

# “The Philosophical Attitude and the Gift of Existence”

By William Cooney

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*He who has a why can bear with almost any how.*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

*The only reality [for] an existing individual . . . is the fact that he exists; this reality constitutes his absolute interest.*  
—Søren Kierkegaard

Let us begin our quest with the consideration of a seemingly all too obvious but incredible truth—you and I exist. Let me repeat with emphasis, *you and I exist!* I think it will do us well to consider this truth for a moment. We spend the vast majority of our lives never contemplating this fact. We seem caught up in a world which has deprived us from considering it. Or, what is worse, *we seem constrained to take our existence for granted!*

I cannot think of anything more tragic and unfortunate than that. Our existence is wondrous and miraculous. We are the products of incredible and awesome forces. The various elements in the cosmos have, at some time in the vastly distant past, congealed into stars and from those great nuclear reactors has come life itself. This is no less remarkable whether it is attributable to the hand of God, or of Nature (or perhaps both, as Baruch Spinoza, 1632-1677, would have us believe, since for him God and Nature are one and the same—*Deus sive Natura*). Whether life has come from Divine Intelligence or from fortuitous circumstance does not seem to change the basic truth, i.e., *our existence is miraculous*. It seems that the consideration of our existence demands respect, reverence and thankfulness. What we are called to do, I believe, is to *think* about our existence. And, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) points out in his *What is Called Thinking?*, there may be a connection between *thinking* and *thanksgiving*:

*The Old English then can, to think, and thancian, to thank, are closely related; the Old English noun for thought is thanc or thonc—a thought, a grateful thought, and the expression of such a thought . . . (WCT, 139)*

This connection seems to find its way into colloquial language. In prayer, for example, we often say we are “giving thanks.” To give thanks in this way is to deeply think (or meditate) about those aspects of our lives which are most precious to us and which give rise (or ought) to thankfulness.

In philosophical terms this attitude of respect, reverence, and thankfulness, is summed up in *wonder*. As Socrates (469-369 B.C.) said, “all philosophy begins in wonder.” And it is specifically *wonder* that is called for rather than simple curiosity. Gabriel Marcel

(1889-1973) helps us to see the difference between these two attitudes. Curiosity, he points out, is appropriate from the point of view of a *spectator* who is detached and uninvolved. But we human beings are not merely detached observers of life. We are *involved* in life. We are *within* existence and not at some vantage point outside it. We are *participants* in Being; we are not *homo spectans* but *homo particeps*.

Often, we do not encounter the wonder of our own existence until life seems meaningless to us. This happens when life becomes a mere daily routine. Albert Camus (1913-1960) explains this in his famous *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

*It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm--this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.*  
(MS, 10)

"Weariness tinged with amazement"—this is the key. The "amazement" refers to the wonder of it all. The "weariness" refers to a level of uncomfortability. Marcel refers to this as a "metaphysical uneasiness," i.e., a feeling of personal crisis over the meaning of it all.

We have all experienced this question concerning the meaninglessness of our lives. It is important that we *feel* it. At the very least, it forces us to confront the fact of our existence. It wakes us up. More than 2500 years have passed since the Greek Presocratic thinker Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.) made his famous distinction between those who are "awake" and those who are "asleep." And at roughly the same time, in India, the Buddha was calling for a level of "wakefulness." It seems that many of us are still asleep to the fact of our own existence. We too often live, it seems, in an artificial world. This is the world of Camus' streetcar, followed by four hours in the office, etc. In calling this world artificial, I do not mean to belittle or subtract from the importance of working life. Such a world can become artificial, however, when it forces us to so direct our lives towards the bottom line and the almighty dollar, that we have no time or energy left to *appreciate* our lives. In such a world, and with such an existence (in so far as it can be called an existence), we become prey to the kind of life that Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) warned us of in his great *Walden*:

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*  
(SWT, 304)

Should this not be our greatest fear—that we have not ever really lived? So many of us merely occupy a space and time, a frame of existence in a very unreal world. But when we are shaken up by the question of the meaning of it all, we enter into the *real* world of wonder. And when we focus on the meaning of our lives, our true *human journey* begins. Marcel, along with the great Franciscan theologian and saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), argued that we are all *homo viatores*—wayfarers and travelers. The human being is an itinerant being. But the journey cannot begin if we are still asleep. We need to wake up! *You and I exist!*

And what do we encounter at the beginning of our journey? Nothing short of life itself. Life, that great gift and responsibility—for “to whom [this] is given, much is required.” Everything, it seems, depends on the beginning. And life is rich enough to provide a marvelous beginning. But what of the responsibility? Wherein does it lie?

When we cease to take our lives for granted, we are at the beginning stages of what I wish to call *the philosophical attitude*. This attitude begins when we *accept* our existence as a gift. Acceptance is no passive relation. It requires what Marcel calls an “active participation” on our part. The acceptance is necessary, because a gift is not a gift unless it is received. In a very important sense, the reception *creates* the gift. To receive the gift, I must open myself up to the gift. That is to say, *reception is also a giving*. You and I exist. Now we must actively open ourselves up to the reception of the gift. *We must, that is, become gifts ourselves*. And we must be gifts to each other, for it is not simply the case that *you exist and I exist*, but *we exist together*. Marcel helps us all to see that we are not solitary creatures. The ancient Greeks understood this. We are involved in each other’s existence. The human being is a social being. As the great poet John Donne (1572-1631) has said,

*No man is an island, entire of itself, Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*  
(DEO, Med. XVII)

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