

From equality to fraternity, with Gabriel Marcel

"Equality" is a term that has become a slogan for many activist movements. People with different sexual orientations or identities within the "gender spectrum" and/or victims of social inequalities are trying to get the legislators and society as a whole to admit that all men are equal - *but from what point of view and in relation to what?*

In his work on political philosophy entitled *Men against humanity* (1951), Marcel already observed a tendency, in post-World War II democratic societies, to claim that everyone is equal. However, he jokingly added: since men are not triangles, it's absurd to suppose there is an absolute, pure and perfect equality between them.

According to him, the French Revolutionaries naively believed that Liberty, Equality and Fraternity could be thought of as being on the same level. Indeed, what should be considered as being of equal value is only the rights and duties that human beings should recognize to one another.

Equality is not a value but a relationship

One thing is equal to another thing when both things can be measured with same standards of measurement. This remark leads us to the main problem underlying the claim for equality: in such an instance **men would be considered like objects whose value is comparable**. This leads to changing man into a mere mercantile good.

But the infinite dignity of a man is immeasurable. If, due to social progress, the democratic principle which says that all men are equal before the law has become a reality, this doesn't mean the human "subject" has been concretely achieved. We need to do away with abstraction as well as with the imaginary fantasy which equals man to an idea, so that we can reach to the real suffering man. Indeed, we do not think that the demand of those who feel they are "less" - less well paid, less cared for, less educated, less considered - is a demand for equality. What makes real people all alike is not inequality but our inability to see their differences. What is lacking is not equality, what we really want is our identity to be recognized and acknowledged.

Indeed, how could equality be a desirable thing if it meant becoming, all of us, identical, the same? In other words, how can we desire something which is in every way similar to what we already have? What can arouse a sense of lacking is precisely what is, at the same time, distant and sufficiently close to us as to make us see it as desirable. However, what pertains to the mass, what is merely normal - that is to say what abides by the law of numbers – becomes invisible to our eyes and can produce nothing but indifference, if not rejection.

However, the need for identity which is growing today comes paradoxically together with an unwillingness to be seen as belonging to a traditional group or to any social institution like churches, political parties, gender communities. What really matters is to be seen not as one among many but as an individual, as one who is recognized in one's uniqueness, loved for what he or she is, without alienating himself to the judgment of others. Unfortunately, this entails a dangerous confusion between *having and being* - a main distinction Marcel makes in his work - as if mastering one's own image meant becoming sure of one's identity.

The image is no longer what it should be, that is to say a metaphor, but it takes on a different meaning for it is seen as meaning a totality. Thus the subject becomes nothing more than an object, only worth being looked at, useful to work with or to be understood. However, what the individual who denies others the right to see him merely as he shows himself – with all the ambiguities and discrepancies which stem from the difference between what is showed and what is perceived – what such an individual gets back in return is what we call "desire": a desire to desire, a desire to not only be the object of the other's desire but also to be a desiring subject, a subject whose desire reaches beyond the world of objects.

From the individual-mass to the subjective knotting

Contrary to the abstraction which causes the individual to get drowned into the mass, we hold that a man who suffers is **in demand of fraternity**. Indeed, suffering doesn't bring the subject back to himself alone. It is a sign of his need to relate to a community which, beyond family ties, would come together because of a common identity which bears a universal meaning. I will now quote Marcel: it is "*the consciousness of partaking in some unique adventure, in some central and indivisible mystery of human destiny.*" To Marcel this seemingly is the only way to give a meaning to the word *fraternity*.

For this philosopher, however, the mass, which is itself an abstraction, wants every individual to agree to more and more abstraction as a condition for being admitted – if not simply to survive - into a system which is a mockery of a society. This way of thinking makes the desire for recognition become an obscure resentment, which results in the feeling of being in exile from the humankind.

I will now quote him again: "(...) *The individual, in order to belong to the mass, to become part of the mass, had, first of all and unconsciously of course, to shed any substantial reality attached to his original singularity, or any link with a small concrete group. The incredibly harmful role played by the press, the radio, the cinema precisely boils down to replacing the original reality for a set of superimposed ideas and images deprived of any real meaning for the subject. (...) It will thus arise in him (...) a passion which is precisely what we call fanaticism. We need to add that this passion is based on a fear which itself stems from an unconscious feeling of insecurity and which shows in becoming aggressive.*"

"Re-resentment" describes the return of a feeling that cannot be expressed in any other way than by shouting into a megaphone or via a thread on Twitter. Following Marcel, we are invited to be wary of a spirit of abstraction which, when overdeveloped, can lead to distorting our conception of time, space and body. This takes us away from real life. Marcel's thought is based on an unmistakable gift: the incarnation. If we become aware of its obvious relevance in a time of digitalization, it is because this is essentially contradictory to the idea - and illusion – that we are fully mastering the world and ourselves.

At a time when rationalism was prevalent in University and this notion was deemed "*marked with an infantile anthropomorphism*", Marcel thought that it was a sign of **divine fatherhood** that "*an authentic, effective human community*" of the living had become a thinkable thing. His contention is that the fraternal man is a man who is connected with others, that his opposite is not a man without bonds but a man who refuses the bonds which make him. Thus the truth of any man lies in his assumption of the symbolic place which is assigned to him in the common space, defined by the language, within the human world of dialogue. The concrete man can then exist otherwise than by conforming to a scale of values or by his position in relation to a norm.

The reality of the encounter toward a concrete fraternity

Marcel's philosophy which can be defined as a quest for the concrete man questions the underlying division of the subjectivity between interiority and exteriority. He is concerned with the expression of the feeling and perceiving body. According to him, man is the embodiment of a dialectical movement, a tension between his being and the outside world. Our philosopher thus moves away from a substantivist conception of the being at the same time as he is unwilling to be labeled an "existentialist": if the being is in some way substantial, it is in as much as he is anchored in the real world, that is to say in his incarnation and his relations. Marcel's conception of the intersubjectivity is that of a stage on which the drama of the existence is played, a mysterious theater where personal and concrete intrigues are taking place. The human community is therefore a fraternity of feelings, of experiencing suffering and evil, without renouncing an ideal of peace and harmony.

Contrary to resentment, Marcel suggests we should seek *recollection* which amounts to a conquest of the concrete by the subject – in order to make our real being able to be heard. We should first make ourselves available: as a matter of fact, the

word "silence" comes from the Latin *sileo* which means "to leave, to allow". To be silent may mean to hold back, to keep things to yourself, but it can also mean allowing the Other to be heard. Whoever can acquire knowledge or wisdom through experience knows that truth is not a synonym of adequacy or accuracy but comes to us from the Other. This is made possible by de-centering oneself, which means distancing from the immediate self. The discourse, when spoken in truth by a subject, becomes a testimony to a truth that makes sense to him and is no longer merely echoing the mass.

The experience of fraternity as a refusal to be compared

According to Marcel, if we don't give in to the temptation to compare or be compared we will be able to be moved by the joy and admiration that our brothers can inspire, for getting the feeling of being treated as an equal is the opposite of what we feel when receiving a gift or a service.

The passion for equality *must be distinguished from* a desire of the Other which entails a widening of the thought, an opening, both creativity and transmission. To meet the Other means to recognize a reality which is as unspeakable as it is noisy. Marcel's work is an attempt to describe the experience of a relentless quest which helps us remember that the daily work-entertainment circle leads us nowhere. This quest is not only about oneself but about what opens up between us. Beyond individualism, man can hear the call of the Other, leading him to serenity and to a plenitude inspired by the feeling that we are all brothers.

What makes us human? Our ability not to be indifferent to each other while not comparing each other. Our ability to value individuality without making an idol of the individual, to recognize each other as unique and irreplaceable but still bound. There is a resemblance between humans – like between brothers. When we look at each other, we don't just see our reflection, nor a monster or an alien. We are alike beyond our differences: we are able to love, understanding that love overflows any emotion, sensation, idea or image, even the word 'love' itself, meaning that it gives itself to us during the journey of a life full of emotions, sensations, ideas, images and words others shared with us.

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