



The Philosophy of Existentialism

Gabriel Marcel, Manya Harari (Translator)

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An exposition in five parts of the character of existentialist philosophy, including an analysis of the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre. Author Gabriel Marcel, a famous French dramatist, philosopher, and author of *Le Dard*, was a leading exponent of Christian existentialism.

The Philosophy of Existentialism Details

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Bob Nichols says

The book consists of four essays. The first, “On the Ontological Mystery,” discusses Marcel’s existentialism. It’s “being” that is more than (“is what withstands” or is that which transcends) “the data of experience” and is an attempt “to reduce them step by step to elements increasingly devoid of intrinsic or significant value.” It’s a dissatisfaction with technical knowing (“there is truly an intimate dialectical correlation between the optimism of technical progress and the philosophy of despair”). In contrast, Marcel’s existentialism is the “active recognition of something permanent....ontologically.” “Supernatural life must,” Marcel summarizes, “find a hold in the natural....a philosophy of this sort is carried by an irresistible movement towards the light which it perceives from afar and of which it suffers the secret attraction.”

In the second essay, Marcel takes on Sartre’s “philosophy of non-being,” which is preoccupied with the self “as idol,...seen from the terrace of a café.” Values in Sartre’s philosophy “can never be ‘recognized’ or ‘discovered.’ Sartre uses “the word ‘good’ and ‘bad,’” Marcel observes, but Marcel then asks, “what can these words possibly mean in the context of his philosophy?” In closing this essay, Marcel is critical of those who read Sartre differently in an effort to find their own way.*

In “Testimony and Existentialism,” his third essay, Marcel writes that “Testimony is always given before transcendence.” Testimony “bears on something independent from me and objectively real; it has therefore an essentially objective end.”

I found these three essays overly abstract, neither appealing to read nor easy to understand. They come across as “a passionate longing for the unknown,” his self-description in his fourth and last essay where he also notes his attraction to Bergson whose thoughts “made it impossible for me to doubt the reality of metapsychical phenomena.”

The book does not come alive until the end of this last essay where he is direct and clear about his perspective. The line between normal and abnormal is “uncertain,” he writes, and any philosophical focus on just the former is to empty the universe “of those principles which conferred upon it meaning and life.” Then Marcel comments that “whatever its ultimate meaning, the universe into which we have been thrown cannot satisfy our reason, let us have the courage to admit it once and for all. To deny it is not only scandalous, but in some ways truly sinful; and indeed I am convinced that this is precisely the besetting sin of the philosopher, the sin of Leibnitz and, less obviously, the sin of Hegel.” Reality “cannot be ‘summed up,’” Marcel states. We cannot know reality from outside, looking in. Rather, that “undertaking had to be pursued within reality itself, to which the philosopher can never stand in the relationship of an onlooker to a picture.”

Having a belief in a supra-normal “Reality” that satisfies one’s longing for “meaning and life” is fine, but to charge that those beliefs that would deny such a world is scandalous or sinful is philosophical arrogance and the very opposite of the humility that Marcel otherwise proclaims as a virtue. Stated this way as his philosophical position, Marcel’s humility is before a transcendent presence. It is akin to that of a believer and prompts the question that Freud and others might ask about why he, Marcel, might need to see the world in this particular way. But to do this is to pursue a scientific question, which is something that, on this question, Marcel’s philosophical-theological approach does not allow.

*Marcel writes that “it is from the ranks of a misdirected and anarchical youth that he will, either directly or

through his zealous intermediaries, recruit his disciples and, so often, his victims.

Erik Graff says

This book was required reading for The Philosophy of Existentialism taught at Grinnell College. It's exposition of Sartre was much clearer than anything we had read by Sartre himself and Marcel's general approach to ontology, along with our reading of Kierkegaard, contributed to a growing sense that one need not be crazy or stupid to be a Christian.

Josh says

Not the easiest read, but worth it for the last chapter, which is an autobiographical account of how the author came to be a philosopher.

Ellen says

"To think, to formulate, to judge, is always to betray."

Greg Plante says

I don't agree with much of Marcel's philosophy (at least what is contained in this book), but he has a way of unraveling Sartre that is, nonetheless, very interesting (not to mention brutal). There are some beautifully described and modestly enlightening nuggets in the other essays too, although some of it was confusing (which is more a reflection on my own shortcomings). Many days I found myself reading a page or two, then taking an hour just to digest a particular idea - which is actually immensely satisfying if you're the patient, pondering type. All in all this was a worthwhile read and has surely helped with my understanding of Existentialism.

AM says

The author of this little tome is Marcel, NOT Sartre.

John Allen says

An appropriate indictment of Sartre's effect on people of his time (and our time too, in all likelihood). I read this in 1997 and have never forgotten certain passages.

John Wilson says

Marcel finds Sartre's examples of the homosexual acknowledging his sexuality 'rather disgusting'. Need we say more?

Jason Retherford says

Marcel critiques Sartre well, and provides a basis for his rationale. It seems that Marcel is suggesting a meta-narrative based on love.
