BODY-CONSCIOUSNESS:

GABRIEL MARCEL'S DEBT

TO MAINE DE BIRAN

Generally it can be agreed that twentieth century philosophy's investigations of body-consciousness derive to a large measure from the work of Gabriel Marcel. This line of thinking, moreover, has demonstrated alternatives to our Cartesian heritage, to its total fascination with propositional knowledge, strong objectifying tendency, separation of knowing from valuating, and thorough-going disembodiment. A non-representational, pre-socratic brand of knowing, one holding promise of healing our deep dichotomy between thought and act can now be explored. We can again examine subjectivity, rather than, as Wittgenstein recommended, pass over it in silence. Marcel's contributions have been contributory to this new epoch.

The body as mine, sensation, immediacy. These three terms come to mind in outlining Marcel's attack against Cartesian idealism. Much of what he offers, both critically and constructively, is suggestive. He himself averred systematically articulate ways of thinking.[1] Nonetheless, it is a useful exercise to see where his approach coheres, and where it remains obscure. To achieve this aim we will examine one most central notion, that of coenesthesia, in light of the philosophical debt under which Marcel employs it: the term owes its origin to one of Marcel's intellectual predecessors, Maine de Biran.

As far as I know, Marcel cites Maine de Biran only once in his entire corpus, in his essay "Creative Fidelity." Yet, Maine de

---

[1] See his preface to the *Metaphysical Journal* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), pp. vii-viii, where he indicates that his intentions: "I take care to avoid giving my thought anything resembling a systematic form."

Biran's work of nearly 150 years before could not have escaped his notice. Marcel says that (MJ, 19)

> between consciousness and body there is another relation inasmuch as my body is a datum given to internal perception (coenesthesique).

This mode of perceiving is expressive of my body-consciousness, as opposed to my knowledge of objects. The former carries with it an intimate sense of mineness which the latter, though it may indicate possession, never does. Marcel notes that (MJ, 243)

> It can be seen straight away that my body is only mine inasmuch, however confusedly, it is felt. The radical abolition of coenesthesia, supposing it were possible, would mean the destruction of my body insofar as it is mine.

These characteristics have tremendous ontological importance for Marcel, where incarnation becomes the "central 'given' of metaphysics": (BH, 11)

> Incarnation is the situation of a being who appears to himself to be, as it were, bound to a body.

Coenesthesia thus bears the full weight of ontological perception, our means of perceptibly contacting the real. Simply, the real is that which is perceived coenesthetically. Marcel acknowledges this fact when he observes: (BH, 10)

> We cannot really separate:
> 1. Existence
> 2. Consciousness of self as existing
> 3. Consciousness of self as bound to a body, as incarnate.

Furthermore, the case that coenesthetic perception does not operate through transparency, as the perceptual modes associated with the cogito and discursive thought. Such modes merely vouchsafe the representational determination of the object; "the cogito is the affirmation of self as universal power of intellectual determination" (MJ, 261). As it "merely guards the threshold of objective validity" (PE, 6 & MJ, 325) the cogito is defined by its striving after clarity and distinctness. An object is that which must

be capable of bearing a predicate or its negation; no object without identification. By contrast, coenesthesia remains inherently opaque. Marcel says "this 'given' is opaque to itself: opposition to the cogito" (BH, 11-12). Thus, we are confronted, in the notion of coenesthetic perception, with an access to immediacy (non-representationality) and to presence (non-objectified contact). The vital aspects of Marcel's analysis are taken over directly from Maine de Biran's, with, as we will see, one critical difference. For Maine de Biran also, coenesthesia is a way of perceiving; the body has its own condition:[2]

> All movements spread throughout the body, of whatever sort they are, their state regular or abnormal, their suspension or cessation, every degree of their slowness of speed, are continually represented to the soul by coenesthesia.

This perception should not be confused with a mere physiological monitor of homeostasis. The organism is not simply "reporting" to itself on the various somatic equilibria it maintains. For, coenesthesis entails consciousness, consciousness of a non-object kind. In words strikingly similar to Marcel's, Maine de Biran says: (FPP, 44)

> If one could find an animal which was deprived of each external sense organ, it would still, through coenesthestique, have some feeling, more or less obscure, of the existence of its living body, from which sense it cannot be absolutely separated.

As is known, Marcel labels instances of this perceiving sensation ("the act of feeling")[3], and describes their occurrence as pure immediacy ["which by very essence is incapable of mediation," (EO, 329)], and as "being incapable of specification" (EO, 329). These impredicable experiences of existence thenceforth bear the tremendous ontological weight Marcel places on them.

---

[2] From *Faits psychologiques et Physiologiques*. Reprinted in *L'Effort*, ed. A. Dreuet. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), p. 44. All translations are my own.

[3] "Existence and Objective," reprinted as an appendix to *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 337.

For Maine de Biran also, there is immediacy, non-specificity and the other characteristic Marcel makes much of, opacity: (FPP, 44)

> But this sense of the immediate presence and of the functions of the body is confused in its nature, and the soul distinguishes none of the many essential elements which converge at each instant on it.

While Maine de Biran remains unequivocal in that opacity is a condition attaching to coenesthestic perception (in contrast to the discursive cogito's transparency), Marcel equivocates. The opacity is either peculiar to body-consciousness, or is a product of our preoccupation with representative and objectifying habits. He says: (CF. 66)

> I have been increasingly compelled to adopt the paradoxical thesis that it is always the self which creates its own obscurity, its opacity deriving from the fact that the self places itself between the I and the other.

His wishes seem to have been to ascribe intentionality to the repeated turning away from coenesthetic perception. That perception is somehow always available: (MJ, 243)

> My attention is brought to bear on my body first of all, that is to say before my attention can be fixed on any other object whatsoever.

What is lacking in Marcel at this point is some account of the advent of "the possessive index." But his version of coenesthesia, borrowed, as we have seen, whole from Maine de Biran, lacks the required apparatus. He does suggest that, in coenesthetic perception, "what we call 'the jump to existence' is really a kind of intra-existential transformation" (BH, 14). Here, part of what blocks his investigation of the transformatory process is his inheritance. What is crucial is the careful distinction between sensation and feeling, between affectivity and the body's own perceptions of its state, sensing. This distinction, it is true, is belief by language. "Feeling" can mean either emotion or sensation; this ambiguity occurs also with the French "sentir." But Maine de Biran fails to disambiguate. He says, for example, with coenesthesia, "it can contain the immediate feeling [sentiment] of the presence of the

body" (BH, 45). Earlier, he makes clear that there are two kinds of sensation: (BH, 20)

> one purely affective, or which affects the living combination, the other intuitive, which represents without affectivity.

Marcel embraces this equivocity boldly. He asserts that "we need to adopt a different attitude to sensation, or, if you like, to the act of feeling. . . ." (EO, 327). Repeatedly, he speaks of "feeling" my body (MJ, 243). He challenges us to focus (CF, 24)

> our attention on what is usually called the problem of sensation but what is in reality the mystery of feeling.

Instances could be multiplied. But it is without doubt because of this oversight that Marcel never provides the depth analysis of coesnesthetic perception.

There are clues. To talk about a sensation which is non-instrumental, which cannot be used in the representation of an object, which is not a "sense-datum," is to talk about a certain gathering or condensation of the attention in the interior volume of the body. Marcel speaks of the recollective activity of his methodological tool, second reflection. The attention so condensed in the body milieu initiates contact with what we saw Maine de Biran describe, "all movements spread throughout the body, of whatever sort they are." It is the pressure of the attention touching the inside of the body which results in sensings. Interestingly, "to touch" enjoys the same ambiguity as "to feel" does. Such contact registers the body's inherent resistance. At the same time, it records the irresistability of our habits of attending. By habit, the attention is caught up with the representational and objectifying tendencies of the intellectual. In first reflection, as Marcel calls it, we continually christen the object, predicate and propositionalize it. Hence, the entry into coesnesthetic, bringing the attentive pressure to the point of sensing, encounters what Maine de Biran was to base his pioneering study on, effort. He says: (CF, 23)

> whereas with this sense, unique and separate from all others (if that is possible), the individual subject of the effort, the I, is found to be constituted within the fundamental relation and essential to the term, organic resistance.

Attentive pressure against that which resists that pressure gives rise to the "infra-existential transformation" Marcel wants to focus on. What has remained impenetrable, under the pressure of touch, begins to become permeable. The touching gains entry into what had been untouched. There is opening.

This transformation of the resistant interior surface of my body, coenesthetically induced, is what Marcel has in mind when he speaks of "influx." Literally, that surface, the underside of my skin, has grown porous. Correlatively, there is a shift from the thought that I am doing something, to a being receptive. Reading sensing for affectivity, we can see this in his claim that (CF, 87)

> I can only grasp myself as being on condition that I feel; and it can also be conceded that to feel is to receive; but it must be pointed out at once that to receive in this context is to open myself to, hence to give myself, rather than to undergo an external action.

By means of this persisting touch, moreover, I move into contact with the "concrete dialectic of participation" (BH, 18). Condensing the attention around the coenesthetic sensing, I am "a being . . . more exposed to influences insofar as he has less density" (CF, 87). It is in this state of transformatory tension--the attentive touch balanced against the resistant force, maintained by effort--that takes Marcel to the farthest point of philosophical investigation. He says: (BH, 52)

> 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 shall have in that instant ceased to be.

This point of "exclamatory awareness of self" is where both feeling and the I simultaneously arise. At this far point, there is all-prevading touch, on the part of the attentive pressure; that which has resisted has been entirely transformed. Effort, and the need for effort, has ceased. I have, as Marcel indicates, arrived home.

Returning to the confusion over opacity, we can see again the virtues of Maine de Biran's analysis. There, effort is a key term. With regard to coenesthesis, effort arises in two places. There is

the momentum of representational habits of mind, and there is the impenetrability of the body. The first concerns the difficulty of disengaging the attention from its objectifying proclivities; the second, of engaging it to press against the body's density. There are, perhaps, two dimensions to resistance. One concerns our tendencies to become abstract, inattentive to coenesthetic perception. The other derives from the conditions of perceiving themselves, that touching implies effort against resistance. It may well be that the former comes, as Marcel argues by way of a refusal. We fail to heed the exigencies of our existence, it demands, which are to be received coenesthetically. If so, then there is the possibility of growing more attentive, of living more at the disposal of our sensate striving. But the latter surely is eradicable. In Marcel's terms, it manifests (BH, 174)

> the ontological deficiency proper to the creature, or at least to the fallen creature. This deficiency is essentially a kind of inertia, but apt to turn into a sort of negative activity, and it cannot be eliminated. On the contrary, our first task is to recognize it.

We must not, therefore, conceive of opacity as of our own doing, nor ask, with Marcel: (BH, 13)

> is it not very largely the consequence of an act and is not this act simply sin?

For, to do so is to fall into a rigorim of the worst kind, one which would make us responsible for the "givenness" of our place.

Thus far, I have been concerned with showing how Marcel's uncritical legacy of the notion of coenesthesia is a gift with mixed blessings. In some ways, he advances Maine de Biran's thought, in others, stumbles behind it. Among the latter, there is one last matter worth mentioning. This involves Maine de Biran's inclusion of kinaesthesis as part of coenesthetic perception. Kinaesthesis is the mode of body-consciousness peculiar to the awareness of the body's movement. He says that coenesthesia (BH, 45)

> must take into account the characteristic impression of the muscular organs, not only while at rest, when their impressions converge to general coenesthesis, but even when they are put into play by the active force of will. . .

This gives his notion special power, for it is just at the point of action, of moving from rest and stillness, that Marcel's treatment seems to lose touch with body-consciousness. To come to acting, for him, brings me to the verge of betrayal. It threatens me with the loss of sensing, of the attentive pressure which assures engagement in coenesthesia. He says: (MJ, 278)

> action is only possible inasmuch as I succeed in defining objects, inasmuch as I treat sensations as messages and do not trouble about the fact that it is radically absurd to consider them in that way.

He even poses the issue in terms that harken back to the confusion over opacity: (MJ, 258)

> Personal life involves the impossibility of dissociating the immediate participation from the inevitable appearance of mediation and of communication. Hence the metaphysically unintelligible element in sensation.

Here, Maine de Biran offers a superior treatment. It is true that action calls up our stronger representational tendencies. We portray the act in terms of its goal or result; we conceive of ourselves as the agent. Furthermore, there is the added element of motor coordination, in guiding the body in its movement, that adds a demand to the deployment of attention. But in Marcel's own terms, we can work toward second reflection, even in the midst of acting. The attention can be freed from its habits of object construction, and pressed against the inner space of the body. What is to be found there is quite as Maine de Biran describes, the sensing of self activated motor activity working effortfully against a resistance. The ontological components are everywhere the same. Because kinaesthesia is included in body-consciousness, it is possible for me to arrive at the deep sense of the reservoir of my own body, out of whose volume, that at which arrival I receive the exclamatory awareness that I am, I exist, arises.

State University College, New Paltz DAVID APPELBAUM

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Being & Having, tr. Katherine Farrer. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. [BH]

Creative Fidelity, tr. Robert Rosthal. New York: Noonday Press, 1964. [CF]

"Existence and Objective," reprinted as an appendix to *Metaphysical Journal* [EO]

Faits psychologiques et physiologiques, reprinted in *L'Effort*. Ed. A. Dreuet. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966. [FPP]

The Philosophy of Existence, tr. Manya Harari. Freeport: Books for Library Press, 1949. [PE]