

THE PLACE OF GOD IN GABRIEL MARCEL'S EXISTENTIALIST THOUGHT

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Abstract

The sustainability of intersubjective relations between conscious, independent subjects in the physical world is mainly predicated on reciprocation. However, intersubjective engagers are not usually consistent in maintaining mutual and reciprocal relations between them. This failure largely accounts for breakup of conjugal and other forms of interpersonal relationships. Against this background, this paper proposes that Marcel's intersubjectivity is an effective approach to maintaining and achieving authentic interpersonal relations. It employs the method of analysis to explore and examine Marcel's intersubjectivity. Findings show that Marcel's intersubjectivity is grounded in God, the Absolute *Thou* whose presence can be experienced in the realm of concrete human experience through acts of love, fidelity, hope, and ultimately faith in Him. Given that God is the ground and guarantor of all *I-Thou* relations, the paper argues that human finite fidelity must be rooted in the Absolute fidelity (fidelity to God) in order to guarantee consistent and successful interpersonal relations. Fidelity grounded in the absolute fidelity requires that an intersubjective engager reciprocate God's unconditional and absolute faithfulness to her by remaining faithful to God which presupposes unconditional and unceasing love for, and faithfulness to, the other (her intersubjective partner). The paper concludes that strict adherence to the above principle of absolute fidelity guarantees stable and enduring intersubjectivity which will go a long way towards sustaining conjugal and other forms of interpersonal relations, and rebuilding broken ones.

Keywords: Intersubjectivity, love, fidelity, hope, faith, God

Introduction

Intersubjectivity is generally conceived of as involving a relation between separate conscious minds (subjects). The stability and sustainability of authentic intersubjectivity involving a relation between independent subjects in the experiential world is merely predicated largely on the reciprocation offered by intersubjective engagers which finds expression in mutual love, fidelity, trust, respect, understanding, openness, availability, communication,

and so forth. The manifestation of reciprocity (mutual beneficence) is expected to guarantee the maintenance and stability of intersubjective relations. Accordingly, an individual has the propensity to opt out of an intersubjective relation when her intersubjective partner fails to reciprocate her love, fidelity, and so forth. This mainly accounts for a breakdown of intersubjective relations between married couples, family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers and so forth in contemporary times. For instance, in Europe and America, divorces are mainly occasioned by infidelity and breakdown in (or lack of) communication between spouses.¹ Ewherido notes that Americans have a divorce rate of over 50 percent of married people.²

Clark and Brauner-Otto studies indicate that divorce is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, for in more than two-thirds of 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa under study 25% of first unions end in divorce within 20 years of the first union.³ In Nigeria, court records reveal that the rate of divorce is on the increase. For example, a report published in 2018 shows that a total of 3000 divorce cases were recorded in Badagry, Lagos, while a 2019 report by Umar Yakubu indicates that Kano State alone had over 1 million registered divorces.⁴ Annebrafa, an Abuja-based lawyer, discloses that there are 4,000 divorce applications filed before various courts in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) between January and February, 2020.⁵ Moreover, records at the FCT High Court indicate that over 2000 divorce cases were filed between 2019 and February 2020, while further findings show that the figure is higher at the Customary Courts, the Alkali and the Sharia Customary Courts within the FCT.⁶

¹ F. Ewherido. "Divorce is Incredibly Expensive," *Vanguard Nigeria*, (May 1, 2015). <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/05/divorce-is-incredibly-expensive/>

² F. Ewherido. "Divorce is Incredibly Expensive," <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/05/divorce-is-incredibly-expensive/>

³ S. Clark and S. Brauner-Otto. "Divorce in Sub-Saharan Africa: Are Unions Becoming More Stable?" *Population and Development Review*, 41/4, (2015), 592.

⁴ Blueprint. "4,000 Divorce Cases in 2 Months: Which Way Family Values?," (February 28, 2020). <https://www.blueprint.ng/4000-divorce-cases-in-2-months-which-way-family-values/>

⁵ Blueprint. "4,000 Divorce Cases in 2 Months," <https://www.blueprint.ng/4000-divorce-cases-in-2-months-which-way-family-values/>

⁶ O. Olafioye, G. Tsa, and F. Ezech. "Worries as Courts Get More Divorce Cases," *The SUN*, (March 8, 2020). <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/worries-as-courts-get-more-divorce-cases/>

The above cases of marital breakdown in Nigeria exclude thousands of unreported cases of separated and divorced married couples whose traditional marriages are not governed by modern law and thus their separation and divorces are undocumented. Infidelity, lack of love, care and attention, incompatibility and irreconcilable differences, communication gap, intolerance, infertility, financial predicament, anti-social behaviour, inter alia, are cited as causative factors in official marriage dissolutions.⁷ Against this background, this paper will posit that the internalisation and application of Marcel's intersubjective ideas in interpersonal relationships would go a long way towards maintaining conjugal and other forms of interpersonal relations and rebuilding broken ones.

To this end, this paper will first show that the major concern for scholastic philosophers is proving the existence of God in order to appreciate Marcel's significant departure from the traditional ways of affirming the reality of God which consequently brings about his inclusion of God in human intersubjectivity. Second, it will present Marcel's distinctions between problem and mystery, primary and secondary reflections, being and having, and levels of ontological participation to show that human existence is transcending towards God through intersubjectivity or participation in being. Third, it will demonstrate that God, the Absolute *Thou*, the Transcendent is the ground of all *I-You* relations in Marcel's intersubjectivity and argue that His presence can be experienced in concrete human experiences through acts of love, creative fidelity, hope and ultimately faith in Him. Finally, the paper will conclude that the implication of Marcel's intersubjectivity is that it is only by grounding human finite fidelity in God can genuine and enduring intersubjectivity be guaranteed and achieved.

Marcel's Scathing Remarks on Traditional Proofs of God's Existence

Marcel is critical of scholastic philosophers for presenting us with abstract, theoretical, logical and universal conceptualisation of God in their cosmological and ontological arguments for God's existence. He does not concern himself with traditional proofs of God's existence, for he is interested in the presence of God rather than the existence of God. He asserts that God

⁷ Vanguard. "The Rate of Divorce in Nigeria: Latest Statistics," (October 21, 2020).
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/10/the-rate-of-divorce-in-nigeria-latest-statistics/>

is infinitely above existence⁸ since existence, for him, is ascribable only to that which falls within the horizons of human experience.⁹ He thinks of existence as space-time realities. God does not exist in space-time, for him, and thus cannot be known as space-time entities – existing worldly objects – are known.

Marcel is oriented towards finding a possible means of safeguarding the reality of God which, for him, seems to be inevitably compromised from the moment one speaks of God's existence, for to conceive of God as an existing object is to place Him within the purview of the world, thus making the idea of God superfluous. In this sense, Marcel concurs with Kant's conception of existence as something limited to space-time relations. He expresses thus: "When we suppose we are positing (in existence or still only objectively) the absolute independence of God, we are really on the contrary only binding up God with immediate consciousness."¹⁰ He therefore insists that God is not engaged in space-time causal relationships. He follows Maimonides in maintaining that existence cannot be applied to God. His concern is what God is, and not that He exists, and thus his metaphysical inquiry is oriented towards being, not existence. To say that God exists, in Marcel's view, is to objectify Him – to make him an object of logical analysis and demonstration as if He were something out there for one to grasp and pin down. Marcel's view here seems to concur with that of John E. Smith who points out that to state that God exists would imply to treat God as a finite component of a system rather than as the ground and goal of all systems.¹¹

Marcel's Existentialist Thought

Intersubjectivity is the core of Marcel's concrete philosophy of existence. His intersubjectivity is a relationship with oneself, others (other existents) and primarily with the Absolute *Thou*, God. Traditional philosophers, especially, idealism and rationalism, have identified being with only one of its modes,

⁸ G. Marcel. *Philosophical Fragments*: 1909 – 1914. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1965), 80.

⁹ G. Marcel. *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 27.

¹⁰ G. Marcel. *Metaphysical Journal*, B. Wall (Trans.). (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1952), 31.

¹¹ J.J. Benefield. "The Place of God in the Thought of Gabriel Marcel," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, The University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand), 1976, 74.

that is, thinking – “what is real is rational and what is rational is real” – and claimed to have encapsulated the universe in a set of formulas – to have grasped the whole of reality – thus possessing absolute knowledge. Marcel, like other existentialists, frowns upon such reduction of reality to rationality and insists that an existing individual cannot be reduced to an object perceptible to human reasoning/rationality, or be reduced to an absolute status of an idea.¹²

To unravel the mystery of being, Marcel maintains, philosophy must reflect concrete human situations¹³, for a human person is ontologically a ‘being-with’, a being that is essentially related to the world and to others. The world is not a phenomenon distinct from the self, but rather the self is immersed in the world of concrete experience and thus should be understood as a participant (an actor) rather than a spectator. To be a human person, one must be in a situation, in the world participating in being.¹⁴ For Marcel, a human person is open to a higher level of transcendence and is oriented towards God, the Transcendent, for the fulfillment of her ontological exigency.¹⁵ His notion that an individual subject is oriented towards the Transcendent is demonstrated, as we shall see, through his distinction between problem and mystery, primary and secondary reflections as well as levels of ontological participation.

Problem and Mystery

In his book, *Being and Having*, Marcel draws a distinction between problem and mystery. A problem is an object of inquiry that is placed before one, and which one can apprehend exteriorly. As he puts it: “A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce.”¹⁶ In the problematic realm, we deal with exterior facts which are in certain disorder, and the problem is addressed when the order of the facts is established. Here, an approach to what is problematic is through

¹² E. J. Fitzgerald. “Gabriel Marcel” In F. Patka (Ed.). *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*. (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1962), 139.

¹³ G. Marcel. *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, E. Craufurd (Trans.). (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), 180.

¹⁴ F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 11. (London: Bloomsbury, 2003a), 169.

¹⁵ G. Marcel. *Man Against Mass Society*, G. S. Fraser (Trans.). (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 37.

¹⁶ G. Marcel. *Being and Having*, K. Farrer (Trans.). (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 117.

abstract and objective analysis. The realm of the problematic is the domain of natural sciences that are concerned with abstraction and objectivity in an attempt to achieve the knowledge of the problematic. The sense of participation in being is severed here since an individual subject is isolated from the immediacy of experience. She is not personally and wholly involved in what she is investigating, thus creating a dichotomy between the subject and the object.

The realm of the problem is consistent with the domain of 'having' where being is objectified in such a manner that it can easily be manipulated functionally. The problematic realm is also consonant with the spirit of abstraction – there is spirit of abstraction when a particular fact about, or a specific element of, a being is isolated from its concrete existential context with apparent indifference to this concrete existential context such that the entire worth of a being is reduced to a mere functional value. For Marcel, the question of God or God's reality is beyond the realm of the problem and so God's reality, for him, cannot be demonstrated through objective and logical proofs that are amenable to the problematic realm.¹⁷ He therefore rejects all traditional proofs of God's existence arrived at through objective and logical thoughts and analysis.

On the contrary, mystery is the realm where all objective data is not given. Here, a problem transcends "itself as a simple problem."¹⁸ The experiencing subject is personally and completely involved in an object of inquiry such that neither the subject nor the object can be reduced to a mere abstract and objective analysis. In the realm of the mystery, the subject-object dichotomy is transcended and dissolved. Mystery can therefore be thought of primarily "as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its significance and its initial validity."¹⁹ Intersubjective experiences of love, fidelity, hope, faith and so forth are in the realm of mystery where participation in being takes place.

It is worth stating that Marcel does not place the mystery of being in an inaccessible and unintelligible realm, for his mystery cannot be identified with the unknowable. Therefore, there is nothing mysterious about Marcel's

¹⁷ G. Marcel. *Being and Having*, p. 119.

¹⁸ G. Marcel. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, M. Harari (Trans.). (New York: The Citadel Press, 1961), 19.

¹⁹ G. Marcel. *Being and Having*, p. 117.

idea of mystery. The realm of mystery is just non-problematic (meta-problematic) realm where being cannot be fully disclosed and comprehended through abstraction, objectification and reductive analysis. Being, as a mystery, implies that its totality can only be unravelled and grasped through participation in being. The question about my being and of God's reality is a mystery.

Primary and Secondary Reflections

Marcel distinguishes between two kinds of reflection or ways of apprehending reality, namely primary and secondary reflections which correspond to his distinction between problem and mystery respectively. Primary reflection deals with abstract, objective and logical thought and analysis. It is purely analytic and reducing.²⁰ The realm of the *problematique* (problem) is amenable to primary reflection. At this level of thought, the object of reflection is subjected to abstraction and reductive analysis such that the subject with all its individuality and particularity is completely isolated from the object. This level of reflection is appropriate for the province of natural sciences where scientific problem-solving technique is rigorously applied. Intersubjective reality such as the experience of love, creative fidelity, and of my relation to my body is inaccessible on the plane of primary reflection, for such reality cannot be rationalised by abstract thought and reductive analysis.

By contrast, secondary reflection is a philosophic mode of reflection. It is essentially synthetic. It synthesises and recuperates the unity of experience dissolved by the primary reflection.²¹ The question of God's reality comes within the purview of secondary reflection since it is a mystery. Marcel is therefore critical of scholastic philosophers for reducing the question of God's existence to a problem through rational and logical proofs characteristic of primary reflection.²² God's existence cannot be demonstrated and established on the plane of primary reflection because an existing individual has to be personally and genuinely involved in various intersubjective experiences that can lead to an affirmation of God. The presence of God, the Absolute *Thou*,

²⁰ G. Marcel. "What Can One Expect of Philosophy?" *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 48/190 (1959), 162. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30103592>

²¹ G. Marcel. *The Mystery of Being I: Reflection and Mystery*, G. S. Fraser (Trans.). (Chicago: Illinois, Henry Regnery Company, 1950), 83.

²² G. Marcel. *Being and Having*, p. 119.

can be experienced and His reality can be affirmed through participation in being which comes under the purview of secondary reflection.

Participation in Being

Marcel believes that one *is* as long as one participates in being. Hence, he asserts that to be is to participate in being – *Esse est co-esse*.²³ This participation involves one's relation with the other in a non-objectified way. In ontological participation, one does not relate with the other in a detached and impersonal manner. Here, participation entails a co-presence rather than distanced relations.²⁴ Participation in being occurs in an ascending hierarchy of one's relation with the self (incarnation), with others (communion), and with God (transcendence).

For Marcel, the nature of human existence is incarnated.²⁵ A human person is ontologically an incarnate being, an embodied subject. Her body is an integral part of herself and so it cannot be conceived of in isolation from her being. She participates in being, that is, relates to the world (others) and God through her body. Incarnation lies at the root of all human experiences. It is the primordial basis of all experience and cognition.²⁶ Unlike Descartes' ego that is enclosed and isolated from the world, Marcel's ego is open and permeable, participating "in the inexhaustible fullness of being from which it enunciates."²⁷

Ontological communion is another mode of participation. An individual subject is a being that communes with others. One's communion with the other "involves interpenetration without a loss of Being."²⁸ Communion is realised through intersubjective acts of love, fidelity and hope.

To love is to be open and available to the other. One is said to love the other when one is in a selfless union with her and be committed to her well-being. Here, there is a mutual recognition of the other as a *thou* (another

²³ D. W. Rodick. "The Religious Dimension of Experience: Gabriel Marcel and American Philosophy," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Boston College, USA), 2009, 94.

²⁴ S. Kruks. "Marcel and Merleau-Ponty: Incarnation, Situation and the Problem of History." *Human Studies*, 10/2, (1987), 227.

²⁵ G. Marcel. *The Mystery of Being I*, 125.

²⁶ G. Marcel. *The Mystery of Being I*, 70.

²⁷ G. Marcel. *Being and Having*, 26.

²⁸ E. J. Fitzgerald. "Gabriel Marcel" In F. Patka (Ed.). *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*, 147.

subject). Love is a “pledge to remain faithful even when the immediate and experienced feeling for the other has disappeared.”²⁹ It is marked by presence – an affective and unconditional commitment to the other – which transcends physical presence since the presence of a beloved one can still be felt when she is not physically present as Marcel felt after the demise of his beloved mother. He maintains that through the act of love, a beloved person outlives death and transmutes into the realm of the eternal that is above this world of vicissitude.³⁰

Love is characterised by *disponibilité* (availability). To be *disponible* (available) is to offer oneself as a gift, to put one’s resources (such as material, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and moral resources) at the other’s disposal. In Marcel’s view, when one is available, open and committed to the other, one transcends one’s egoism.³¹ Marcel sharply contrasts *disponibilité* with *indisponibilité* (unavailability).³² One is *indisponible* (unavailable) when one is indisposed to open and commit oneself to the other. In other words, an *indisponible* person is unwilling to make her resources available to the other. She is self-absorbed; she is obsessed with her possessions. She treats the other as ‘it’ (an object) rather than as a *thou* (another subject like herself). Although Marcel acknowledges that reciprocal love and *disponibilité* are necessary in intersubjectivity, he holds that one must not receive reciprocation from the other in order to remain open and available to the other.

As an attitude, *disponibilité*, for him, has an affective element of spontaneity by nature which is not predicated on reciprocation. It does not insist on its rights or make any claim on the other. It is analogous to the situation of a “being who is awaiting a gift or favour from another being but only on the grounds of his liberality and he is the first to protest that the favour he is asking is a grace, that is to say the exact opposite of an obligation.”³³ The spread of love which manifests itself in *disponibilité* is based on the faith and hope in God, the Absolute *Thou*, who is love Himself and the foundation of

²⁹ E. J. Fitzgerald. “Gabriel Marcel” In F. Patka (Ed.). *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*, 146.

³⁰ G. Marcel. *Metaphysical Journal*, 63.

³¹ F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9. (London: Bloomsbury, 2003b), 335.

³² G. Marcel *The Mystery of Being I*, 203.

³³ G. Marcel. *Homo Viator*, 55.

agape. One's soul remains open and available to God, the Absolute Presence, when one is available and committed to the other in a relationship of love.

Fidelity is a response in commitment to an appeal of the other to be *disponible*. It is a gift of oneself to the other who is at once present to one and accepted by one as a *thou*.³⁴ Marcel's concern is fidelity to an underlying unity that grounds one's being rather than fidelity to a certain future state which one desires. True fidelity, for him, is intersubjective and creative since "it possesses the mysterious power of renewing both donor and recipient, no matter how unworthy the latter may have been at first: it gives him the chance to open himself in communion to that spirit which animates the consecrated soul."³⁵ Creative fidelity is that faith (or trust) and hope we have for beloved ones which does not only manifest itself when our beloved ones are physically present, but also effective in their absence. It is primarily "the active perpetuation of presence."³⁶ Creative fidelity finds expression in one's *disponibilité* and openness to the other. It consists in "actively maintaining oneself in a state of openness and permeability, in willing oneself to remain open to the other and open to the influx of the presence of the other."³⁷ It is initiated by one's act of irrevocable commitment to be with, and for, the other in loving care and self-giving. Marcel writes thus:

The fact is that when I commit myself, I grant in principle that the commitment will not again be put into question. And it is clear that this active volition not to question something again, intervenes as an essential element in the determination of what in fact will be the case ... it bids me to invent a certain *modus vivendi* ... it is a rudimentary form of creative fidelity.³⁸

However, there is no guarantee that faithful relationship between intersubjective engagers would remain consistent and stable. Accordingly, for

³⁴ A. Nichols. "Gabriel Marcel, Philosopher of Mystery: A Centenary Appraisal." *New Blackfriars*, 70/828, (1989), 295.

³⁵ J. J. Benefield. "The Place of God in the Thought of Gabriel Marcel," 45.

³⁶ F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 334.

³⁷ B. Treanor and B. Sweetman. "Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel" In E. N. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (updated 9 May 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcel/>

³⁸ G. Marcel. *The Creative Fidelity*, R. Rosthal (Trans.). (New York: The Noon Day, 1964), 162.

Marcel, if human fidelity is to be absolute and irrevocable, it must be rooted in the unconditional and absolute fidelity, that is, fidelity to the Absolute *Thou*.³⁹ Absolute fidelity is fidelity to God, and it is reciprocal in that if Mr. A is faithfully committed to Mr. B, Mr. B should reciprocate by being faithfully committed to Mr. A. But it can also be unilateral in that in the event that Mr. B becomes unfaithful to Mr. A, Mr. A can remain faithful to Mr. B, just as God has ever remained faithful to him even when he becomes unfaithful to God.⁴⁰ Absolute fidelity requires humble and active confidence in God as well as patience since “its dependence on God is such that it makes no demands for instant recognition of its faithful services.”⁴¹

Hope is the act of transcendence which supplies one with the strength to overcome temptation to despair and to continue to create oneself in openness and availability to the other.⁴² Hope does not envisage outcome; it transcends the bounds of possibility set by a calculation to penetrate deep into the metaphysical. Marcel’s idea of hope is different from the traditional conception of Christian hope that is oriented towards eschatology and hope in salvation. Hope, manifests itself in the life of communion and sharing which can be realised in this world. It is cultivated by participating in being. It requires a relationship of communion and love which guarantees creative fidelity. For Marcel, “agape lies at the root of hope.”⁴³

Genuine hope stems from humility, not from pride.⁴⁴ To hope truly is to be open, available, selfless, patient, courageous, positive and persevere in the face of present sufferings, trials and other predicaments, accepting and bearing them as integral parts of human existential conditions, and affirming one’s being through participation in being. It is worthy of note that this acceptance of limiting situations of life does not imply being passive or inert – a sort of moral quietism that results in fatalism. It rather suggests having positive attitude to life and facing life squarely. Hope, like fidelity, is grounded in the Absolute *Thou*. It is intimately connected with one’s being that is

³⁹ J. J. Benefield. “The Place of God in the Thought of Gabriel Marcel,” 143.

⁴⁰ J. J. Benefield. “The Place of God in the Thought of Gabriel Marcel,” 143.

⁴¹ A. Nichols. “Gabriel Marcel, Philosopher of Mystery,” 295.

⁴² B. Treanor. “Constellations: Gabriel Marcel’s Philosophy of Relative Otherness.” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 80/3, (2006), 381.

⁴³ G. Marcel. *Presence and Immortality*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1967), 183.

⁴⁴ G. Marcel. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 32.

oriented towards transcendence. To hope is to have absolute confidence in the Absolute *Thou*, the ground of one's being as a response to the inner appeal for transcendence.

Marcel does not employ the term 'transcendence' to mean transcending the bounds of human experience. God is the Transcendent that can be experienced and recognised in the realm of human experience. However, the possibility of experiencing the Transcendent does not imply that it can be pinned down and thus reduced to the status of an object which can be thought of in abstractions.⁴⁵ To attain the level of transcendence is to be in union with God, the Absolute *Thou*, the ground and guarantor of all authentic intersubjective relations. God is an ontological mystery and the concrete approach to the mystery of being cannot be sought on a scale of logical thought. God, as a mystery, cannot be grasped through abstraction, objective and logical analysis characteristic of primary reflection and so to argue for the existence of God on the plane of logical, objective and demonstrable proofs is, for Marcel, to reduce God to an abstract and objective concept, a transcendental object of thought that can be grasped with analytic principles.⁴⁶

But God, in Marcel's view, is encountered rather than proved. He is an Absolute Presence that can be experienced and recognised on the plane of ontological communion through love, fidelity and hope which are sustained by, and point to, Him.⁴⁷ The reality of the Transcendent is affirmed on the basis of faith which is a trust or belief in God. For Marcel, transcendence is basically an ontological necessity: every human person has ontological exigency – an inner need or urge for transcendence, for plenitude.⁴⁸ This human ontological exigency leads to one's awareness and recognition of God as the Absolute Recourse who alone can fulfil that exigency, for He is plenitude Himself.

⁴⁵ G. Marcel. *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, S. Jolin and P. McCormick (Trans.). (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press), 1973, 193.

⁴⁶ E. J. Fitzgerald. "Gabriel Marcel" In F. Patka (Ed.). *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*, 149.

⁴⁷ F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 335.

⁴⁸ G. Marcel. *The Mystery of Being II: Faith and Reality*, G.S. Fraser (Trans.). (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2001), 37.

Philosophical Evaluation

Marcel's existentialist thought may be criticised on the grounds that beneficence enunciated in his intersubjectivity is unrestrained. In a bid to ensure that one remains *disponible* to the other, he insists that reciprocation is not a precondition for one's availability to the other, provided that intersubjectivity is grounded in the faith and hope in Absolute *Thou*, albeit he acknowledges that reciprocal availability is necessary in intersubjective relations. For Marcel, one must not receive reciprocation from the other in order to remain open and available to her. But it is by no means certain that intersubjective relations that are devoid of reciprocation will be stable, enduring and successful. Humans are rational and moral beings and thus their decisions and actions are often informed by a strong sense of justice and morality.

One is unlikely to remain absolutely open and available to the other when one's beneficence continues to be met with a rebuff and complete unavailability from the other. Besides, given that one's availability and openness to the other in particular and intersubjective relations in general are premised on the faith and hope in the Absolute *Thou*, it remains to be seen whether an individual, like an atheist or an agnostic, who has different ideological orientations, would subscribe to the faith and hope in God as the basis of her relation with the other so that any rebuff from the other would not undermine her intersubjective engagement. In any case, it seems that all intersubjective engagers must be *disponible* and open to one another in order to realise full ontological communion. The other has to be present to one in some way. She must be available and open within one's horizons, for one to recognise her, listen and attend to her.

Besides, Marcel is critical of traditional (reasoned) proofs of God's existence on the grounds that the reality of God cannot be justified according to the data of rational proofs. In Marcel's thinking, traditional arguments for God's existence reduce God to an abstract concept, an object of thought that can be grasped by abstraction and objective analysis characteristic of primary reflection. However, rather than seen as an attempt to objectify God and undermine the mystery of His Being, logical traditional proofs of God's existence are meant to provide some justification for holding a belief in the reality of God. They should be viewed as a demonstration of reason in faith aimed at making the belief in God plausible, convincing, and strong. Such

proofs are efforts at comprehending and rationally demonstrating the revealed truth of God's reality as it is possible to, or accessible by, the human mind. In this regard, St. Anselm contends that the application of reasoning to dogmas of mystery is not intended to strip dogmas of mystery, but rather to penetrate and develop them and discern implications as far as it is possible to the human mind.⁴⁹ An attempt to understand one's belief in God's reality does not amount to negation of the mystery of God or stripping Him of His meta-problematic nature.

Nevertheless, credit must be given to Marcel for restoring hope to our intersubjective relations dismissed by Sartre's radical existentialism. Unlike Sartre that views being as nothingness and thus engenders despair, Marcel conceives of being as a mystery and thus engenders hope. In his philosophy of existence, Sartre's suicide, denial (betrayal) and despair are supplanted with love, faith and hope respectively. He demonstrates that we can have genuine and successful intersubjective relationships that promote human well-being on the plane of ontological communion through love, fidelity and hope, and ultimately faith in the Absolute *Thou*, thus rubbishing Sartre's claim that all intersubjective relations are marked by conflict and thus authentic and successful intersubjectivity is not possible.

Moreover, by grounding human finite fidelity and hope in God, Marcel's intersubjectivity can be instrumental in maintaining conjugal relationships and other forms of intersubjective relations. Fidelity to, and hope in, the Absolute *Thou* requires that one remains faithful and committed to one's intersubjective partner in the face of trials and tribulations, hardships, afflictions, persecutions, anguish and other limiting situations of life, and face the vicissitudes of intersubjective life squarely. Life is still meaningful in the face of limiting situations, for our being is grounded in God who never fail or betray His people's trust. We should be willing and ready to make sacrifices and bear one another's burden with humility, courage and patience in our intersubjective engagements. Life is not a bed of roses. It involves struggle. We need to develop a yes-attitude – a positive attitude to life. We should not succumb to despair or adopt a fatalistic approach to life, and give up the struggle when predicament of any sort sets in. We can sustain our finite

⁴⁹ F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2. (London: Bloomsbury, 2003c), 156.

fidelity and overcome the temptation to despair through fidelity and hope in the Absolute *Thou* in whom we live, move and have our being, and who alone can satisfy our ontological exigency.

Conclusion

Intersubjectivity is the core of Marcel's existentialist thought. To engage in intersubjective relations is to participate in being. This participation occurs at three interconnected levels, namely, incarnation (through body/sensation), communion (through love, fidelity and hope) and transcendence (through ontological exigency). God occupies a place in Marcel's intersubjectivity as the Absolute *Thou* (the Transcendent), the ground and guarantor of all genuine intersubjective relations. By grounding all *I-Thou* relations in the Absolute *Thou*, Marcel posits that human existence is transcending towards God. The major import of Marcel's philosophy of existence lies in the fact that he incorporates God, the Transcendent in our intersubjective relations and demonstrates that the Transcendent can be experienced and recognised in our experiential world. In ontological communion, through acts of love, creative fidelity, hope, and faith in God, the reality of the Transcendent manifests itself in the realm of concrete human experiences. In this way, Marcel establishes an intimate connection between incarnation and transcendence, and bridges the chasm between them.

The implication of this is that intersubjective engagers, especially those in conjugal relations, can experience the living presence of God and affirm His reality in their intersubjective relations. It demands that they ground their finite love and fidelity in the Absolute Recourse, the Absolute *Thou*. Accordingly, for human finite fidelity to be consistent, stable and enduring, it must be rooted in the absolute fidelity – fidelity to the Absolute *Thou*. Absolute fidelity demands reciprocation: an intersubjective engager is required to reciprocate unfailing and absolute love and faithfulness of God to her by remaining faithful to God. By implication, she must continue to love and be faithful to her intersubjective partner. Given that reciprocation is what is required of both *I* and *Thou*, genuine and sustained intersubjective relations are achievable when this principle of absolute fidelity is strictly adhered to. The internalisation and application of Marcel's intersubjectivity in interpersonal relationships will go a long way towards maintaining conjugal and other forms of interpersonal relations, and rebuilding broken ones.

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