Gabriel Marcel (1889– ) AS A PHENOMENOLOGIST

I. Marcel's Relations to the Phenomenological Movement

In his pioneering survey of Phenomenology in France Jean Hering concludes his two-page discussion of Gabriel Marcel as “an independent phenomenologist” with the following statement: “We believe we may affirm that, even if German phenomenology (to suppose the impossible) had remained unknown in France, nevertheless a phenomenology would have been constituted there; and this, to a large extent, would be due to the influence of Gabriel Marcel.” Hering, an old-style phenomenologist and anything but an existentialist, supports this remarkable estimate by referring to Marcel’s “concern for research” and for exploring the “essence” of things without separating them from the consciousness that presents them to us; to his sense of the “inanity” of Weltanschauungsphilosophie; and to his concrete studies of such phenomena as “having,” which keep free from the “mania” of reducing the phenomena to “nothing but” something else.¹

Against such an impressive estimate stands, however, the fact that Marcel himself has never claimed to be a phenomenologist. Nor do his publications contain any extensive discussion of phenomenology and of the Phenomenological Movement as such, favorable or adverse. Thus, Husserl’s name hardly ever figures in Marcel’s works. In Being and Having he pointedly refrains from using “the Husserlian terminology as well as that of the German phenomenologists” (EA 228), although in the Gifford Lectures he remarks twice with approval that Husserlian

¹ Marvin Farber, ed., Philosophical Thought in France and the United States, p. 75
phenomenology had developed the conception of consciousness as intentional, i.e., as referring to something other than itself.\footnote{Le Mystère de l'être I, 60 f., 188; also, in Les hommes contre l’humain, p. 101. where Brentano too is given credit for the idea of intentionality.} But there is no evidence that apart from this particular doctrine Husserl had any important influence on Marcel’s philosophy and phenomenology.\footnote{In a memorable interview in 1953, Marcel told me that he had seen Husserl’s Ideen in German not long after their appearance but without being impressed and wondering what it was all about. Husserl’s Sorbonne lectures in 1929, which he had attended without meeting him personally, had left him with the impression of the typical German scholar. More recent information about Husserl’s religious life had made him question this impression.}

For Marcel, the most important figure in the Phenomenological Movement is Max Scheler. There had even been personal contacts between them. But it is uncertain whether it was Scheler the phenomenologist or Scheler the human being and metaphysician that impressed Marcel more. Still, such concrete phenomenological studies as Scheler’s essay on “Ressentiment” proved so important to Marcel that he prepared a special critical article on that essay.\footnote{Troisfontaines, Roger, De l’Existence à l’être, II, 424.} After 1933 Marcel was in close contact with one of Scheler’s main disciples, Paul-Ludwig Landsberg.

For Heidegger Marcel entertains a mixed admiration. Around 1950 he even visited him in Freiburg. In mentioning this fact he refers to him as “this difficult philosopher, without doubt the most profound of our time, but the least capable of formulating anything resembling clear directions which could orient effectively the youth that turns to him as a guide.”\footnote{L’Homme problématique, p. 147. See also “Autour de Heidegger” in Dieu vivant I (1945), 89–99.} Marcel refers repeatedly to Sein und Zeit, of which he has made an intensive study. He also acknowledges the parallelism in Heidegger’s and his own concerns. But this does not prevent him from protesting against the somberness of Heidegger’s outlook and from making light of the pompousness of the Heideggerians. But again, in his comments on Heidegger the thinker of Being and existence, he does not pay any particular attention to Heidegger the phenomenologist.

Marcel’s chief antagonist among the French “existentialists” is undoubtedly Sartre (who, however, hardly takes note of the much older Marcel). Yet in the beginning there were some friend-