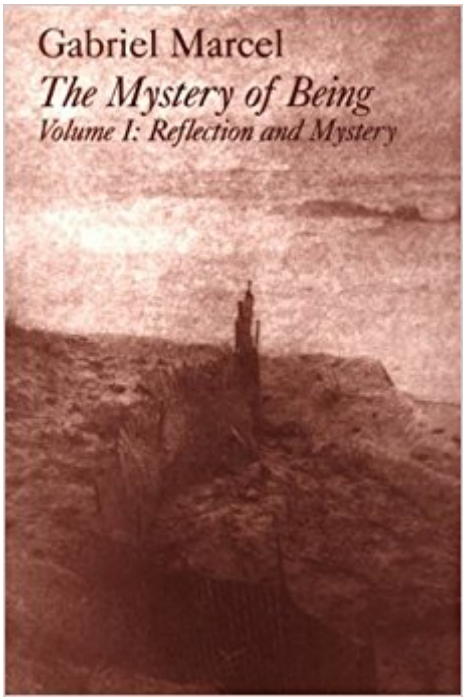
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The Mystery Of Being, Volume I: Reflection And Mystery (Gifford Lectures, 1949-1950)



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Synopsis

The Mystery of Being contains the most systematic exposition of the philosophical thought of Gabriel Marcel, a convert to Catholicism and the most distinguished twentieth-century exponent of Christian existentialism. Its two volumes are the Gifford lectures which Marcel delivered in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1949 and 1950. Marcel's work fundamentally challenges most of the major positions of the atheistic existentialists (Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus), especially their belief in an absurd, meaningless, godless universe.These volumes deal with almost all of the major themes of Marcel's thought: the nature of philosophy, our broken world, man's deep ontological need for being, i.e., for permanent eternal values, our incarnate bodily existence, primary and secondary reflection, participation, being in situation, the identity of the human self, intersubjectivity, mystery and problem, faith, hope, and the reality of God, and immortality.

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Customer Reviews

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Gabriel HonorÃƒÂ© Marcel (1889-1973) was a French philosopher, playwright, music critic and Christian existentialist. He wrote many other books, such asÃ Â Metaphysical Journal, etc. This is the first of two series of Gifford Lectures given by Marcel in 1949 and 1950, at the University of Aberdeen; the second volume isÃ Â Mystery of Being: 2. Faith and Reality. [NOTE: page numbers

refer to the 270-page Gateway paperback edition.]He states in the Introduction, "my tasks... could not be that of expounding some system which might be described as Marcelism... but rather to recapitulate the body of my work under a fresh light... above all to indicate its general direction." (Pg. 4) He continues, "When I look at or listen to a masterpiece, I have an experience which can strictly be called a revelation. That experience will just not allow itself to be analysed away as a mere state of simply strongly felt satisfaction. One of the secondary purposes, indeed, of these lectures will be to look into the question of how we ought to understand such revelations." (Pg. 12) He adds, "it may be that the role of the free critical thinker in our time is to swim against the current and attack the premises themselves... we must state, simply and flatly, that there do exist ranges of human experience where a too literal, an over-simplified way of conceiving the criterion of universality just cannot be accepted." (Pg. 13)He explains, "We shall be starting off... from the double observation that nothing is more necessary than that one should reflect; but that on the other hand reflection is not a task like other tasks; in reality is it not a task at all, since it is reflection that enables us to set about any task whatsoever, in an orderly fashion... It may be, nevertheless, that this process of reflective self-clarification cannot be pushed to the last extreme; it may be, as we shall see, that reflection, interrogating itself about its own essential nature, will be led to acknowledge that it inevitably bases itself on something that is not itself... it may be that an intuition, given in advance, of supra-reflective unity is at the root of the criticism reflection is able to exert upon itself." (Pg. 47)He observes, "we can say that where primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity. But how is such a reconquest possible? ... what we have to deal with here is an actual way of access to a realm that is assuredly as near to us as can be, but that nevertheless, by a fatality... has been, through the influence of modern thought, set at a greater and greater distance from us; so that the realm has become more and more of a problematic realm, and we are forced to call its very existence into question. I am talking about the self, about that reality of the self, with which we have already come in contact so often, but always to be struck by its disquieting ambiguity." (Pg. 102-103)He suggests, "I AM my body in so far as I succeed in recognizing that this body of mine CANNOT, in the last analysis, be brought down to the level of being this object, AN object, a something or other. It is at this point that we have to bring in the idea of the body not as an object but as a subject." (Pg. 124) He notes, "contemplation, in so far as it cannot be simply equated with the spectator’s attitude and in a deep sense is even at the opposite pole from that attitude, and even as one of participation’s most intimate modes." (Pg. 152)He states, "in the last analysis I do not know what I live by nor why I live; and that moreover, as a character says in one of my plays,

perhaps I can only go on living on condition that I do not ask myself why I do. My life infinitely transcends my possible conscious grasp of my life at any given moment; fundamentally and essentially it refuses to tally with itself... the practical conditions in which my life unfolds itself force me... to attempt to make my accounts tally; but my sort of moral bookkeeping is of its very nature concerned with factors that evade any attempt to confine their essence or even to demonstrate their existence... The task of the profoundest philosophical speculation is perhaps that of discovering the conditions ... under which the real balance-sheet may occasionally emerge in a partial and temporary fashion from underneath the cooked figures that mask it." (Pg. 206-207)He says, "I cannot speak of my life without asking myself what point it has, or even whether it points in any direction at all; and even if I decide that it is in fact a pointless business, that it points nowhere, still the very fact that I have raised the question presupposes the assumption that life, in some cases at least, might have a point." (Pg. 212) He adds, "We ought vigorously to reject any attempt to represent my life, or any human life at all for that matter, as a sequence of cinematic images... it is impossible that my life should reduce itself to a mere flow of images, and impossible therefore that its structure should be merely that of a succession... we have to acknowledge that our inner experience, as we live that experience, would be an impossibility for a being who was merely a succession of images." (Pg. 232-233)He concludes, "one thing that we may feel that we have established in this first volume is that this process of getting an insight into something whose reality, by definition, lies completely outside our own. We have been forced to insist more and more emphatically on the presence of one’s self TO itself, or on the presence to it of the other that is not really separable from it. And we have, in fact, real grounds for stating that we discern an organic connection between presence and mystery. For, in the first place, every presence IS mysterious and, in the second place, it is very doubtful whether the word `mystery’ can really be properly used in the case where a presence is not, at the very least, making itself somehow felt." (Pg. 266)Marcel’s work is important for anyone studying Existentialism, or contemporary Catholic philosophy.

You can’t go wrong with Marcel. Excellent book!

This is a difficult book to read but not because of the difficulty of the subject matter or because Gabriel Marcel is abstruse like a Sartre or Heidegger. Rather, Marcel is difficult to read because he is very tangential. He veers off topic frequently into imagined objections to or issues about what he is presenting--objections and issues whose pertinence often seems inflated, trivial, or

irrelevant.Almost as disturbing is Marcel's frequent habit of extensively referencing his other philosophical works and plays. While Marcel does mention other thinkers (e.g. Sartre), he does so mostly in passing. One gets the impression that he used the Gifford Lectures to market the oeuvre of Gabriel Marcel. Given that he delivered these lectures in the philosophically rich post World War 2 era (1949-1950), Marcel's work in volume 1 chronicles a disappointing missed opportunity for philosophical engagement.None of this is to say that Marcel doesn't have his moments. He does, but, unfortunately, they are merely that: moments. His discussion of the human body is a case in point. He makes the interesting and potentially seminal claim that our sense of ownership of secondary and tertiary things arises from our felt ownership of our bodies. But he doesn't develop the insight with any depth because he launches into other considerations, ones (like the body should be understood as a subject and not an object) that would have served to progress the discussion of ownership had he presented them earlier in the discussion.I found volume 1 so disappointing that I now have serious reservations about reading volume 2.

There is another answer to the existential question- an answer full of hope and not despair. Gabriel Marcel shows us a path to the beauty of who we are and who we can become.

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