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Life as Celebration of Mystery

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Abstract: Existentialism is not a system of philosophy rather it is way of philosophizing. There is no common pattern of thinking in this style of philosophizing. Though Søren Kierkegaard is called the father of existentialism, this style of philosophizing came to the fore during and after the World War I & II, when the human life was on the verge of extinction. At the same time what makes these thinkers similar in view is that they all begin their works centered on human life and its existential situation. Thus, Existentialism came as a reaction to logical positivism with its emphasis on sensory empiricism, objectivity, and science with emphasis on individualism, subjectivity, introspection, and feeling. It is a philosophy of the situation-the actuality of existing and not the concept of existing. In reaction to idealism it is an objection to be liberal doctrines of optimism and progress that man is not an object to be understood, or a problem to be solved and grasped but a subject and a mystery to be lived as brought out by Gabriel

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Marcel in his writings. With their outcry of subjectivism, existentialism is a champion of the concrete against the abstract, of life as opposed to logic, of the non-intellectual and irrational in contrast to intellectualism, and of freedom as against mechanism and determinism. It has much in common with romanticism, pragmatism, personalism, Bergsonism, voluntaristic and vitalistic philosophies in general. This article brings to light that life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived, a thought central to the writings of the French writer Gabriel Marcel.

Keywords: Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Existentialism, Problem Mystery, Celebration.

Introduction

As Rev Dr Cyril Desbruslais SJ, writes when we take a brief glance at contemporary Western philosophy, we are filled with new interest and it seems to confirm our all too human penchant for constructing neat “national stereotypes” and over-simplified generalizations. Thus, German philosophers turn out to be “characteristically,” abstract and obscure as they elaborate vast system of thought which, in ‘an all-too-orderly fashion, assign a neat place to everything according to a pre-planned scenario, Idealism, culminating in Hegel, appears to be precisely that kind of thing.¹ He says that as for the French, most obligingly, they offer us Existentialism, a philosophy which, in “typical Gallican” spirit, wears its heart on its sleeve and writes melodramatically about anguish and anxiety in a hyperemotional vein that would make us “traditionally inexpressive Orientals” blush.² For him Sartre is a good example of this and it is a pity that Kierkegaard is Danish; his outpourings would fit in well with the type of stuff we’d expect a Frenchman to produce. The British, with their usual English phlegm, guard a stiff upper-lip and raise their eyebrows at the sentimentalism of “those wretched frog-eaters” and serve us up the philosophy which cause us no surprise at all; cold, detached analysis of “words, words, words.”³ While linguistic

philosophy is “so thoroughly English, y’know” and the average professor of philosophy in Indian Universities of today will hasten to sit at the feet of Wisdom and Ryle (we are still culturally colonised by the British).⁴ Prof. Desbruslais asks: “and the Americans?” The reply is simple: “What else can we demand from them but pragmatism – that rough and ready way of reviewing things which is so stamped with the “American way of life’ and actually pontificates in philosophical terminology what the Great American Dream has always proclaimed: the important thing is to succeed? The true is what works. After all, isn’t that ‘in a nutshell’ what William James was trying to say?”⁵

Pro. Desbruslais reminds us that we should be more than cautious about all kinds of stereotypes, nutshell-summaries and hasty generalizations and at best these are but exaggerations. At the same time let us not forget that, if they are authentic exaggerations, as they can only be so by underscoring a solid vein of truth.⁶ According to him it is not too startling to note that philosophers, like everyone else, are as much makers of their age as they are shaped by their cultures. He points out that nowadays, when we are more than aware of the conscious and unconscious undercurrents of the will to power that infiltrate all manner of national and international structures.⁷ Keeping in mind of this nature of the background of all philosophies, systems and patterns of thought that this article titled, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived,” is being brought out. This, I believe that it is a common experience of every one of us that life is often a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived and contemplated. But as humans whatever be the problems one has to face in life, one comes to realization at one time or other that life is not merely a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived, which makes us to live our life as authentic and responsible human persons. Such approach to

life will help us to see the preciousness our life as humans in this world.

1. Basics of Existentialism

Thus, at the opposite pole of logical positivism, with its emphasis on sensory empiricism, objectivity, and science, Existentialism has been a reaction in favour of individualism, subjectivity, introspection, and feeling.⁸ It is a philosophy not of things, but of the situation, the actuality of existing and not the concept of existing.⁹ Against the philosophy of idealism it is an objection to the liberal doctrines of optimism and progress that man is not an object to be understood, or a problem to be solved and grasped but a subject and a mystery to be lived. With their outcry of subjectivism, existentialism as a champion of the concrete against the abstract, of life as opposed to logic, of the non-intellectual and irrational in contrast to intellectualism, and of freedom as against mechanism and determinism. Existentialism has much in common with romanticism, pragmatism, personalism, Bergsonism, and voluntaristic and vitalistic philosophies generally.¹⁰

Though existentialism is not a system of thought, but a way of philosophizing, has its historical roots deep in the culture, with an ancient heritage, the outlines of which have become plain especially since the work of its chief technical philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Socrates, the psalmists, Paul, Augustine, and Pascal who contributed to its foundations.¹¹ But it came to its modern technical form, grounded in the psychology and theology of Søren Kierkegaard, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and the method and ontology of the phenomenologist Husserl.¹²

It should be noted that there is no single existentialist position in their philosophizing but they all begin their philosophizing with man (humans) from their act of existing. Thus, the philosophy varies with its proponents, some of whom insists

that they are not existentialists at all.¹³ But there is a common stream of doctrine that identifies them, nevertheless, and indicates quite clearly their relation to the classical philosophic tradition with their major and differentiating thesis that “existence is prior to essence,” while in the established tradition, “essence is prior to existence.”¹⁴ By this the existentialist means that human nature is determined by the course of life rather than life by human nature.¹⁵

In political philosophy, in the present, epoch, the submerging of the individual takes other forms than that of absolute idealism, in the powerful tendency towards political and social totalitarianism with its reduction of personal responsibility, and its evaluation of personal value in terms of service to the collectivity.¹⁶ Existentialism, in some of its forms, can be considered, in part that is to say, as a reaffirmation of the free individual in the face of this powerful tendency.¹⁷ Frederick Copleston points out that one of the reason why Marxists have represented the existentialism of M. Sartre as being the philosophy of the dying bourgeoisie, the last convulsive effort of an outmoded individualism.¹⁸ He says that again, existentialism, by insisting on the individual, on the free subject, is also a protest against the general tendency in our civilization to resolve the individual into his (her) social function or functions, such as taxpayer, voter, civil servant, engineer, trade unionist, etc.¹⁹ According to Copleston this theme has been developed by Gabriel Marcel in particular, who believes that the tendency towards the functionalization of man (humans) involves degradation of the human person.²⁰ As he writes that in general, therefore, we can say that existentialism represents the reassertion of the free man (humans) against the collectivity or any tendency to depersonalization, and in this respect it is akin to personalism and has some affinities with pragmatism.²¹

Existentialism is more than a protest of the free individual against totalitarianism and impersonal functionalization. For as in certain

forms it seems to be being presented, tacitly at least, as a way of salvation, which is partly true of Marcel's philosophy; for as a convinced Catholic, he believes that man's salvation is achieved by other means than by man's unaided effort and choice.²² For example, it seems to be verified not only in the case of Jaspers' philosophy but also in those of Sartre and Camus.²³ As Copleston writes that it may, indeed, appear to constitute a gross paradox if one speaks of a way of salvation in connection with an atheistic philosophy such as that of Sartre.²⁴

In the ancient world history we find people looking to philosophy for a way of life, for reasoned guidance in conduct and belief, which was not provided by the official cult. It does not mean great numbers of people turned to philosophy for moral guidance and for religious belief.²⁵ According to Copleston serious philosophy is scarcely a popular pastime; and the number of people who pay much attention to philosophers is at any time comparatively restricted.²⁶ He points out that even in the earlier phases of Greek thought we find the tendency to look to philosophy for a way of life: we have only to think of the Pythagorean "society." In the Hellenistic and Roman periods we find the tendency taking definite forms as in Stoicism and Neoplatonism.²⁷ Copleston points out that the former offered a moral doctrine which was supported by rational argument: the latter offered, besides ethical teaching, a deeply religious view of the world and of human life, a view which was capable of attracting those who had no real belief in the ancient anthropomorphic mythologies and who at the same time looked, in the uncertainty and bewilderment of 'human existence,' for some message of personal salvation which was at once intellectually respectable and satisfying to the religious impulse.²⁸ In many a time, the individual (human), thrown back on himself (herself) in the great cosmopolitan

society of the Empire and only too conscious of the forces threatening his personal security, could find in Stoicism the ideal of the self-sufficient virtuous man or in Neo-platonism a religious doctrine of liberation and salvation.²⁹

While in the mediaeval world the situation was very different. For them the way of salvation was provided by the Christian religion and, whether they practiced it or not, men accepted the Christian code as the norm of moral action. In the mediaeval world, philosophy, therefore, tended to be a purely academic pursuit, a matter for university professors and their students.³⁰ It was the view of the general circumstances, that mediaeval man should not have expected from philosophy, as distinct from Christian theology and Christian moral and ascetic teaching, what Marcus Aurelius, for example, had looked for in Stoicism.³¹

Coming to modern Europe not however, mediaeval Europe, here, belief, in the Christian religion has waned, and this has been followed as Nietzsche saw that it would, by doubt concerning the absolute character and universal applicability of Christian values and of the Christian moral teaching.³² Copleston says that at the same time it is now realized more clearly than it was in the last century that we cannot expect science to provide us with a normative morality or with religious belief.³³ He points out that it is no matter for surprise that some at least should look to philosophy to provide them with what, in their opinion, neither Christianity nor science can give them.³⁴ In such human situation where one finds himself (herself), Copleston says that whether we think that existentialism meets the need or not, it seems to him that it is one of the forms of philosophy which attempts to do so.³⁵ Thus existentialism lays special emphasis on the free individual that is why existentialism finds its relevance even today.

Existentialism in its theistic form has been an important factor in the neo-orthodox awakening that has marked theology since the first war with its emphasis on the negative qualities of man, on

human estrangement and the tragedy of human existence, have supported the resurgence of the dogma of original sin and the entire structure of eschatological theology.³⁶ While secular, or what is often called atheistic, Existentialism has popularized especially since the second war by numerous in fiction, drama, and poetry, particularly by its French partisans under the leadership of Jean Paul Sartre.³⁷ Existentialism in its recent technical formulations is largely a German product, its foremost representatives being the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich and the philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger.³⁸ In the post-war scene, to some extent the rise of Existentialism must be attributed to the destruction and human desolation attending the two world wars and the anxieties that stem from the continuing unrest in both world and domestic affairs and as such it is a product of large-scale social failure.³⁹ It is also an expression of the psychological and moral tensions that hold the individual in their grip in any age and in any society, for as humans we are the same irrespective of place and time.⁴⁰

a. Gabriel Marcel

Gabriel Marcel, in full Gabriel-Honoré Marcel, (born December 7, 1889, Paris, France—died October 8, 1973, Paris), French philosopher, dramatist, and critic who was associated with the phenomenological and existentialist movements in 20th-century European philosophy and whose work and style are often characterized as theistic or Christian existentialism (a term Marcel disliked, preferring the more neutral description “neo-Socratic” because it captures the dialogical, probing, and sometimes inchoate nature of his reflections).⁴¹ He is considered as the advocate of Christian existentialism in France, who was also a personal thinker like Kierkegaard, whose thought springs from personal experience. Marcel was opposed to abstract system

building and absolute capacity of reason to resolve human difficulties.⁴²

According to him evils, hatred and mass hysteria of modern times are the result of unwarranted abstraction. He says that the need of day is to react with our whole strength against that dissociation of life from spirit which a bloodless rationalism has brought about, which reflects his 'obstinate and untiring battle against abstraction.'⁴³ According to Marcel such abstraction not only leads the philosopher away from the truths of one's own experience but also leads to fanaticism and violence.⁴⁴ Marcel sees the limitation of excessive claims of thinkers who place everything in the wheel of reason. For him reason is always inadequate in explaining existing individual.⁴⁵ He says that it causes evils in society and obstructs natural flow of life and, as such brings man into the chain of determinisms.⁴⁶

Thus, at times, it catches hold of the individual person and fastens him (her) so tightly that he (she) feels immense pressure in participation.⁴⁷ It is for this that Marcel emphasizes the recovery of personal value not through reason but through art, contemplation and friendly association.⁴⁸ Thus, this personal value culminates in the existential unity of every creature and in the love of Being.⁴⁹

Being

Marcel's spirit of his thought, as revealed in his concern with exploring the realm of "Being," is more "metaphysical," than the spirit of Sartre's thought, which is turned dramatically towards action.⁵⁰ At the same time as Copleston points out that we can hardly read Marcel's writings without realizing his concern with exhibiting that it means to be a human person in the fullest sense of the term and with bearing witness to what he regards as the truth with a view to enabling others to appropriate it freely, not only by intellectual recognition, but also on the plane of being.⁵¹

The Existent

Marcel analyses the existent reality. The existent reality for him cannot be known rather can be encountered through communion. Thus he is against the dichotomies of thought and being, subject and object, self and God, the individual and the society, set forth by different thinkers in the history of thought.⁵² According to him these dichotomies are epistemological rather than ontological and, as such, they are contingent. For him, even knowledge is contingent and being so, it fails to explain the existent reality.⁵³ He says that it does not account for participation in being. Thus, his statement, knowledge is contingent on a participation in being for which no epistemology can account because it continually presupposes it, bears testimony to this fact.⁵⁴

Thus, Prof. Desbruslais points out that Gabriel Marcel was an existentialist before the term became fashionable. According to him Marcel was the first to use the word to describe his own approach to philosophy-though he rejected it afterwards because of Sartre's appropriation of the label into his atheistic system.⁵⁵ He says that Marcel was also a phenomenologist before phenomenology became a central concern for European philosophy.⁵⁶ Prof. Desbruslais points out that finally, he was a religious thinker at a time when religious was not a respectable thing in philosophy.⁵⁷ For him, no wonder Seymour Cain called him "a herald of our times."⁵⁸ Marcel lived in a time when the world was shaken by the two great earthquakes viz., World War I & II. So his life was one of sufferings, pain, hunger and thirst, alienation, anxiety, despair and death. Thus his world was a world of problems. From the midst of such a situation he develops his philosophy of life that 'life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.'

Being in a Situation

It is the experience of any of us as humans in the world that we are always in a situation or in a predicament, which could be called as in an existential situation. Thus, Prof. Desbruslais writes that Marcel's is indeed, a very "concrete approach," to man (humans).⁵⁹ He says that rather than approach him abstracting man's ego from out of its context and then grappling with the pseudo-problem of how to bring the context back again-via the "problem of the bridge" bogey or attempts to "prove" the reality of the world-he takes a realistic, down-to-earth approach which takes men (women), as he (she) is, a being in situating.⁶⁰ This also means to what am I? Or what does it mean to be a person? This situation also implies the world, the spatio-temporal reality that surrounds me (us). Thus it is not the self-enclosed ego but myself (ourselves) in the world, present in a situation, participating in Being and open to Being.⁶¹ Prof. Desbruslais says that according to Marcel this insertion into the cosmos is through my body. He points out that through my body I am "incarnating into the world and my relation to my body is, thus, mysterious. Thus neither statement does justice to the facts – neither have "I had a body," nor I am a body".⁶²

According to Marcel it is a unique type of relationship; it can be properly compared or likened to none other.⁶³ Thus Marcel avoids the fatal dichotomy of "me and the body," trying to put the proverbial Humpty Dumpty together again after having separated what was inextricably joined together.⁶⁴ For him the postulate that the primary philosophical-and psychological concept is not the isolated "I" but the "I-in-situation" which, in the context of persons, broadens into an "I-in-communion" is certainly a healthy corrective to the usual individualistic thrust of many an existentialistically inclined author.⁶⁵ Being human always implies that we are always in a situation. This is also what we mean when we say, 'life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived,' particularly when we are faced with life's problems and anxieties.

b. Problem and Mystery

Prof. Desbruslais points out that this well-known distinction of Marcel is the key to his whole philosophical development.⁶⁶ He says that in his own words, metaphysics is essentially a ‘reflection bearing on a mystery’⁶⁷ for Marcel to speak of ontology as a problem is an abuse of language, which, in the last analysis invalidates the whole process of philosophizing.⁶⁸ Thus by making the distinction between ‘problem’ and ‘mystery,’ he intends to explain the true position of existential philosophy which does not explain the concepts rather unfolds the mystery and reveals deeper implications of our existence.⁶⁹ This is one of the distinctive mark of Marcel when we say, ‘life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.’

Problem

For Marcel, a problem relates to things that can be resolved by intellect objectively and does not involve the being of the questioner.⁷⁰ For example, in a problem, the involved object is an epistemological subject who can be replaced by a machine as a computer solving the problem of calculation.⁷¹ But as humans we are, most of us today are faced with daily problems of life such as basic necessities of life like shelter, food and clothing. Even in these utter human necessities of life one does not get lost in the stark realities of life such as these problems of life. But in the midst of all these, there is always a ray of hope which makes us go on with our life joyfully and with hope and love which raises us from problem to life as a mystery. This could be what in Marcel’s philosophy when he says that life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.

Mystery

Aristotle says; “one fine day, the mind comes up against not this or that aspect of being but being itself-being as being.”⁷²

For Marcel in mystery, the being of the questioner, the human person, is involved. Therefore, is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, which invades them, as it were.⁷³ And finally, it transcends itself as a simple problem. For Marcel ontological reality is a mystery and not a problem as it cannot be solved like problem by intellect but can be revealed directly through participation or encounter.⁷⁴ Thus the work of philosophy, according to him, relates, to the realm of revelation of mystery underlying human existence and not the mere explanation of the concepts related to it.⁷⁵ This is the outstanding contribution of Marcel to the thought of philosophizing in the history of philosophy. For him, the existential philosophy does not or should not undertake the explanation of concepts or resolution of problems related to these concepts but attempts or should attempt to unfold the mystery of human existence and reveals the deeper implications underlying it.⁷⁶ This is what we mean when we take Marcel's pattern of thought that life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.

Conclusion

Marcel is noted for describing man's (humans') place in the world in terms of such fundamental human experiences such as relationships, love, fidelity, hope, and faith.⁷⁷ He is a survivor of the two great earthquakes – World War I and II that shook the whole world. Among his contributions to the history of thought is his description of human life with regards to problem and mystery which can be summarized in these words that life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived. His whole philosophy can be said to be centered on this theme. His brand of existentialism was said to be largely unknown in the English-speaking world, where it was mistakenly associated with that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Marcel's view of the human condition was that “beings” are beset by tension, contradiction and ambiguity.⁷⁸ He was also interested in life's religious dimension and was considered the first French existentialist philosopher.⁷⁹ At times

it may seem that Marcel offers an anthropocentric philosophy with regards to human life where metaphysics seems to be absent or alien.⁸⁰ To this Copleston himself says that Marcel's thought centres round the human person; round the person as related to other persons and to God, it is true, but still round the human person⁸¹, which Marcel calls 'intersubjectivity.' It is from this background that Marcel develops his theme that life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived, where oneself, others, God and the world are intimately related.

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Notes

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²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸ B.A.G. Fuller (ed), *A History of Philosophy*, (Calcutta: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co, 1955), 603.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Frederick Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Search Press Ltd., 1972.), 138.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 138-139.

¹⁹Ibid, 139.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 139-140.

³⁰Ibid., 140.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶B.A.G. Fuller (ed), *A History of Philosophy*, 603-604.

³⁷Ibid., 604.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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- ⁴² M.N. Sinha, *A Primer of Existentialism*, (Delhi: Capital Publishing House, 1982), 18.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 18-19.
- ⁵⁰ Frederick Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy*, 136.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 136-137.
- ⁵² M.N. Sinha, *A Primer of Existentialism*, 20.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Cyril Desbruslais, SJ, *Contemporary Western Philosophy*, 102.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 103.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 101.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
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- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
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- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
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⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Frederick Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy*, 133.

⁸¹Ibid.

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