ON CONFUSING FEELING WITH SENSATION, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PROBLEM OF INTIMACY

Gabriel Marcel's philosophical work bristles with innovative forays into the groundwork of metaphysics. In these, perhaps the "concrete approach", its abjuring of all systematization, its overriding concern for the "string of reality" offered by contact with the here and now, and above all its commitment and situation, best characterizes this movement of thought.[1] It defies analysis and summation; it invites re-thinking. In this vein, any critical comment should be seen as deepening the point of contact Marcel himself provides, correcting the angle of approach, modifying the pressure. The concept of error here is precluded. The latter is a reflective notion, as Descartes demonstrates, that philosophical discovery must correspond to, or replicate, reality. It is very far from the intimate and often shocking touch the real conveys.

Nonetheless, there is a serious confusion haunting the foundations of Marcel's work. It pervades his thought so globally that the most a brief investigation can provide is a survey of its boundary lines, and some very preliminary suggestions on how to redraw them. The confusion I speak of is that between feeling and sensation, between the "I feel" and the "I sense." Marcel terms his position "sensism" or a "sensualistic" metaphysics.[2] Yet, the expressiosn most pivotal to this enterprise---fidelity, hope, admiration, love---are plainly affective. He writes of incarnation---"the central 'given' of metaphysics"---as the "situation of a being who appears to himself to be, as it were, bound to a body"[3] This fact issues in the prime requirement that

> existence can only be sensed, as sensation is the mode in which the

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[1] *Creative Fidelity,* tr. Robert Rosthal. (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), p. 64.

[2] *Metaphysical Journal,* tr. Bernard Wall. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), p. 316.

[3] *Being and Having,* tr. K. Farrer. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p.11.

> continuity of anything whatever with my body can be given to me as datum.[4]

Then, in almost the same breath, he goes on to say that "to feel is not to receive but to participate in an immediate way"[5].

In giving examples of feelings, he frequently offers what is in fact a sensation, and vice-versa: as, e.g., when he speaks of being hungry as a feeling[6]. After discussing the place of a "fundamental sensation" in the metaphysical ground, he immediately moves to the claim that "this *Urgefuhl* can in no way be felt, precisely because it is fundamental"[7]. Instances of Marcel's lack of bearings on this matter could be multiplied. It is important, however, (1) to pinpoint the basis of confusion; (2) to examine the ontological disarray that it creates; and (3) to understand how it threatens the movement central to Marcel's work, that of intimacy.

1. Sensing and feeling

The verb "to feel" is deeply equivocal. I can feel the table, or any of its qualities (hardness, smoothness, woodenness). My feeling the table can be expressed propositionally: I feel that it is hard. In each case, a tactile contact with the table is presupposed, engendering a sensate experience which is then conceptualized. Or, I can feel afraid, or again, feel that I am afraid, for some reason or other. That is, I can be subject to an emotional or affective experience, which is then expressed on the conceptual level. Derivative from the last propositional usage is the modality "I feel that", meant to express belief, as in, e.g., "I feel that he is honest" or "I feel that it will rain."

The crucial linguistic difference between feeling sensately and feeling affectively is the dimension of touch. Oddly enough, the equivocity is taken up here too. The verb "to touch" can be synonymous with tactile contact. Or, it can signify an engagement with an emotional

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[4] *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 269.

[5] Ibid., p. 258.

[6] Ibid., p. 247.

[7] Ibid., p. 247.

element, as, e.g., "His poverty touched me." This double ambiguity affecting the idea of feeling cannot, moreover, be resolved by linguistic fiat, since both kinds of usages have equal claim to priority. It is this two-way oscillating structure, moving between sensibility and sensitivity, between passions and sensations, that is responsible for the metaphysical hedge that threatens to unseat Marcel's ontology. For, without saying as much, Marcel warrants the transition from the sensate to the affective by means of this unresolved ambiguity. Put another way, he transcribes his discovery concerning the "central given"---my body---into an emotive mode, stamping the results of the former with the insignia of the latter. Behind the claim "to adopt a different attitude to sensation, or if you like, to the act of feeling" is Marcel's set aversion to the problem of disambiguating the matter of "feeling" itself[8].

Why? The nerve lies with Marcel's inexactitudes with the way my body perceives, i.e., body-consciousness. For, the perceptual event of "internal" or coenesthenique perception is unequivocally bound up with sensation, not emotion. (Cf. "It can be seen straight away that my body is only mine inasmuch as, however confusedly, it is felt"[9]). Marcel indicates what sensation is not: it is not a message from "without", not conceptualisable nor propositional, not objectifiable, not a sense-datum[10]. However, he noticeably fails to say what sensation is, or more precisely, how it arises within the workings of coenesthenia. Sensation degenerates to a mystifying simple, somehow providing access to the real.

Yet the intimations are there. Through second reflection ("philosophical reflection"), which is "only a mode of attention," there is access to body-consciousness[11]. The attention, which hitherto had been absorbed in the representational mode, confronting the demands of a Cartesian transparency, no longer is totally caught up in objective imagery. It condenses. It, according to Marcel, is re-collected, or better, re-gathers itself. This is an activity of developing substance, body,

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[8]"*Existence and Objective*," reprinted as an appendix to *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 327.

[9]*Metaphysical Journal*, p. 243.

[10]Cf. *"Existence and Objectivity,"* pp. 327-330, for his argument against the "message theory" of sensation.

[11]*Creative Fidelity*, p. 23.

pressure. Put simply, the attention, returning to my body, becomes touch. Pried from its preoccupation with, and disappearance in, analytic thought the attention (to some degree or other) is able to turn to touch my body from the inside.

It is here precisely that one of the ontological roots of the semantic ambiguity of "touching" resides. For the touch of the body can be one of two kinds. There is the touch of my hand on the table, wherein my skin comes into contact with the table's surface. And, there is the touch of the attention touching my hand, whether or not my hand is in contact with anything else. The first is contractile touch; the second, cotangible touch. Each, it could be said, evidences sensations. But only contangible touch is perceived coenesthetically. Or, rather, it is itself that mode of perceiving. Marcel fails to notice the distinction when he asserts:

> It is evident that whenever there is no direct contact there occurs a construction of a state of consciousness that would correspond to the contact, and that this state of consciousness generally condenses itself into a sort of abstract symbol[12].

Not the body's contact, but the touch of attention, galvanizes coenesthenique. Even if we call that which is evidence a sensing, to mark it from contractile sensation, it is important to note that a sensing too is a result, a percept, a record of a perceptual event---and not the activity of perceiving itself. That activity, coenesthesia or body-consciousness proper, is the moving pressure of the attention, condensing (to a greater or lesser degree) within the form of my body. A temporary equilibrium, a high point of pressure, a more cotangible condensation--a sensing--may be seized as evidence, incurring the risk therein of triggering representational strivings, and an attention rarefied to transparency. But if not, if coenesthenia is allowed to operate over an interval, only then do some of the more significant possibilities of this mode of perception arise.

2. Toward an ontology of sensings

Contactile touch potentiates tactile sense-data. It is quickly drawn into the chain of representational judgment. Here, Locke was not that far wrong in identifying sensation with objectifying perception, for it

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[12]*Metaphysical Journal*, p. 24.

is through sensations of contact that I arrive at judgments like "The table is hard." Through long habit of reflection, sensation operates under the demands of transparency. Its value in seeking access to reality is nil. The case is different with sensing. Sensing supposes a build-up of the attention to the point that cotangible touch with the interior of my body is attained. Directing, developing, and maintaining the attentive pressure of touch inside has unmistakably ontological consequences. To these Marcel alludes when he says:

> what we call "the jump to existence" is really a kind of intraexistential transformation. That is the only way to avoid idealism[13].

What transformation? Sustained engagement with contangible touch stabilizes and deepens the experience of sensing. In itself, however, touch is merely generalized over the interior surface of my body. It is in relation to that which resists the pressure--the touched--that a new element arises. Initially, pressure or force against a countering surface, requires a container in order to manifest itself. Then, under continued touch, the touched, when resisted with solidity, becomes permeable. This is what Marcel suggests when he notices:

> that permeability... is doubtless related to a certain lack of cohesion, or if one prefers, of density. We can say, it seems, that a being is more exposed to influences insofar as he has less density[14].

The attentive pressure than can enter what hitherto blocked its touch. The line demarking one from the other is, in that moment, transposed to some new boundary. Surface is no longer surface, but interior. Touch and touched conjoin, amplifying the force of attentive pressure.

The blending of the two, the touch and the touched, brings about more than an extended condensation of the attention. The shift to a highly permeable, less dense, bodily milieu generates a two-fold change in the conditions of sensing. First, that which stood in my way, a thing, that for which I had assigned instrumentalities, no longer remains exterior, separate, in opposition:

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[13]*Being and Having*, p. 27.

[14]*Creative Fidelity*, p. 23.

> The metaphysical essence of the object as such is perhaps simply its power of sealing-off[15].

Instead, there are what Marcel calls "prolongation" of my body, a set of internal relations, hence, sensings, which in composite take the place of the object. This is a point I will return to in the following section. Second, the stabilized pressure of the attention calls a quality to the sensing which informs it with the mark of an identity, one which is mine. As Marcel says:

> A presence is a reality; it is a kind of influx; it depends upn us to be permeable to this influx, but not, to tell the truth, to call it forth[16].

Opening to the depths of an expanding pressure of the attention, I notice emerging from the composite sensings a sense of the one that I am, myself. The transformation of touch is immanently personal. It provides the genesis of my identity. It is recollective in the most primordial way: in front of the disparate sensing of my bodily interior, that I appears once again as the forgotten source of which each sensing is a tributary. Through sensing, I contact anew the reality that is mine.

Thus, Marcel's "jump to existence" is in fact a path each step of which is to be trod. Condensing the attention within my body, allowing sensing to delimit the boundaries of cotangible touch, permitting the transaction between the resistance and the attentive pressure to occur, letting enter that which confers quality to the sensing, participating in the I which emerges from the depths of the tangibly sensed. Each step brings me closer to touch with reality. Or, each step makes the touch I exert more real, more real because it is mine (and not some representational figment of who I am), and because it is more in keeping with the way things are (and not the way I presume them representationally to be). Each step, moreover, is a fleshing out of the initial sensing. It is not that sensing is every "transcended" at some step of the path. Rather, sensing increasingly fills out, and is filled out by, the body that is mine. In becoming more active, less dense, more permeable, sensing opens the pores of the organism from the inside until it is ready to welcome the

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[15] *Being and Having*, p. 113.

[16] *The Philosophy of Existence*, tr. M. Harari, (Freeport: Books for Library Press, 1949), p. 24.

reality in which it is immersed. The aim of the concrete approach, through this transition, can be summed up by the question, how to remain in touch with sensing?

> We are involved in Being, and it is not in our power to leave it; more simply, we are, and our whole inquiry is just how to place ourselves in relation to plenary Reality[17].

3. "Sympathetic mediation"

Some of the most suggestive of Marcel's thought centers around the existence of things, other bodies, when my body is recognized as the "central given." What happens to objects under the transforming pressure of touch? Here is opportunity for a decisive formulation of the place of the physical universe in his thought. Yet, because of the ambiguous tension within the notion of feeling remains unresolved, the moment is not seized.

How are things to be accounted for in the non-representational medium of contangible touch? Marcel says that:

> between me and all that exists there is a relation. . . of the same type as the relation that unites me to my body; instrumental or objective mediation is completed by what I have called a non-instrumental mediation. This amounts to saying that my body is in sympathy with things[18].

Granted that under the demands of transparency, my objectifying habits of reflection grasp a thing conceptually, in terms of the uses to which it can be put. And the "non-instrumental mediation"? That role plainly is assigned to feeling, "feeling" as affectivity. "Sympathy" is pre-eminently an emotive term. Feeling sympathy for another means being affected similarly by what affects him. This emotional accord or mutuality of interest also comes into play when I am in sympathy with another. There is no such thing as an unfelt sympathy. Thus, the notion of a sympathetic mediation recalls Marcel's "forefeeling" used to describe second reflecting; it suggests the calling into play of a sense I might enjoy of a felt harmony with things. The affectivity's response to its thing-laden environment then

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[17]*Being and Having*, p. 35.

[18]*Metaphysical Journal*, p. 274.

is a felt community[19].

Giving primacy to affectivities here may be tempting to Marcel because of the apparently higher cognitive value they have than sensations. Yet this conflict with the immediacy he attributes to them when cleaved of the representation we customarily associate with each[20]. Indeed, it is the non-representational character, which they share with sensation, which reinforces the ontological confusion. But unless Marcel subscribes to William James' theory of the emotions, making them the causal consequence of bodily states, there is no reason to believe the different immediacies--sensate and sentiment--always march hand in hand. What is lacking in its entirety is a separate analysis of he body-consciousness of the emotions. Without this, what is most evident is how affectivity leads away from the body that is mine, e.g., how strong emotions like fear lead the soldier to disregard fatigue and hunger, or how weaker ones like nostalgia evoke memory. Thus, sympathy is an unsatisfactory basis for revealing my body's touch on physical objects.

Now, what "unites me to my body" is the attentive pressure of cotangible touch. Could not sensing likewise place me in direct contact with physical reality? In this case, a kind of synaesthetic mediation would be called into play. Another body in the environment is encountered as something resisting my touch. Then, when the attention presses the inside surface of my body, sensing, the inward pressure generated by the object becomes part of the general resisting force. Where there is a persistent display of attention, the activity becomes transformatory. The attention condenses and expands; the body surface becomes permeable. That which resists, the untouched knot, grows penetrable. No longer separate from my touch, it becomes part of it. Or, more precisely, to use Marcel's term, it prolongs it. Perception of another body becomes

> not representation but a prolongation of the act by which I apprehend my body as mine[21].

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[19]Cf. the discussion of the sentiment of community, *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 282.

[20] Ibid., p. 307.

[21] Ibid., p.274.

Furthermore,

> Things exist for me in the measure in which I look upon them as prolongation of my body[22].

To prolong, in this sense, is to transmute Cartesian extension into the medium of sensing. It is to extend my body through newly discovered internal relations with things, the sensing of them, when the attentive pressure is sustained at sufficient depth. It is to intensify the sensing by incorporating the force of resistance. It is to exercise coenesthesia to the point of generating the quality of perception which is the harbinger of the identity that is mine.

Finally, this formulation shows how far from the mark it is to label Marcel a Berkelian idealist. For Berkeley, the cessation of perception brought with it the cessation of the physical universe. For Marcel, on the contrary, that universe plays a crucial role in developing the transformatory force. Paraphrasing a remark of his we could say that the radical abolition of other bodies, supposing it were possible, would mean the destruction of my body insofar as it is mine[23].

4. Feeling and intimacy

> Thus we are indirectly brought to the question whether there is not a basis for granting the existence of a fundamental analogy between the sensory perceptivity of a living being exposed to the solicitations of his surroundings and the disposability of a consciousness capable of caring for another person[24]

The continuing semantic tension inherent in "feeling" blunts Marcel's approach to the problem of the intimate other. He continues to look in both directions, toward a "felt community" with the other[25] and toward the approach through sensing. I have already suggested that the emotivism or intuitionism implied by the first is inadequate to his aims.

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[22]Ibid., p. 211.

[23]Cf. Ibid., p. 243.

[24] *Creative Fidelity*, p.88.

[25]For example, *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 291.

It neglects any treatment of how emotions relate to feelings. But the second would not only disambiguate his key term. It would also, by fleshing out this "fundamental analogy," make clear the identity of the other, with whom I enjoy a relation of intimacy.

How is a concrete approach to intimacy ("one of the most important"[26]) to be made? Under sustained pressure of the attention, coenesthesia becomes stabilized. Whereas initially, touch was "blindfold," it now gains some perceptibility as it remains in front of what is touched. Density begins to be transformed to permeability. The remaining fragments of representational transparency are replaced by sensing. The balance of reflection shifts from thought to organism. At this point, at the depth of attentive activity, the conditions are suitable for the entry of a qualitative dimension. Sensing on this global scale seems to attract a kind of emotion to it. It ceases to remain a composite, instead becoming an identity. This identity calls itself to an immediate, undeniable recognition. It is the identity that is mine. Its recognition releases what Marcel call "an exclamatory awareness of self."

> Existence and the exclamatory awareness of existence cannot really be separated; the dissociation of the two can be carried out only at the cost of robbing the subject of our investigation of its proper nature; separated from that exclamatory awareness. . . existence tends to be reduced to its own corpse...[27]

Emerging from the depths of non-representational touch, this recognition lacks all adequate means of expression. Because there are no criteria of success in describing it propositionally, choice of conveyance is arbitrary. This is not, however, to claim that the recognition cannot be communicated, but certainly more indicated than said. It can be pointed to, but again, the ostensive definition lacks success criteria. Thus, there is license in Marcel's personal choice of traditionally emotive terms for this exclamatory recognition., viz., hope, fidelity, love. The matter of license would far less dangerous freed from the background equivocity over "feeling." Calling the emergent cognition "emotion" must, in any event be left open to question. If emotion furnishes the spring of action, this "emotion"

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[26] Ibid., p. 200.

[27] *Le mystère de l'être*, vol.I. (Paris: Arbier, 1951), pp. 103-107; translated by John B. O'Malley in *The Fellowship of Being* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), p. 66.

need not move me to do anything whatsoever. Indeed, by the abundance of its qualitative dimension, it robs desire of the incompleteness that customarily motivates. On the other hand, the thorough-going permeability which is the recipient to this exclamatory recognition is more patient than agent. If there is action, I am not as ready to claim it as belonging to me. Rather, the recognition readies me for a kind of stewardship, as Marcel describes it:

> that I must keep myself at the disposal of the unknown Me, so that one day he can come into my place without meeting any resistance from the Me that I am still, but should have in that second ceased to be [28].

This stewardship is presaged by the foretaste that awakens a responsibility to the new role it demands of me--participation. The weight of this participation is too exhaustive to examine here. For, the demands of participation carry with them the implication that the ultimate power, of sensing, of transforming my bodily milieu, of moving toward the real, does not lie within my own disposal. Marcel says

> this disposal or power always implies the interposal of the organism, i.e., of something about which, for that very reason, I cannot say it is of my disposal[29].

Attending to the sensing pressure in my body, I awaken to the recognition that I have not brought about what occurs, that the very notion of my own agency has come into question. Uncannily, in this discovery, the primal encounter with the intimate other--the thou--appears. Who is the other, and how do I achieve contact? Marcel answers from the perspectives of his emotivism, noting,

> simply that inasmuch as I am a tabulation *(repertoire)* that I treat myself as such, I am only a third person for myself. It is only through emotion that I become a thou for myself[30].

This is inaccurate. The ontological shift corresponding to the

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[28] *Being and Having*, p. 52.

[29] Ibid., p. 82.

[30] *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 200.

grammatical transformation from third to second person familiar is not driven by affectivity, but sensitivity. Emotion, if called that, enters only superveniently, as a later sign of an intimacy already in full force. It is not a generative element. In returning the attentive pressure to the inside of my body, sensing begins. In this movement, the attention is disengaged from the habitual representational modes that characterize functional life. Part of habit is to formulate an abstract identity for myself, a personality, an ego.

> I can attribute to myself a series of predicates as though somebody else were attribute them to me; in this measure I am 'somebody else" for myself; I speak of myself as I would speak of anybody else[31].

When the back of this idealist representation is broken by the advent of sensing, contangible contact with the resisting surface is attained. This is the scene for the ontologizing transformation of constriction into permeability. This the matrix from which the one I do not and cannot know arises--the one that I am. This event, Marcel is quite sure about, is nothing other than the encounter with the thou.

But what about other persons? Do I not contact another as a thou? It would be mistaken to construct a simple equation between another person and the thou. Or rather, such an equation would once more signal belief in a "felt community", of which I and the other are members. And it is true that in certain moods, Marcel speaks of other persons in this way[32]. But in fact, it is through touch, through sensing, that I encounter the condition of intimacy that allows me to say "thou." Marcel acknowledges this when he says one

> is not to be construed here as externally manifesting oneself to the other, but rather as involving a quality which cannot be so easily described in objective terms, of making me sense that he is with me.[33]

In this fashion, other persons become prolongations of my body in the

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[31] Ibid., p. 220.

[32]Cf. *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 286: "Actually I cannot help treating the 'fact of being thou' as the predicate of a him."

[33] *Creative Fidelity*, p.154.

same way things do. By their physical resistance, they allow for the deepening pressure of the attention, which alone can open to receive the exclamatory recognition of my own identity. All sharing, all contact in intimacy, must take place through this vehicle. There is no other.

The other is the resistant surface thrown up in the face of the real, behind which I manoeuver. Cotangible touch with it reveals its otherness. It opens the way for intimacy. This is perhaps why it is possible to experience reality with a tree, an animal, or any sentiment being. Still, with regard to other persons, there seems to be something exceptional. What is it? It is not, I believe, as Marcel claims, that "the *us* without doubt reveals itself as much more profound than the I."[34] This once again derives from his belief in a "felt community" of persons. Nor is it quite accurate to say the exclamatory recognition "behaves as the affirmation of a you also."[35] For this sounds like my coming to an identity which is mine, in the depths of sensing, has something to do with recognizing another as a person--which it does not. The inclusiveness of this identity is real. As said, the boundaries habitually separating me from the world are rendered permeable in the later phases of sensing. But then, the other person is admitted together with the rest of reality, not as a special element. The other person is simply one face of the many-faceted real.

The exceptional characteristic of another person rather has to do with resistance and with that other's own involvement with touch. First, another person resists my movements in ways that things cannot. He thwarts my plans, he challenges my motives, he contradicts my actions. The greater the resisting surface he provides, the greater the opportunity for coming to the transformation of sensing, provided the initial move is made. Second, the other person might also be seeking a way to contact the real. He also might be engaging the attentive pressure, which can lead to sensing. If so, then it is possible to repeat with Marcel: "This is what I have translated by the word co-participation; or could just as well

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[34]*Présence et immortalité.* (Paris: Flammarion, 1959), p. 160; tr. by O'Malley, op. cit., p. 78.

[35]Ibid., p. 162.

speak of co-implication." [36] In this case, his exploration can resonate in my body, bringing me closer to my own. In this case, both he and I would conjointly be working for intimacy. Yet, there is no guarantee of this situation; and the impact of the other's resisting aspect on my body is surely the more customary form of meeting.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show how some of Marcel's basic work flounders on an ambiguity in the notion of feeling. Because of his attraction to an emotivism, he withholds himself from a closer examination of the body's own form of perception, coenesthenia. Body consciousness, that is, sensing as opposed to affectively feeling, alone holds the key to contacting the real. I have sketched the way in which sensing provides an account of the physical universe. At the same time, I have outlined the place of intimacy, and where the other enters my bodily habitat. Finally, it must be said, in sum, that the matrix of this thought can be located in Marcel, but like a pearl from an oyster, it must be prried lose.

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[36]Idem.