

# Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*

by Alex Scott



Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973)

*Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being is based on the Gifford Lectures he delivered at the University of Aberdeen in 1949 and 1950. The first series of lectures is entitled "Reflection and Mystery," and the second series of lectures is entitled "Faith and Reality."*

*"Volume I: Reflection and Mystery" is divided into ten chapters, which are entitled: (1) "Introduction," (2) "A Broken World," (3) "The Need for Transcendence," (4) "Truth as a Value: The Intelligible Background," (5) "Primary and Secondary Reflection: The Existential Fulcrum," (6) "Feeling as a Mode of Participation," (7) "Being in a Situation," (8) "My Life," (9) "Togetherness: Identity and Depth," and (10) "Presence as a Mystery."*

*"Volume II: Faith and Reality" is divided into ten chapters, which are entitled: (1) "The Question of Being," (2) "Existence and Being," (3) "Ontological Exigence," (4) "The Legitimacy of Ontology," (5) "Opinion and Faith," (6) "Prayer and Humility," (7) "Freedom and Grace," (8) "Testimony," (9) "Death and Hope," and (10) "Conclusion."*

*Each series of lectures is outlined in the table of contents at the beginning of each volume. The text consists of explanations of the statements that are made in the table of contents. Marcel does not attempt to construct a complete philosophical system or to formulate a comprehensive set of arguments in order to describe the mystery of being. Instead, he conducts a wide-ranging inquiry into the mystery of being, and he examines all of the results of that inquiry.*

**Transcendence** ... According to Marcel, we live in a "broken world." The modern world is in conflict with itself, and we must therefore try to transcend its disunity. The need for, or exigency of, transcendence is the source of our desire to more fully understand the nature of our existence. Transcendence implies going beyond the limits of ordinary experience.

To transcend is not merely to go beyond the spatiotemporal limits of ordinary experience. Transcendence is also a mode of ascending above the limits of ordinary experience.

The exigency of transcendence is intrinsic to human experience. Transcendence does not imply a state of going beyond all experience. To the contrary, the transcendent is capable of being experienced. If the transcendent were beyond all experience, then it could be thought or felt.

**Truth** is only a single aspect of reality and is not the whole of reality. It may emerge from reality, but reality is more than truth. The fulfillment of truth, or the totality of all truths, may produce an inclusive reality. The universe may reveal its reality in the fulfillment of truth. However, the universe may also include things that are lacking in truth.

Truth is an ideal that we should strive for. However, truth may not belong to feelings in the same way that it belongs to propositions. Feelings are neither true nor false, and they are therefore different from propositions. Judgments of value may be true or false, but we are not able to describe a sensation or feeling as true or false.<sup>1</sup>

**Philosophic thought** is reflective, not only because it is concerned with investigating the nature of human existence, but also because it is concerned with evaluating its own method of investigating the nature of human existence. Reflection may be a process of recalling or reexamining past experiences in order to better understand them. Reflection may transform experiences into concepts.

Primary reflection tends to break down the unity of experience, but secondary reflection tends to restore the unity of our experience. Primary reflection is an analytic process, but secondary reflection is a synthetic process. Primary and secondary reflection are on opposite sides of an existential fulcrum, in the center of which is the question: "Who or what am I?" Primary reflection may discover that "I am not who I am thought to be," but secondary reflection may discover that "I am not merely the negation of who I am thought to be." Further reflection on the question of "Who am I?" may enable each of us to recognize the importance of personal feelings and emotions in defining who we are as human beings. We may discover that who we are cannot be separated from what we feel.

**Feeling** is not merely a passive function which is made possible by sensory capability. Feeling is also a mode of active participation in the world. Active participation may be either objective or non-objective. Non-objective participation may include subjective participation. However, non-objective participation may also include intersubjective participation. Intersubjectivity (or shared subjectivity) may bring unity to our being in the world.

Feeling is not passive, and that feeling is participation. However, participation is more than feeling. Participation is active engagement in the world.

Each person may have both an objective **identity** in the outer world and a subjective identity in the inner world of his or her own thoughts or feelings. A person's subjective identity may be a felt quality of identity which may change in accordance with changes in that person's feelings. A felt quality (or a quality of feeling) may be unanalyzable, because the quality of a person's feelings may be inseparable from the things which that person feels. A felt quality may be a unity of feeling which cannot be dissolved by primary reflection.

According to Marcel, **contemplation** is a mode of active perception that transcends the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity. It is a mode of observation which transcends the difference between the inner world and the outer world. It is also a mode of participation in the being of whatever is contemplated. Contemplation is an inward regrouping or 'ingathering' of mental resources. To contemplate is to gather one's mental resources in the presence of whatever is being contemplated.

The exact relation between existence and being may be indefinable. Existence and being may be inseparable insofar as anything which is perceived as being may also be perceived as existing.<sup>2</sup> Being is always 'being in a situation,' and thus is always changing. Our own mode of Being is 'being in the world.'

We may not be able to provide an objective answer to the question: "**What is Being?**" because we may not be able to objectively consider our own experience of being. Being may transcend any of our attempts to define it objectively. Thus, 'intersubjectivity' becomes an important starting point for any mode of ontological inquiry.

We are part of, and thus cannot be objective about, our own existence. Existence transcends objective enquiry and is thus a mystery. Scientific questions may be objectively answerable and may be considered as problems for which there may be solutions. However, philosophic questions may not be objectively answerable, and may involve mysteries which are part of our own existence. Science may be concerned with problems which we can stand apart from and be objective about, but philosophy may be concerned with mysteries which we cannot stand apart from or be objective about.<sup>3</sup>

**The mysterious** is not the same as the unknowable, and that the unknowable is only the limiting case of the problematic.<sup>4</sup> A mystery is not an 'object' of perception but is a 'presence' which is capable of being recognized.

Mystery may reveal to us a depth of being which leads to eternity. Eternity is a mystery, and every mystery flows into eternity.<sup>5</sup>

Marcel distinguishes between **faith and opinion** by explaining that faith is a belief in something, while opinion is a belief which makes a claim about something. To have faith is not to believe *that* but is to believe *in*.<sup>6</sup> Faith may be a belief in a transcendent reality whose existence is a mystery. If we believe in something, then we place our faith in it, and thus we may be changed by faith, and faith may change our sense of our own being.

Faith may be combined with humility and **prayer**. Humility is a mode of being in which an individual acknowledges his or her own imperfections. Humility is also an affirmation of the sacred.<sup>7</sup> Prayer is a form of spiritual communication with God. Authentic prayer is not a self-centered request for attention but is a way of uniting ourselves with God.

**Freedom** is defined by the ability to act significantly. Free acts are significant because they help to make us who we are as human beings. Freedom is not merely the ability to make arbitrary

choices, because we are not free if everything which we can choose to do is insignificant. Freedom is the ability to make significant choices and is given to us by God.

*The Mystery of Being* is in some respects more concerned with mystery than with being. It explains that if we are to understand our own existence, we must investigate mysteries that we may not be able to be objective about. At the same time, however, it explains that we may be capable of recognizing mysteries when we find them. Marcel's lectures are mainly concerned with existential themes, but he also makes a persuasive argument for religious faith.

---

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume I: Reflection and Mystery* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>*Volume II: Faith and Reality* (London: The Harvill Press, 1951), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, "Existentialism," in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, edited by D.J. O'Connor (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 522.

<sup>4</sup>Marcel, *Volume I*, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 218-9.

<sup>6</sup>*Volume II*, p. vi.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

MacIntyre, "Existentialism," in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. Edited by D.J. O'Connor. New York: The Free Press, 1964.

Marcel, Gabriel. *The Mystery of Being. Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*. London: The Harvill Press, 1950.

Marcel, Gabriel. *The Mystery of Being. Volume II: Faith and Reality*. London: The Harvill Press, 1951.

Copyright© 2001 Alex Scott