Gabriel Marcel: Having and Being

Steven Knepper

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 evening gatherings.[3] Paul Ricoeur, who visited Marcel's gatherings as a student, later hosted similar gatherings of his own (though on Sunday afternoons rather than Friday evenings).[4]

Unsurprisingly, given this place in the Parisian milieu, Marcel shaped some of the major movements of these tumultuous decades. His account of humans as both singular and relational 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

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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).

[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).

existentialism.[6] Yet Marcel 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 philosophy as an open inquiry, of philosophy as an ongoing quest.

This exploratory approach can frustrate. Marcel seems at times to reject not only closed philosophical systems but also the systematic presentation of ideas. He often proceeds by digression and indirection, edging up on an essay's proclaimed topic and then veering away—sometimes far away—before edging up on it once more. The philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, who did much to bring Anglo-American philosophy and French existentialism into conversation with each other, complains that Marcel's "argument rambles around in an impressionistic manner, and he tends to let one special concept lead us onto another one, without either having been sufficiently defined by examples."[9] She also notes a tendency to use metaphors in "vague and confusing" ways: "Truth is like a city, Marcel says: he starts to work

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[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, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 7-38.

[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 also 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. Marcel did at times wish that he could present an overview of his concerns, and he did offer more programmatic essays.

[9] Iris Murdoch, "The Image of Mind" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature,* edited by Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 127.

out the comparison, drops it, and says truth is like a conversation."[10] Still, Murdoch sees great value in Marcel's writings. There are sudden epiphanies in the midst of his exasperating "rambles." He offers some concepts of "very considerable" "revelatory power."[11] These can help readers "to *see* something" in their own experience, something which they may not see otherwise.[12] Murdoch was drawn to Sartre, but she ultimately found his philosophy too individualistic. Sartre, she claimed, offered a conception of the atomistic human agent that, though more poetically rendered, was ultimately closer than one might expect to the "dry" Oxbridge philosophy of, say, Stuart Hampshire.[13] Marcel, in contrast, offered a richer account of human relations. He especially stressed the importance of opening oneself to others, something that resonated deeply with Murdoch.

Marcel's distinction between having and being is a good entry point into this account. It recurs throughout his writings and illuminates his most persistent concerns. "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."[14] This can take overtly exploitative forms, such as in slavery. It can also take much subtler 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."[15] We interact with others to get something we desire—help, information, affirmation, sex—and then draw back into our self.

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 126.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Murdoch, "Against Dryness" in *Existentialists and Mystics,* 287-295. See also Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (New Haven, CN: Yale UP, 1953).
[14] Marcel, "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy," 71.
[15] Ibid.

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.

Marcel juxtaposes interactions structured by "having" with relationships of "being." These transcend instrumental calculation. They involve opening oneself up to the other. In them "I" am no longer pitted over against "you."[16] 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 another."[17] Such relationships take place on the plane of the "we," the "I-thou," the "intersubjective," on the plane of "communion."[18] 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

[16] Marcel argues that "having" and "being" are tied to contrasting affects, such as envy and admiration. Marcel posits a "musical performance or a poetry reading," for instance, where the performance leaves one "soaring." The experience of such admiration "is to tear us away from ourselves and from the thoughts we have of ourselves." It is an "irruption," a "revelation." Here we are in the world of "being." In the world of "having," though, the excellence of the musician or the poet will be experienced as a humiliation or as something to covet. Marcel concludes "to affirm: admiration is a humiliating state, is the same as to treat the subject as a power existing for itself and taking itself as a center. To proclaim on the other hand, that it is an exalted state is to start from the inverse notion that the proper function of the subject is to emerge from itself and realize itself primarily in the gift of oneself and in the various forms of creativity." See "Belong and disposability" in *Creative Fidelity,* 47-49.

[17] 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.

[18] There are marked affinities here with the work of Martin Buber, whom Marcel held in high 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 Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel,* 135-152.

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 own *ego,* a mechanism of which I must discover the spring or manner of working […] I shall never succeed in obtaining anything but a completely exterior knowledge of him, which is in a way the very denial of his real being?"[19]

Intentionally or no, this ultimately "*degrades him.*"[20] There is a certain resonance here with Kant's categorical imperative. "Having" entails treating humans as a means to an end rather than an ends in themselves. Yet Marcel is less concerned with a rational ethical imperative than with the concrete encounter with a specific other.

Furthermore, while Marcel admires Kant for putting human dignity at the heart of his philosophy, he is highly critical of the modern emphasis on autonomy. "The more I enter into the whole of an activity with the whole of myself," Marcel claims, "the less legitimate it is to say that I am autonomous."[21] Yet such "non-autonomy" can actually be true "freedom."[22] Marcel insists that the threats to freedom are not only external. Self-enclosure is a sort of jail cell in its own right. The problem with modern philosophies of autonomy, Marcel claims, is their failure to grasp how immersion "with the whole of myself" is "rooted in Being, at a point either short of self or beyond self, and in a sphere which transcends all possible possession."[23] An ideal of autonomy cannot account for the fulfilment such immersion can offer.

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[19] Marcel, "Ego and its Relation to Others" in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope,* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 23.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Marcel, "Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having" in *Being and Having,* trans. Katharine Farrer (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), 173.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

Marcel argues 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."[24] Still, Marcel acknowledges 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).[25]

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."[26] 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 words."[27] We are always capable of subtle self-delusion, of substituting a counterfeit for the real encounter with the other.

Marcel's remarks on how we can distort the other resonates with Sartre's analysis of "bad faith," and Marcel acknowledged that his fellow dramatist-philosopher was often an insightful

[24] Marcel, "Belonging and disposability" in *Creative Fidelity,* 48.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Marcel, "The Ego in its Relations to Others," 16.
[27] Ibid., 16-17.

diagnostician of relational ills.[28] 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.[29] 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 recoils from the fundamental relatedness of concrete existence. He greatly circumscribes, and thus in Marcel's view greatly distorts, the reality of love. For Sartre, freedom and authentic existence require a disentangling from relations, a disentangling that borders on self-negation. Marcel's criticisms of Sartre range from sympathetic, careful engagement to strident denunciations: "The essential question is, to my mind, whether this philosophy [of Sartre's] is not heading for the abyss into which the forces of self-destruction threaten to drive our unfortunate race."[30] At other times, Marcel offers mischievous quips. Marcel liked to claim, for instance, that Sartre did philosophy from a "café terrace."[31] (In Parisian fashion, one does not sit opposite a companion, but looks out upon the boulevardiers, perhaps like so many competitors for the empty chair beside.) Elsewhere Sartre becomes a slinking Orestes with parent issues, Marcel a Perseus ready to slay the Gorgon of despair.[32]

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[28] 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,* trans. Manya Harari (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973), 47-90.

[29] This chapter focuses on Marcel's philosophical writings, but Marcel always insisted that that his philosophy and plays are intertwined, and that many of his philosophical ideas had their origins in his work as a dramatist. See Katharine Rose Hanley, "Marcel: The Playwright Philosopher," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature,* 55.3 (2003): 241-256.

[30] Marcel, "Existence and Human Freedom," 85.

[31] Ibid., 59.

[32] See Marcel, "Presence and Immortality" in *Presence and Immortality,* trans. Michael A. Machado (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1967), 229-230.

Contra Sartre, Marcel argues that we must cultivate a radical openness to others, an alert readiness to attend to them. He calls this openness *disponibilité*.[33] Again, this is both an ethical mandate and the path to fulfilment for Marcel. Healthy relationships within marriages, families, friendships, and communities involve a "creative fidelity" based on such openness. Marcel insists that true fidelity involves continual re-attunement and responsiveness. It is dynamic, "creative." Marcel distinguishes such fidelity from mere "constancy," which can be a grudging perseverance in a static, stale relationship.[34] 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.[35] Marcelian hope transcends hope for particular things. This distinguishes it from shallow optimism and allows it to persevere through setbacks.[36]

Marcel was shaped by both his philosophical education and key life experiences. The influence of Henri Bergson, whose lectures Marcel attended, is pervasive. Marcel frequently appeals to the Bergsonian distinction between the "closed" and the "open." There is also a Bergsonian echo in Marcel's use of the adjective "creative" to describe something as dynamic and generative. Marcel speaks of creative exchange, creative fidelity, a creative vow. Much of Marcel's early work was on American philosophy, and Josiah Royce's treatment of loyalty

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[33] 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.

[34] See Marcel, "Creative Fidelity" in *Creative Fidelity,* 147-174.

[35] See "Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope" in *Homo Viator,* 29-67.

[36] In *Hope Without Optimism* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2017), Terry Eagleton criticizes Marcel's hope for not being tied to any particular outcome. He says that it amounts to "a quasi-religious way of cheering oneself up, grandly impervious to all counterargument," 64. Eagleton may suggest a real danger in Marcel's account. Yet Santiago Ramos offers a persuasive argument that Marcel's account is suppler than this and is actually close to one of Eagleton's own positions. See Ramos, "Review of *Hope Without Optimism,*" *Marcel Studies,* 3.1 (2018): 41-42.

influenced his own treatment of fidelity.[37] Marcel also mentioned the influence of Charles Péguy in this regard.

Marcel's emphasis on relationships also has roots in formative experiences.[38] He was born in 1889 to a wealthy family, but his mother died before his fourth birthday. His childhood was largely lonely, his school days largely unhappy. Marcel did not serve in the army during World War I, but he did head the Red Cross Information Service in Paris. His job was to track down information about soldiers missing at the front and then relay it to inquirers. This often meant telling mothers, fathers, and fiancées that their loved ones had died. This pressed on him the centrality of love and the magnitude of loss. While many philosophers of his generation explored the relationship between one's own death and despair, Marcel continually insisted that the death of the loved one was of more existential importance.[39] Marcel was also influenced by positive experiences of friendship and love. He was himself a ready and generous friend. One can see his Friday evening salons, for instance, as a practice of *disponibilité*. His marriage to Jacqueline Boegner in 1919 was a happy and deeply collaborative one. He was grateful to her large, warm family for welcoming him into their fold. He and Jacqueline adopted a son together, and this too would profoundly shape his philosophy. He wrote insightfully about marriage, fatherhood, and family life.[40] He recognized how easily the these relationships could be distorted

[37] Marcel discusses the influence of Americans like Royce, William James, and William Ernest Hocking in his 1961 James Lectures at Harvard, which were published as *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963). On Marcel's debts to American philosophy, and his influence in turn on the American philosopher Henry Bugbee, see David Rodick, *Gabriel Marcel and American Philosophy: The Religious Dimension of Experience* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

[38] See Marcel's autobiography *Awakenings,* trans. Peter S. Rogers (Marquette, WI: Marquette UP, 2003).

[39] See Marcel, "Presence and Immortality," 229-244.

[40] See "The Mystery of the Family" and "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood" in *Homo Viator,* 68-14. See also 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/

by an exploitative "having," but he also knew from experience the possibilities of communion and creative fidelity within them.

Christianity also shaped Marcel's philosophy. His account of *disponibilité* echoes 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 argues 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 here of the first epistle of 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, 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 saw egotism and exploitation as perennial human dangers, but he also worried about emergent forms of reductionism in the modern world. [41] Along with contemporaries like Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno, Marcel feared the ascendency of an instrumental rationality, one that threatened to reduce all value to use value or, to use Marcel's terms, to privilege "having" over "being." Yet Marcel warned that it was not just instrumental rationality, but also the passions that could yield distorting abstractions or reductions. He saw this at work in modern ideologies, and in particular in fascism and communism, with their propaganda and

[41] For studies that forefront Marcel's social criticism and ethics, see Jill Graper Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope: Evil, God and Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) and 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. See also Sally Fischer, "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), 24-44. Fischer explores how Marcel offers an "ethics of care" and brings his thought into conversation with that of Luce Irigaray.

caricatures of enemies. Marcel railed broadly against how ideology depends on reductionism. In his 1949-50 Gifford lectures, "The Mystery of Being," Marcel refers to the Rumanian C. Virgil Gheorghiu's 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.[42] The young man escapes to the Americans, who at first welcome him but then, upon discovering he is Rumanian, put him in prison because "Rumanians are the enemy, ergo."[43] In each of these cases, ideology reduces the singular, complex young man to a cipher.

Marcel also worried about the reductionism inherent in spreading bureaucracies, in their tendency to reduce humans to "datum" in a "dossier."[44] His World War I experience in the Information Service influenced him in this regard. When Marcel was researched a missing soldier, he was dealing with a name and a few bits of information on an index cards. 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 saw how the Nazis, in World War II concentration camps, utilized this to horrifying effect through "techniques of degradation" designed to psychologically infiltrate detainees, to make them see themselves as valueless.[45] After the war, Marcel was sensitive to the 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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[42] 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).
[43] Ibid.
[44] One could perhaps see Marcel as anticipating, within a very different philosophical framework, some of Michel Foucault's analyses of "biopolitics."
[45] See Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society,* trans. G.S. Fraser (South Bend: Gateway, N.D.), 37-75.

Marcel was also worried about a modern tendency to reduce "mysteries" to "problems."[46] This is another key distinction in Marcel's writings. 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 in the depths of our being, but it also reaches beyond us. While a problem can be solved, a mystery can only be navigated in light of the concrete situation and the people involved. Moderns have become adept at solving technical problems. Marcel acknowledges that this has yielded many goods, from antibiotics in medicine to indoor plumbing. While Marcel points out that it has yielded nuclear bombs as well, he is not simply anti-modern or anti-technology.[47] The danger is not techniques or problem-solving per say. The danger is how our facility with and constant use of techniques encourage a tendency to reduce mysteries to problems. As noted, bureaucracies usually deal in the latter. They tend to reduce the mystery of the human person to a reductive datum, to manage this datum with techniques. A similar dynamic is visible in educational bureaucracies, where students are largely taught to solve problems rather than navigate mysteries, where the students themselves are usually treated as 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 Dickens' Gradgrind is a caricature of modern educational theories but a telling one nonetheless.[48] A mystery like death is often reduced to a biomedical problem. It is to be delayed as long as possible and thought about as little as possible rather than as an inevitable mystery to be confronted. Marcel feared that we

[46] Marcel recurs to this distinction throughout his philosophy. See, for instance, Marcel, "An Outline of a Concrete Philosophy," 68-69. See also the chapter on this distinction in Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel,* 30-50.
[47] Marcel claimed that, we now live in an "eschatological age" given humans' technological capacity to destroy life on earth. See Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society,* 72.
[48] See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1,* 23-24

were losing our ability or willingness to accompany others as they approached death because of this reduction. Medicine itself becomes increasingly reductive, with hospitals serving as "the inspection bench or the repair shop."[49] Love is reduced to "the will to live, the will to power, the *libido,* etc."[50] The most basic ontological mystery, the mystery of being itself, is either forgotten (as Heidegger noted) or misunderstood as a physics problem. An inarticulacy about mysteries seems to attend the increased facility in problem-solving. Moderns 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 one is struck by the beauty of the natural world.

Marcel feared that the "problematic man" of his day was losing not only the language to discuss mysteries but also rich and deep experiences of them. They were not masters of their techniques so much as mastered by them. Murdoch summed up a similar concern in an aphorism: "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble that picture."[51] Living in technocratic societies that reduce them to data points, humans increasingly see themselves as loose collections of disparate functions, of capabilities and problems. Marcel feared 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 an "ontological need," a desire for true communion with being in its depth, a desire for "fullness," remains even if it is greatly dulled.[52] Moderns often try and fail to meet this need via having, via consumption and dreams of

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[49] Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," 11.
[50] Ibid., 20.
[51] Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics" in *Existentialists and Mystics,* 75.
[52] On the ontological need, see Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Vol. II: Faith & Reality,* trans. René Hague (Chicago: Gateway, 1960), 37-57.

consumption. The marginalization of religion is important here for Marcel, since its language of mystery has been largely displaced by a more reductive language of problems. The question "Who am I?" is no longer answered with the mysterious "an image of God" but with a profession, a "function," and a set of basic biographical facts. Life is no longer imagined as a dramatic journey, quest, or pilgrimage but as a series of work weeks and weekends. For Marcel, the great task of philosophy is to help restore awareness of mysteries, to provide or renew a language for talking about them, to provide or renew the wisdom for navigating them.

Marcel could offer a dystopian and perhaps hyperbolic picture of "problematic man." He remained a philosopher of hope, though. Relationships of "communion" continue to form all the time, even in the most inauspicious of environments, and a wider renewal remains possible. Politically, Marcel saw atomization and centralization as two sides of the same coin, since both involve the hollowing out of the intermediate associations of civil society—family, communities, church.[53] Still, if he is something of a traditionalist in this regard, Marcel is hardly a hidebound one, since the emphasis repeatedly falls on the "creative" work of readjustment and renewal. The spectrum of Left and Right is limiting in regards to Marcel. He is better situated in relation to the Catholic personalists and to French thinkers like Raymond Aron. The Dreyfus Affair made Marcel a staunch critic of the anti-Semitism harbored in parts of the French Right, and he also continually critiqued its authoritarian proclivities. He was likewise critical of communism's technocratic authoritarianism. In the end, though, Marcel is less interested in 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

[53] 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.

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.