French Philosopher Defends His Views, Attacks Critics

By DAVID TILSON

Last week the Rice campus was host to one of the most notable philosophers of our times, Dr. Gabriel Marcel.

Philosopher, dramatist, drama critic and composer, Dr. Marcel was brought to Rice by the chapel committee to deliver two lectures in the Memorial Center on Thursday and Friday.

On Thursday Dr. Marcel was seen in his capacity as a drama critic. The “Finality (or end) of the Drama” was considered along two lines: the external finality and the internal finality.

By “external,” Dr. Marcel had reference to the “play with a point,” social criticism as a moral institution. After raising several objections to the didactic theater, Dr. Marcel pointed to another dimension of the drama in which the spectator grasps feelings which defy conceptualization resulting in an “elevation” of the spectator.

He began his Friday lecture with a repudiation of the name “existentialism” as applied to his philosophy, a linking largely due to a pamphlet by Jean-Paul Sartre in which Sartre grouped himself and Martin Heidegger as atheistic existentialists as opposed to the Christian existentialists — Marcel and Karl Jaspers.

Dr. Marcel was led to the probe he felt himself closer to Heidegger than Jaspers, whose Christianity may be questioned. In his first remarks, he also joked about the society ladies image of the existentialist. He objected to the current tendency to analyze his writings as derivative of Sartre’s.

Dr. Marcel said his first challenge to rational idealism in 1922 in which he used the term “existential” anticipated Sartre by years.

Dr. Marcel was led to the problem of existence itself through the problem of the existence of God and found that existence could not be treated as problematic, was not a predicate in Kant’s sense and as “givenness” was pushed into the background by thought.

He then sought to study a thing in its “givenness.” Facing the dilemma that either existence is a pure generality in which case it becomes a predicate or else something determinate or objective, Dr. Marcel rejected the whole method of analysis as inadequate.

The idealism of Kant, for example, results in a severance from existence by reason — existence defies conceptualization. But this radical questioning or doubt can only take place “inside” existence.

Existence then is the “matrix of any situation” — and man finds himself in its grip (Sartre characterizes this experience as a sort of congealing.)

Existence, said Dr. Marcel, is grasped in “wonder” — the kind of wonder found in normal children and not in Sartre’s “nausea,” a perhaps authentic but depraved experience. Thus, a phenomenological approach reveals a new aspect of existence.

Concerning his feud with Sartre, Dr. Marcel observed that Sartre’s atheism does not appear to be existential at all but rather based on logical analysis. He noted that Sartre’s position that “freedom coincides with the nothingness in the heart of man” and that “to exist is to choose” is opposed by his own view that man is only sometimes free and that freedom is nearer to “creation.”

Dr. Marcel distinguished a “truth” from the “Spirit of Truth.” When we speak of God, it is never of God we speak, and our too ready ideas of God degenerate into idolatry. The spirit of Truth is radically opposed to petty sectarianism and must have its ground in existence.