers of the Protestant tradition down to the present time find the concept of mystery fundamental in the interpretation of Christianity. One talks of "the mystery of the cross" "the mystery of Baptism", "the mystery of the Trinity and "the mystery of Incarnation." The uniqueness of God's relation to Christ itself makes that relation a mystery. The problem arises as to how to reconcile the Christian belief in three Gods with the Jewish monotheistic belief. For all the ingenious efforts at trying to express the possibility of such tri-unity, the fact remains that belief in Trinity is a mystery incomprehensible to human reason.

There is a group of theists who use the concept of the mystery of existence as a stepping-stone to God. Jacques Maritain expresses the neo-Thomist strand of this position in the following words:

"The Supreme mystery is the supernatural which is the object of faith and theology."

The other groups of thinkers who have dealt with the theme of the mystery of existence are John Hick, but it is Gabriel Marcel who occupies a

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central position among them. The mystery of cognition is discussed by John Hick in his book, *Faith and Knowledge*. Hick maintains that in cognition there is an unresolved mystery. The mystery of cognition persists at the end of every inquiry though its persistence does not prevent one from cognizing it. The theistic believer cannot explain how he knows the divine presence to be mediated by human experience. He just interprets his experience thus:

The question posed by Hick is about the awareness of God, and its relationship to other cognitions. One apprehends God's presence through the benevolence of his friends, through the bounties of nature, and also as he responds to its behests in his own life. Hick terms the basic significance of our experience 'significance' and the mental activity by which it is apprehended 'interpretation'. Interpretation takes place in relation to three types of existence or orders of significance- the natural, the human and the divine.

A distinction may be made between two kinds of significance: natural significance and situational significance.

- (I) This is the significance which the environment has for us. In other words we seek survival and pleasure and shun pain and death. Man seeks shelter, satisfies hunger and creates a stable and congenial environment for himself.
- (II) As far as situational significance is concerned one is so to say under a moral obligation or responsibility. Hick gives the example of a traveler who happens to come across a stranger who has met with an accident. Apparently this is an empirical state of affairs. But at the moral level, the traveler is under an obligation to provide the stranger medical aid.

The divine is the highest order of significance. The monotheist through his experience interprets the world as mediating a divine presence and purpose. He sees this situation as a human being, a significance to which the response is of religious trust and obedience. He envisages the world which exists through the will of God who is a righteous and loving being – the creator and sustainer of all that is. This religious perception is not the result of an inference or reasoning, but a 'divine human encounter' a mediated meeting with the living God:

When the call of God is clearly heard other calls become inaudible, and the Prophet and saint, martyr or missionary, the man of conscience or of illumined mind may ignore all considerations of worldly prudence in responding to a claim with which nothing else may be put in the balance.

The theist believer cannot plausibly argue how the divine presence be mediated through his human experience. He simply finds himself interpreting his experience thus. The outcome of the discussion is to bring out the similarity of epistemological structure between man's basic convictions in relation to the world, moral responsibility and divine existence.

In his Gifford Lectures the approach to the mystery of Being is intelligible by the consideration of one's own existence. The question "What am I" precedes 'What is Being'? As providing phenomenologically the only starting point. An inquiry in to the nature of Being is the most fundamental question posed in philosophy. The answers given to this question constitute the history of metaphysics. From the beginning of Western metaphysics, there is no doubt that Being is constant and permanent as against the world of becoming. If we explicate what being is, we affirm it an entity whose essence is necessary as against the contingency taken into account in the realization of this general essence. It may be added that substance is that which makes every existing entity what it is.

If the manner in which the interrelation of Being as essence and Being as Dasein (existence) is understood, then the question must be raised whether the precedence of essence versus Dasein remains possible. It is in this situation that the revolt which is referred to as 'philosophy of existence' has its origin. It is Heidegger who raises the pertinent question of the 'groundlessness'. If it is asked as to the meaning of groundlessness or forgetfulness of Being, it implies that Being had remained hidden to Western metaphysics from its very beginning and this concealment has determined the fate of Western thought.

As against these short comings of metaphysical thinking, it is the function of 'foundational thinking to lay bare the 'hidden ground' of metaphysics. Foundational thinking thinks of the Truth of Being as such. Its first step is the analysis of human Dasein and this analysis – as a fundamental ontology transcends traditional ontology in every respect. The fact that this analysis encounters on its way "the fundamental state of mind of dread" means that it has entered the dimension of foundational thinking – that is "the remembrance of Being".

From this point of view Heidegger understands Nihilism as the end phase of Western metaphysics, as an end which is already implicit in its beginning, an end that carries the insight which remained hidden for metaphysics – Being is steeped in the 'not' of negativity.

In *The Philosophy of Existence*, Gabriel Marcel discusses problem and mystery. The distinction that Marcel draws between 'problem' and 'mystery' is one that he arrives at in giving an account of the status of modern man.

What has been lost in Marcel's opinion is the fulfillment of "man's ontological need." It is a need that has been repressed in the onslaught of modern civilization. The individual man is depersonalized in a set of functions. These functions give rise to problem which needs solutions. The engineer, the physiologist or psychologist deals with problems in a way that there is a total neglect of what Marcel calls "the ontological need."

Taking into account problem and mystery, Marcel talks about an encounter between two people not known to each other. Supposing one happens to meet a person in a particular place in Florence or is suffering from a disease and happens to come across someone in the same hospital. But there are always number of people who like the same place and patients victim of the same disease. But it is neither taste, nor this pain which has brought them together. One's illness is a mystery and it is apprehended as a presence in the sense that one has to live with it and has to define his attitude towards it. The presence of people assumes meaning and they are united by a bond. One is in the presence of a mystery and beyond the realm of the problematic.

There is as a matter of fact no exact bifurcation between problem and mystery. As we ponder over mystery, we relegate it to the level of a problem. This is evident in the case of the problem of evil. In reflecting upon evil one regards it as a disorder and de-arrangement which one envisages from outside and of which one wants to find out the cause. When one experiences pain it is grasped as evil but it nevertheless remains a mystery.

It may be pointed out that Marcel's method is phenomenological. He stands with the present day philosophers – Max Scheller, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau Ponty whose thinking is rooted in Edmund Husserl. There could be no better contrast between Husserl, the German logician, with his idea of philosophy as a rigorous science and his search for essence purged of their existential embodiments, and Marcel with his idea of philosophy as taking birth from, and continuously bearing on the basic situations of human existence. He makes use of simple language, gathers instances from everyday life and his approach is congenial, soothing easy-going.

Marcel elucidates the notion of intention and takes it much further. One's life is directed towards the absolute being or reality. One sees this basic 'intention' first in every day relations with others, our companions or strangers encountered in life. The approach to this notion is concrete of what presents itself in experience. In these relations there is the presence of mystery if we probe deep enough.

Taking into account the notion of participation we make a phenomenological distinction between two kinds of reality the participative/ responsive and the detached/ non-responsive. The act of worship, the

peasant's relation to his soil or the artist to his work these are concrete examples of the participative relation. This is the same as the distinction between presence and object (or mystery and problem). Thus we look into situations of life, and through 'reconnoitering', feeling our way we recognize their essence.

In *the Metaphysical Journal*, Marcel's interpretation of the 'seer' and the power of vision furnishes an example of the process of participation. It points to the possibility of the recapture of the past through participation. The seer's vision requires a 'purification an emptying out and opening-up as well as recollection of the mind that would see into the past or view a distant scene or event.

The method requires that everyman be the judge of the truth of his findings, just as the artist knows where to put a particular colour with his paint and brush. Such affirmation is similar to what the phenomenologist call 'evidence'. There is nothing very unusual about it, we all have such intuitions and acknowledge the sanction of such 'evidence' in our everyday life. The 'ontological need' referred to earlier is satisfied by turning to Being. It is Being which provides a source of love, faith and hope.

Marcel maintains that when one talks to someone, one is merely collecting information about him – his name, his place of birth; this is like a filled –up questionnaire. Such communication takes place only at the mundane level. The exchange of words assumes meaning when unity is felt. It is meaningful if some harmony however feeble it is, is expressed between the two. The other person who offers himself to one and is ready by all means to help is a presence. This is availability or disposability on his part. Closely linked to it is the notion of fidelity. This implies one's faithfulness to the other, but it should not be taken in any static sense. Personal relations are an opportunity for mutual creation and destruction. We participate in each other and make each other.

Furthermore, there is communication in memory in as much as in a system of signs. "The clairvoyant does not read in me he remembers me in my stead." He participates in one's memory because one recollects him from past. The past is not an accumulation of data, but the past which is embraced, is intimately and genuinely one's own. But the more one loves, the more one participate, in one's life. One can conclude from this that to love someone truly is to love him in God.

Faith in the philosophy of Marcel appears as the act by which thought reconstructs itself subject by participation in God. The subject of faith is not abstract or indeterminate. It is concrete. Were faith converted into certitude it would cease to be faith.

In the *Metaphysical Journal*, Marcel makes a cardinal point that faith is not a hypothesis. It is the act by which the ego fills the void between the thinking ego and the empirical ego by affirming that they are transcendently linked. The question arises that how is the transcendental unity of the thinking ego and the empirical ego comprehended? The unity is in function of the freedom that wills it. The freedom realized in the act of faith is not virtual freedom; it is freedom for its own sake. But this faith in God is itself conditioned by God, that is to say the affirmation of the divine fatherhood. We conceive two orders, of which only one is legitimate. One order consists in inferring participation as a fact (for other minds) the other by reducing the believer himself to participate. The first of these orders can be thought. We posit the idea of the believer as mediator, constituting an order by means of faith itself without relation (other than mystical) to that faith. To quote, “the real believer, the saint in this sense appears as the absolute mediator and at the same time as the redeemer”.

Closely linked to faith is Marcel’s view of prayer. Prayer has no pragmatic worth if taken from a determinist and natural standpoint. It could be maintained that we are dealing with an absolutely necessary process in which it is impossible, except by physical means to change. However, the action of prayer is only conceived in relation to Faith (hence it is not objective).

Marcel holds that one participates in the being of the other person and hopes that by this participation he will endure the pain of death. What he hopes is not the continuance of the other person as he might hope for the persistence of a flower that is withering. It is hope of immortality which enables him to conquer death. So we arrive at metaphysics of hope.

According to Marcel, presence is the locus within which mystery is experienced, is at best only partially satisfied by love, disposability. In the *Metaphysical Journal* (23 February, 1923), Marcel refers to charm. In *The Mystery of Being* Vol. I he says that though charm and presence cannot be regarded as merely identical, charm seems to be one of the ways in which presence makes itself felt. Charm is not a physical quality like red hair, nor a moral quality like self-control, an intellectual quality like a gift for mathematics. It is a marginal to personality.

In the final analysis we may say that a presence can be evoked and the evocation is essentially magical. By way of example Marcel refers to the mysterious character that is associated to the presence near one of a sleeping child. From the point of view of physical activity, the sleeping child is utterly unprotected and appears to be in our power. However, from the point of view of mystery, it is completely at our mercy, and that makes it sacred. It might be said that in all civilizations, the guest has been regarded as more sacred, even

weak and feeble he is. The more the ideas of efficiency and output assert their authority, the more is there the attitude of reverence towards the guest, towards the wounded, towards the sick. It may be added that the best way of explaining mystery is in terms of the concept of divine presence, the revelation to man of the spirit of Christ with whom the individual experiencing the mystery is identified. It is this identification that lends purpose and meaning to his own existence.

**Bibliography**

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