

# CONCRETE PHILOSOPHY, THE MYSTERY OF LOVE, AND THE ABSURDITY OF EVIL

As a lad of eighteen who spent more time playing football and basketball than reading literature and philosophy, I entered Maryville College in the fall of 1960. After a year of liberal arts courses, the time arrived to select a major field of study. My decision was significantly influenced by three factors: Sputnik, basketball, and puberty images of masculinity. As a member of the post-Sputnik college generation, I was aware that all the money and prestige belonged to the sciences and mathematics; consequently, there was never any serious consideration of majoring in the humanities and especially no consideration of majoring in philosophy. As an undergraduate, I would not have been caught dead in a philosophy course: not only were the people who taught philosophy somewhat queer, but those who studied it were wimps; real men mastered the sciences. So, the humanities were out, and the question became which of the sciences? It was basketball and laziness that provided the answer. First, the natural sciences were much too messy and required long periods in the laboratory, in other words, lab time would infringe on my time playing basketball and trying to actualize my masculinity through the puberty rites of seeking feminine companionship. But mathematics was another matter: it required no labs, and mathematics was simple, clear, concise (no long term papers for example), and relatively easy. So, I became a math major. Fortunately, however, Maryville College was a good liberal arts school, and I was required to study a foreign language, explore literature, examine history, survive a Bible class taught by a missionary's widow, and register for several other kinds of classes. To my surprise I found myself completing a literature minor, but this was excusable to my masculine side because, after all, I was a math major, and I managed to evade those strange, effeminate philosophy classes.

Upon graduation from Maryville I accepted a NASA fellowship for graduate study in mathematics at the University of Kentucky and was able to propose to and marry an English major because the fellowship

was financially generous. As I began the study of mathematics at Kentucky in the fall of 1964, she returned to Maryville to complete her final semester. At Kentucky, I studied nothing but mathematics eight hours a day. It was then I discovered that what had made my education at Maryville so enjoyable and fulfilling was not only the mathematics but even more so the courses in literature, world history, and religion. In other words, I discovered that it was really ideas, values, and beliefs that excited me. After much soul-searching, I called my wife Jeanie in Maryville and told her that I had made an important decision. She asked with concern, "Oh, no! You haven't decided to vote for Lyndon Johnson (the 1964 Presidential election), have you?" I responded, "Nothing as drastic as that; I am resigning my fellowship and going to Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary." Besides struggling with what to do with my life, there was an important religious question I needed to answer, and it seemed that it could best be explored at seminary.

At Louisville I first encountered philosophy in the person of Sam Keen, who introduced me to Gabriel Marcel: an introduction which was to become a lifetime blessing. It was Sam who seduced me into the study of philosophy but a view of philosophy that was somewhat less than orthodox. Sam taught philosophy as though it were what Zorba the Greek did in his semi-reflective moments. Thus, on the basis of Marcel and Sam Keen's Dionysian image of philosophy, I applied for and received an assistantship in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma during my last year at Louisville. Upon graduation, we moved to Oklahoma.

It took less than one week to discover that graduate philosophy was little concerned with Marcel and more prone to worship Apollo than Dionysus. For three months I did not even understand the questions that students were asking in class. Every week I wanted to quit, but our only source of revenue (we now had a baby daughter) was the assistantship; thus, I "hung-in-there" for a semester and slowly began to understand and appreciate the field of philosophy. I was also most fortunate to be at Oklahoma because it had a department that had not sold its soul to any of the modern schools of philosophy. As a consequence, I was allowed to do a thesis on Marcel and a dissertation on Marcel and Camus. I have always believed that this represented a kind of indulgence on the part of the faculty, but I was a good boy who also took every class in logic and the philosophy of science in their curriculum.

In the summer of 1972, I began to teach philosophy at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. As a teacher I believed that I had a responsibility to teach SERIOUS philosophy; so, Marcel was

put aside as I turned to Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, the British empiricists, the Continental rationalists, logic, analytic philosophy, etc. At this time in my philosophical life, serious philosophy meant teaching students about Forms, the Agent Intellect, the Cogito, monads, the principles of logic, idealism versus empiricism, synthetic a priori, ontological arguments, Geist, phenomenological epoches, etc; but my philosophical heart still belonged to Marcel. On rare occasions I would backslide and submit a paper on Marcel to a conference. On those few occasions when I could get a paper on Marcel accepted at a conference--never the "big, prestigious" ones--the papers were never a big draw: they were usually scheduled for the last session of the conference and consisted of me and a couple of members of a Catholic order. Then, ten years into my professional career, three events transpired which changed my understanding of philosophy and the nature of my teaching philosophy; events which led me back to Marcel and Camus and their recognition of the centrality of the mystery of love and the absurdity of human suffering for both human life and the love of wisdom.

Before briefly recounting these events, it is helpful to describe the fundamental insights which they revealed concerning the nature of, the content of, and the teaching of philosophy. During my first decade of teaching I taught a philosophy of religion class several times in the traditional manner: that is, **the class examined** the arguments for and against the existence of God, for and against the occurrence of miracles, the free will-predestination and foreknowledge problem, the attributes of God, the nature of religious language, and the **PROBLEM OF EVIL** . Each time that I taught the class I must confess to a vague uneasiness over the Western bias and the abstract nature of such an approach and such issues, but this was the way I had been taught that serious philosophy was to be done. Further, I never examined the Problem of Evil in other philosophy classes (except Modern Philosophy when we examined Leibniz) because it seemed to be a problem specific to religion. What I discovered in these three events is that experiences of human love and human suffering are as central to philosophy as to religion, that suffering is not a **PROBLEM**, and this led me back to Marcel and Camus. Three brief quotes should suffice to illustrate this:

A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined: whereas a mystery...transcends every conceivable technique. It is no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem.... The problem of evil, as the philosophers have called it, supplies us with a particularly instructive example of this degradation. (Marcel, *Being*

*and Having*, p.117)

I think and I say that the science of ontology will not get out of its scholastic rut until it takes full cognisance of the fact that love comes first. (Marcel, *Being and Having*, p.167)

There is but one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest--whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories comes afterwards. If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.3)

If Marcel and Camus are correct, as I believe they are, then the mystery of love and the absurdity of suffering are more than just theological questions and issues, they are concrete human experiences which are fundamental to human life and to any relevant and respectable search for wisdom, that is, to philosophy. Three experiences powerfully revealed this truth to me.

On a fall afternoon in October 1982, I was at a local Texaco station filling my car with gas when a former student who had become a lawyer in the community arrived for gas. When he saw me, he stepped over to the pump I was using and shared something most precious, in his words: "Bert, there is something which I think you should know about a former student who took your class in *The Literature and Philosophy of Existentialism* [the only class where I ventured to discuss Marcel and Camus]. When he entered your class he was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. As a consequence of the questions and issues you raised in the class he has left the Klan and is struggling to relate to blacks as human beings rather than things. You should know that you make a difference in other's lives." This revelation was both exhilarating and humbling: exhilarating because it came at a time in my teaching career when I badly needed to know that what I was struggling to do as a teacher was of value and humbling because of the sacred responsibility of teaching about human life and relationships.

Several months later, during early spring, I received a telephone call from the brother of a student who had attended one of my classes during my second year at Austin Peay (eight years earlier). After he identified himself, he told me that his brother had committed suicide the previous day. As I inadequately tried to express my sadness to his brother, I was desperately trying to remember this student. He had only

taken one class, the course in Existentialism. Vaguely I remembered him as an older student (early thirties) who was shy, serious, occasionally asked insightful questions, and wrote passionate papers. But I hardly knew or remembered him; consequently I was puzzled by his brother's call. This puzzlement was quickly clarified. In a note left for his brother, this young man I barely knew or remembered had commented upon the importance of this class in his life and requested that I perform his funeral service. As difficult as this request was, there are petitions of such human sacredness that there is only one acceptable response. I asked to borrow a diary he had also left for his brother and his class notes from the course. In both I discovered that the readings and the discussions in the Existentialism class had touched him in many good and healthy ways, especially the insights of Marcel concerning love and Camus concerning suffering.

Finally, during early summer of the same year, two friends of mine lost their two year old son to a defective heart. The boy passed away on a Friday afternoon in the intensive care unit of a local hospital. Later that evening I received a call asking me to come to their home early Saturday morning. To this day I still cannot recall what any of us said as we exchanged greetings at the front door. We moved to a large living room and sat down. A moment of silence followed which was probably only seconds long but seemed like hours, when the mother broke the silence with a sobbing cry: "Bert, you have to tell me why this has happened." After I partly recovered from the piercing pain in her voice and the shock of her question, I quietly struggled to respond. What was she asking me? I thought quickly of three possibilities: medical, theological, or a third which was neither but even more basic. I ruled out the medical possibility because I am not a physician. The religious question, "Why did God let this happen?," was a possibility because the parents were members of a Presbyterian Church to which I also belonged. However, I think that her excruciating question was more fundamentally existential: she was asking me the most difficult question of human existence (a question concerning the mystery of love and the absurdity of suffering and death):

BECAUSE THIS PRECIOUS HUMAN PERSON WHOM I LOVE WITH ALL MY BEING HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM MY LIFE, CAN YOU TELL ME HOW I AM GOING TO GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING AND GO ABOUT MY LIFE? CAN YOU TELL ME HOW I CAN FIND THE MEANING, VALUE, PURPOSE, AND MOST OF ALL THE HOPE I NEED TO GO ON TOMORROW AND THE DAYS AFTER?

There is no more burning or difficult question any human being can face; this is a fundamental question of human life; consequently, it is a fundamental question and issue of philosophy: the mystery of love and the absurdity of suffering and death are not only experiences that philosophy cannot avoid, I believe that they are the givens with which philosophy must begin. As a result of these experiences, I made a decision and a commitment that have determined the approach, content, and nature of my teaching:

WHILE I WILL NOT IGNORE THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY, THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS, AND THE GREAT PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS AND ISSUES, AS I ATTEMPT TO SHARE THE LOVE OF WISDOM WITH STUDENTS, I WILL STRUGGLE TO RELATE THE TRUTHS AND INSIGHTS OF PHILOSOPHY TO THEIR CONCRETE, FLESH AND BLOOD LIVES, AND I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT THE MYSTERY OF LOVE AND THE ABSURDITY OF SUFFERING AND DEATH ARE THE FUNDAMENTAL EXPERIENCES OF HUMAN LIFE AS WELL AS THE **GIVENS** WITH WHICH PHILOSOPHY MUST INITIATE ITS REFLECTIONS AND EXPLORATIONS.

Developing from this commitment and awareness over a period of several years and many revisions, I now present students in my Introduction to Philosophy class with the following description of the love of wisdom:

PHILOSOPHY IS AN EFFORT TO CONFRONT THE PROBLEMS OF, TO ENCOUNTER THE MYSTERIES OF, AND TO STRUGGLE WITH THE ABSURDITIES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE.

The rest of the semester, then, is spent in exploring this description. For me, any adequate exploration of this understanding of philosophy would require more than a book length manuscript; it would require a lifetime. Thus, in the remainder of this essay, I hope to accomplish two humble goals: (1) to further clarify the description, and (2) to suggest several concrete examples of problems, mysteries, and absurdities. As I do so, I remain cognizant of Abraham Kaplan's great warning about professional philosophy and philosophers given at the end of his extensive interview in *Time* magazine over fifteen years ago:

The word philosophy means the love of wisdom, and the love of wisdom is, I suppose, like most kinds of love: so often it is the professional who knows the least about it.

## PHILOSOPHY AS PROBLEM

While there are many passages in Marcel's works which describe the distinction between a problem and a mystery, one of the clearest and most descriptive is found in his essay titled "The Mystery of the Family":

...there can only be a problem for me where I have to deal with facts which are, or which I can at least cause to be, exterior to myself; facts presenting themselves to me in a certain disorder for which I struggle to substitute an orderliness capable of satisfying the requirements of my thought. When this substitution has been effected the problem is solved. As for me, who devote myself to this operation, I am outside...the facts with which it deals. But when it involves realities closely bound up with my existence, realities which unquestionably influence my existence...I cannot consciously proceed in this way. That is to say, I cannot make an abstraction of myself, or if you like, bring about this division between myself on the one hand and this ever-present given principle of life on the other; I am effectively and vitally involved in these realities. (*Homo Viator*, pp.68-9)

These latter realities are mysteries. For Marcel, then, both problems and mysteries are experiences, but experiences of a significantly different existential nature. A problem is an experience that I can effectively SEPARATE from myself. I confront a problem; that is, I put it in front of myself (this is the etymological meaning of the term PROBLEM, "to put in front"). In other words, a problem is an experience that I can treat OBJECTIVELY because I can separate it from myself. This allows me to analyze, measure, define, describe, test, collect information concerning, and evaluate the problem. If these operations have been performed adequately, then I have solved the problem. Unquestionably human life is filled with problems. An example should help. My bank statement arrives in the mail. Upon examining it, I find that the bank statement indicates there is \$100.00 less in my checking account than my checkbook records. While my first response to this problem may be passionately, subjectively emotional, I should shortly be able to set my emotions and frustration aside, get a calculator, analyze my checkbook, and discover the error in a rational, objective manner. In thus confronting the problem I solve it.

Because human existence is everyday confronted with many problems, it follows that philosophy (the love of wisdom) is partly an effort to understand and solve the problems of life. Under this category much of the traditional content of philosophy is to be found, especially epistemology, logic, and the philosophy of science. However, much of