

GABRIEL MARCEL'S INTER-SUBJECTIVITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHICAL MODEL TO UNDERSTAND THE SELF AND THE WORLD

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Abstract:

Our world today is witnessing puzzles relating to religious tensions, economic hardship and political instability and humanity seems to be overburdened with these troubles as a result of which love and trust seems to have been misplaced and has been shockingly overthrown by animosity, mistrust, hatred and individualism. There can be no significant growth in this atmosphere of disorder and instability. It is therefore against this background that this paper seeks to make an exploration of Gabriel Marcel's concept of inter-subjectivity as the basis for understanding human existence, its complexity in relation to the world in order to achieve meaningful development, social order and peace for humanity. This paper explores Marcel's philosophy by acknowledging the complexity of human relationships, recognizing also that this complexity is often characterized by ambiguity, vulnerability, and unpredictability and by embracing this complexity, individuals can develop a more nuanced understanding of their interactions with others and cultivate empathy and compassion, thereby allowing individuals to embrace their authentic selves and to be open and vulnerable in their relationships. The paper concludes that, Marcel's philosophy can provide a code for meaningful living and peaceful coexistence by emphasizing the importance of understanding and empathy. The key to this is the concept of understanding, the importance of togetherness which refers to the ability to understand another person's perspective and experience from their own point of view.

Keywords: Inter-subjectivity, Engagement, Participation, Relationality, Humanism

Introduction:

The world today is perturbed by puzzles of instability and violence: religious, economic, and political. Humanity is overstrained with all kinds of troubles such that fraternal love seems to have misplaced and has been shockingly overthrown by animosity, hatred and individualism. However, human life and activities is complex in a way that no one can exist independently. There can be no significant growth in this atmosphere of disorder and instability. It is therefore against this background that this paper seeks to make an exploration of Gabriel Marcel's concept of inter-subjectivity as the basis for understanding the self and the world in order to achieve meaningful development, social order and peace for humanity. Primarily, different people are unable to free themselves from egoism and selfish pride, which leads to many social problems, wherefore it is the concern of this paper that the many evils which obstruct peace and order be purged out of our contemporary societies.

It is therefore these irksome tendencies that have stimulated our interest in the study of Marcel's theory of inter-subjectivity which we hope will give men and women the possibility of meeting together and living together to develop our societies for peace and harmony despite the different socio-cultural, ethnic, religious, political as well as economic backgrounds. The

earlier we acknowledge Marcel's inter-subjectivity as an avenue that cluster humanity in a one big body to realize a unified purpose which is humanness, the better the conflicts associated with humanity is resolved. This implies that it takes two to form the process of one, how then can that one be separated from the two that are responsible for its existence? In essence, without others, there is no self (Obi 70). Marcel's proposition is necessary for purposeful living both at the individual and family unity-level all the way to the larger community at large.

Background to Marcel's Thought

Marcel was a French philosopher and one of the notable intellectuals who associated with the phenomenological and existentialist crusade of the 20th century. Although he became a member of the Catholic Church in 1927, Marcel nevertheless grew in his curiosity for and development of existentialism and he became widely cherished. But the apologetic spirit of the early Christian was not in him as he differed significantly from the typical apologetic tradition. His main concern was his emphasis on the inner individual experience, which he thought places man in direct experience with God. Marcel was not a "dogmatic pacifist" like the apologetics but his experiences during the World War I (though as a non-combatant) changed his perception about life ultimately. The experience for him became an experience of indignation, "a horror without equal" and contributed to his life-long attraction and fascination with death (*Autobiographical Essay* 17). It was during the war that several of the important philosophical themes in Marcel's later work would take root and indeed, during the war, Marcel began writing in a journal that served as a template for his first book, *Metaphysical Journal* (1927).

After the war, Marcel taught at basic schools in Paris. In the early years of Marcel and his wife Jacqueline Boegner, He was busy as a playwright, philosopher, and literary critic and He and his wife travelled round Europe developing friendships with some important thinkers of the time. He gave lectures throughout Europe as a result of these acquaintances and interactions; he became famous and was considered as an inquisitive mind and a type of renaissance figure, excelling in music, drama, philosophy, theology, and politics. During his later years, he emerged as a vocal political thinker, and played a critical role in organizing and championing the International Moral Re-Armament Movement of the 1960s, contributing to reasons for which he was bestowed the Peace Prize of the Brsenverein des Buchhandels in 1964. All through his life, Marcel sought out, and was sought out by, several prominent thinkers of his time, including Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Levinas, Gustave Thibon, and Charles Du Bois. However, and in spite of the many that he positively influenced, Marcel became known for his very public disagreements with Jean-Paul Sartre.

In his entire sojourn, Marcel however observed that Western individualism stands as a fundamental pillar of their cultural, philosophical and societal tenet that shaped them for centuries. Rooted in the Enlightenment era, this concept places a profound emphasis on the autonomy, rights and unique identity of the individual. In contrast to collectivist ideologies prevalent in many other cultures, Western individualism champions personal freedom, self-expression and the pursuit of individual goals and aspirations. The origins of Western Individualism of course can be found in the philosophies of thinkers like John Locke, Jean-

Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, who laid the intellectual groundwork for a society that values individual rights and liberties. Schutz is of the opinion that:

This cultural paradigm has significantly influenced political systems, economic structures, and social attitudes across the Western hemisphere, fostering a deep-seated belief in the importance of personal agency and the protection of individual rights. Over time, Western Individualism has manifested in various forms, shaping the development of democratic governance, capitalism, and the recognition of human rights (p.121).

For Marcel therefore, this has played a fundamental role in the creation of frameworks (legal as well as social frameworks) that safeguard individual liberties and has fuelled movements advocating for social justice, equality, and the recognition of diverse identities. However, Marcel is of the view that, Western individualism is not without its complexities and criticisms. Working for the Red Cross during World War 1, Marcel gathered experience which shaped his view of human relationships and confirmed a (Catholic) religious conviction. Marcel therefore, sought for a philosophical position, which would be directly applicable to the deepest anxiety and concerns of human life. These include love, loyalty, hope, faith, death, communication and community. He thus, needed a philosophical perspective which would do justice to the mystery of human experience, for this reason, Marcel was more inclined to philosophical flexibility that would offer description rather than abstraction. It is against this background that Marcel's philosophical works appear almost poetic.

In his distinctive manner of writing, Marcel, like several other existentialists, renounced any 'system-based philosophy', and that was why his early writings were reflective diaries, while his later works were basically organized in themes that were announced in those diaries. In his book, *The Mystery of Being, Reflection & Mystery, Volume One*, Marcel inquired out the failure to recollect and imagine coupled with blind trust to leaders with a radical incapacity to draw conclusion from the sort of things that have been happening in the past. According to Marcel:

A philosophy worthy of the name ought to attach itself to a given concrete situation in order to grasp what that situation implies; and I think it should not fail to acknowledge that almost inconceivable multiplicity of combination of events that may arise from the factors as lay bare by its analysis (p.37).

Marcel describes his philosophy as a concrete one and as a true empiricism distinguished by a refusal to follow most empiricists in their myopic focus on perceptual experience.

Marcel's Concept of Inter-Subjectivity

One prominent feature of Marcel's work is that his writings illustrate the inherent significance in everyday human situations. This immediately appeals to the life experiences of everyone

whether in drama, prose, music, the metaphysical or spiritual realm, which Marcel describes as “real people” who live, work, suffer, love, celebrate and die. Thus, spirit, as we understand it, comes alive only in human persons. This is what he calls *Inbetweenness*. Marcel refers to this as the mystery of inter-subjectivity where spirit manifests in the lives of the human family (Marcel, 112). He sees this as a most wonderful and creative mystery. This may well be one of Marcel’s notable and enduring gifts to humanity. Inter-subjectivity is the shared experience of presence between two *selves*. This is one of the most important parts of being to Marcel because it is the only way that we can come to understand God, who is the “ultimate other” (114).

In Marcel’s words, “There is a “we” that emerges that was not there before this inter-subjective encounter” (116). Marcel relates this to the way a team transforms from various individuals to one cohesive unit working toward the same goal. This team takes on a meaning that is more than the sum of its parts” (162). Another part of inter-subjectivity is the *I-thou* relationship. According to Michael Smith within inter-subjectivity is “the intimate openness of one individual to another, of an ‘I’ to a ‘thou’”. It transcends the opposition between self and other by placing two persons in genuine intimacy” (Smith, 74). One question within “inter-subjectivity” and “presence” (another key concept in Marcel) is whether this experience is one that lasts after death. Marcel says that because inter-subjectivity involves transcendence, it is able to remain after death. Marcel says if we interrogate our experience without prejudice, it becomes reasonable to accept that co-presence (also known as inter-subjectivity) can remain after death (Marcel, 164). As such, the inter-subjective experience goes beyond the physical, so that when a person leaves this earth, they can still be present to us. The relationship is then, not just between two subjects, but within them.

In *The Mystery of Being* Marcel makes an essential distinction, a *le motif* that recurs throughout his work, distinguishing between the relationship of things and people he says, “Relationships between things are external, relationships between people are internal” (78). *Inbetweenness*, inter-subjectivity, is lived internally. It is also given manifestation by human action and thereby carried into actual existence. Through human action, the worth of life and conditions of the world can be changed. Through human effort, the initiating spirit becomes embodied in action. Actions arising from and imbued with the transformative power of the spirit most fully and poignantly shapes and given form to the direction and unfolding of our shared human reality (76). Thus, Marcel illustrates the spiritual dimension of inter-human relating, the touching and intertwining of spirit, by choosing to describe, in depth, the father-son relationship. Universally, the qualities of spiritual intimacy are most frequently found in relationships shared within the immediate family. This is where one would first look for experiences of *Inbetweenness*, for the depth of relating, the qualities of truly “living together,” situations of being *with* one another. It is here where the deepest nature of one’s own person is typically rooted. Relationships in this context are where personal existence is most deeply shared and interflowing. This way of relating creates a living, spiritual field of inter-subjectivity. These persons whose living together flows together to establish a field of inter-subjectivity discover the qualities of humanness, caring, compassion and loving.

Marcel's insight into this fundamental nature of authentic inter-human relation is tremendously noteworthy to the contemporary world. It is the foundation upon which it is favorable to launch an expanding sphere of relationships that go beyond the immediate family to embrace members of a "chosen-family." According to Marcel, nothing on earth is as creative, dynamic and enlivening as two persons whose spirits touches and intermingles (152). For Marcel, the mystery will always be "there" *Inbetweenness*, the mystery of inter-subjectivity, lives and has its being in the *Inbetweenness* of us all. For Marcel, "An encounter is therefore unthinkable if one insists on separating the meeting. It is rather a participation; "having-a-part-in" as well as "being-a-part-of" (154).

Inter-subjectivity as Participation in Marcel's Philosophy

Complementing Marcel's concept of inter-subjectivity is also his idea of participation. Marcel was an early proponent of what would become a major Sartrean existential tenet: *I am my body* (*The Mystery of Being* 122; *Body and Being* 51). For Marcel, the body is not simply a part or extension of the self; it holds instrumental value as a vehicle for experiencing and engaging with the world. It serves a medium through which individuals interact with their surroundings and express their existence (123). It is impossible for the self to conceive of the body in any way at all except as a distinct entity identified with the self. Thus, the concept of participation in Marcel, emphasizes the active engagement of individuals with their lived experiences and the world around them. For him, it involves a deep, personal relationships, actions, and encounter, as opposed to mere observation or detachment. This idea underscores the importance of authentic engagement and relationality in human existence. Marcel's concept of participation extends beyond mere involvement; it encompasses a sense of commitment, presence and interconnectedness in human interactions and experiences. He thus, emphasizes the importance of fully engaging with the world and others rather than remaining distant or detached. Through participation, individuals actively shape and are reshaped by their relationships, experiences and environment contributing to the ongoing process of self-discovery and meaning-making

Existence is prior to any abstraction that we do on the basis of our perception. In Marcel's philosophy, existence is contrasted with the abstraction of objectivity by emphasizing the lived subjective experience of individuals over detached, objective analysis. Marcel critiques the inclination to reduce human existence to the abstract concepts or objective dimensions, arguing that such attitudes fail to capture the full richness and profundity of human life. He highlights the importance of embracing the concrete, embodied realities of existence with all its complexities, emotions and personal meanings. This disposition underscores Marcel's existential perspective, which prioritizes the lived experience of individual within the context of their relationships and their encounter with the world. That we are body, of course, naturally lends us to think of the body in terms of object. But individuals who resort to seeing the self and the world in terms of functionality are ontologically deficient because not only can they not properly respond to the needs of others, but they have become isolated and independent from others. It is our active freedom that prevents us from the snare of objectifying the self, and which brings us into relationships with others. Thus, hen we are able to act freely and

spontaneously, we can move away from the isolated perspective of the problematic man ("I am body only,") to that of the participative subject ("I am a being among beings") who is capable of interactive relation with others in the world. This participation is possible through a special type of reflection in which the subject views itself as a being among beings, rather than as an object. This reflection of the self is secondary reflection and is different from both primary reflection and mere contemplation. For according to Marcel, primary reflection explains the relationship of an individual to the world based on her existence as an object in the world, whereas secondary reflection takes as its point of departure the being of the individual among others. The goal of primary reflection, then, is to problematize the self and its relation to the world, and so it seeks to reduce and conquer particular things (379).

Thus, Marcel discards primary reflection as germane to ontological matters because he believes it cannot appreciate the core metaphysical question involved in existence. Secondary reflection has as its goal the revelation of existence in its completeness, which cannot be separated from the individual, who is in turn situated among others. For Marcel, an understanding of one's being is only possible through secondary reflection, since it is a reflection whereby the self questions itself how and from what starting point the self is able to proceed. The existential motivation of secondary reflection cannot be overemphasized for Marcel: "participation which involves the presence of the self to the world is only possible if the temptation to assume the self is wholly distinct from the world is overcome" (382). The existential consequence is that secondary reflection permits the individual to strive for the wellbeing of others, and it dissolves the polarity of primary reflection by realizing they lived body's relation to the ego.

Reflexive reflection consequently, is the reflection of the exigent self. It occurs when the subject is in communion with others, and is free and also dependent upon others. Reflexive reflection is an inmost viewing that allows the self to be amenable and receptive to the call of others. Nevertheless, Marcel does not call on the participative subject to be reflective for receptivity's sake. Rather, the self cannot fully understand the existential position without adjusting itself to something other than the self. This is why participation becomes important, alongside inter-subjectivity.

Participation as the Basis for Community

To think about ways of how the sense of community could be restored among humans, let us begin through a return to Marcel's inter-subjectivity as a basis for community. Marcel's position of inter-subjectivity refers to what could be called the interhuman being. In *The Mystery of Being*. A familiarity with Marcel's thought unwraps the awareness that his metaphysics of being is "essentially anti-Cartesian" in that it "is the metaphysics of *we are* as conflicting with the metaphysics of *I think*" (Smith, 100). Cartesian *ego* is a theoretical misconception, for the relatedness of human being and being itself entails that *being-with* is the nature of all being (107). Human beings are together in being through an inter-subjective nexus, "a world in which everything is bound together" in relations of "living communication". Even one's self-knowledge and self-communication involve others because "I communicate effectively with

myself only insofar as I communicate with the other person". In fact, in generalizing from his own experience, Marcel adds that because of his interhuman bonds: "the best part of my personality does not belong to me. I am in no sense the owner, only the trustee" (*the Mystery of being* 84). The human being is therefore birthed by others, physically and psychologically (Obi, 61).

,What we are as distinctive subjects is a creation of our inter-human relation, and the eventual grasp of our humanity is within universal community which is on the way to understanding the completeness and fullness of being itself. Marcel's idea of community can be refined by contrasting it with what it is not. Community is not purely social co-existence, which is distinctive of the underdeveloped forms of collectivism and democratic individualism. These forms, according to Marcel, are at the crux of the modern social-political crisis of humankind, and in struggling to overcome this predicament, "The question is how to get people out of the deceitful dilemma between an invented individualism and a collectivism that denies the human personality" (Smith, 88). Thus, Marcel's rejection of collectivism is built on his argument that collectivism erases the individual human personality; the human subject is lost within a faceless mass, unable to establish his own freedom, his own participation in the values which bind him to others and to being (Marcel, 235).

Inter-subjectivity as a Philosophical Model of Understanding the Self and the world

Marcel's theoretical assessment of inter-subjectivity presents a fascinating substitute model for comprehending the self and the world. Departing from the prevailing individualistic paradigms that dominated much of Western philosophy, Marcel's inter-subjectivity offers a perspective that underscores the relational nature of human existence. At the heart of Marcel's thought is a rejection of the Cartesian and Kantian forms of duality that atomize the self and isolate it from its surroundings. Instead, he posits that: "genuine understanding arises from the dynamic interplay between individuals, each contributing to the collective tapestry of human experience (132). In Marcel's outlook therefore, the self is not an isolated, inaccessible and self-contained being but a relational being whose distinctiveness is molded and defined in interaction with others (132). This inter-subjective structure defies the reductionist propensities characteristic of traditional philosophical attitudes. Marcel offers us a move beyond the constricted boundaries of solipsism and to embracing a more holistic understanding of the self and the world, through shared experiences, dialogues and sympathetic actions. Marcel proposes that we can untangle the complexities of our existence, forging connections that transcend individual subjectivities (Marcel, 200).

Furthermore, Marcel's inter-subjectivity emphasizes the significance of lived, embodied experience rather than reducing reality to abstract concepts or intellectual abstractions, Marcel advocates for an engagement with the concrete, the personal, and the immediate. It is through the richness of human encounters that we come to grasp the multifaceted dimensions of our own existence and the world we live in. Thus, in line of this strive, Marcel's tenets to scrutinizing the implications for selfhood, interpersonal relationships and our broader understanding of reality, it is pertinent to embrace this alternative model. As Marcel tasks us

to reevaluate entrenched notions, inviting us to view the self and the world through a lens that is inherently communal, interconnected, and deeply human.

Inter-subjectivity is often seen as an alternative to the philosophical model of "objectivity or individualism" In the objectivist or individualist model, individuals are seen as separate, isolated entities, and the world is seen as something that can be objectively studied and understood. There is an emphasis on autonomy and seperatedness of individuals, often leading to a focus on personal interests and concerns rather than relational dynamics. Marcel's philosophy often critiques these opposing perspectives, this model for him often ignores the complex ways in which individuals are connected to each other and to the world around them, he advocates a more holistic understanding of human existence that acknowledges both individuality and relationality.

Marcel's philosophy with its emphasis on existential themes such as relationality, engagement and embodiment, therefore provides a veritable model that can also accommodate cyclicity within human experience. Obi however notes that cyclicity is how everything is interconnected to form the basis of completeness (Obi, 142). Cyclicity whether in the form of recurring patterns, seasons or life circle, is seen as fundamental to the rhythm of existence and within Marcel's existential perspective; so, for him, cyclicity can be understood as part of the ongoing process of engagement and transformation of individuals' lives. Thus, inter-subjectivity emphasizes the ways in which we are interconnected and interdependent, and how this shapes our experience of the world. It challenges the objectivist model by highlighting the ways in which our understanding of the world is shaped by our relationships with others.

Marcel's concept of participation also acknowledges the dynamic nature of human existence, wherein individuals continually engage with their surroundings, relationships and experiences in a cyclical manner. Moreover, his emphasis on the importance of relationships and interconnectedness suggests cyclical patterns which manifest in the ebb and flow of interpersonal dynamics overtime.

Thus, Marcel philosophy can contribute to a better understanding of human relation by highlighting the significance of authenticity, presence and continual engagement in interpersonal interactions. His emphasis on engagement underscores the importance of genuine engagement and presence in human relationships. By encouraging individuals to actively participate in their interactions with others, Marcel's philosophy fosters deeper connections and mutual understanding. Marcel's focus on inter-subjectivity and the interconnectedness of individuals emphasizes the relational nature of human existence. This perspective encourages people to consider the impact of their actions on others and to approach relationships with empathy and respect.

Marcel's philosophy acknowledges the complexity of human relationships, recognizing that they are often characterized by ambiguity, vulnerability, and unpredictability. By embracing this complexity, individuals can develop a more nuanced understanding of their interactions with others and cultivate empathy and compassion, thereby allowing individuals to embrace their authentic selves and to be open and vulnerable in their relationships. This emphasis on

authenticity fosters genuine connections and allows for deeper intimacy and trust to develop between individuals.

Conclusion:

Marcel's philosophy provides a code for meaningful living and peaceful coexistence by emphasizing the importance of understanding and empathizing with others. The key to this is the concept of understanding the importance of togetherness which refers to the ability to understand another person's perspective and experience from their own point of view. It is like the value of the two sides of a coin that when one side is damaged, the relevance of the other side becomes meaningless, when we are able to realize this, we can begin to build bridges of understanding and empathy, leading to a more meaningful living and peaceful coexistence. This can be seen in all areas of life, from personal relationships to global politics. In personal relationships, inter-subjectivity provides a way to overcome conflict and build stronger bonds by taking the time to understand each other's perspectives, just as it is not possible for one part of the body to be against another simply because they are not the same, the fact that they are interdependable or need others to function make their co-existence peaceful and the understanding of it, provides a perfect ground of living without war and enmity. We can also in this form dwell with one another with the mindset of "self as the extension of others". Inter-subjectivity is a model that if adopted and incorporated can translate into an ethical relationship system of "we" and "being-with-others" which would diminish misunderstanding and conflict, and see to the promotion and sustenance of order and peace in human society.

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