

**PERSONHOOD AND THE MYSTERY OF
BEING:
MARCEL'S ONTOLOGY OF
COMMUNION, PRESENCE, AND
AVAILABILITY**

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Am I a number or a person? The need to explore and to understand the nature of personhood is at a critical watershed in our history. There are several reasons for this: the moral conflicts over abortion, euthanasia, sexual orientation, capital punishment, political correctness, and genetic engineering; the denial of personhood (*i.e.*, human dignity) in the expanding pockets of bigotry throughout the world; the increasing destruction of persons in acts of violence, even extending to the frighthening phenomenon of ten-year-olds murdering toddlers; the disturbing increase in drug use and suicide among teenagers; the bureaucratic reduction of persons to statistics; the eroding of the spiritual self and community in a hedonistic, narcissistic, and secular society; the dependence on social and government agencies to fill the gaps created by the loss of family ties and individual responsibility; the manipulative power of mass media; and the social-science reductions of persons to problems of having.

While there are voices who speak out against this rising tide of dehumanization and depersonalization, one of the most important goes almost unknown in the United States: Gabriel Marcel. His

insightful warnings about the dangers of technology and the reduction of persons to problems (*i.e.*, persons reduced to things in the world of having) are almost prophetic since they were written decades ago. But Marcel offers more than just warnings; he provides a hopeful vision of the mystery of personhood as emerging from experiences of availability, communion, and presence.

The preceding words were composed during a late Friday evening flight from Nashville, Tennessee, to Washington, D.C. On Saturday morning, as I wandered around the D.C. Mall area, I encountered two radically different experiences of persons: the Holocaust Museum, which testifies to one of the most chilling reductions of persons to things (*i.e.*, things to "be disposed of") in recent history, and the Viet Nam War Memorial, which witnesses to the mystery of that sacred relationship between a person and his name. As I encountered each, Marcel's warnings about the problem of having and his promises concerning the mystery of being provided excellent ontological foundations for exploring these radically different views of persons. I turn first to Marcel and then to the two memorials.

According to Marcel, a person cannot have a body, at least not in the same sense as having (possessing) a car or a house. While one cannot have a body, it is one's body that provides part of the foundation for having, a point that Marcel makes in *Being and Having*: "I cannot therefore say that I have a body, at least not properly speaking, but the mysterious relation uniting me to my body is at the foundation of all my powers of having . . ."¹ Marcel's insight is twofold. First, the relationship that exists between a person and his body is a mystery, not a problem, *i.e.*, not a relationship of having. Having requires objectification, reduction, and disposability. So mysteriously intimate is the relationship between a person and his body that it cannot, in a healthy manner, be treated like an object: *e.g.*, one cannot dispose of it in the same manner that he can dispose of an old car. Certainly there are mental aberrations which result in a person's treating his body as a thing: masochism may be a prime example. However, for the healthy personality the body is more than a thing. If

¹*Being and Having*, tr. K. Farrer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 84. Hereafter BH.

Marcel is correct on this point, it follows that it is both unhealthy and immoral for any person to treat another's body as an object or a thing, which is exactly the mode of having that is fundamental to slavery, bigotry, and pornography.

Second, fundamental to any act of having which extends to persons is the reduction of a person to a thing, the power to dispose of things, and techniques of degradation, which function to destroy self-respect and reduce persons to "waste products," a point Marcel discusses in *Man Against Mass Society*.

. . . I understand by "techniques of degradation" a whole body of methods deliberately put into operation in order to attack and destroy in human persons . . . their self-respect, and . . . to transform them little by little into mere human waste products, conscious of themselves as such, and in the end forced to despair of themselves . . . in the very depths of their souls.²

The "techniques of degradation" are many and so well known that they need not be examined at this point. The spiritual-psychological-emotional cost to the person, now the thing who can be disposed of, is also well known. What is not as well known, however, is the tragedy of the "haver", the possessor, the disposer: a tragedy seen when we realize that to possess is to be possessed.

In a passage in *Creative Fidelity*, Marcel hints at the deeper "tragedy of having" for the haver, the possessor: "Why, then, did I write: 'Whatever can be catalogued is an occasion for despair?' an observation which I believe is very important since in it may be discerned the root of what I have been led to call the tragedy of having"³ Having involves cataloguing, *i.e.*, reducing to definitive categories. While both bigotry and slavery are excellent examples of reducing persons to catalogued things, the Nazi cataloguing of Jewish prisoners daily added to the "Final Solution" offers an

²*Man Against Mass Society*, tr. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1967), p. 42. Hereafter MMS.

³*Creative Fidelity*, tr. R. Rosthal (New York: Noonday Pr., 1964), p. 70. Hereafter CF.

especially chilling example of the reduction of persons to *things to be disposed of*, of the technological *problem* of finding more efficient and cost-effective means of *disposing* of bodies, and of the tragedy of *having*.

The manner in which the Nazi was also a victim of the tragedy of having is worthy of additional comment. At the very moment that the SS member was disposing of the bodies of Jewish prisoners, he was disposing of his own human spirit, that is, he was reducing his soul to a thing possessed by his distorted ideas, values, and beliefs. This is why the extreme passion for possessing is ultimately one of the forms that fanaticism takes, as Marcel recognizes in *Being and Having*:

I am thinking in particular of such pseudo-possession as *my ideas and opinions*. In this case, the word "have" takes on a meaning which is . . . threatening. The more I treat my own ideas . . . as something *belonging* to me--and so as something I am proud of--the more surely will these ideas . . . tend, by their very inertia . . . to exercise a tyrannical power over me; that is the principle of fanaticism in all its shapes. (*BH*, 166)

Fanaticism is always reductive, that is, the fanatic necessarily catalogues and abstracts: ideas become possessions, truth becomes inertia, and persons are reduced to "disposable" things, a disposability tragically evidenced in the Holocaust Museum.

There is, however, another realm of personhood: the realm of being. One of the avenues into this realm is through the mystery of the sacred relationship between a person and his name. In a social context, everyone has a name. Certainly names may have different meanings in different social contexts and may even be changed, but everyone has a name. Even though one may change his name as well as change his automobile, a person does not have a name in the same way that he has a car. According to Marcel, ". . . the name lies at the intersection . . . of being and having. It signals more than it signifies the unique place which belongs to the individual in the whole in which he has to find his place and discover the type of creative activity . . . which is his own".⁴ A person's name is not only something

⁴*The Mystery of Being, Vol. I: Reflection and Mystery*, tr. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Gateway Edition, 1960), p. 62. Hereafter MBI.

that *he has*--it separates him from others--but it is also part of *who he is*. For example, one's name on a class roll can be treated objectively when the teacher calls it and expects the response "present." On the other hand, when a loved one calls a person's name, it becomes more than just an object; indeed, it becomes a call to experience a presence, a mystery. Understood from this perspective, it is not surprising to note that one of the techniques of degradation basic to bigotry is the denial of the value of a person's name. As Marcel indicates, a name lies at an intersection that divides persons into things or mysteries.

In silent, agonizing, and ineffable sacredness the Viet Nam War Memorial witnesses to the mysteries of communion, presence, and availability that help to create the depth of personhood, especially as that depth is revealed in the meaning and value of a name. The passionate, heartrending engraving on black marble of the names of thousands of young men and women who died in the killing fields of Viet Nam constitute the controversial Wall of the Memorial. Tears, memories, fears, loves, hopes, longings, griefs, loneliness, anger, and, above all, remembered intimacies are evoked in the presence of the Viet Nam War Memorial. As the Memorial grows to a height several feet beyond one's head, the terrible list of names goes on and on--the dreadful and tragic loss is overpowering. As one looks at the names, something amazing and mysterious happens: suddenly he sees his face reflected in the polished black marble along with the ongoing list of names. In this experience a poignant truth is revealed: as human beings we share a solidarity that makes the loss of any human life an act that diminishes us all. The Viet Nam War Memorial is a testimony to the mysteries of communion, presence, and availability that are encountered through love, a love that reaches out even to those who are beyond space and time.

In Marcel's terms, the Viet Nam War Memorial indicates that the significance of personhood is to be found in communion, in the "We" rather than the Cartesian "I":

At the root of existence there is first the recognition of a "Here I am!"--*exclamation as the soul of the existential* But this "Here I am!" is treated as the manifestation of a "for itself," The "for itself" can be understood only as a participation: to

exist is to co-exist.⁵

From the moment of conception, a co-participation, the human being *is always related to something other than himself: to be means to be with*. In *Creative Fidelity*, Marcel comments on how fundamentally *being* is dependent upon *being with* when he writes: ". . . I communicate effectively with myself only insofar as I communicate with the other person . . ." (*CF*, 34). Even self-knowledge and communication depend upon the existence of the other.⁶

In his lecture on "Ontological Exigence" at the University of Aberdeen, Marcel begins by restating the significance of communion (intersubjectivity, *i.e.*, *internal* relationships between persons) for human existence:

We have already seen that the more my existence takes on the character of including others, the narrower becomes the gap which separates it from being; the more, in other words, I am There is a sense in which it is literally true to say that the more exclusively it is I who exist, the less do I exist; and conversely, the more I free myself from the prison of egocentricism, the more do I exist.⁷

In other words, Marcel's metaphysic of being is "essentially anti-cartesian": "But to take up such a position immediately throws into relief the essentially anti-cartesian character of [my] metaphysic . . . [It] is a metaphysic of *we are* as opposed to a metaphysic of *I think*" (*MBII*, 10). Unlike so much of modern metaphysics, influenced by Descartes' *cogito* (the "I that thinks"), Marcel is claiming that the fundamental human experience and awareness of existence is

⁵*Presence and Immortality*, tr. M.A. Machado (Pittsburgh: Duquesne U. Pr., 1967), p. 205. Hereafter PI.

⁶ If loneliness is the absence of meaningful, communicating human relationships, and suicide is the result of loneliness combined with hopelessness, it is not surprising that those who work with attempted suicides find that they have great difficulty communicating not only with others but also with themselves.

⁷*The Mystery of Being, Vol. II: Faith and Reality*, tr. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Gateway Edition, 1960), pp. 37-8. Hereafter MBII.

communal: "Would not the true existential movement always be the gaining of an access to a 'we,' or to an 'ours'. . . Existence in its higher forms is inseparable from intersubjectivity" (*PI*, 201-02).

By beginning with a metaphysics of *we* rather than the Cartesian starting point of *I*, Marcel avoids the paths of both dualism and solipsism into which much Cartesian thinking leads. There is no lonely, isolated *I* that is the foundation of metaphysics; rather the *we* is already in each of us, in Marcel's words:

. . . the intersubjective is really within the subject himself, that each one is for himself a "we," that he can be himself only in being many, and that value is possible only on this condition . . . My own [loved ones] are not only represented in me, they are part of my very being (. . . I am neither *alone*, nor *one*). (*PI*, 210)

It is the *we* in each one of us that makes communion (intersubjectivity) possible. When the *we* that is in each one of us responds to the gift of intimacy, Marcel states that a communion is evoked that frees us from the power of egocentrism and creates an "openness" (availability) and "spirituality" that transcend even communion:

There can be no authentic depth except where there can be real communion; but there will never be any real communion between individuals centred on themselves . . . The very notion of intersubjectivity presupposes a reciprocal openness between individuals without which no kind of spirituality is conceivable. (*MMS*, 267)

Many philosophies, theologies, political ideologies, and ethical systems have affirmed the dignity of human life. Often this *human dignity* has been based on the affirmation of persons, *i.e.*, affirming the value of each individual life. While affirmation of the individual person is a respectable value, to base human dignity on the affirmation of the self is to commit another Cartesian mistake. The value of the individual person is not based on the self (the *I*) but must be founded upon our shared humanness, *i.e.*, upon the *we* that is within each person. In *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, Marcel argues that human dignity is grounded "not on the affirmation of the self and the pretensions it exudes, but on a stronger

consciousness of the living tie which unites all men".⁸ In other words, the *we* within takes us beyond ourselves, *i.e.*, experiences of communion provide a spiritual foundation for transcending the self-contained ego.

Inevitably, when a *thou* relationship (communion) is not maintained, the relationship deteriorates into uncertainty, doubt, lies, jealousy, anger, and, sometimes, hate. On the other hand, when a *thou* relationship (*i.e.*, a relationship of intimacy between two persons) is established and maintained, the consequences are self-discovery, joy, growth, love, belief, freedom, and hope. All of these consequences are experiences of persons as mysteries rather than problems (things). For Marcel, the I-thou relationship (communion) is essential for the growth and nurture of the person: "The indistinctness of the I and thou . . . does not imply the existence of a neutral environment in which one can lose oneself and abdicate, so to speak; on the contrary, it is a kind of vital milieu for the soul from which the soul draws its strength and where it is renewed by testing itself" (*CF*, 35). In order to explore the nature of an I-thou relationship (communion), it is necessary to examine Marcel's thoughts on presence and availability because communion is actualized through both.

There are several issues that Marcel explores concerning presence, availability, and communion. First, although there is a human tendency to treat presence as a problem capable of analysis, definition, and measurement, a true experience of presence goes beyond the problematic realms of having and techniques. Marcel addresses this tendency in *Being and Having*: "Consider presence as something of which I cannot dispose in any way; which I cannot possess. There is a constant temptation to turn it into an object, or to treat it as an aspect of myself" (*BH*, 146). Either temptation, to turn presence into an object (a problem) or into an aspect of the self, distorts the nature of presence. In Marcel's words, ". . . as soon as there is *presence*, we have gone beyond the realm of problem" (*BH*, 115). To recognize that presence cannot be treated as an object (as a problem) is to realize that presence is not a possession of the self (the

⁸*The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Howard U. Pr., 1963), p. 135. Hereafter EBD.

subject). Rather presence is an encounter between two subjects: ". . . there cannot be an encounter . . . except between beings endowed with a certain inwardness. . ." (MBI, 169). *Encounter* is the key term here. Problems are confronted, *i.e.*, placed *in front of* one; presences are encountered (*en* = within), a point Marcel clarifies in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*:

When I say that a being is granted to me as a presence or as a being . . . this means that I am unable to treat him as if he were merely placed in front of me; between him and me there arises a relationship which, in a sense, surpasses my awareness of him; he is not only before me, he is also within me . . .⁹

Second, presence cannot be separated from mystery (the reverse may also be true), and every experience of presence is also one of communion (intersubjectivity). In his Aberdeen Lectures, Marcel describes the necessary relation between presence and mystery:

. . . we discern an organic connection between presence and mystery. For, in the first place, every presence is mysterious and, in the second place, it is very doubtful whether the word "mystery" can be properly used in the case where a presence is not, at the very least, making itself somehow felt. (MBI, 266)

Marcel indicates in several passages that the mystery of presence is the mystery of communion. The following passage from *Presence and Immortality* is a representative example:

. . . *presence is intersubjective*. It cannot but be interpreted as the expression of a will which seeks to reveal itself to me; but this revelation supposes that I do not put an obstacle in its way. In short, the subject is treated, not like an object, but as the magnetic center of presence. At the root of presence there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is regarded by me as taking me into account. Now, by definition, an object does not take me into account; I do not

⁹*The Philosophy of Existentialism*, tr. M. Harari (New York: The Citadel Pr., 1956), p. 38. Hereafter PE.

exist for it. (*PI* 153)

Because presence is inseparable from the mystery of communion (the reverse is also true), like any mystery it can be affirmed ("invoked or evoked") or denied (betrayed). In his Aberdeen Lectures, Marcel states that

. . . a presence must not be thought of as an object . . .
[A]presence is something which can only be gathered to oneself or shut out from oneself, be welcomed or rebuffed . . .
A presence can, in the last analysis, only be invoked or evoked . . . (*MBI*, 255-56)

In other words, presence can only be offered as a *free gift* and received as a *free offering*; thus, presence cannot be separated from availability.

Third, presence requires availability. Although presence cannot be measured or adequately defined (*i.e.*, turned into an abstraction), according to Marcel the experience of presence is revealed in those manifold ways that one person becomes available to another:

Presence is something which reveals itself immediately and unmistakably in a look, a smile, an intonation. . . . the person who is . . . [available] is the one who is capable of being with me with the whole of himself when I am in need . . . Presence involves a reciprocity which is excluded from any relation of subject to object . . . (*PE*, 40)

Because presence depends upon availability, it is something that cannot be claimed, demanded, forced, manufactured by willpower, or purchased. Presence can only be accepted as a *gift freely given*; in Marcel's words: "Presence is response to the act by which the subject opens himself to receive; in this sense it is the gift of oneself. Presence belongs only to the being who is capable of giving himself" (*PI*, 153). In other words, only persons are capable of availability. Things or persons reduced to things are incapable of availability. Interestingly, the two most debilitating forms of persons reduced to things are self-reductions: neither the narcissist nor the masochist is capable of availability.

Finally, presence is revelation. Not only does presence reveal communion, mystery, love, creativity, and availability, but it also reveals "me to myself," a theme Marcel emphasizes at Aberdeen: "When somebody's presence really does make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact" (*MBI*, 252-53). From Marcel's perspective, there is no "more fatal error" concerning the human personality than that made by both Descartes and Sartre: the reduction of persons to ego-states of thinking or individual actions and decisions. In *Homo Viator*, Marcel corrects this error by describing the personality (self) as a gift:

Maybe there is no more fatal error than that which conceives of the ego as the secret abode of originality. To get a better idea of this we must here introduce the wrongly discredited notion of gifts. The best part of my personality does not belong to me. I am in no sense the owner, only the trustee . . . Indeed, if we come to think of it, there is nothing in me which cannot or should not be regarded as a gift.¹⁰

Understood in this manner, the human person (personality) has, so to speak, two parents: inner urges, needs, instincts, understandings, genetics, and talents *and* those presences which creatively offer themselves in acts of communion. Only a fool claims to be a *self-made person*. Instead, our personalities (selves) are born and grow out of that intersubjective interaction between the inner self and other selves who become present to us and, therefore, become a part of us. In other words, we become persons through the mysteries of communion, availability, and presence, which are most clearly experienced in love, faith, hope, wonder, joy, and laughter.

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¹⁰*Homo Viator*, tr. E. Crawford (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 19. Hereafter HV.