

RICOEUR AND MARCEL: AN ALTERNATIVE TO POSTMODERN DECONSTRUCTION

In a special way today, when the emphasis on the end of metaphysics puts the very possibility of philosophy into question, Gabriel Marcel's philosophical reflections, together with those of his astute disciple Paul Ricoeur, can shed light on the philosophical enterprise for the future. In whatever form it survives, continental philosophy, to be viable and adequate, must confront head on this challenge from postmodern (antimodern) deconstructive thinkers.¹ And it is precisely the positive role of closure or limit in the philosophies of Marcel and Ricoeur which can serve as a response to that recent challenge, a response which must be made for the redirection of continental philosophy in this country. It is our purpose to dwell on this challenge, assess its positive contribution to recent thinking, and then, to present an alternative philosophy at the limit of reason as one of the most innovative and fruitful currents of contemporary thinking. A first brief focus on the recent adaptations of the role of the Kantian productive imagination will be helpful to distinguish currents of thought in addressing the limit of thinking.

Three distinct roles of imagination emerge in philosophy at its end-limit. First, in Heidegger's finitization of reason, the productive imagination is the source of reason itself and, as such, of the limit placed by reason; all of which, in Heidegger's view, are rooted in

¹"Postmodern" is not the most felicitous term, and is not adequate for many who are usually included under the label. To speak of "postmodernism" is already to make it something solidified and structured, which is precisely what many of its adherents oppose. Since they do agree in their opposition to modernism, it might be more benign to refer to this movement or style of thinking as "antimodernism".

"primordial time",² bespeaking the closure which must be transgressed--the closure toward the meaning of Being and toward Being itself within language and within time. A second distinctive role, one also arising out of Heidegger's proclamation of the end of philosophy, that of deconstruction, as a postmodern-antimodern critique of Heidegger, transforms Heidegger's interpretation of the central role of the Kantian productive imagination by subordinating it to chance, thus radically adjusting the nature of the end of metaphysics. For the deconstruction of Derrida, the closure results from the propensity to fixate on the effect within the flux of the *différance*, a fixation which prevents the transgressing of philosophy to *différance*, dissemination, and the "play of reason." But perhaps there is yet another way of reaching this "closure," one which does not go by either of the paths above and one which has not lost original creativity. If reason is not produced by imagination, then reason itself limits knowledge to experience from above, putting the imagination in a central position both in knowledge and in thinking, as it is for both Marcel and Ricoeur. And with the famous phenomenal/noumenal distinction overturned, this limit enacted by reason on human knowledge encompasses knowledge within the experience of reality itself, but allows reason to reach beyond the boundary to something of a more far-reaching significance, as it does in the philosophies of both Marcel and Ricoeur. The further development of deconstruction and its challenge to philosophy must be further explored.

Derrida follows Heidegger's finitization of reason, but goes further, and instead of centralizing the role of imagination, subordinates it to chance, rendering it passive instead of creative, and, like the late modern idealists, reduces everything to the same status, under the sway of chance, thus eliminating the creativity so central for both Marcel and for Ricoeur. In spite of Derrida's critique of structuralism and of de Saussure, he himself succumbs to the allure of the sciences of sign, ending up in a semeiological reductionism which strips away meaning, reference, and persons involved in discourse in favor of diacritical relationships in language as a system of signs with the concomitant loss of words as words.

²Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, tr. James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).

Derrida's shift of focus from the imagination to chance originates from his critiques of Saussure's and Husserl's views of signs as well as from his critique of Husserl's view of the living present,³ making chance and trace central to writing at the core of his deconstruction. It is for this reason that he refers to artistic or imaginative discourse as a "floating signifier" or a "wild card which puts play into play."⁴ And the imagination is limited to its reproductive function, serving to yield indeterminacy and ambivalence into discourse in a move away from logocentrism.

Derrida, however, in opposition to Saussure's view of sign as constituted by the signifying-signified relation, considers the signifier to be independent from the relation to any particular signified and, rather, to be related to other signifiers in relations of difference. In considering the system of signifiers as inescapable, he has effectively cut off presence and the present now, moving instead to a view of language from which meaning, in a sense different from that of any usual semantics, emerges. Consequently, his deconstruction begins with the subordination of semantics in the traditional sense to syntax, and the development of a view of syntax quite different from its usual sense.

From such a syntax, as the root of the formal dimension of language, the semantic dimension emerges. Thus, Derrida subscribes to a new and far more radical sense of syntax than that of syntax as form in contrast to content. Rather, for him, syntax is the condition making meaningful language possible, and, at once, is itself productive of the semantic dimension of language. This has been

³See the following articles for these two points of Derrida concerning the living present and sign in language: Patrick L. Bourgeois, "Semiotics and the Deconstruction of Presence: A Ricoeurian Alternative," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXVI; and Patrick L. Bourgeois, "Trace, Semiotics, and the Living Present: Derrida or Ricoeur," *Southwest Philosophy Review*, Vol. 9, 1993.

⁴Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.), p. 96, quoting Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, tr. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 93.

referred to as a "syntax of syntax" from which the "formal" syntactic properties can be syntactically composed and decomposed.⁵ And the use of language involves the play of différences, the play of traces of future and past to bring about the present and its presence. This play of traces is a "sort of inscription prior to writing, a protowriting without a present origin...."⁶ Thus, for Derrida, the trace is in some elusive sense the "origin of sense in general" if one can speak of origin at all, and it is the "differance which opens appearance (*l'apparaître*)".⁷ Already it can be noted that the subject has become decentered and thus that the role of the imagination, at best reproductive, has been subordinated to the depersonalized play of chance in language as a network of signs.

This move from logocentrism and phonocentrism and the extension of the notion of writing means that the imagination's role has dissolved into the textual play of undecidability. The world becomes a never-beginning, never-ending text where 'everything is reflected in the medium or speculum of reading-writing *without breaking the mirror.*' It becomes clear from the above consideration that, in order adequately to understand deconstruction, the significance of its substitution of chance for the central role of productive imagination must be understood, for this shift in the role of play marks not only a distinctive thought, but a fundamentally different attitudes from that which places the imagination in a central position, and opts for a philosophical thinking at the end of philosophy. The option of chance at the core of a doctrine of dissemination and the Derridian view of the living present as effect, both of these within the primacy of a unique syntactics, spills over into an entirely different doctrine than one for which imagination is central, for which semantics

⁵Rodolphe Gasché ' "Infrastructures and Systematicity," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 11-12.

⁶Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays of Husserl's Theory of Signs*, tr. David B. Allison and Newton Bercer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 146.

⁷Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 65.

of discourse takes precedence over syntax, and for which the unity of the sentence on the semantic side is far more fundamental than the unity of a sign in relation to others in the system. By contrasting these differing roles of chance and imagination and their respective philosophies, the fundamental motif leading to one or the other emerges into light: on the one hand, a thought skeptical to its core, in which the human act of thinking, grasping and imagining is left, like a ship in a tumultuous sea with no other control over the sail or rudder except the haphazard capriciousness of the elements; and on the other hand, a philosophy of limit in the context of reason's demand for infinity and completeness. And it is a fundamental option which sets the basic directions of these two courses of thought--an option for chaos engulfing any effort toward sense, where sense transpires in the context of spacing of lettering and of words in positions; or an option for a sense and light arising out of what could be called the fullness of the sense of existence. It is Marcel who first plotted this latter course,⁸ and Ricoeur who takes it up and develops it in terms of a hermeneutic of existence within the limit of reason.

Marcel's philosophical reflection expresses the question of limit or end only obliquely, and in a way to which Ricoeur wants to suggest an adjustment, as we shall see. For Marcel, in this context of limit, the objectivity and characterizability of the problematic are surpassed in the notion of mystery to which access is gained in a second reflection attuned to existence in such a way as to bring it to thought. For Marcel, existence as mystery eludes any problematical treatment, for it is irreducible to that tendency to characterize. It is not a problem before me, but one which involves me, if it can be spoken of at all in terms of problem, as he does in saying: "A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon itself".⁹ I cannot abstract myself from the mystery of my own being. Thus, this dimension of mystery cannot

⁸Marcel expresses the overcoming of objectivity in favor of existence before either Heidegger or Sartre were writing on human existence. He published his famous essay, "Objectivity and Existence" in 1925 in *Revue de metaphysique et de morale*. His *Journal metaphysique*, written in 1914 and 1915-1923, was published in 1927: (Paris, Librairie Gallimard).

⁹Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, tr. Manya Harari, Seventh Paperbound Edition, (New York, Citadel Press, 1963).

be considered merely to be a problem which cannot be solved. Rather, I am precisely what (who) is being reflected upon. On this level there is an ontological exigence at the heart of human existence which should prevent me from closing myself off into the problematic and the objective. And it is on this level that the "thou" is encountered in presence. If second reflection were to allow itself to begin other than with this realization, i.e., the presence of the other, it would not be possible to get the "other" precisely as person back into reflection. This presence is closely linked to availability or readiness for the other (*disponibilite'*). The unavailable person is not *really there* for the other, but maintains a certain closedness and distraction toward something else.

With this move in second reflection to existence as mystery, Marcel has turned toward the fullness of existence which illudes first reflection and which is irreducible to it. This concretely situated being is not able to be approached in a philosophical reflection which is detached, epistemologically oriented, instead of involved and immersed in the concrete situation. Thus, in this critique of the primacy of objectivity, Marcel has overcome the primacy of epistemology, and at once, found its source: "...But what is more important for me is the affirmation that existence is not only given, but it is also giving--however paradoxical that sounds. That is, existence is the very condition of any thinking whatsoever."¹⁰ Existence as giving encompasses creativity. This giving as creative is the central motif of Marcel's whole philosophy, as he himself says, in agreeing with Kenneth Gallagher's interpretation: "... as soon as there is creation, in whatever degree, we are in the realm of being (p.84). But the converse is equally true: that is to say, there is doubtless no sense in using the word 'being' except where creation, in some form or other,

¹⁰Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond: Including Conversations Between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel*, tr. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 221 (in conversation 1).

is in view."¹¹ Marcel says that this insight grew as he concentrated more on the relations between his philosophical thought, his dramatic work, and even the attempt he has made in musical compositions.

We see here that Marcel, in his own rich and concrete way, has turned to lived existence in its concrete fullness in a unique reflection different from and going beyond that of first reflection. It is on this level that all of his celebrated themes, mystery, participation, presence, fidelity, creativity, charity, faith, and hope, must be interpreted, for, first reflection, oblivious to this level, would reduce them to an abstraction or an objectivity. Thus mystery is Marcel's manner of bringing into focus the attempt to think, beyond the boundaries of knowledge, the wholeness of existence in the question that most vitally concern human life, interest and heart. It is somewhat an attempt to reach the ineffable in a reflection which will never be adequate because of the richness of existence and of being. For this he invokes faith. And this faith, intimately related to hope and charity, is not exclusive of a philosophical faith in God.

In this context, Marcel seems to admit or to hint at the need for an indirect access to the question of the whole, in thinking beyond the boundaries of knowledge and of problematic reflection. In fact, most of his reflection on the mystery of being takes place within a certain domain going beyond the boundaries of the Kantian limit--*i.e.*, the total and full existence beneath and beyond the realm of primary reflection--the domain of existence, which for Kant must remain unknowable. And, in certain contexts, Marcel speaks of the need for images, for myth, in order to prevent idolatry that which is reflected upon here. He says concerning knowledge of the historically human: "a thought which cannot be embodied without the help of myth--the price we have to pay for our own condition which is that of incarnate

¹¹Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, forward by Gabriel Marcel (New York: Fordham University Press), 1962. See Marcel's forward to Gallagher's book, p. xiii, which refers to page 84 of Gallagher's text.

beings."¹² Further, Marcel refers to the need for images which really serve as symbols of something richer, with two levels of meaning for the one for whom they speak in a certain way:

Must not the philosopher admit that we cannot really free ourselves from some key-images--for example that of heaven as the abode of the blessed--provided that he shows that these images are bound up with the conditions of existence which belong to a wayfaring creature, and that they cannot accordingly be considered as literally true. In this sense I would say, for example, that heaven can hardly appear to us, who are of the earth, as other than the sky above; but in so far as the bond which holds us to the earth is relaxed or changes its nature, it will be bound to present a different aspect to us. We are fated to undergo a metamorphosis whose nature we can foresee only very imperfectly, and it is just on the idea of this metamorphosis that rests the revival of orphism whose imperious demands must be familiar to many of us today. Hence again it follows that salvation can also be better conceived by us as a road rather than a state; and this links up again with some profound views of the Greek Fathers, in particular St. Gregory of Nyssa.¹³

We now turn to Ricoeur's way of dealing with concrete reflection as a hermeneutic of existence, gently critiquing Marcel's "experiential thinking", ¹⁴ and responding to the challenge of deconstruction in a Marcelian style of concrete philosophy.

¹²Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), vol. II, p. ix. "The Hegelian idea of history, which is the source of the vilest idolatries of our time, is only a counterfeit or a perversion of a much more profound thought, a thought which cannot be embodied without the help of myth--the price we have to pay for our own condition which is that of incarnate beings. Here it is that philosophy reaches its boundaries, and awaits the first glimmers of the fires of revelation."

¹³*ibid.*, Vol. II, 204-205.

¹⁴Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, "Conversation 2", p. 229.

It is Ricoeur's view of a central role of productive imagination, rooted in his interpretation of the priority of the semantic in language and the unity of language in the sentence, which pulls the props out from under Derrida's reduction of the imagination and which at once offers a richer and more viable view of language and semantic innovation at the center of his hermeneutic.

In his critical remarks to Marcel, Ricoeur points out the need for critique in the manner of a first Copernican revolution, and the further need for a second naivete after that revolution. Thus, his own addition to Marcel's doctrine is twofold: first in the direction of the Copernican revolution, he is not adverse to engaging in reflections on human being of an abstract and pure kind, one instance of which he develops as eidetic phenomenology, a legacy which he accepts from Husserl (his other great teacher in addition to Marcel); and his insistence on a philosophy of limit--i.e., one which moves to the reflection on totality and on the full concreteness in terms of a revamped Kantian limit. And it is here that we can return to the dialogue with deconstruction, after a few words about Ricoeur's hermeneutics of existence as a philosophy of limit, in response to the question of how to think beyond the limit or boundary.

Ricoeur's concrete reflection, in contrast to that of Marcel, takes place as a hermeneutics of existence, a hermeneutics which gives an indirect access to concrete existence in its fullness and to the totality in its illusiveness. Ricoeur, appropriating Kant's doctrine of the limit concept imposed by reason on knowledge, contends that objective knowledge is the labor of understanding (*Verstand*), but that understanding does not exhaust the power of reason (*Vernunft*) which remains the function of the unconditioned. This distance and this tension between reason and understanding finds an expression in the notion of limit which for Kant is not to be identified with boundary. The concept of "limit" does not primarily imply that our knowledge is limited, but, rather, that the quest for the unconditioned puts limits on the claim of objective knowledge. "'Limit' is not a fact, but an act,"¹⁵ meaning that in its quest for the unconditioned, reason actively puts limits to the claim of objective knowledge to become absolute in a way parallel to Marcel's critique of the Hegelian absolute.

¹⁵Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics", *Semeia IV*, (1975), p. 142.

Ricoeur, however, wants to give to the limit-concept of Kant a less negative function than the prohibition addressed by reason to the claim of objective knowledge to absolutize itself. Rather, for Ricoeur, the "empty" requirement of an unconditioned finds a certain fulfillment in indirect language such as metaphorical language, which says what things are like rather than what things are, and that the "is like" implies an "is not."¹⁶ In the present context, however, the philosophy of limits dwells primarily on the limits which are essential to the philosophy of human existence within reason's quest for totality and for completeness. As Ricoeur says: "I think everything and I demand everything, but I am never able to know it. Kant only applied to cosmology his golden rule of the limiting function of the concept of the thing-in-itself."¹⁷ Ricoeur wants to extend this application to apply, in the present context, to the totality of man¹⁸ and to the totality of history,¹⁹ thus using the limiting concept as regulative in such a way as to demand that reason think such totalities from indirect expressions. For, it is only as a regulative idea that the totality and the unity of man, along with the indirectly accessible Sacred, are given to thought. And here the imagination serves a central role, for it is the imagination which is intimately involved in the semantic innovation leading to the culmination of Ricoeur's reflection on human being. This role, however, does not hedge the role of reason (spirit) which gives to the imagination the ideas which stimulate it to creative thought, which, in the thinking more, cannot ever be adequate to the ideas. Thus, the demand for totality within the context of a bond to existence, through desire and spirit, allows a glimpse again at the

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Paul Ricoeur, "What Does Humanism Mean?", in *Political and Social Essays*, ed. by David Steward and Joseph Bien (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p. 86.

¹⁸Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1965), pp. 75, 76, p. 3, TU.

¹⁹Paul Ricoeur, "What Does Humanism Mean?", p. 86. "But it is necessary to apply to the totality of history this *limiting* role of the ideal of its total meaning and to raise it up against all pretensions that would say what this total meaning is."

infinite human quest within a finite human situation. Such treatments of philosophy, originally intimated by Marcel, and explicated by Ricoeur, allow for continual and ongoing reflection on the mystery of existence in spite of the challenge from deconstruction. A few words further are now in order concerning a positive influence of deconstruction for our present purpose.

In the light of the above considerations on the end-limit of philosophy, something quite positive can be gleaned from the recent emphasis and direction of continental philosophy, especially in America, in the proclamation of the end of metaphysics and of philosophy. In the attempt to be attuned properly, let us first take up the point of the deepening passage within the critique of Heidegger accused by Derrida of hanging onto a presence of being in his efforts to overcome metaphysics, and thus of not going far enough. For, Heidegger, in leading to a refocusing on the totality of the hermeneutical situation, or on the whole network of the presuppositional structure, has thrown into focus the sense of Being in its unity through which anything emerges into its being. But according to deconstructionists, he fails to reach beyond this temporality structure and toward that from which it is the effect, the singularity of the flux. And, just as Heidegger approaches Kant and the whole history of metaphysics with his precomprehension and question of Being to see how Kant and others, at least subliminally, posed the question, so too, do the current critics of Heidegger, the post-Heideggerian deconstructionists, now bring their own precomprehension to their deconstruction of texts. And that which is in precomprehension precisely as other is not reachable as such, and everything in experience and awareness relates to it as other, both in the depth of the human and beyond.

It is precisely here that a positive message can be gleaned from deconstruction's subversion of language and philosophy. Without going quite in the same direction, the "other" to which it leads can be interpreted in another way. Take the example of lived time and cosmic time. In a sense lived time is part of cosmic time, because it is cosmic time in the lived experience of a cosmic, human being. What is clear is that the self-comprehension of lived time is at once a self-comprehension of cosmic time in that instance of the lived. And it must be seen that the "other" here is the cosmic in the lived, which is

mediated, or expressed in the lived, which itself is experienced only in a quasi unity of precomprehension. And by a certain extrapolation, we can see the characteristics of that other as cosmic. This positive element fosters a move beyond a limited hermeneutic phenomenology of existence, a move which the philosophy of Marcel fosters in the manner of concrete reflection. And a parallel analysis holds true of language as that to which humans are receptive, and in terms of which they become decentered. Thus, deconstruction indicates for a philosophy at the limit of reason, more viable than deconstruction itself, a possible path for further inquiry.

What does this say about philosophy at its end? That its end as boundary is transgressed and therefore philosophy becomes thinking in its context of the whole or of completion. But, due to the limit of human experience, and to the quest for the total in thinking (and in action), philosophy will never be completed. Thus, one could perhaps say that philosophy culminates precisely in its attempt to stay attuned to its limited access to the total--to completion, and to "see" or to interpret at this point, its ultimate significance. And is this not what Marcel and Ricoeur are doing?

Thus, as an alternative to Derrida's semeiological reductionism, the concrete ontology of Marcel and Ricoeur provides a philosophy which does not displace the imagination in its role in thinking, subvert the semantic as the essential dimension of language, or reduce the living present to an abstract discreteness. Rather, their philosophy of existence, with its essential relation to language, prevents the reduction of language to sterile and empty signs and existence to some "other", while preserving a certain positive element of the mystery within and beyond existence. The deconstructive inversions of these makes a mockery of meaning, distorts language, and renders philosophy meaningless. Rather, the philosophy of Marcel and Ricoeur reestablishes some faith in philosophical analysis as having something worthwhile to say, especially when it interprets existence and language.

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