CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism and traditional systematic philosophy are two important trends of modern European philosophy. Each makes an attempt, one way or another, to face the challenge of modern science and mathematics towards religion. But, even in the face of this common cause, they, as a matter of fact, are opposed to each other to such an extent that each wants to deny to the other, at least in an indirect manner, the title of philosophy. The systematic thinkers accuse the existentialists of being woolly, vague, verbose and even irrational. For example, A.J. Ayer writes: "Whatever may be the affective value of these statements, I cannot but think that they are literally nonsensical! .... What is called existentialist philosophy has become very largely an exercise in the art of misusing the verb 'to be'". ¹ On the other hand, existentialist thinkers say that the systematic philosophers do not deal with real

---

problems, but only with abstractions. For example, Marcel writes: "In general, the *Cogito* in its idealist interpretation... does not seem to me a likely point of departure for a possible metaphysics". But are these two schools of thought as opposed as they are made out to be by most, if not all, supporters of both the schools of thought? This is the crux of the issue which we attempt to explore in this thesis.

A

It would, indeed, be desirable to comprehensively consider the issue mentioned above, viz., the mutual hostility between existentialism and the traditional systematic philosophy. However, I consider it beyond my capacity, at least within the limits of time at our disposal in a doctoral dissertation. I propose, therefore, to severely circumscribe the scope of our dissertation in the following manner.

(1) Instead of taking the two movements or traditions as a whole, we shall choose one representative of each, and consider the problem with reference to them. As the representative of the existentialist school we will choose

1. Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p.65
Marcel, and as the representative of the systematic tradition, we will choose Descartes. I do not want to claim that this choice is the best for the purpose in view. Nonetheless, it has certain merits. The choice of Marcel was determined by the fact that I had been impressed by his thought when I studied it. And the choice of Marcel in some ways led to the choice of Descartes. Both are French and therefore belong to the French tradition of thought. Marcel refers to Descartes in the course of his discussion. For example, he writes: "It should be added that the Cartesian position is inseparable from a form of dualism which I, for my part, would unhesitatingly reject".¹

But convenience is not the only factor in favour of this choice. In so far as we are considering the challenge of science and mathematics to religion, a theistic existentialist like Marcel is better than an atheistic existentialist. And Descartes is a good choice, because he is the father of modern philosophy and, besides, he is simple to consider, compared with Spinoza or Leibniz.

(2) It might be said that the choice is unsatisfactory in so far as we have to consider the mutual criticism by the two kinds of philosophers. It is unsatisfactory because Descartes does not have any comments against existentialist thinking. However, this is not a problem, because I want to consider only the existentialist attack on systematic philosophy. For this purpose, the choice of Marcel is all right.

(3) The next important point is that we are not going to consider the whole of Marcel's thought and its counterpart in Descartes. We consider only Marcel's characterisation of the nature of the philosophical problem according to himself and the systematic philosophers.

What is Marcel's characterisation of the philosophical problem? According to Marcel, the philosophical problem is concrete, personal and existential; whereas the philosophical problem as understood by Descartes is abstract, impersonal and non-existential. It is very important, but it is extremely difficult to define these terms. And, it would be better to clarify the meanings of these terms in the course of the discussion. Here we shall content ourselves with making just the following remarks. In the first instance, we have to say that these
characteristics are characteristics of the same problem and, therefore, aspects of the same problem. It is, therefore, not possible to consider any one of the aspects in isolation from the other two aspects. However, for the sake of convenience, it is useful to discuss these three characteristics separately. Further, a separate discussion of each of them is of value to enable us to examine the question in as great detail as possible.

But how are these distinctions to be considered with reference to the nature of the philosophical problem? In a narrow sense of the term, it is possible to think of the problem in terms of its formulation. However, in a wider sense, an understanding of the problem includes an understanding of the way it is discussed and the answer that is arrived at. So, one way of considering the distinctions would be to consider Marcel's account of the nature of the philosophical problem as a whole according to himself and according to systematic philosophers (for us here, René Descartes). This would involve us in a discussion that will be very complicated, and would require us to refer backwards and forwards. Another way is to break up our discussion. In considering the account of the philosophical problem, one thing we have to consider is the question or questions posed. (The distinction
between problem and question is one of convenience. In talking of the question, we want to emphasize the question in isolation from the two other elements in the account of the problem). Another factor we have to consider is the discussion of the question, and the method employed in the discussion. As we shall see, the nature of the question is not merely a matter of method; but both the question and the method may be influenced by the background in which the question arises. The third factor is the answer that is given to the question. In respect of each, the question, the method and the answer, we will consider the characteristics of the problem, namely whether concrete or abstract, personal or impersonal, existential or non-existential.

This kind of division of the philosophical problem is not altogether satisfactory - because each determines the other. However, the manner in which they are related is not always the same. For example, the relationship between the answer and the method is not the same in the case of the systematic and the existentialist thinkers. This kind of division will lead to repetition, but an attempt is made to keep it to a minimum.

(4) The fourth important factor to be stressed here
is that, given this approach, it is not necessary for us to examine whether, on a particular point or a particular problem, Marcel or Descartes is right. For example, it is possible to argue that Descartes is not successful in proving the existence either of the self or of other things, or that his argument is circular. Or, it is possible to argue that what Marcel calls 'hoping against hope' is not really so, but perhaps, sentimentalism, if not neurosis. But this discussion of the rightness or wrongness will not alter the nature of the problem they are discussing. And what is of interest to us here is the account of its nature. Hence, this interest can be pursued without going into the rightness or wrongness of their philosophy of a particular issue, or on several.

(5) It is necessary also to point out that a thorough account of the context of the philosophy of Marcel and Descartes requires considerable breadth and depth of historical and philosophical scholarship. In this area I can only hope that the shortcomings of the account do not affect the account of the general historical and philosophical trends.

(6) There is a very obvious limitation which, too,
must be noted. Marcel's works, philosophical and literary, were written in French. My ignorance of French has been a handicap; and I have had to rely on the available translations. There can be no doubt that a knowledge of French, and of the French literature about Marcel, would have greatly benefited me. Fortunately, the most important of his philosophical works have been translated into English, such as, "Mystery of Being": Vols. I and II, "Metaphysical Journal", "Being and Having", "Philosophy of Existence", "Homo Viator", "Creative Fidelity". Of these works, I have depended mainly on the following: "Mystery of Being": Vols. I and II, and "Metaphysical Journal". Indeed, scholars are unanimous in their contention that almost all of his original philosophical ideas are there in these two works, at least in its germinal form. Whereas, the other works are mainly illustrations of the ideas which are found already in these two books.*

* Indeed, Marcel disagrees with this point when he writes as follows: "Jean Hyppolite, ...., is of the opinion that all that I have written since is, in fact, contained in the Journal ("Metaphysical Journal"). I myself am unable to endorse his opinion as it stands". (Gabriel Marcel, "Metaphysical Journal", p. vii.) (Brackets ours).
However, some of his works, to my knowledge, have not yet been translated, such as "Présence et l'Immortalité", "L'homme Problematique", "Fragments Philosophiques", "Recherches de la Famille", etc. Further, there are a good number of plays written by Marcel in French of which only one, "A Man of God", has been translated into English. The rest of his plays, numbering nearly 26, are, as far as I know, not yet known to the English-speaking people. This is not all. There is considerable literature in French about Marcel by others. All these would have helped me to understand Marcel better. However, I hope that this has not affected the main trend of the arguments and the conclusions we have put forward in this thesis.

But, it might be asked, if the enquiry is limited in this way, what is the use of this enquiry? Is it not pointless? In reply to this, the following points may be made:

(A) One purpose is to consider the nature of the distinction between the two approaches. Can the distinction be drawn in the manner in which Marcel does it? Can we do so? What is the meaning of the terms used to make the distinction?
(B) In the light of our understanding of the distinction, what is the relationship between the two approaches? Are the two approaches opposed to each other, or are they different but related?

(C) It might be pointed out that the clarification of the above two points has a very important bearing on some very important issues.

(a) It will help our understanding of the relationship between contemporary linguistic analysis and the existentialist approach to philosophy; because the relationship between linguistic analysis and systematic philosophy has been considered both extensively and intensively.

(b) It will help our understanding of the relationship between different elements present in Indian philosophy.

(i) The systematic element, e.g., in the Samkhya system of thought.

(ii) The element of predicament and the goal, e.g., the predicament is the threefold misery in the Samkhya and the goal is the discrimination between Purusha and Prakriti.
(iii) The way out of the predicament, according to Samkhya, is the building up of particular kinds of aggregates of dispositions.

I am aware that this work would have been much more valuable if these issues had been considered. There is, perhaps, much to seek even in what I have already written in this thesis. Besides, it requires both breadth and depth in the knowledge of linguistic analysis and also of Indian philosophy. In the absence of these, I must content myself with what I have been able to do.

(D) Let me clarify what I mean by the need for greater clarity and precision in what I have already said in the thesis. The distinctions between concrete-abstract, personal-impersonal, existential-non-existential, practical-theoretical need to be drawn more thoroughly and carefully. However, the extent to which they have been drawn is adequate to enable us to see two varieties of concrete-abstract, personal-impersonal, existential-non-existent, and practical-theoretical relationships.

(E) In the light of the foregoing remarks, the thesis may be described as a philosophical history of some philosophical ideas; a problem in metaphilosophy. Only in that sense is it a thesis about a philosophical problem.
The approach outlined above has been worked out in the following manner in the thesis.

(1) The first chapter is the introductory chapter. The details of the procedure, the scope and the limits of our whole discussion are presented here.

(2) In the second chapter, "The Philosophical Question", we have discussed the nature of the question raised by Marcel and Descartes. Our discussion here can be divided mainly into three parts. In the first part we just expound Marcel's account of the nature of his question, 'Who am I?', with a specific reference to both the historico-philosophical context and the context of the contemporary social life. Then we bring out Marcel's characterisation of his question as concrete, personal and existential.

In the second part of this chapter, we try to bring out Marcel's account of the nature of the question of Descartes' philosophy, with a particular reference to the philosophical as well as the scientific context. Then we make an attempt to give an account of Marcel's characterisation of Descartes' question as abstract, impersonal and non-existential.

The third part of this chapter is set apart for our critical assessment as well as appreciation of Marcel's
characterisation of his and Descartes' questions. Since Marcel's criticism of the systematic philosophies and the various claims in favour of his own philosophy is developed to a considerable extent on the basis of a comparison and contrast between the concrete and abstract, personal and impersonal, existential and non-existential characteristics of philosophy, our critical assessment as well as appreciation of Marcel's claims as well as criticisms, as a whole, will also be confined within these aspects. Therefore, the third part of this chapter will mainly comprise the answer to the following question, namely, "Is it possible to describe the differences between the two questions by labelling one as concrete, personal and existential and the other as abstract, impersonal and non-existential? If it is not possible, what is the real difference between them? And, dissatisfied with Marcel's characterisation and his way of distinguishing his question from that of Descartes, we try to formulate the distinction between their questions in our own terms. And this we could do by way of linking their questions with their own specific contexts as well as with the purpose of raising such questions.

(3) Our discussion in the third chapter, "The Philosophical Method", are developed more or less on the same pattern
and procedure that we adopted in the third chapter. The only difference lies in the fact that, before giving Marcel's account of his and Descartes' methods, we give an account of their respective thought. What we attempt to do in the discussion of their thought is to present how actually both philosophers tackle their respective questions. It is on the basis of this account of their thoughts that we make an endeavour to bring out the various details and the different characteristics of their respective methods.

In the next chapter, "The Philosophical Solution", we follow a pattern and procedure different from that of the second and third chapters. Here, after considering the conception of Marcel's and Descartes' solutions, we will briefly mention their characteristics as Marcel formulates them, namely, practical vs theoretical, concrete vs abstract, personal vs impersonal, existential vs non-existent. We do not go into the question whether Marcel is right in the characterisation of his and Descartes' answer, since that is explicitly referred to in the last two chapters. Instead, we bring home certain other important points which will bring out the similarities and the differences between them, such as the narrow and the wider sense of Marcel's and Descartes' answers and
their inter-relationship, the relationship between the thought and the answer of Marcel and Descartes, and so on.

(5) In the fifth and last chapter, we bring together the results of the discussion in the foregoing chapters—focussing attention on both what we have been able to do and what we have not wanted to do.