



REVIEW

SUFFERING, THERAPY, AND MEETING: MEDICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PRISMS IN GABRIEL MARCEL

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Marcel, G. (2022). *Sofferenza, terapia, incontro. Etica e crisi della medicina*. Castelvecchi. 96 pages.

With the competent translation by Paolo Scolari and the superb introductory essay by Franco Riva, renowned Italian researchers, Castelvecchi in Milan launches another important editorial project that forms part of the Itineranze Collection. This is *Sofferenza, Terapia, Encontro: Etica e Crisi della Medicina*, a small set of texts by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. This precious material, carefully collected, signals a profound reflection that intersperses, in the context of medical sciences, three fundamental themes from a unique philosophical angle: suffering, therapeutic experience, and the ultimate meaning of the meeting as an intersubjective manifestation.

Marcel is a profoundly visceral author without ceasing to be philosophically sensitive. He interprets his time with a very peculiar look at medicine, placing it beyond a purely rigid, bureaucratic, functionalist, and therefore depersonalized interpretation. Thus, he observes places and modes of medical practice and revisits literary works such as Robert de Traz's *Les Heures de Silence* while, of course, reflecting on the health area in its broadest spectrum. With this, the philosopher evaluates the spirit present in standardized hospitals, diagnoses the working conditions of health professionals, and the very meaning of the idea of service in an increasingly technocratic and bureaucratic world. Starting from this scenario, Marcel launches a programmatic appeal: to rehabilitate the humanistic soul of medicine. Then, in a humanitarian sense, the direct doctor/patient relationship comes into play, therapeutically reconfigured via the authentic experience of the meeting. What it is about recognizing is the essential fact that the patient's own historically suffered experience manifests itself as highly relevant to situate the scientific rigor required in an art and scientific technique as demanding as medicine is.

By gathering texts –such as *Leysin's Patient, Loving Suffering? Letter to Elisabeth N., Artificial Insemination: Psychological and Moral Impacts, Observations on the Depersonalization of Medicine, Hippocrates and Humanistic Medicine, Observations on the Future of Medicine*, and, finally, *Illness: The Having that Overflows in Being*– the book really does have a *sui generis* scope. For the reader to have a minimal overview of this thematic interweaving, let us start with the first axis addressed: suffering. In his correspondence with Elisabeth N., Marcel writes: “Whatever we say about suffering, it is not a shadow, an illusion, a mirage; it is a *reality*” (Marcel, 2022, p. 52) - as such, getting closer to what makes this terrible reality is necessary. Thus, “suffering exists, being a voice that emerges in what is most profound in ourselves, a voice that does not allow itself to reach the point of being reduced to silence, a silence that cries out to us that *suffering should not exist*. Therein lies the scandal. No thinking game can eliminate it. It would be vain to say that it does not exist, or rather that it is a lie” (Marcel, 2022, p. 52). Marcel, right away, asks himself: Are we facing a *stricto sensu* problem? The answer, from the phenomenological point of view, can only be negative. Why? Because the manifestation of suffering launches us into a deeper order of experience, i.e., beyond purely physical or technical limits. That is to say, “In reality, we find ourselves in the unfathomable: there is something there that needs to be elucidated philosophically; something strange; suffering is not susceptible to assume a metaphysical or spiritual significance except insofar as it implies an *unfathomable mystery*” (Marcel, 2022, p. 54). With this, our philosopher accentuates the metaphysical dimension of suffering, a kind of superior activity

in spiritualizing everything placed or reduced to the problematic level as an obstacle. This mysterious character also points to another decisive aspect: the experience of communion, of intersubjectivity: "This is why I cannot literally approach your suffering but by starting from mine – and under the condition that what was yours alone is also mine, passes to be mine or more exactly ours. If a 'discourse on suffering' is possible, it can only be based on an effective, lived communion" (Marcel, 2022, p. 53). This is why "one cannot separate the disease from the patient's experience. This is what prevents it from being reduced to a simple malfunction. At the same time, the depersonalization or functionalization of medicine would only be admissible if the disease could be reduced to an objectively traceable or repairable collapse" (Marcel, 2022, p. 72).

The second axis is the therapeutic experience. Marcel insists on the properly intersubjective character of such a process, as we have just seen. It is obviously not a matter of disregarding the importance and efficacy of physicians' usual methods and techniques. The surgeon has the prerogative of his praxis, his technique in his exercise or craft, which, by the way, is as necessary as it is vital. In any case, what cannot be lost sight of is another level of approximation to illness and, therefore, to suffering; this level in which the patient can be "treated as a unique being, as an immortal destiny" (Marcel, 2022, p. 52). Ultimately, it is about establishing a mysterious relationship, one that is profoundly intersubjective as a concrete gesture of communion. Thus, when measuring the existential weight of the disease and, consequently, of suffering, Franco Riva points out in what terms we can better understand the therapeutic relationship between physician and patient: "to reiterate that suffering cannot be reduced to a technical-scientific problem and that it is an existential and profound dimension that protects it, despite all appearances, Marcel does not interrupt his speech claiming the mystery for me" (Riva, in Marcel, 2022, p. 8). By revisiting Rita Charon's work, *Narrative Medicine* (2006) which even mentions the figure of Marcel among other philosophers, Riva still draws attention to the "humanist integration of medicine" (Riva, in Marcel, 2022, p. 10). The interpreter shows that the health profession involves recognizing the presence of others, such as a presence revealed immediately in a look, a smile, or a handshake. It is, therefore, a way of listening, of giving, or, if preferred, a new connection, a new contact.

Well, this context announces, in the aura that covers such writings, another essential theme circumscribing the general thematic circuit: the experience of the meeting. The effective presence of others amid clinical work suggests a fundamental empathic dimension. Now, this is, essentially speaking, what Marcel has in view when he describes the experience of the meeting. The therapeutic meeting between the physician and the patient roots in an essential inter corporeity: that of the body experienced as a place, par excellence, from which all intersubjectivity or the highest communion emerges. On this plane, the extreme suffering situation completely reconfigures such an order of relationship, or rather, meeting. This question reminds us, for example, of the small but brilliant book *Phénoménologie de la Rencontre* (1952) by F. J. J. Buytendijk, a renowned Dutch scientist with a phenomenological orientation who, moreover, in this detail, was one of the most attentive authors of Marcel's work when observing that "the common source of knowledge from which a phenomenology of the meeting proceeds is not the transcendental consciousness, but the engaged consciousness (Merleau-Ponty) or the being in a situation (Gabriel Marcel), understood from the knowledge of the fundamental forms of human existence" (Marcel, 2022, p. 11). Buytendijk observes further: "we think that each concrete form of meeting can, in the beginning, be known psychologically in the transcendence of the meeting" (Marcel, 2022, p. 16) which is why we must "understand that each authentic meeting is like a human event culture in which the ambiguity of existence is manifested" (Marcel, 2022, p. 8). Aware of this, in his *Essai de Philosophie Concrète* (Gallimard, 1999, p. 22), Marcel notes: "meeting someone is not just crossing paths with them; it is to be, at least for a moment, close to him, with him; as a *co-presence*."

That said, by gravitating around these three fundamental thematic axes, *Sofferenza, Terapia, Encontro* offers a rich and instructive subsidy that increasingly revives current culture in an interdisciplinary context of knowledge dissemination, not only for the Italian-speaking reader and philosophy scholar but for the scientific community as a whole and the general non-specialized public.