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BEING, MYSTERY AND FIDELITY: THE EXISTENTIAL PERSONALISM OF GABRIEL MARCEL IN A DISINCARNATE AGE

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Abstract

This article explores the existential personalism of Gabriel Marcel, highlighting his central philosophical themes of being, mystery, incarnation, availability (*disponibilité*), fidelity, and hope. In contrast to the atheistic existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which often concludes in despair, Marcel advances a theistic and relational philosophy rooted in presence, participation, and metaphysical depth. Marcel's distinction between "being" and "having" underlines the ethical and ontological divergence between objectifying, commodified modes of existence and the relational, incarnate experience of human life. Through the lens of mystery - distinguished from mere problems- Marcel affirms the sanctity and depth of lived realities like love, suffering, and death. His emphasis on the embodied self as a locus of presence offers a critique of the disincarnate tendencies of modernity, especially within a technologically driven culture. Fidelity and hope emerge in Marcel's work not as sentimental ideals, but as existential and metaphysical commitments that bind the self to the other and to transcendent meaning. *Disponibilité*, or availability, expresses the art of being truly present to another, resisting commodification and fostering genuine communion. By engaging with related thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Buber, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur, the paper situates Marcel within a broader philosophical tradition. Ultimately, it argues that Marcel's thought offers a vital corrective to contemporary forms of alienation and disconnection, illuminating a path toward a more humane, relational, and spiritually grounded understanding of existence.

Keywords: Gabriel Marcel, Existential Personalism, Being, Mystery, Incarnation, Availability Fidelity.

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Introduction: Marcel in the Shadow of Existentialism

Gabriel Marcel's existential personalism emerges as a distinctive voice in 20th-century existential philosophy, standing in sharp contrast to the dominant narratives shaped by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. While Sartre's atheistic existentialism begins with radical freedom in a universe devoid of meaning (Sartre, 1943), Marcel's thought is theistic, relational, and participatory. For Marcel, human existence is not a solitary confrontation with absurdity but a dialogical engagement with being, mediated through mystery, presence, and hope (Marcel, 1949). Marcel called his philosophy a "philosophy of the concrete," emphasizing lived experience over abstract theorizing (Marcel, 1964). He was deeply influenced by phenomenology and personalism, sharing intellectual kinship with thinkers like Martin Buber, Emmanuel Mounier, and Edith Stein. Marcel's insistence on embodied subjectivity and interpersonal communion makes him a key figure in bridging existentialism and Christian philosophy, much like Søren Kierkegaard before him. Unlike Camus, who perceived life as an absurd confrontation between human longing and an indifferent universe (Camus, 1942), Marcel believed in the sacramentality of being. He offered a vision in which human suffering, love, and death were not meaningless but invitations to deeper participation in the mystery of existence.

Being vs. Having: Marcel's Ontological Distinction

A defining contribution of Gabriel Marcel to existential philosophy is his ontological differentiation between "being" (*être*) and "having" (*avoir*), first elaborated in his seminal work *Being and Having* (1949). Marcel posits that modern existence is increasingly governed by the logic of possession, appropriation, and utility. The mode of "having" reflects an objectifying relationship to the world in which persons, ideas, and even emotions are reduced to things to be controlled, accumulated, or consumed. In contrast, the mode of "being" signals a deeper, participatory engagement with reality. To exist authentically is not to own, master, or dominate, but to enter into communion with others and with being itself. Marcel describes being as inherently mysterious and interpersonal; it is something we encounter, not something we manipulate. As he puts it, "I am not my body in the way that I have a car; I am my body in a much more intimate and mysterious sense" (Marcel, 1951). This distinction has significant ethical and spiritual implications. The world of "having" fosters alienation, competition, and instrumental relationships, while the world of "being" nurtures reverence, presence, and vulnerability. Marcel warns that the technological age, with its emphasis on efficiency and control, deepens the dominance of "having" at the expense of being, thereby creating what he calls a "broken world" (Marcel, 1951).

Marcel's insights resonate with the concerns of other major philosophers. Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1927), critiques the forgetfulness of Being in modern metaphysics and calls for a return to an originary understanding of Dasein as being-in-the-world. Although Heidegger's approach is more ontologically abstract, both thinkers converge on the view that modernity has lost touch with a deeper, non-instrumental reality. Similarly, Erich Fromm, in *To Have or To Be?* (1976), echoes Marcel's critique by distinguishing two modes of existence: one based on ownership and consumption, the other on authenticity and relational openness. While Fromm's framework is more psychological and social, it supports Marcel's philosophical and spiritual vision. Furthermore, Simone Weil's reflections in *Gravity and Grace* (1952) align with Marcel's concerns. Weil critiques the reduction of persons to functional roles and pleads for attention to the sacredness of human dignity. She emphasizes that true value cannot be quantified or possessed - it must be received with humility, a stance congruent with Marcel's metaphysics of being. In sum, Marcel's distinction between being and having is not merely semantic or conceptual - it is ontological, ethical, and existential. It

challenges us to discern whether our lives are guided by the logic of control or the invitation to communion. His thought calls us to rediscover a mode of existence rooted in openness, participation, and fidelity to the mystery of being itself.

Mystery and Problem: A Metaphysical Clarification

Central to Marcel's metaphysical and existential reflections is his distinction between the categories of "problem" and "mystery." A problem, according to Marcel, is a question that lies outside the subject and is susceptible to solution through analytical reasoning and technical mastery. A mystery, by contrast, envelops the subject; it cannot be detached from one's lived experience or reduced to a formula. In *The Mystery of Being* (1950), Marcel writes, "A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data," meaning that the very act of engaging with a mystery transforms the one who engages. This distinction is not merely epistemological but deeply ontological. Problems demand resolution and control, fitting into the framework of scientific and technological reasoning that characterizes the modern world. Mysteries, however, must be dwelt in, approached with reverence, and inhabited with the whole self. Love, death, suffering, fidelity, and hope are not problems to be solved but mysteries to be experienced and honored. Marcel contends that an overreliance on technical rationality leads to the erosion of the domain of mystery and, by extension, the spiritual core of human life (Marcel, 1950).

This insight finds resonance in other philosophical traditions. Michael Polanyi, in *Personal Knowledge* (1958), distinguishes between tacit and explicit knowing, insisting that the most important forms of understanding - such as scientific intuition or moral judgment - depend on a participatory form of knowledge that transcends mere propositional logic. Similarly, Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923) makes a parallel distinction between the "I-It" relation, which objectifies and manipulates, and the "I-Thou" relation, which recognizes and reveres the other as a mystery to be encountered rather than a thing to be known. Marcel's concern with the loss of mystery also aligns with the work of Edith Stein, particularly in her early phenomenological writings on empathy. In *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), Stein emphasizes that genuine empathy is not a matter of analytical categorization but a deep engagement with the irreducible otherness of the person. Empathy, like mystery, requires participation, not calculation. In contemporary terms, Marcel's distinction offers a compelling critique of technocratic modernity. By treating human life as a set of solvable problems - whether in education, healthcare, or interpersonal relations - modern systems often strip away the dignity and sacredness that come from acknowledging the mysterious depth of the human person. As Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Expulsion of the Other* (2018), modern society's drive for transparency and efficiency leaves little room for the opacity and depth of mystery, thereby flattening the existential horizon. Thus, Marcel's metaphysical distinction serves as a call to recover an attitude of awe and humility before the depths of human existence. In affirming mystery, we affirm not ignorance but reverent participation in what transcends us. Marcel's metaphysics is, ultimately, a spiritual ethic - an invitation to dwell within mystery rather than to flee it.

The Embodied Self and the Crisis of Incarnation

In his critique of modernity, Gabriel Marcel consistently highlights the depersonalization and disincarnation of the human subject - a process by which the body is reduced to an object among objects and the person becomes estranged from their own embodiment. For Marcel, the self is not a disembodied consciousness or an isolated ego but an incarnate being whose body is a fundamental mode of presence and relationality. In contrast to Cartesian dualism, Marcel insists that "I am my body" and not merely that "I have a body" (Marcel, 1951). This

affirmation of embodiment is essential to his existential personalism. Marcel's concern with the crisis of incarnation is particularly relevant in the context of technological modernity, where human interactions are increasingly mediated by abstract systems and digital platforms. The body is often seen as a tool, a commodity, or a site of manipulation, rather than a sacrament of personal presence. Marcel warns that this reduction leads to the erosion of the human capacity for communion. As he observes, "when the body becomes a thing, the person becomes anonymous" (Marcel, 1962).

His views find parallels in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who similarly rejects the objectification of the body and argues in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) that our primary mode of being-in-the-world is through embodied perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not simply a biological mechanism but the very condition of possibility for experience, thought, and intersubjectivity. Marcel's understanding of incarnation resonates with this view, yet is more overtly spiritual: the body is not just a site of perception, but a site of communion, of presence, of availability to others and to God. Moreover, the crisis of embodiment that Marcel diagnoses is not merely philosophical but cultural and ethical. The contemporary culture of disincarnation manifests in practices that deny the body's integrity - ranging from virtual disembodiment and cosmetic commodification to systems that marginalize or devalue those whose bodies are aged, disabled, or non-normative. Marcel's call to recover the dignity of the incarnate self challenges these tendencies, insisting that to love and be loved requires the courage to be present in and through one's body. Emmanuel Levinas also offers an important complement to Marcel's thought. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas emphasizes the ethical significance of the face-to-face encounter, which discloses the irreducible alterity of the other. This ethical immediacy presupposes embodiment - it is through the body that the other speaks, suffers, and calls us to responsibility. Marcel, similarly, emphasizes that ethical and spiritual availability is not abstract but incarnate: to be available to the other is to be bodily present, not just cognitively alert. Thus, Marcel's philosophy of the embodied self provides a crucial counter-narrative to the mechanistic and virtual tendencies of our age. It is a call to reinhabit the body as a place of mystery, vulnerability, and communion. To be a person is to be incarnate - not as a limiting condition, but as a gift that enables the fullness of presence and participation in the mystery of being.

Fidelity and Hope: Existential Virtues in Relationship

For Gabriel Marcel, fidelity and hope are not merely psychological attitudes or social conventions but ontological virtues rooted in the metaphysical structure of human being. In a world characterized by transience, fragmentation, and objectification, these existential virtues serve as pathways to authentic interpersonal communion and spiritual transcendence. Marcel explores these themes extensively in *Homo Viator* (1951), where he portrays the human being as a "wayfarer," one who journeys through the ambiguities of existence sustained by the interior disposition of hope and fidelity. Fidelity, in Marcel's thought, is the affirmation of presence over time. It is a form of constancy that transcends mere obligation or duty; rather, it is a creative and loving commitment to the other, even in the face of change, suffering, or absence. Marcel writes, "To be faithful is to remain available to the other even when the other is no longer present" (Marcel, 1964). Fidelity is thus intimately linked to memory and promise, grounding the self in a relational matrix that resists the dehumanizing pull of temporality and isolation.

Hope, on the other hand, is not mere optimism or a psychological coping mechanism. It is a metaphysical act, an expression of trust in the ultimate meaningfulness of being. Marcel describes hope as "an openness to the transcendent" (Marcel, 1951), a readiness to receive what cannot be guaranteed or controlled. Unlike despair - which closes off the future and

isolates the self-hope expands the horizon of existence and sustains the soul's availability to being, to love, and to God. These themes find resonance in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, especially in *Works of Love* (1847), where fidelity and hope are presented as Christian virtues that demand inwardness, sacrifice, and spiritual endurance. Likewise, Paul Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another* (1992), discusses the narrative identity of the self as forged through promises and fidelity over time, echoing Marcel's insight that the self becomes truly personal only through faithful commitment. Marcel's emphasis on these virtues is also a critique of a society marked by utilitarianism and disposability. In a culture where relationships are often seen as transactional and time-bound, fidelity appears countercultural - a radical affirmation of the other's irreplaceable worth. Similarly, hope challenges the dominant narratives of despair and nihilism, offering instead a posture of receptivity and spiritual openness. In pastoral and therapeutic contexts, Marcel's insights have significant implications. Fidelity grounds the possibility of enduring love and covenantal relationships, while hope sustains healing and moral resilience. Both virtues embody Marcel's broader philosophical vision: that to be human is to dwell within mystery, to remain present in love, and to journey forward in trust.

Availability (*Disponibilité*) and the Art of Presence

In Marcel's existential vocabulary, *disponibilité* - translated as "availability" or "readiness to respond" - is a central concept that deepens his vision of the human person as one called into relational communion. This availability is not mere physical presence or utilitarian readiness to help; rather, it is a spiritual and ontological posture characterized by receptivity, openness, and fidelity to the mystery of the other. Marcel defines *disponibilité* as the condition of "being inwardly disposed to respond to the call of the other," and he situates it as the existential foundation for authentic intersubjectivity (Marcel, 1949). Availability is closely tied to the ethical imperative of presence. In a world increasingly saturated with distraction, mediated interactions, and superficial connections, Marcel's call to availability is a radical ethic of attentiveness. To be truly available is to make oneself vulnerable to the other's need, to suspend self-interest, and to practice an interior silence that welcomes the unpredictable and unprogrammable. In *The Mystery of Being* (1950), Marcel writes: "We are only present to someone to the extent that we are inwardly free for them - that we are not preoccupied, not absorbed in ourselves."

The spiritual depth of *disponibilité* invites comparison with the phenomenological ethic of Emmanuel Levinas, who insists in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) that the ethical subject must be infinitely responsible for the face of the other. While Levinas emphasizes asymmetrical responsibility, Marcel offers a more mutual vision, where availability is a two-way openness in which both persons risk encounter and transformation. Likewise, Martin Buber's concept of the "I-Thou" relationship parallels Marcel's *disponibilité*. In Buber's terms, one must be fully present, without instrumentalizing the other, to achieve true dialogue. For Marcel, this dialogue is undergirded by availability, a cultivated attentiveness that allows communion to emerge within the unpredictable rhythm of real human presence. *Disponibilité* is also linked to the practice of hospitality. As Henri Nouwen notes in *Reaching Out* (1975), true hospitality is not about offering comfort or control but about creating space where the other can be fully themselves. This echoes Marcel's insight that availability is not self-effacing servility, but a spiritual strength rooted in presence, attentiveness, and hope. It demands moral discipline, requiring the self to resist the compulsions of busyness, control, and fear.

In applied settings such as pastoral ministry, psychotherapy, or friendship, Marcel's vision of *disponibilité* becomes deeply practical. Therapists who offer attentive silence and empathetic presence mirror the kind of availability Marcel envisions. Pastors and spiritual directors who resist the temptation to offer quick fixes and instead accompany others through

mystery and suffering enact the very posture Marcel articulates. True friendship, for Marcel, is marked not by entertainment or shared interests but by sustained availability - a presence that remains, listens, and honors the other's mystery. In this way, *disponibilité* resists the objectifying and mechanistic tendencies of our technological culture. It serves as an existential counterweight to commodification, reminding us that persons are not problems to be fixed or resources to be used, but mysteries to be encountered. Marcel's vision of the human person, therefore, is deeply incarnational: it calls for presence over productivity, communion over calculation, and fidelity over efficiency. Ultimately, *disponibilité* is an expression of hope and faith - a trust that being-with the other, even without answers or solutions, has intrinsic value. It is through availability that the self transcends solitude and touches the transcendent in and through the presence of another.

Conclusion: Marcel's Relevance in a Technological Age

Gabriel Marcel's existential personalism offers a profoundly humanistic response to the challenges of modernity. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, social alienation, and metaphysical amnesia, Marcel's emphasis on being, mystery, incarnation, fidelity, hope, and availability reorients philosophical attention toward the sacredness of personhood and presence. His critique of depersonalization and technological objectification speaks directly to contemporary issues of disconnection, commodification, and the loss of spiritual depth. The postmodern world increasingly values speed, efficiency, and abstraction over depth, attentiveness, and relational integrity. Marcel counters this cultural drift with a vision rooted in ontological communion. Rather than accept the fragmentation of the self into functional roles or data points, he invites us to reclaim the embodied self as a locus of mystery and presence. Against the culture of control and calculation, Marcel proposes the existential disciplines of availability, hope, and fidelity - virtues that anchor human existence in love and transcendence.

Marcel's thought is especially relevant in light of current trends in artificial intelligence, surveillance capitalism, and digital mediation, which risk further distancing persons from the lived realities of embodiment and interpersonal encounter. His insistence on the irreplaceability of the personal - on the uniqueness of every "Thou" and the sacredness of human presence - stands as a philosophical and spiritual bulwark against such dehumanizing forces. Moreover, Marcel's metaphysical sensitivity to mystery offers a counterweight to both scientism and nihilism. Rather than reducing reality to what can be explained, controlled, or commodified, Marcel affirms a participatory ontology that restores wonder, reverence, and openness to the transcendent. In this, he aligns with a broader tradition of thinkers - from Kierkegaard and Buber to Edith Stein and Charles Taylor - who view the human subject not as an isolated ego but as a being-in-relationship, capable of grace, presence, and ethical transformation. In sum, Marcel's existential personalism offers not only a critique of modern reductionism but a constructive philosophical path forward. It calls us to rediscover the concrete, the relational, and the mysterious as central to what it means to be human. In doing so, Marcel remains a vital guide for our time - a thinker who helps us to remember what we risk forgetting: that to exist is not merely to function, but to love, to hope, to remain faithful, and to be present.

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