Gabriel Marcel: Mystery in an Age of Problems

For many years, both before and after the Second World War, the French philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel hosted Friday night salons in his Paris apartment.[1] Miklos Vetö recalls visiting them as a student in 1959: "Each Friday, from 5 to 7pm a large and very heterogeneous group of people, students, philosophy teachers, society women, freaks, monks, Christian or Buddhist, turned up to talk about a wide selection of philosophico-social themes."[2] Many prominent philosophers and literary figures attended at one time or another: Jean Wahl, Nikolai Berdyaev, Simone de Beauvoir, Charles Du Bos, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. Emmanuel Levinas met Jean-Paul Sartre for the first time at one of Marcel's Friday gatherings.[3] Paul Ricoeur, who visited Marcel's gatherings as a student, later hosted similar gatherings of his own.[4]

Unsurprisingly, given this place in the Parisian milieu, Marcel shaped some of the major movements of these tumultuous decades. His account of relational humanity influenced the Catholic personalism of the early 1930s.[5] Likewise, his rejection of abstract systems and his attention to concrete, first-person experience helped launch French existentialism.[6] Yet Marcel

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[1] Those new to Marcel are well served by *A Gabriel Marcel Reader,* ed. Brendan Sweetman (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2011). Kenneth T. Gallagher's *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham UP, 1974) offers a concise, clear overview of Marcel's major concepts and concerns.

[2] Miklos Vetö, "Personal Memories of Gabriel Marcel," *Marcel Studies,* 3.1 (2018): 51.

[3] See the interview with Emmanuel Levinas in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers,* ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 53. Marcel was an important influence on Levinas's thought. See Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2006). See also William Desmond, "Philosophies of Religion: Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas" in *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy,* ed. Richard Kearney (New York: Routledge, 1994), 131-174.

[4] See Charles E. Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 17.

[5] See Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 2018), especially pp. 35-90. For a recent reworking of personalism, see David Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2015).

[6] On the importance of the concrete situation in Marcel, see Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham UP, 1974), 13-29. See also Brendan Sweetman, 7-38.

did not want to be known as a "personalist," and he bristled when Sartre called him a "Christian existentialist."[7] Marcel worried that such labels distort or lead to assumptions. He even worried about being hemmed in by his own work. He claimed to cringe when someone asked him to sum up his philosophy. Marcel perceived this as an attempt to "imprison" him in a "sort of shell."[8] Marcel wanted to maintain the sense of his philosophy as an open inquiry, as an ongoing quest.

Still, there are consistent themes in Marcel's work. He was concerned, for instance, with how technocratic rationalism increasingly pervades modern life.[9] This rationalism relies on generalizable techniques and technical solutions. Marcel was no luddite. He claimed "only a lunatic" would deny the usefulness of much technological progress, the ways in which it has eased material hardships for many. [10] He noted how the scientist can model certain human excellences, such as precision and accuracy. He applauded the "purity and soundness of the joy which goes with technical research when it results in a discovery."[11] Yet the twentieth century had thoroughly discredited technological utopianism for Marcel. He was born in 1889 and died in 1973. He lived through both world wars and some of the tensest moments of the Cold War. He denied a necessary or even likely link between technological progress and social or moral

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[7] Sartre calls Marcel and Karl Jaspers Christian existentialists in "Existentialism and Humanism." See *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London: Routledge, 2001), 27. Marcel did accept the existentialist designation for a while. He assented, for instance, to its use in the title of an essay collection edited by Étienne Gilson: *Existentialisme Chrétien: Gabriel Marcel* (Paris: Plon, 1947). From midcentury onward, though, Marcel sharply rejected the label, claiming that it had become associated with Sartre's philosophy. F.H. Heindemann suggests that Marcel may have been influenced by Pope Pious XII's critique of existentialism in the 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*. See Heindemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 150.
[8] Marcel, "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy" in *Creative Fidelity,* trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1964), 60.
[9] For a study that forefronts this aspect of Marcel's thought, see Jill Graper Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope: Evil, God and Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
[10] Marcel, "The Limitations of Industrial Civilization" in *The Decline of Wisdom,* trans. Manya Harari (London: The Harvill Press, 1954), 8.
[11] Ibid.

progress. Technological research yields life-saving medical advances, but it also yields nuclear weapons.[12] In his later writings, Marcel claimed that we live in an "eschatological age" because of the threat of nuclear annihilation.[13]

More controversially, Marcel held that a pervasive technical ethos reshapes how we see the world. He warned "there is a danger of the technical environment becoming for us the pattern of the universe, that is to say, the categories of its particular structure being claimed to be valid for an objective conception of the world."[14] Generalized techniques involve a reductive abstraction. The environment to which they are applied is abstracted out of its particularity and treated as malleable material. Such techniques "seek to reconstitute the world, moulding it to [their] own image."[15] This calls to mind Heidegger's account of how modernity reduces the world to a "standing reserve" of exploitable resource, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of "instrumental rationality."[16] One of Marcel's primary examples of this reductive abstraction is the modern city. (Here the resonances are with Jane Jacobs.) In "the past a city moulded itself on the natural structure or prestructure, as if it were fulfilling it," whereas now "we are likely to see larger and larger agglomerations piling up without the slightest regard for the natural pre-formation. There is not the least hesitation in doing violence to nature to carry

[12]See Bernard Gendreau, "Gabriel Marcel's Personalist Ontological Approach to Technology." *The Personalist Forum,* 15.2 (1999): 229-246.
[13] See Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society,* trans. G.S. Fraser (South Bend: Gateway, N.D.), 76.
[14] Ibid., 13.
[15] Ibid.
[16] See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans.William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings,* edited by David Ferrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 287-317. See also Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002). Sally Fischer notes that Marcel actually begins exploring these themes well before Heidegger.

out an abstract plan."[17] As a result, cities begin to lose their distinctiveness and their charm.

They become increasingly generic, interchangeable.[18]

Marcel claimed that this pervasive ethos also reshapes are conception of the human: "It is

impossible for man not to consider himself part of this cosmos—or of this a-cosmos—planned

and dissected by the technicians; as a result, he inevitably becomes a target for those techniques

which, in principle, are legitimately applicable only to the outward world."[19] Humans are

increasingly viewed in terms of their functions, "as machines which are needed here or there for

reasons connected with the general economy and whose feelings are of not the slightest

interest."[20] Marcel saw "mass transfers of populations" within communist countries as revealing

this underlying ethos of reductive abstraction.[21] Humans are lifted out of their concrete

relationships to a place, to a community, to a shared past. They become discrete units that can be

repositioned according to an abstract economic logic (or for the political aim of sheering those

very relationships, of creating discrete units).[22] At an extreme, a society that manages its

populations in such a way conceives of life "in bio-sociological terms, that is to say, as a process

whose physico-chemical conditions are claimed to be strictly and objectively definable and

which exists in view of a given task which relates to the collectivity."[23] Here, we might see

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[17] Marcel, "The Limitations of Industrial Civilization," 14.

[18] Marcel predicts that such an approach will actually leave cities more vulnerable to "crises, catastrophes, even natural upheavals." Ibid., 15.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. Note, though, that Marcel does not see this as a logic peculiar to communism. It is a logic that underpins modern societies broadly to the extent that they share a technical ethos. We might think of how in the United States it is often assumed that a young college graduate will follow the best economic opportunity, wherever it may lead. To privilege ties to family or community over this is often seen as naïve or regressive.

[22] The political use of forced migration or deracination is of course nothing new. It was common to ancient empires like the Assyrians and Incans, and it was also a central strategy of modern chattel slavery.

[23] Marcel, "The Limitations of Industrial Civilization," 17.

Marcel anticipating something like Michel Foucault's critique of "biopolitics," though within a very different, humanistic sensibility.[24]

As this last example suggests, Marcel saw the technical ethos spreading primarily through bureaucracies. He noted the bureaucratic tendency to reduce humans to a datum or a case file. Marcel's experiences during World War I were formative in this regard. Marcel did not service in the trenches, but he did direct the Red Cross Information Service in Paris. His job was to track down information about soldiers missing at the front and then to relay it to inquirers. When Marcel researched a missing soldier, he dealt with a name and a few bits of information on an index card. For the inquirers who came to the Information Service, though, the missing soldier was a son, brother, fiancée, husband, or friend. The experience taught Marcel much about the dehumanizing potential for bureaucracies. He realized if he had only been researching and not also reporting to inquirers, he could have easily turned the war into an "abstract schema."[25] Even still, he could have played the part of the reserved bureaucratic functionary, simply reporting information. Marcel later saw how the Nazis, in World War II concentration camps, utilized this potential for bureaucratic dehumanization to horrifying effect through "techniques of degradation" designed to psychologically infiltrate detainees, to make them see themselves as valueless.[26] After the war, Marcel was sensitive to techniques of degradation at work in the Soviet Gulags, to how subtle forms of propaganda and surveillance were spreading in the supposedly liberal West.

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[24]See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979,* trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

[25] Marcel, *Awakenings,* trans. Peter S. Rogers (Marquette, WI: Marquette UP, 2002), 93.

[26] See Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 37-75.

Marcel noted how "techniques of degradation" often bring together a bureaucratic rationalism and an ideological irrationalism, both reductive. In the latter, political passions yield distorting stereotypes and simplifications.[27] He saw this at work in modern ideologies, and in particular in fascism and communism, with their propaganda and caricatures of enemies.[28] Marcel referenced C. Virgil Gheorghiu's World War II novel *The Twenty-fifth Hour*, in which a young man is falsely accused of being a Jew and sent to a deportation camp, only to be deemed an "example of the pure Aryan type" by a Nazi leader and sent to a SS training camp.[29] The young man escapes to the Americans, who at first welcome him but then put him in prison because "Rumanians are the enemy, ergo."[30] In each of these cases, ideology reduces the singular, complex young man to a cipher.

Marcel claimed that a technocratic ethos ultimately reshapes how we see ourselves, how we try to navigate our lives. This brings Marcel's existentialism to the fore. Marcel frequently makes a distinction between problems and mysteries. A problem is something external to us that can be determinatively understood and solved with a generalizable technique. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which we are inextricably involved. It has roots deep within us, but it also reaches beyond us. While a problem can be definitively solved, a mystery can only be navigated in light of the concrete situation and the people involved. As Jill Graper Hernandez points out, "Marcel does not mean to bring a vague literary floweriness to the discourse on

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[27] In his youth Marcel was struck by the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus Affair.

[28] We might also think of racism broadly. See Dwayne Tunstall, *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking About Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiblack Racism* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013). Tunstall explores the affordances in Marcel's philosophy for a critique of racism but also criticizes the relatively scant attention that it receives in Marcel's own writings.

[29] Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1: Reflection & Mystery,* trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Gateway, 1960), 35. See also C. Virgil Gheorghiu, *The Twenty-fifth Hour,* trans. Rita Eldon (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950).

[30] Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, vol. 1*. 35.

mystery; rather *the mystery of our being* involves the active situation that we are concerned with—our experiences—and so, is one whose true nature can only be grasped, acknowledged, or recognized from the inside."[31] Marcel claimed that the modern facility with techniques encourages the reduction of mysteries to problems. Death is no longer an inevitable mystery to be confronted but a biomedical problem to be delayed as long as possible and thought about as little as possible. Love becomes "the will to live, the will to power, the *libido,* etc."[32] The mystery of being itself is either forgotten (as Heidegger noted) or misunderstood as a physics problem.

Marcel pointed out that techniques do not simply work for us. They also rework us. Iris Murdoch, who was influenced by Marcel, sums up a similar concern in an aphoristic line: "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble that picture."[33] Marcel claimed moderns are becoming less articulate about mysteries. They find themselves without the words to talk meaningfully and non-reductively about love or death. They struggle to express feelings of wonder and gratitude when they irrupt into their lives at, say, the birth of a child or the start of a new relationship or when they behold natural beauty. The sentimental and the trite often move in to fill the void.

Marcel's feared this diminishment of mysteries actually made us less present to others, less able to care for them in a holistic way. Marcel claimed, for instance, that we were losing our ability or willingness to accompany others as they approached death.   He worried that medicine

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[31] Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope,* 12-13.
[32] Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery" in *The Philosophy of Existentialism,* trans. Manya Harari (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973), 20.
[33] Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature,* edited by Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 75. Murdoch reviews Marcel's *The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1* in "The Image of Mind" in *Existentialists and Mystics,* 125-129.

itself was becoming increasingly reductive, with hospitals serving as "the inspection bench or the repair shop."[34] If we see love as inherently selfish then we may be more likely to act in selfish, exploitative ways or to avoid entering into relationships for fear of being exploited. Marcel noted that modern educational bureaucracies mostly teach students to solve problems rather than to navigate mysteries. Indeed, the students themselves become problems. Education is not a matter of *paideia* or *Bildung* but the application of the correct generalizable pedagogical technique to students, the teaching of students to apply techniques in turn. Marcel quipped that Charles Dickens' Gradgrind is a caricature of modern educational theories but a telling one nonetheless.[35] Fundamentally, we lose our sense of ourselves and others, their lives and our own, as mysteries. We increasingly think of ourselves and others in terms of our functions. William Desmond points out that for Marcel, many modern malaises have their roots in this reductionism: "The tyranny of technique drowns the deeper human in a conspiracy of efficiency and a frenzy of industry. It may erect a house but cannot make us a home."[36]

The marginalization of religion is important for Marcel in this regard. The language and rituals it provides for navigating mysteries have been largely displaced. The question "Who am I?" is no longer answered with the mysterious "an image of God" but with an occupation, a "function," and a set of basic biographical facts. Life is no longer lived out as a dramatic journey, quest, or pilgrimage but as a series of workweeks and weekends unto retirement. The marginalization of religion is bound up with the loss of communal wisdom, a *sensus communis*, that at its best is neither abstract nor reductive but responsive to human particulars.[37] For Marcel,

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[34] Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," 11.
[35] See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1,* 23-24. See also Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).
[36] Desmond, "Philosophies of Religion," 137.
[37] See Marcel, "The Breaking Up of the Notion of Wisdom" in *The Decline of Wisdom,* 37-56.

the great task of philosophy is to restore awareness of mysteries, to provide or renew a language for talking about them, the wisdom for navigating them.

Marcel claimed philosophy should especially help recover a non-reductive sense of human relations. This brings us to another of Marcel's key distinctions, the distinction between "having" and "being." Having involves appropriation and consumption. In terms of human relations, it involves considering "a certain person as a mineral from which I can extract a certain amount of usable material."[38] This can take overtly exploitative forms, but it can also take subtle forms, such as when interactions are structured by an unconscious egotism or unrecognized instrumentalism. According to Marcel, there is no true communication in such interactions, no open, ongoing reciprocity. They are a means of extracting "the responses I want."[39] We interact with others to get something we desire—help, information, affirmation, sex—and then draw back into our self. Paradoxically, the stance of having, even though it is defined by appropriation, can lead to a sense of emptiness. It involves closing oneself off, at least partially, from the fullness of being, from a true encounter with the other. Marcel suggests that it is like secreting a carapace. As we have already seen, Marcel feared that a society dominated by a technical, problem-solving ethos will subtly encourage relations of having.

Marcel juxtaposed interactions structured by having with relationships of "being." These transcend instrumental calculation. They involve opening oneself to the other. In them "I" am no longer pitted over against "you." We are on a different ontological plane: "At the moment when communication is established between me and the other […] we pass from one world into

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[38] Marcel, "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy," 71.
[39] Ibid.

another."[40] Such relationships take place on the plane of the "we," the "I-thou," the

"intersubjective," on the plane of "communion."[41] By opening ourselves to others, we also open

ourselves to being in its inexhaustible depth. The proof of this is experiential for Marcel. (And,

as is the case with much of Marcel's philosophy, its plausibility will depend on whether it rings

true with the reader's own experience.) In healthy relationships—with family, friends, or

spouses, for instance—we experience a dynamic richness and sense of depth that we do not

experience in more guarded interactions. For Marcel, this distinction between having and being

is also ethically charged:

> Is it not obvious that if I consider the other person as a sort of mechanism exterior to my
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> own *ego,* a mechanism of which I must discover the spring or manner of working […] I
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> shall never succeed in obtaining anything but a completely exterior knowledge of him,
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> which is in a way the very denial of his real being?"[42]

Intentionally or no, this ultimately "*degrades him.*"[43] This may seem like a reformulation of

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. Having entails treating humans as a means to an end

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[40] Marcel, "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy," 72. Note how Marcel juxtaposes the "world" of having versus the "world" of being, suggesting fundamentally different attunements. One danger of Marcel's account, perhaps, is its tendency toward dualistic oppositions. We might wonder, for instance, if some relationships move subtly back and forth between having and being, if the threshold between the two worlds is a bit more permeable than he often suggests.

[41] Marcel shares much in common with Martin Buber in this regard. See Marcel, "Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology" in *Searchings* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 73-92. See also the chapter on Marcel and Buber in Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 135-152.

[42] Marcel, "The Ego and its Relation to Others" in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope,* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962)*,* 23.

[43] Ibid.

rather than an ends in themselves. Yet Marcel was less concerned with a rational ethical imperative than with the concrete encounter with a specific other.[44]

Marcel argued that the "we" is ultimately more basic than the "I," that openness is more basic than closure. This is anchored in the realities of human childhood, which of course entail extended dependence. It is also anchored in the continual experiences of irruption—in wonder and beauty, for instance—that reopen us to reality and that could "only occur in a being who is not a closed or hermetic system into which nothing new can penetrate."[45] Still, Marcel acknowledged that it is easy to be "misled" by "a false atomism":

> It can easily happen that, in general, I feel opaque, non-permeable, and this state can be attributed to a number of different causes (fatigue, moral deterioration, the habit of concentrating on myself too much; intimacy with oneself, like any other relation or liaison, can degenerate and become vicious).[46]

We slip easily into "egotism," into assuming that we are the center of the world. Such egotism distorts how we see others: "From the very fact that I treat the other person merely as a means of resonance or am amplifier, I tend to consider him as a sort of apparatus which I can, or think I can, manipulate, or of which I can dispose at will."[47] We ultimately project an idea "that can become a substitute for a real person, a shadow to which I shall come to refer my acts and

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[44] Furthermore, while Marcel admired Kant for putting human dignity at the heart of his philosophy, he was highly critical of the modern emphasis on autonomy. He thought it failed to account for how true freedom is found in an immersion in reality. See Marcel, "Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having" in *Being and Having,* trans. Katharine Farrer (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), 173.

[45] Marcel, "Belonging and disposability" in *Creative Fidelity,* 48.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Marcel, "The Ego in its Relations to Others," 16.

words."[48] We are always capable of subtle self-delusion, of substituting a counterfeit for the real

encounter with the other.

Marcel's remarks on such delusion skirt close to Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of "bad

faith," and Marcel acknowledged that his fellow dramatist-philosopher was often an insightful

diagnostician of relational ills.[49] Marcel's own plays are full of egotism, manipulation,

instrumentalism, and indifference. They testify more readily than his philosophical works to

how we may retreat into self-enclosure to protect ourselves from this.[50] Openness entails

vulnerability, which can lead in turn to ill treatment, abuse, and heartache. Marcel did not

quarrel with Sartre's analysis of antagonistic and agonistic relationships, then, so much as reject

Sartre's penchant to see bad faith everywhere. Sartre recoiled from the fundamental relatedness

of concrete existence. He greatly circumscribed, and thus in Marcel's view greatly distorted, the

reality of love. For Sartre, freedom and authentic existence require a disentangling from

relations, a disentangling that borders on self-negation.

Contra Sartre, Marcel argued that we must cultivate a radical openness to others, an alert

readiness to attend to them.[51] He called this openness *disponibilité*.[52] Again, this is both an

ethical mandate and the path to fulfilment for Marcel. Healthy relationships within marriages,

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[48] Ibid., 16-17.

[49] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993). See Marcel's review in *Homo Viator,* 166-184. Marcel also offers an extended critique of Sartre in "Existence and Human Freedom" in *The Philosophy of Existentialism,* 47-90.

[50] See Katharine Rose Hanley, "Marcel: The Playwright Philosopher," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature,* 55.3 (2003): 241-256.

[51] Sally Fischer claims that Marcel offers an ethics of care in "Reading Marcel's Philosophy of Dialogical Inter-subjectivity in a Contemporary Light" in *Living Existentialism: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Busch,* eds. Gregory Hoskins and J.C. Berendzen (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 21-30.

[52] See Marcel, "Belonging and Disposability*,*" pp. 38-57. Marcel was frustrated by English translations of this word. "Disposability" can suggest the entirely different (and negative) sense of getting rid of something. "Availability" is perhaps better but doesn't connote the dynamism that Marcel wishes to convey.

families, friendships, and communities involve a "creative fidelity" based on such openness. Marcel insisted that true fidelity involves continual re-attunement and responsiveness. It is dynamic, "creative." Marcel distinguished such fidelity from mere "constancy," which can be a grudging perseverance in a static, stale relationship.[53] During the Nazi occupation, Marcel famously offered a philosophy of "hope" as a state of open expectancy, a sort of *disponibilité* toward the present and future, one ringed round by the possibility of despair.[54] Marcelian hope transcends hope for particular things. This distinguishes it from shallow optimism and allows it to persevere through setbacks.

Marcel feared, then, that modern life was become increasingly atomistic, lived in the realm of problems and having rather than in the realm of mystery and being. He argued that this was a recipe for widespread dissatisfaction and unhappiness since we have an "ontological need," a desire for true communion with being in its depth, a desire for "fullness" that remains even if it is greatly dulled.[55] Moderns often try and fail to meet this need via having, via consumption and dreams of consumption. Yet this often provides only fleeting satisfaction.

Marcel's Christian sensibility is evident in his account of mystery and being. Marcel's *disponibilité* recalls biblical injunctions to love one's neighbor, to care for the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed. Faith, hope, and love recur throughout his writings. Marcel argued that love is the "essential ontological datum" and that the experience of inexhaustible ontological depth in love and communion point the way to God. There are echoes of St. John: "God is love." For the "anti-theist" Sartre, God was a tyrannical threat to freedom. For Marcel, God was the liberating wellspring of love. Still, Marcel did not convert to Catholicism until the age of forty,

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[53] See Marcel, "Creative Fidelity" in *Creative Fidelity,* 147-174.
[54] See "Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope" in *Homo Viator,* 29-67.
[55] On the ontological need, see Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. II: Faith & Reality,* trans. René Hague (Chicago: Gateway, 1960), 37-57.

after his mature philosophical project was well under away. He never wanted to write for a Christian audience alone. He wanted to write in a way that would resonate with believers and unbelievers alike.

Marcel could offer a dystopian and perhaps hyperbolic picture of "problematic man." While he recognized the "positive value of technical progress," he gave far more attention to the ills he saw in it.[56] We may wonder whether he paints with too broad a brush and thus fails to draw enough distinctions between different sorts of techniques, or whether he is sensitive enough to the complexities of modern life. We might especially note that within the domains he identifies—applied science, urban planning, medicine, education—there have always been counter-movements against reductive tendencies.

Again, though, Marcel should not be dismissed as either an anti-modern crank or a pessimist. He always remained a philosopher of hope. Relationships of "communion" continue to form all the time, even in the most inauspicious of environments, and a wider renewal remains possible. Marcel claimed there was no turning back to "a pre-technical age. The burden of technics has been assumed by man and he can no longer put it down because he finds it heavy. The consequences of such an abdication would be catastrophic."[57] He held we should not abandon technics, but we should react against the reductive ethos that can animate them and that increasingly pervades the wider culture. "What I think we need today," he wrote, "is to react with our whole strength against that dissociation of life from spirit which a bloodless rationalism has brought about."[58]

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[56] Marcel, "The Limitations of Industrial Civilization," 8.
[57] Ibid., 19.
[58] Ibid.

Politically, Marcel concurred with his friend Gustave Thibon "that atomisation and collectivization are two sides of the same and indivisible process which could be described both as devitalising and de-spiritualising."[59] Both hollow out the intermediate associations of civil society: family, communities, church.[60] Still, if Marcel was a traditionalist in this regard and in his desire to preserve a "spiritual heritage," he was hardly a hidebound one. The emphasis repeatedly falls on the "creative" work of readjustment and renewal.[61] Marcel was a staunch critic of communism, but he also claimed that "Marxism is right to denounce the mystifying tactics employed by those who bring in spiritual considerations inopportunely in order to veil realities which they have not the strength or the courage to face in their nakedness."[62] In particular, he called out a tendency to veil the struggles of the poor, the "disinherited."[63] Marcel's philosophy cut across the politics of Left and Right. Ultimately, though he was less interested in political movements or the architectonics of political theory than in the existential predicament of his readers and their societies.

Marcel's social critiques remain relevant in our world of Big Data and the digital panopticon, of screen addiction and pervasive loneliness, of social credit and opioid addiction. Yet he is perhaps most timely in that he offers perennial wisdom as an antidote to these malaises. He challenges us to open ourselves to others, to seek out true communion, to pursue a life of creative fidelity. He calls us back to the concrete. Against the notion that "our thinking

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[59] Marcel, "The Notion of Spiritual Heritage" in *The Decline of Wisdom,* 27,

[60] For Marcel's writings on the family, see "The Mystery of the Family" and "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood" in *Homo Viator,* 68-14. See also Sr. Prudence Allen, R.S.M., "Gabriel Marcel and the Discovery of Fatherhood." *Church Life Journal.* March 20, 2019. https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/gabriel-marcel-and-the-discovery-of-fatherhood/

[61] Murdoch claimed that Marcel "may remind us a little of Burke—and to come nearer home, of Michael Oakeshott, who uses the word 'technique' in the same pejorative sense as Marcel." "The Image of the Mind," 129.

[62] Marcel, "The Notion of Spiritual Heritage," 34.

[63] Ibid.

nowadays is only valid if it is on a world-wide or planetary scale," Marcel claims that it is "the

sense of the neighbor that needs awaking, for it's the only safeguard against calamites which

indeed are certain to be world-wide."[64]

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[64] Marcel, "The Breaking Up of the Notion of Wisdom," 56.