Gabriel Marcel’s Existentialist Ethics and the Search for the Meaning of Life

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Abstract
Marcel’s existentialist ethics is one based on concrete life situations devoid of metaphysical abstractions. Philosophy in general should reflect human experience of life challenges. A reflection on human experience is a practical demonstration of bringing philosophy from its Olympian heights to the ordinary dwellings of men. The task of philosophy is to search for human reality but a reality that is not connected to life experience borne out of human conduct is likely to create distortions in interpersonal relationship. Marcel observes that emphasis in human activity is placed on function or what the individual does which negates the meaning of life. This makes the world a broken one and human beings mere objects of realizing functions at the expense of the meaning and purpose of life. To restore this disconnection in the idea of function and human personality in order to actualize the meaning of life and its strategies, Marcel sees philosophy as adequately suited to confront the real practical dimension of philosophy to focus on the meaning of life. This for him summarizes the essence of existential ethics.

Key words: Broken world, existentialist ethics, abstraction, reality, transcendence

Introduction
Long before coining the term “existentialism”, Marcel had introduced some important existentialist themes to a French audience in his early philosophical discourses. Apart from being a critical philosopher, he was also a dramatist. Marcel’s philosophical orientation had its starting point in a condition of metaphysical alienation; the human individual searching for harmony in a transient life (Marcel, 1995:11). Harmony for Marcel is an essential ingredient of social and political stability. This harmony was to be sought through “secondary reflection”, a “dialogical” rather than “dialectical” approach to the world characterized by “wonder and astonishment” and open to the “presence” of other people and of God rather than merely to “information” about them. Marcel contrasted “secondary reflection” with abstract, scientific-technical “primary reflection” which he associated with the activity of the abstract Cartesian ego. It is on this ground that Marcel sees philosophy as a concrete activity undertaken by “a sensing feeling human incarnate-embodied in a concrete world.” Jean-Paul Sartre, a fellow French philosopher, adopted the term ‘existentialism’ in the 1940s for his own philosophy. Both Marcel and Sartre disagreed in some of their doctrines. While Sartre professed atheism, Marcel as a Catholic convert professed theistic existentialism.
The Meaning of Life

The totality of what human life encompasses cuts across philosophy and religion. Within existentialism, two prominent positions have been canvassed namely; human life as meaningful or meaningless. Camus (1955:11), in the Myth of Sisyphus, sees philosophy as an activity in search of the meaning of life. According to him, man is a meaning seeking being primarily concerned with his existence. The search for meaningful existence constitutes the main philosophical problem. This is because it gives man an understanding about the task ahead of him and his conduct towards it. In this conduct man concentrates on meaning and meaninglessness of life. Such questions as; is life meaningful or meaningless become crucial on how to pursue human goals and aspirations. For Camus, life is absurd, the universe is also absurd (Camus, 1955:12). The implication here is that the universe is meaningless and human life is meaningless. How does this meaninglessness of the universe and life in general affect our activities and goals? Do we fold our hands and watch the helplessness of human frustration? Camus’ response to the forces of absurdity is grounded in revolt. The attitude of revolt is a refusal to remain passive in the face of evil, injustice and oppression. Revolt is the determination to fight against absurdity, against hopelessness with all arsenals available.

Ketcham has observed the meaninglessness of human life from what he calls the loss of wonder. According to him, nothing has disturbed contemporary man more than the loss of his secure, sophisticated, predictable, insured little world (Ketcham, 1968:3). Omoregbe, (2001:7) examines the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of human life through the conception of what man is. According to him, man is so strong, yet so fragile, so powerful, yet so weak, so great, yet so miserable. He is so curious to know, and knows so much about the physical universe, yet he is so ignorant about himself. He is in fact a problem to himself, a mystery beyond his comprehension. Omoregbe’s position shows to a large extent the futility of our endless search for the meaning of human existence, our endless struggle for human values and how they can be attained. It also exposes the fluidity of the meaning of life and how we are carried away by life challenges. The search for the meaning of human life from a moral point of view is summarized in the fundamental questions man has been posing right from enlightenment about his origin, nature and the purpose of life. What am I? Why do I live? What is the meaning of my life? What, in the final analysis, is the ultimate value of my life? Where do I go? Am I heading for nothingness (Marcel, 1967:56). The search for the answers to these questions is the primary preoccupation of humans since the beginning of civilization.

Major Influences

Marcel was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson in his analysis of intuitionism and the idealism of Josiah Royce (Titus, 1964:36). Marcel asserted categorically that, his existentialism grew out of his personal experience and thinking thereby developing independently. He also read and digested Kierkegaard and other existentialists when he had already shaped his philosophical thinking. Although he had a deep religious conviction with liberal disposition, his approach is philosophical in outlook.
and emphasis. Marcel used play writing as a strong method of propagating his philosophy with such themes as loneliness, disappointment in love and misunderstanding. These existentialist themes are centered on human predicament raising such questions as, “who am I?,” and “what is Being?” The themes which dominated Marcel’s existentialism are broken down as follows: The broken world and the functional person, ontological exigence, transcendence, being and having, problem and mystery, primary and secondary reflection, disponibilite and indisponibilite, creative fidelity and hope.

The Broken World and the Functional Person:
Marcel is of the view that the world we live in is a broken one. Unfortunately too, emphasis is laid on function. By function, Marcel is talking about the emphasis we place on persons in respect of what they do. By emphasizing what role or things that people do, we lose the essence of the person. In his view, it would be correct to say that we live in a world that is essentially broken, broken in essence, in addition to having been further fractured by events in history. The broken world is characterized by a refusal (or inability) to reflect, a refusal to imagine and a denial of the transcendent (Marcel, 1951:36-37). For Marcel, the strongest contributing factor to this “brokenness” of the world is traceable to the misplacement of the idea of function. Marcel painted a picture of the broken world and the functional person in these words, “I should like to start,” says Marcel, “with a sort of global and intuitive characterization of the man in whom the sense of the ontological – the sense of being is lacking, or to speak more correctly, the man who has lost awareness of this sense” (Marcel, 1951:9). There are two crucial issues raised by Marcel. The first one is that the world we live in is a broken one, the second point is that there is much emphasis on the functional person. One will be correct to say that the world has never been intact. Many factors in human experience such as anxiety, fear, anguish, dread, death and suffering have made the world unsafe. If these themes mentioned plague the life of man, the reality of the broken world is not in question. Marcel observed that the emphasis placed on the functionality of the individual has made him or her an object for various productive activities thereby negating the human essence. This person who has lost awareness of the sense of the ontological, the one whose capacity to wonder has atrophied to the extent of becoming a vestigial trait, is an example of the misapplication of the idea of function. The loss of ontological sense or awareness which is anchored on functionality, makes man a mere machine whose life is monotonous. At this juncture, our life becomes boring, not challenging any more, and the most problematic is the loss of wonder and the castration of the intellect. The greatest consequence of the broken world and the functional person is the “technization” of knowledge. All knowledge is based on function and technique. Marcel’s explanation is that all human problems cannot be resolved by technology alone, some existential questions that are fundamental, are beyond the scope of technology. This is because granted that technology has its proper role, the deification leads to despair. This is the summation of the broken world and the functional person

Ontological Exigence: Marcel simplified the concept of ontological exigence as the need and a demand for the restoration of incoherence that has characterized the universe. It is the
combination of wonder and attendant desire, not to understand the entire cosmos but the profiles that characterize the cosmos. From here he, concluded that ontological exigence is not merely a “wish” for being or coherence but an interior “urge” or “appeal”. We cannot reduce ontological exigence to psychologism, mood or an attitude of someone, rather, it is a movement of the human spirit that is inseparable from being human (Keene, 1984:105).

Marcel maintains that what defines man is his exigence. Exigence here refers to man’s pressing needs or requirements. These exigencies can be silenced by despair which is an existential characteristic of humans (Marcel, 1973:34) Marcel observes that, the broken world can smoothen transcendent exigencies leaving only quotidian, functional needs intact. To this end ontological exigence and the need for transcendence is linked to a certain dissatisfaction, that is, one that is all the more troubling, because, one is unable to soothe this satisfaction by one’s own. If one is unaware that something is wrong and without a sense of dissatisfaction, ontological exigence dies. Ontological exigence is the rough terrain of human existence. It is responsible for human restiveness in our efforts to confront life challenges. Marcel tries to explain this point further,

Being is – or should be necessary. It is impossible that everything should be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other; or, in the words of Shakespeare, to “a tale told by an idiot….” I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality – and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however, rudimentary (Marcel, 1995:15).

It is pertinent to point out here that ontological exigence is responsible for man’s capacity to be human. It is a restoration of man’s transcendental powers the capacity to equilibrate the contending forces of the broken world. With ontological exigence, we build our interior urge or appeal to what is rational or irrational.

**Transcendence:** Marcel’s argument is that transcendence has been misinterpreted and reduced to the status of an object. For him, it is not enough to say that transcendence is “going beyond” with specificity. It must recognize the vertical and the horizontal perspectives giving due advantage to the vertical. Vertical here refers to going beyond in the vertical direction that the possibility of experience can manifest and give us meaning (Marcel, 1951: 46). The implication of not recognizing or experiencing transcendence has given us the impression that experience is objective. This is not correct. Experience for him is not an objective reality because it is an individual thing. As an individual thing other persons may not access it and that is why transcendence may not be comprehended. He put this matter thus:

There is an order where the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word “transcendent” has any meaning it is here—it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, in so far as being evades every attempt to pin it down (Marcel, 1973:193).
Marcel seems to be equating “transcendent” to the absolute. For him the absolute is incomprehensible. Every attempt to pin it down is an illusion. This position of Marcel has given rise to the conception of the transcendent as God whose definition is impossible. Viewed from this position interpretation becomes complicated and wide off the mark.

**Being and Having:** For Marcel, being and having are two legitimate modes of encountering things and persons in the world. Being is applicable with otherness (example, other persons) Marcel maintains that an encounter with being is not one that is purely external, rather, it involves the presence of others and participation of various activities of human life. On the other hand, having corresponds to things that are complicated and external to someone which also help us to achieve meaningful living. It applies to things I can possess, that I can dispose of. Having implies assimilation in terms of culture, values and all life challenges (Marcel, 1949:83). A clear illustration of being and having can be seen in this way. My body as far as I am concerned is both something that I have and something that I am. I can look at my body in a disassociated manner and see it as an instrument of reaching others in an inter-subjective world. There could be a possibility of detaching myself from my body. If this happens it means that I could be different from my body (Passmore, 1986:488). Being is attained when one interacts or participates with others. In other words, being implies a relationship towards others in our engagements towards fulfilling the meaning of human life. Being and having manifests the relentless search for what human life means and the ways of managing the crisis of existence.

**Problems and Mystery:** Marcel uses the broken world to characterize his notion of problem and mystery. These concepts are contending forces in the broken world. He states that the broken world is one that is “on one hand, riddled with problems and, on the other, determined to allow no room for mystery” (Marcel, 1995:12). Marcel articulates the differences between problem and mystery thus:

A problem is something I meet which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity (Marcel,1995:117).

‘A problem’ for Marcel is a question in which the individual is not involved, in which the identity of the questioner is not an issue. A problem is therefore something that bans ones way, placing an obstacle in front of me that must be overcome. To resolve a problem a technique is always involved. What about a mystery? According to Marcel a mystery is “a problem that encroaches on its own data” (Marcel, 1995:1). A mystery does not need a technique for its resolution, it may be insoluble but not senseless. Marcel grounded the understanding of mystery in the question of Being, for example, the union of mind and body, the problem of evil, freedom and love. Problem and mystery reveal the complicated nature of the meaning of life. Questions as to whether life is meaningful or
meaningless are existential as well as ethical and show the effort we make in the quest for the meaning of life. Some philosophers have conceived life from the perspective of mystery but it raises some unanswered questions.

Marcel’s conclusion is that problems are addressed impersonally, in a detached manner, while mystery demands participation and involvement. Problems no matter how intricate can be resolved either partially or completely but mysteries are embedded in ontological wonder which is the genesis of philosophical thought.

**Primary and Secondary Reflections:** These concepts are two ways of apprehending human reality. Primary reflection is a mode of encounter where an object is examined through an abstraction. Abstraction is the process of breaking down analytically objects into their constituent parts. It is concerned with definitions, essences and technical solutions to problems. Secondary reflection on the other hand, is synthetic; it unifies rather than divides, while primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience. Secondary reflection is recuperative and conquers that unity (Marcel, 1951:83).

Secondary reflection is elevated by Marcel above primary reflection because it provides access to the self. It is the authentic mood of reflection. According to Marcel philosophy must return to concrete situations if it is to be addressed as “philosophy” These difficult reflections in his view are “properly philosophical” in so far as they lead to a more truthful, more intimate communication with both myself and with any other person who is included in this exercise (Marcel, 1951:79-80). Secondary reflection as Marcel concludes connects one experience to the other by providing a path to the unity of experience and understanding. In other words, secondary reflection provides a window or an illumination of the mysteries of life as they unfold. Human search for the meaning of life would have been a fruitless exercise without secondary reflection. This is because reflection generally is the task of philosophy in terms of human actions and decisions.

**Disponibilité (availability) and Indisponibilité (unavailability):** For Marcel these are two ways human beings are expected to comport themselves in inter-subjective relations. Disponibilité and indisponibilité are translated by Marcel as either “availability” and “unavailability” or “disposability” and “non-disposability” To bring this meaning to his English audience, Marcel suggests “handiness” and “unhandiness”. By handiness and unhandiness, Marcel is referring to the availability of one’s resources”—material, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. The concept disponibilité refers to the way in which I am available to someone, the state of having my resource at hand to render service. This availability or unavailability of resources is a general state or disposition. As one is free to allocate his resources there is the possibility of self allocation. This selfishness can happen as a result of inadequate resources available to the individual. If this situation happens, the accessibility of these limited resources to the recipient and what is given is also limited.

The discussion of disponibilité and indisponibilité brings to the fore Marcel’s concept of “inter-subjectivity” as a basis for human relationship and understanding. Indisponibilité (‘unavailability’) manifests in a number of ways, however, “unavailability” is rooted in lack of cooperation between an individual and others. This lack of cooperation
results in some individuals withdrawing from others remaining aloof thereby becoming alienated (Marcel, 1995:40).

Marcel identified ‘pride’ as an example of indisponibilité. According to him pride is not an exaggerated opinion of oneself arising from self-love, which he sees as vanity; rather, pride consists in believing that one is self-sufficient\(^1\). In pride, one is enclosed in himself and his major strength lies solely in himself. Marcel further observes that the proud man is cut off from a certain kind of communion with his fellow men. In this regard, pride acts as a principle of destruction which tends to break down the individual. An unavailable person reduces other people to mere things. This disposition of destructiveness can be directed against the self. Pride is in no way incompatible with self-hate\(^2\). Instead of encountering the other person as a “thou”, the other is encountered as a “He” or “She” or even an It”. Marcel expresses this view thus;

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\text{If I treat a “Thou” as a “He”, I reduce the other to being only nature; an animated object which works in some ways and not in others. If, on the contrary, I treat the other as “Thou”, I treat him and apprehend him qua freedom. I apprehend him qua freedom because he is also freedom and not only nature (Marcel, 1949:106-107).}
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Marcel’s position simply expects interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship between human beings. The treatment of others in a manner that is derogatory is as a result of reducing such people as nothing. If we know that every individual though a part of nature is entitled to freedom and the respect of opinions of others prevail, the world will experience decorum and mutual dignity. The absence of this is hate and ill-treatment of persons and by extension the negation of the others. The negation of others will ultimately amount to the negation of oneself and does not give room to understand the other person and how this will connect the meaningful search for life. Life is meaningful when we make ourselves available the other for exchange of ideas and life strategies. The absence of this leads to isolation, loneliness and misery.

Creative Fidelity: According to Marcel, ‘creative fidelity’ consists in actively maintaining ourselves in a state of openness and permeability in willing ourselves to remain open to the others and create a communication channel for ease of understanding. This means that we have to be disposable to others. This will in turn make people believe in us. Believing in ourselves and others creates an atmosphere of openness for all sorts of transactions. Marcel puts this issue thus:

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\text{The fact is that when I commit myself, I grant in principle that the commitment will not again be put into question. And it is clear that this active volition not to question something again, intervenes as an essential element in the determination of what in fact will be the}
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... It bids me to invent a certain modus vivendi. It is a rudimentary form of creative fidelity (Marcel, 1964: 162).

Why does Marcel recommend creative fidelity? Fidelity involves trust. In his view, the truest fidelity is creative, that is, a fidelity that creates itself in order to meet the demands of fidelity. Such fidelity in his view, interprets the vicissitudes of “belief in various life strategies” This appears to negate the essence of infidelity and creates room for betrayal by the other. For him, if fidelity fails, it is my failure rather than the failure of the other. The problem of fidelity touches on the question of time. How constant can one continue to the bond of fidelity? Where does one find the stamina to continue to create oneself in order to meet the demands of fidelity? To answer this question, Marcel argues that in the interior, ontological affirmation—and the attendant appeal of hope, fidelity is always open to doubt. The bond between people can be open to doubt, and when this doubt creeps in, the foundation of fidelity begins to wane. On the other hand, the more disposed I am towards the ontological affirmation, to the affirmation of Being, the more I am inclined to see the failure of fidelity as my failure, resulting from my insufficiency rather than that of the other. Creative fidelity therefore torches on the essence of the meaning of life. This is because fidelity expects confidence in disclosing our problems to one another making trust the foundation of human ethical life. If this condition is attained it makes hope a path way to understand the meaning of life.

**Hope:** Marcel sees ‘hope’ as the final guarantor of fidelity; It is that which allows me to despair, that which gives me the strength to continue to create myself and make me available to the other. Hope is beyond optimism because we see in hope the possibility of attaining an impossible result. Marcel makes a distinction between the realm of fear and desire and the realm of despair and hope. Fear and desire are anticipatory and centre on the object of fear or desire. To desire is “to desire that X” is possible. Optimism exists in the domain of fear and desire because it imagines and anticipates a favourable outcome. The essence of hope however, is not “to hope that X” but merely “to hope”—In hope ones’ current situation is not a finality. Hope imagines and anticipates a deliverance that is enduring. Hope is not inert or passive much less is it Stoicism which is merely the resignation of a solitary consciousness. Hope is neither resigned nor solitary. Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me (Marcel, 1995:28). Marcel sees hope as patience and expectant, active and to this end, it is called “active patience”. He characterized hope thus:

No doubt the solitary consciousness can achieve resignation (Stoicism) but it may well be here that this word actually means nothing but spiritual fatigue. For hope, which is just the opposite of resignation, something more is required. There can be no hope that does not constitute itself through awe and for we. I would be tempted to say that all hope is at the bottom choral (Marcel, 1973:143).
Marcel’s position here points out clearly that there is a dialectical engagement of despair and hope. Where there is hope, there is always the possibility of despair, and only where there is the possibility of despair, can we respond with hope. Hope therefore renews our fear, our expectations and our confidence. From a metaphysical perspective, Marcel maintains that the only genuine hope is hope that does not depend on ourselves, but hope springing from humility and not from pride (Marcel, 1995:32). Hope gives meaning to life and its challenges. It is hope that gives us the ability to navigate the difficult terrain of life and its expectations. Life and its fruitless search is meaningless if hope is absent. This makes hope an inevitable instrument for the search for the meaning of life. The search for the meaning of life creates values that sustain mankind’s vision of society across different epochs.

Conclusion
Marcel’s existential ethics presents intriguing arguments ranging from the broken world and the functional person, ontological exigence, transcendence, Being and having, problem and mystery, primary and secondary reflection, disponibilité and indisponibilité, creative fidelity, hope. These themes throw more light on the search for the meaning of life showing the complexity of the human condition and values.

The analysis of these themes by Marcel exposes the dynamism of human existential traits and the search for meaning of life. For Marcel existential ethics in particular and philosophy in general should illuminate our life’s experiences This insistence on the task of philosophy and the themes analyzed illustrates the position on applying philosophy on concrete human situation and problems.

Marcel’s existentialist ethics as it relates to the search for the meaning of life examines the broken world and its focus on function of the individual. His position reminds humans of the need of treating man as a human person and not an object. The search for meaning of life is a function of once more the restoration of human dignity and man’s essential nature. In this regard, human experience becomes the concrete stand point of actual existential ethics. He started with the broken world where human problems and their solutions are technologically and technically driven. It makes the individual a functional person. For him man is bottled up in a technological and a mechanical world. His analysis of hope is an indication of the struggle human beings have embarked upon for the ontological affirmation of being. For him, this hope is genuine and holds the key in a multi-dimensional reality. Searching for the meaningfulness of life in a futile effort is the ground of existential ethics.

References
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