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## NEWS AND VIEWS



(Marcel in Paris in the 1960s)

## The Uniqueness and Continuing Relevance of Gabriel Marcel: Interview with Professor Brendan Sweetman

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*Brendan Sweetman* is a teacher, philosopher and writer. From Dublin, Ireland, he is Professor of Philosophy and holds the Sullivan Chair in Philosophy at Rockhurst University, Kansas City, Missouri, USA. He is the author or editor of fifteen books, including *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel* (Rodopi, 2008), *A Gabriel Marcel Reader* (St. Augustine's Press, 2011), and, most recently, *The Crisis of Democratic Pluralism* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021). He has published more than one hundred articles and critical reviews in a variety of journals, collections, and reference works, including *International Philosophical Quarterly*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Review of Metaphysics*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *The Polish Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (for which he was a Consulting Editor). Prof. Sweetman is the current President of the Gabriel Marcel Society and the editor of *Marcel Studies*. His books and articles have been translated into several languages, including Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian.

*Tudor Petcu*: I would like to start this dialogue by addressing to you a very simple question: What are some reasons for saying that Marcel's thought is unique?

*Brendan Sweetman*: Although Marcel is often neglected today and his thought has been somewhat eclipsed by later movements of structuralism and postmodernism, his work contains a number of themes which remain of profound relevance for contemporary times. He emphasizes a number of ideas that have been influential in contemporary thinking in both philosophy and theology. These include the attempt to safeguard the dignity and integrity of the human person by emphasizing the inadequacy of the materialistic life and the unavoidable human need for transcendence; and the inability of philosophy to capture the profundity and depth of key human experiences, and so the need to find a deeper kind of reflection. He also draws attention to the importance of the experience of intersubjectivity, which Marcel believes is at the root of human fulfillment, and which also finds expression in the transcendent dimension of human experience. He believes that this transcendent dimension cannot be denied without loss and that it is by means of it that some of our most profound experiences find their deeper meaning. I think also that Marcel is one of the few contemporary thinkers who manages to do justice to the individuality of the human person, while at the same time avoiding the relativism and skepticism that has tended to accompany these notions and that has plagued contemporary philosophy after Heidegger. We should also remember his effort to challenge the moral relativism and spiritual nihilism of his French rival, Jean Paul Sartre, and of other representative existentialist philosophers. He also argues for a "theistic existentialism," as an important counterpart, and indeed corrective, to the strident, hedonistic secularism of recent times.

*Tudor Petcu:* As we know, Gabriel Marcel was influenced by some major religious traditions. He was born as a Protestant. He received from his mother's side an education influenced by what we can call the liberal Judaism and in 1929 he has chosen conversion to the Catholic Church. Not least, some years later he declared and expressed his love and respect for the Orthodox theology and in this way we can talk about a real and strong ecumenical experience that Gabriel Marcel knew. How in your view did his entire spiritual journey influence his philosophy?

*Brendan Sweetman:* Marcel was not brought up in a particularly religious way and it is probably accurate to say that he was not involved in institutional religion to any extent. However, he clearly had a religious sensibility, which is evident in his early work as well. This is illustrated by his open-mindedness to religious questions, particularly concerning the nature of the transcendent, the openness to Being, and the way that profound human experiences, such as fidelity and faith, can point to something significant about the nature of man that needs to be explained.

You do not see any of the close-minded attitude in him that is so evident in modern secularist writers who try to deny these aspects of the human condition and who sometimes appear as if they are rationalizing their own denials. In addition, the direction of Marcel's thought made it possible for him to come to the point where a conversion to Catholicism made sense for him. He has told us in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* that he had worked out his ideas before he had the remotest thought of becoming a Catholic; later he came to the view that these ideas were consonant with the Catholic religion, even if they did not presuppose it and were not inspired by it. I suppose he was quite orthodox (judging by our standards rather than those of his time), but I think he was not much impressed by fads, or attacks on theology or morality inspired by more liberal attitudes. He regarded liberal Protestantism as leaving one in an "ambiguous position," as he tells us in his autobiography, *Awakenings*. He strikes me as being quite careful in his approach to theology and shows an honesty in his reflections that is also evident in his philosophy.

There is also quite an ecumenical spirit in his work, which you allude to, which no doubt came from his experiences with different denominations growing up and he is quite critical of the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. He also has great affinity with the work of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and their occasional dialogue reveals a shared sensibility toward religious themes, which is not hampered by denominational differences.

*Tudor Petcu:* What would be the most important role that philosophy has played in Marcel's literature and theatre? On the other hand, do you think that there would be any similarity from a philosophical point of view between Marcel's literature and Dostoevsky's?

*Brendan Sweetman:* Marcel's work in philosophy and his work in theatre complement each other. I would not say that his philosophy plays a role in his theatre but rather than he uses theatre, as he has explained many times, to further work out, and sometimes to illustrate, ideas that are present in his philosophical work (see his *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, where he discusses this topic at length). A key theme in Marcel's work is that there is a realm of human experience that is very difficult to capture, to describe, in philosophical analysis. This is the realm of mystery. It is a realm of a range of experiences that are a real and objective part of human life, yet when we attempt to describe them in an abstract, philosophical way, even with our best phenomenological efforts, something is lost in the description.

This realm includes the relationship between body and mind, the experience of our own embodiment, our concrete, personal contextual situation, and the "concrete approaches" involving

experiences of fidelity, hope and love. Marcel believed that art and drama could help us to further reveal these experiences when dramatized in concrete situations and so good drama can reveal something of the human condition beyond the level of conceptual knowledge. But philosophy too can give a description of, for example, fidelity; it is not an adequate description but it can help us to understand something of the experience. In this way philosophy and theatre complement each other. This is why in his philosophical work Marcel will often turn to discuss a scene from his plays to illustrate a point. My colleague in the *Gabriel Marcel Society*, K.R. Hanley, now retired from Le Moyne College (Syracuse, New York), has published several editions of his plays and I am working on a new publication of several unpublished plays which will appear next year. We feel that it is important to put his plays before the world as a complement to his philosophical work. Unfortunately, many of them have been seldom or never performed and this may be in part because they are a bit too philosophical!

I do think there is some similarity between Marcel and Dostoevsky in this sense: both of them are exploring philosophical ideas through literature, though Dostoevsky with considerably more literary brilliance and intensity than Marcel. But Dostoevsky is a novelist with a clear philosophical bent and his attempt to explore deep religious questions in his work, as well as to portray individuals who are confronted with intensely difficult moral experiences and choices, is similar to some of what Marcel is doing, especially in his plays. Dostoevsky, being a novelist, is not as interested in deeper philosophical questions, such as the relationship between experience and reflection, or between the body and mind, as Marcel is.

*Tudor Petcu:* Considering that Gabriel Marcel was influenced mainly by Kierkegaard and Bergson, how could we highlight the complementarity between these two philosophers and the Christian tradition in Gabriel Marcel's thinking?

*Brendan Sweetman:* Yes, this is a very interesting question. There are themes in both philosophers that are similar to Marcel's, though the influence of Kierkegaard on Marcel is not clear. Marcel does say that he had worked out most of his ideas before he had read Kierkegaard and so he was not significantly influenced by him. In fact, Kierkegaard and Marcel are often thought to be opposed to each other in their general approaches to the question of God and religion. This is because although Marcel does not espouse a Thomistic approach to God, and does not focus on proofs of God's existence, or on the rational case for believing in God, he does emphasize the reasonability of the Christian worldview. This is often thought to differ from Kierkegaard who seems to place more emphasis on the commitment to what one believes than on the truth of what one believes. On this question I want to draw your attention to a new article on the relationship between Kierkegaard and Marcel that appears in our new online journal, *Marcel Studies*, and I recommend that your readers take a look if they wish to explore this question further.

I do think that Marcel was quite influenced by Bergson's distinction between experience and conceptual knowledge, especially the idea that conceptual thinking forces discreteness on experience, but that experience itself is not discrete. Unlike Bergson, Marcel would not say that time is necessarily in a flow; rather he developed the view that in the act of conceptual abstraction something is lost, that which makes our experience personal, and that which situates the self in a concrete context in existence. In this sense, there are no abstract objects; there are only particular subject's objects, i.e., objects that are involved with particular human subjects in concrete situations. I think Bergson helped him to arrive at this way of thinking about human experience

and its relationship to reflection and he does note that Bergson freed him from “the spirit of abstraction.”

Marcel in general is very influenced by the Christian tradition in that many of his themes are those that concern the Christian view of the human person in one way or another, especially his focus on the transcendent as a key part of experience. He has always stressed this point right from the beginning of his work, many years before his conversion to Catholicism. One way he illustrates the transcendent dimension is in his analysis of human relationships and how they contain a transcendent dimension that not only helps to explain them but that makes them possible.

*Tudor Petcu:* Which would be the best philosophical understanding of the “metaphysical journal” written by Gabriel Marcel?

*Brendan Sweetman:* This early work of Marcel’s is an unusually interesting philosophical text. It introduces us to Marcel’s early inchoate thoughts and philosophical probings relating to most of his main concerns; indeed most of what were to become the major themes for which he is best known are introduced in these early attempts at philosophical reflection. A second reason the book is engaging is that it is written in a diary format, covering the period 1914–1923 of Marcel’s early career, when he was first working out his ideas in philosophy. The entries range across the days and months of this time period and provide a rare glimpse into a philosopher in action as he wrestles with a number of questions. Indeed, it is uncommon to see a philosopher’s ideas published in this form. Yet there is some price to pay for exposure to Marcel’s thoughts expressed in this cursory, tentative, and suggestive manner: a lot of excavation and reconstruction of his main claims and general position is required and one can understand that some readers might not have the patience for this task. The book offers us an unusual insight into a philosopher at work, a philosopher thinking out loud as it were, in the same way we might watch a painter or a sculptor at work, and we should regard this as an opportunity perhaps rather than as a challenge.

It is here that Marcel first develops the distinction between experience and reflection, though he tends to explain it more in terms of the distinction between existence and objectivity, where existence describes the concrete situation of the individual and objectivity refers to the attempt to explain this, and indeed to give primacy to conceptual knowledge. Marcel describes existence as “indubitable,” and so it cannot be put into question, and he goes on from this basic theme to develop a strong critique of the approaches of Cartesianism and of idealism that splits the mind off from the body, and from the world, and then has a terrible problem getting them back together again. For Marcel, existence is prior to all conceptual thought, so it is not possible to place it under any kind of doubt, and so therefore idealism, skepticism, and anti-realism all crumble. Existence is the very condition of any thinking whatsoever. He went on then to offer a very interesting account of sensation which rejected a standard scientific approach that tried to explain sensation as the reception of a message. Marcel offered a critique of this view and argued that sensation testifies to our participation in existence and that it cannot be explained in scientific terms because the scientific account always presupposes an underlying realm of sensation. The rest of his work is an elaboration of these key themes.

*Tudor Petcu:* Which were the main contributions of Gabriel Marcel to the evolution of French philosophy of XXth century and how important would he be for some contemporary philosophical approaches?

*Brendan Sweetman:* I think that Marcel was quite an important thinker in the development of not only French philosophy, but European philosophy more generally, even though his work is somewhat neglected today because it does not fit in with the zeitgeist of contemporary European intellectualism. He is perhaps best known for a number of key distinctions: mystery and problem, being and having, primary and secondary reflection, existence and objectivity, that capture something fundamental about the human condition and that still have great relevance today. His work is a challenge, for instance, to the scientific view of the human person which is gaining ascendancy: the temptation to think that all human problems must have a scientific solution. His work is also a challenge to analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American world, a reminder that it is a mistake to think that all aspects of the human condition can be analyzed and understood in conceptual abstractions. At the same time, he is very keen to avoid subjectivism, irrationalism, and a kind of epistemological and moral relativism. This is one of the reasons his work will remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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### Cluny Media re-issuing Marcel's work

Our readers will be very interested to know that publishers today continue to re-issue Marcel's work, no doubt fully aware of the relevance of his ideas for the contemporary world. The latest is Cluny Media, "a Rhode Island based publishing house dedicated to promoting the Catholic tradition and supporting evangelization initiatives with great books that speak of goodness, truth and beauty" (from the publishers website at <https://clunymedia.com>).

Cluny has re-issued Marcel's, *The Philosophy of Existence* (translated by Manya Harari) (paperback 2018), along with Kenneth Gallagher's study, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (first published in 1962). Marcel's *Presence and Immortality* was issued in 2021 (first published in 1967).

Cluny has also published a translation of Marcel's play, *The Thirst* (translated by Michial Farmer)

From the publisher's website:

Prompted by her stepmother, Stella Chartrain delves so frantically into family history that her father is forced to reveal the full truth about the past—regardless of its implications for the present. Instead of setting her free from fear, however, the truth further provokes Stella's obsession and casts its cloud of accompanying anxiety over her father and stepmother and her fiancé and his family. In this new translation (the very first into English), Michial Farmer brings out the intensity and conversational spirit of the prose to provide a highly readable—and actable—edition of Marcel's play.

Set in a single room across three acts, the drama takes on a close, almost suffocating, atmosphere as the Chartrain and de Puygerland families wrestle with their dread and disquiet in the face of a suspect past and an uncertain future. In this setting, as Farmer notes in his Introduction, *Thirst* stands among the best of Marcel's dramas, as it "limns that suffocation and points beyond it, however tenuously and ambiguously."

**Michial Farmer** (PhD, University of Georgia, 2013) is the author of *Imagination and Idealism in John Updike's Fiction* (Camden House, 2017). His poems and essays have appeared in *America Magazine*, *Front Porch Republic*, *FORMA*, and elsewhere.

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### Recent Marcel Scholarship

James Lisowski, C.S.C., "Gabriel Marcel and Thomas Aquinas: A Dialogue on Self-Knowledge," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 60 (No.4), December 2020, pp.473-478.

*Abstract:* This article considers the positions of Gabriel Marcel and Thomas Aquinas on self-knowledge and argues for a synthesis between them. The basis of this Marcelian-Thomistic synthesis is their common understanding of the self as inherently in relation to that which is other (via embodiment) and in the necessity of activation for self-knowledge to occur. The divergence between these thinkers occurs in regard to the process of activation. While Aquinas presents an Aristotelian account of activation rooted in his understanding of cognition, Marcel offers a broader vision of activation that gives pride of place to intersubjectivity. A Marcelian-Thomistic synthesis preserves the Aristotelian systematization of Aquinas, while adding Marcel's expanded understanding of activation and his prioritization of intersubjectivity. Such a synthesis allows for a treatment of self-knowledge that is metaphysically systematic and true to lived experience.

C. A. Longhurst, *Unamuno, Berdyaev, Marcel: A Comparative Study in Christian Existentialism* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021)

From the back jacket:

This book seeks to examine the mutual interplay between existentialism and Christian belief as seen through the work of three existentialist thinkers who were also committed Christians—a Spaniard (Miguel de Unamuno), a Russian (Nikolai Berdyaev), and a Frenchman (Gabriel Marcel). They are compared with each other and with leading non-religious existentialists. The major themes studied include reason, freedom, the self, belief, hope, love, suffering, and immortality.

**Alex Longhurst**, before retiring and writing this book, was previously a Professor at Leeds University. He is the author of ten previous books/editions and more than 100 journal articles and essays.

### NOTABLE BOOKS OF RECENT YEARS:

JILL GRAPER HERNANDEZ, *GABRIEL MARCEL'S ETHICS OF HOPE* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011)

*From the back jacket:*

The idea of 'hope' has received significant attention in the political sphere recently. But is hope just wishful thinking or can it be something more than a political catch-phrase? This book argues

that hope can be understood existentially or on the basis of what it means to be human. Under this conception of hope, given to us by Gabriel Marcel, hope is not optimism, but the creation of ways for us to flourish. War, poverty, and an absolute reliance on technology are real life evils that can suffocate hope.

Marcel's thought provides a way to overcome these negative experiences. An ethics of hope can function as an alternative to isolation, dread, and anguish offered by most existentialists. This book presents Marcel's existentialism as a convincing, relevant moral theory; founded on the creation of hope, interwoven with the individual's response to the death of God. Jill Hernandez argues that today's reader of Marcel can resonate with his belief that the experience of pain can be transcended through a philosophy of hope and an escape from materialism.

DWYANE TUNSTALL: *DOING PHILOSOPHY PERSONALLY: THINKING ABOUT METAPHYSICS, THEISM, AND ANTIBLACK RACISM* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2013)

*From the back jacket:*

This book contends that Gabriel Marcel's reflective method is animated by two extraphilosophical commitments. Marcel's first extraphilosophical commitment is to an ethico-religious insight where the highest ontological exigency for human persons is to participate in being. Marcel's second extraphilosophical commitment is to battle the ever-present threat of dehumanization in late Western modernity. The importance of these two commitments to Marcel's reflective method can be appreciated better if one views it as a teleological suspension of philosophy. Unfortunately, Marcel undermines his second extraphilosophical commitment by neglecting to examine what is perhaps the most prevalent threat of depersonalization in Western modernity, antiblack racism. Given Marcel's professed commitment to battle against the forces of dehumanization in late Western modernity, any Marcelian reflective method that is faithful to Marcel's commitment to combat dehumanization should account for how antiblack racism has affected modern human persons, especially African persons. Tunstall thinks Lewis Gordon's existential phenomenology is a promising candidate for providing this sort of account.

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### COMING SOON FROM ST. AUGUSTINE'S PRESS

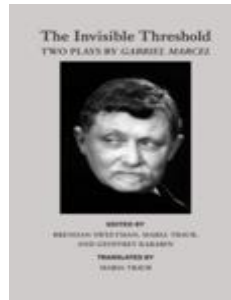
*Gabriel Marcel: Toward Another Kingdom: Two Dramas of the Darker Years* (Translated by Maria Traub)

Maria Traub's translation of Gabriel Marcel's post-war plays is a window into the French philosopher's answer to his own signature questions regarding human existence. And as in the earlier collection of plays, *The Invisible Threshold*, the realism, passion, and sincerity that frame conscience and moral duty in Marcel are most profoundly visible in the day-to-day of family life. Ideas never before presented theatrically emerge in Marcel's characters who struggle to understand their times and how best to live in them. Post-war life was as much a spiritual reckoning as it was a new society and Marcel's treatment of introspection is a valuable key to his own work.



Marcel's dramas require characters to respond authentically and from their true selves. He thereby offers the vision of how individual compromises may build up to break the world and condemn, or, conversely, contribute to the discovery and meaning of relation and redemption. Traub's new translation will interest the dramatic players as much as the scholar and Marcel's aptitude for theatrical writing is proven once again. His intellectual sensitivity creates characters that beckon performance, which is an added dimension to the presentation of the human condition.

*Also, from St Augustine's Press (in 2019), a book you will want to add to your Marcel collection!:*



### **The Invisible Threshold: Two Plays by Gabriel Marcel**

*Edited by Brendan Sweetman, Maria Traub, and Geoffrey Karabin; Translated by Maria Traub, 275 pages, 6" x 9", preface, notes, bibliographical*

French philosopher and dramatist, Gabriel Marcel (1888-1973), who belonged to the movement of French existentialism, is one of the most insightful thinkers of the twentieth century. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Marcel approaches human existence from a theistic perspective and gives priority to the themes of hope, fidelity, and faith in the human search for meaning in a challenging world. Written early in his career, the plays in this new volume were originally published in 1913 under the title *Le Seuil invisible* (*The Invisible Threshold*).

The first play, *Grace*, explores the theme of religious conversion. The drama depicts a crisis between characters of genuine depth and sincerity, who are struggling with different interpretations of shared experiences. After a serious illness, Gerard, one of the main protagonists, undergoes a religious conversion, an experience which allows of two different and irreconcilable interpretations. The play raises the question of grace in a profound dramatization of a personal religious experience as it sustains in challenging life situations.

Similar themes are addressed but developed differently in *The Sandcastle*. This drama explores the confrontation between one's beliefs and their consequences when faced with challenging family and social circumstances, especially with regard to the tension between love and freedom that often arises between parents and children. Marcel raises issues of moral character, commitment, and sincerity, and introduces the role doubt plays in the way we form and hold our convictions. The springboard for the unfolding of the drama is the contrast between accepting Christianity in an intellectual and cultural sense and a Christianity that is lived. Both plays bring out one of Marcel's major themes: that life's most profound, fulfilling experiences are often compromised in what he describes as the modern, broken world (*le monde cassé*), a world unfortunately characterized by alienation, loss of meaning, and feelings of despair.

These new plays of Marcel's, here translated into English for the first time, will appeal to all interested in the role of grace in everyday life, the relationship between faith and reason, the choice of faith in a secular world, and the struggle between inauthentic and authentic existence. Marcel raises weighty and challenging questions, but does not offer final answers. In his dramatic work, he leaves those to us.

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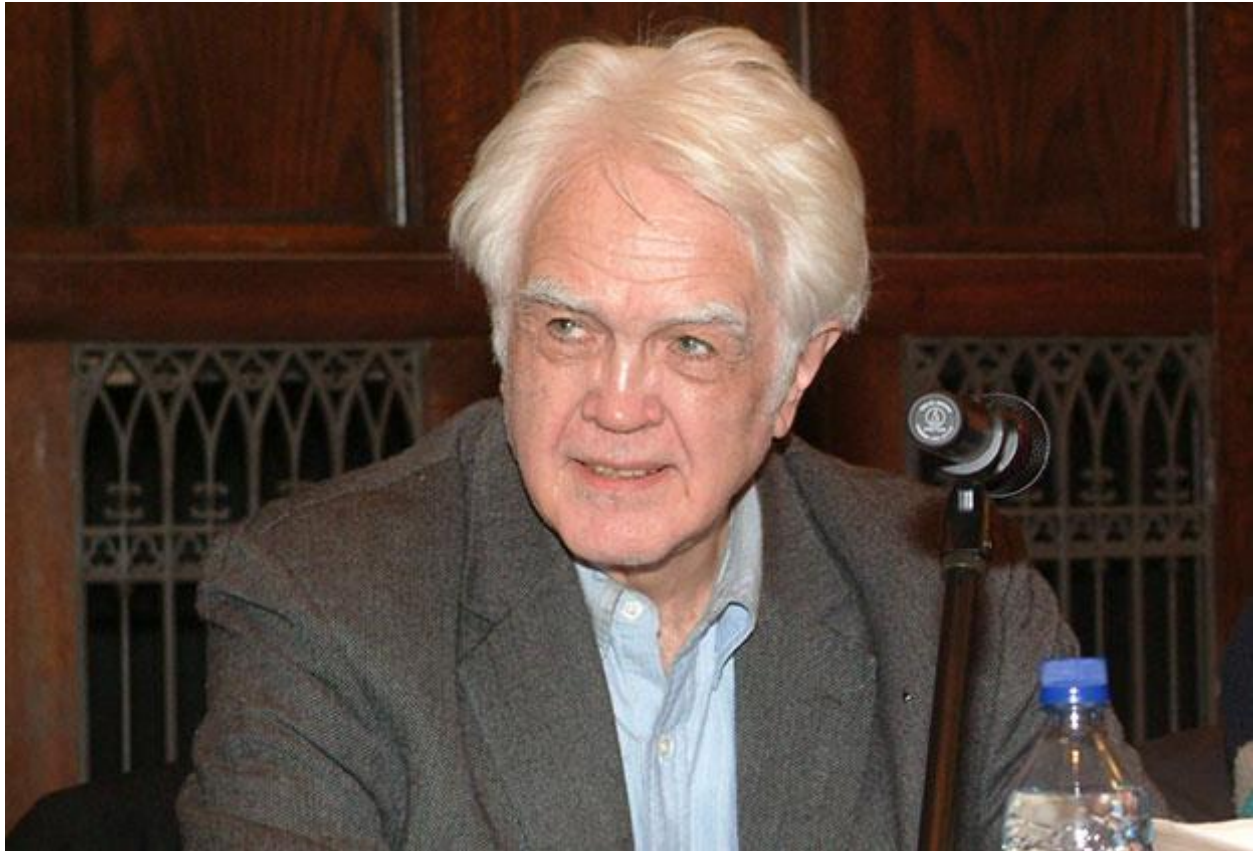
### **Marcel on Technology and Spiritual Loss**

“I am not sure that every kind of technical progress may not entail, for the individual who takes advantage of it *without having had any share in the effort at overcoming difficulties of which such a progress is the culmination*, the payment of a heavy price, of which a certain degradation at the spiritual level is the natural expression. Obviously, this does not mean that history can start moving backwards and that we ought to break all the machines: it means merely that, as Bergson with so much profundity observed, every kind of outward technical progress ought to be balanced in man by an effort at inner conquest, directed towards an ever greater self-mastery. Unhappily, what we still have to ask is whether for an individual who every day takes more and more advantage of the facilities which technical progress has put at his disposal, such an effort at self-mastery does not become more and more difficult. There is certainly every reason to suppose that it does. In our contemporary world it may be said that the more a man becomes dependent on the gadgets whose smooth functioning assures him a tolerable life at the material level, the more estranged he becomes from an awareness of his inner reality. I should be tempted to say that the center of gravity of such a man and his balancing point tend to become external to himself: that he projects himself more and more into objects, into the various pieces of apparatus on which he depends for his existence. It would be no exaggeration to say that the more progress ‘humanity’ as an abstraction makes towards the mastery of nature, the more actual individual men tend to become slaves of this very conquest.” [FROM: GABRIEL MARCEL, *MAN AGAINST MASS SOCIETY* (1951)]

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**FAREWELL TO TWO DISTINGUISHED PHILOSOPHERS AND COLLEAGUES****Dr Patrick Bourgeois (1940-2021)**

A founding member of the Gabriel Marcel Society, former President of the Society, and long time contributor to the annual scholarly meetings, Pat passed away on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at the age of 81. He was a wonderful colleague, mentor and friend to so many of us in the Society, a gentle soul who was always encouraging and stimulating in philosophical exchanges. A former President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Pat was a very impressive and productive scholar in the Catholic and Continental traditions. He was the William and Audrey Hutchinson Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University, New Orleans, where he had worked since 1968. Pat's areas of interest were contemporary Continental philosophy, especially the work of Ricoeur, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Marcel, and he had strong interests in pragmatism, phenomenology, and philosophical theology. He published more than one hundred articles, and several books, including *Philosophy at the Boundary of Reason* (SUNY Press, 2001), *The Extension of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), and *The Religious Within Experience and Existence: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Duquesne University Press, 1990). His book on the boundaries of reason is a landmark study of recent work in Continental philosophy including detailed analysis of complex themes in Ricoeur, Derrida and their contemporary disciples. One of the most careful works in the area of postmodernism, deconstruction and post-Kantian philosophy, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in later Continental thought.

**Dr James Marsh (1937-2021)**

Sadly, we also note the passing (on June 20, 2021 at the age of 84) of James Marsh, long time Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, and also a great Continental scholar (and coincidentally a very good friend of Pat's!). Professor Marsh was a frequent contributor to and supporter of the Marcel Society over the years, and was a member of the Executive Committee in the early 1990s. A distinguished scholar of Continental thought, Professor Marsh was author and editor of nine books, including *Post-Cartesian Meditations* (Fordham University Press, 1988), *Critique, Action and Liberation* (SUNY Press, 1994), *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence* (SUNY Press, 1999), and *Unjust Legality: A Critique of Habermas's Philosophy of Law* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2001). He was also a former President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association.