

## **Gadamer, Marcel, and the Sense of Mystery**

**Paul Fairfield**

During the latter phase of Gadamer's career he would issue a series of intriguing remarks on the subject of global dialogue and solidarity which seemed to him not only a consequence of the general philosophical stance he had spent decades articulating but something of a pragmatic necessity in a time when western societies and an increasing portion of the world had become so thoroughly beholden to modern science and technology. As he expressed this point in the mid-1970s, "Just as we, in our overstimulated process of progress of our technological civilization, are blind to stable, unchanging elements of our social life together, so it could be with the reawakening consciousness of solidarity of a humanity that slowly begins to know itself as humanity, for this means knowing that it belongs together for better or for worse and that it has to solve the problem of its life on this planet. And for this reason I believe in the rediscovery of solidarities that could enter into the future society of humanity." The one thing needful in a scientific age is to achieve, in his words, "a new self-understanding of humanity," where this could be brought about by dialogical means if it could be achieved at all.<sup>1</sup>

A couple of decades later, an interviewer would ask Gadamer whether he shared Karl Jaspers' view that the future of humanity and of human rights in particular crucially depends upon what the latter was speaking of as philosophical faith and transcendence. Gadamer's negative reply is worth recalling: "We have to realize that the longing for transcendence that we have in our European thinking is secretly present everywhere and anywhere, and we must organize it in such a way that we can achieve comprehensively what, for instance, the Chinese have done with Shintoism. Is that too much to ask? How, then, could we do it? Well, perhaps we

are already capable of it—if the four great world religions could reconcile themselves to acknowledging transcendence as ‘the great unknown,’ then they might even be able to prevent the destruction of the earth’s surface with gas and chemicals. Besides, it’s the only way out—there is no other. We must enter into a conversation with the world religions. Maybe we have enough time; maybe we don’t—I don’t know. It might take a few centuries before it’s possible to universalize a form of human rights in the Christian sense, so to speak, that is, in the sense in which we were brought up.”<sup>2</sup>

The latter statement might strike us as remarkable considering that its author was not a religious believer in any obvious sense of the term and who when theological questions were put to him was inclined to be ambiguously skeptical.<sup>3</sup> Gadamer’s religious sensibility, as Jean Grondin has documented in his admirable biography, was curiously and almost purposely opaque, yet on the rather pressing question of whether humanity has a future, or one that we would wish to be a part of, it is in a global dialogue not of philosophers, academics, diplomats, or artists that Gadamer expressed hope but quite specifically of religions. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism would be its principal interlocutors, not the major representatives of nations or exponents of given political, philosophical, or cultural movements, even as the questions this raises are likely to strike us as unanswerable: why them, by which questions would such a conversation be oriented and in what settings would it occur, are a few of the more obvious. Gadamer, when he had reached the stage of life at which some may have looked to him as qualified to express an opinion on such matters, was not (quite) of the view that only a god can save us—however (and this is the interesting part), his ultimate hope lay quite specifically in “a religious dialogue about transcendence,” and if not exactly in Jaspers’ sense then in some other. In the same conversation in which he made this remark he would add the following: “I

would like to defend one single assertion—the idea that angst is a natural instinct that everyone possesses. Since we are in the highly unfortunate situation of having our survival depend on our behavior, we are deeply plagued by angst. So says the famous passage from Schelling that Heidegger so often quoted, ‘The angst of life drives creatures away from their center.’”<sup>4</sup>

In a related vein, Gadamer in one of his final interviews would express the view that “People cannot live without hope; that is the one thesis I would defend without any restriction.”<sup>5</sup> While on one hand it is unsurprising that a philosopher nearing the end of his life would, particularly when responding to interviewers’ questions, turn perhaps with a touch of wistfulness toward themes of transcendence, angst, and hope, on the other such sentiments are not inconsistent with Gadamer’s writings in which his age was merely in the double digits. Dialogue invariably presupposes what he had earlier called “a deep common accord,” and the kind of accord to which he was now appealing was overtly theological.<sup>6</sup> The “solidarity of a humanity that slowly begins to know itself as humanity,” if such a thing were indeed possible, would need to emerge from “stable, unchanging elements of our social life together,” and where these stable elements turn out to bear upon a “great unknown.” Again, we are on the threshold of religion: “I believe ... that only a dialogue among the different world religions can lead to mutual tolerance and respect and bring these minorities together—minorities who are really constituted on the basis of their religions. In Europe, just as in the rest of the world, only such a dialogue could lead to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.”<sup>7</sup>

Those of us who share a deep admiration for Gadamer’s work might wish he had lived even longer so that he might have developed these ideas further, given their obvious importance. What “great unknown” was he envisioning and how did he imagine this great dialogue of religions unfolding, or are such questions impossibly woolly? Grondin reports that “Gadamer’s

‘religious sensibility’ bespoke a dissatisfaction with the church, and yet an especially solid sense of human limits to which Plato’s neuter term ‘the divine’ gave appropriate expression.”<sup>8</sup> An accent on finitude and humility had long featured prominently in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and of course such notions need not carry a theological connotation. Plato’s “the divine” is not God, and Gadamer’s decided preference was always for Greek metaphors over biblical ones.

Nonetheless, many a theologian has found resources in Gadamer’s work for their own inquiries and Gadamer himself, while neither a theologian nor a believer, would sometimes find himself on the threshold (perhaps in the vestibule) of religious thought. To cite him once more on this theme, “I have nothing against theology, which, especially in Germany, played a large role within the political and cultural debate at the time of the Reformation and contributed very much to the honing and the refinement of sensibilities about religious, ethical, and philosophical problems, not to mention the origin of hermeneutics. I only want to warn of the misuse that one makes of a theological doctrine when it turns into an instrument of the imperialism of a church within a state.”<sup>9</sup> Inseparable from this honing of sensibilities is a “saying-further of a message that stands written,” which he spoke of as “a special task for the theologian.” If understanding in every case involves a saying or an operation of language, it falls to the theologian to clarify and elaborate upon what is written. There are limits to what is sayable undoubtedly, but where there is understanding, something that had been strange or unanticipated has been “brought ... into our linguistic world.”<sup>10</sup> Religious experience is not an exception to the general imperative in human experience to understand through speaking, and while speaking of the divine presents special and obvious difficulties it is in this direction that Gadamer looked as “the only way out.”

The theme of ecumenical dialogue is, of course, old and familiar within some theological circles, although to say that it has been slow to bear fruit would be an understatement. “We

must,” as Gadamer put it, “enter into a conversation with the world religions,” yet the monumental difficulty of the task confronts us immediately. How on earth could such an undertaking be carried out, and indeed are we not speaking of a hopeless task? Any “new self-understanding of humanity” is going to have to be achieved through inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue and transcend the vocabulary of scientific-technological rationality. We are back to the dreaded “how” question, and here I shall make bold to make one small suggestion only. This is that we listen anew to one of Gadamer’s French contemporaries, and one whom to my knowledge Gadamer never cited. This philosopher, as one may have surmised from the title of this paper, is Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). Hermeneutical reflection requires “that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome” through the medium of language, and if we would speak of the divine or of that which transcends knowledge in any ordinary connotation of the term, we are gesturing in the direction of mystery.<sup>11</sup> To gesture toward is not always to advance propositional claims, and Marcel was able to speak of mystery and of the sense of mystery in a way that may not have ensnared him in the kind of metaphysical and epistemological issues that can attend such claims. What light was Marcel able to shed on the vital questions of transcendence, mystery, and a humanity that is neither a wholly material being nor an agglomerated mass but a bearer of what he continued to call dignity? My suggestion will be that certain of his ideas here may point us further along the road to which Gadamer was gesturing.

Marcel too remained on the threshold of theological reflection, endeavoring to speak, however haltingly, of what Gadamer called “the conceptual opposition between faith and knowledge” as well as “the old opposition between mythos and logos.”<sup>12</sup> While the term “Christian existentialist” was pinned on Marcel by Jean-Paul Sartre in his early days, this easy

label does not begin to do justice to the richness and complexity of his work, as he often had occasion to point out. Toward the end of his life he would remark, “Since 1949 I’ve said on every occasion that I reject this tag, and more generally that I’m repelled by labels and ‘isms.’”<sup>13</sup> “Neo-Socratism” he would allow as a limited exception, but as labels go this one is decidedly open-ended, considering that “Socratism” is not Platonism if indeed it contains any intellectual content at all. More ethos than doctrine, Marcel’s neo-Socratism may be thought of as a relentless search for a wisdom that accentuates humility and finitude more than any given hypotheses and which stands within the mysteries and limit situations it strives to comprehend without transforming these into solvable problems. After his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1929, the theological undertones of this tradition would be apparent in more or less all of his philosophical works, although he did not wish to be classified straightforwardly as a Catholic philosopher for a number of reasons, among which is his view of the distinct vocations of the theologian and the philosopher.<sup>14</sup> If both could speak to the “fundamental situation” of humanity, the latter must make some effort (however imperfectly) to bracket one’s personal religious convictions or, at any rate, avoid presupposing these in advancing a properly philosophical case.<sup>15</sup> What Marcel was up to, one might say, in such major works as *The Mystery of Being*, *Man Against Mass Society*, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, and various others was to discover or often rediscover the conditions—at once ontological, existential, ethical, and at times political—that would make possible something like Gadamer’s “new self-understanding of humanity.” Without seeking anything as grand as a dialogue of the religions, or rehabilitating Plato’s “divine,” Marcel did afford us a clue to how we might begin to navigate this terrain or mediate the apparent chasm of mythos and logos by focusing on the concept of mystery and the sense of mystery which, like any sensibility, is not a hypothesis but a claim of a different order.

An analysis of Marcel's understanding of mystery begins with his well-known distinction between the domains of the mysterious and the problematic. An early formulation of a distinction at the heart of Marcel's philosophical project as a whole from *Being and Having* reads as follows: "In fact, it seems very likely that there is this essential difference between a problem and a mystery. A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as *a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity*. A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined: whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique. It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding, whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a kind of corruption of the intelligence."<sup>16</sup> There is much to unpack here, and it may be best clarified with reference to an example. What philosophers have long called the "problem of evil" is not a problem in Marcel's sense of the word but a mystery. A problem stands to the individual at arm's length, as the obstacle in my path; it lies "before me" or wholly outside me, and its being there reveals nothing about me but only about the situation in which I find myself. Anyone who ventured down this path would have encountered this obstacle, and it is solvable by means of a technique which is equally impersonal and objective. In the case of a mystery, the distinction between what is outside and what is within me evanesces entirely, as it belongs to the general condition in which I exist. Anything properly described as a mystery—from evil to joy, love, mortality, suffering, knowledge, hope, freedom, and the various limit situations that Jaspers spoke of—is something that each of us stands within, or under, rather than at arm's length, and no impersonal method of

reflection can rescue any one of us from this condition. In modern times our habitual tendency is to downgrade the mysteries that belong to our fundamental mode of being to problems, for which we hold out false hope that they may be remedied by means of techniques of one kind or other. Hence suffering in its various forms, as we often hear, is remediable by means of psychotherapy and pharmaceutical products, while the problem of evil is solvable through appropriate legal and institutional measures ranging from incarceration to hospitalization, and more psychotherapy and pharmaceutical products. On this familiar story, all of life may be placed on a single scale of utility, and the general business of living is an affair of calculating this basic commodity in a way that is optimal either for the person or the society.

Evil, as Marcel conceived this together with mysteries in general, belongs to the fundamental condition of human beings and is no more a solvable problem than death is. The latter may be delayed, rendered relatively comfortable, and so on, but it is neither knowable nor solvable for the reason that it constitutes the very ground on which we stand or a reality in which we are suspended every moment of our existence. It is neither outside us nor wholly solvable, whether by technical or any other means, but a condition with which we cope in the best way that we can, as the Christian says of sin. We are one and all sinners, but we hope and strive for redemption, as love and joy also belong to our existence in some measure yet not as brute facts which we cannot affect and which place no demands upon us. In speaking of mystery in this way, “as a problem which encroaches upon its own data” in one of his other formulations, Marcel would distinguish this from the ordinary sense of mystery as an unknown fact about the world.<sup>17</sup> What modern science often speaks of as a mystery is but “the limiting case of the problematic,” or the problem that our techniques have yet to solve but in principle may one day.<sup>18</sup> The problem of evil will not be solved for a problem it is not but a condition that every one of us experiences



in an immediate way and from which we can never wholly separate ourselves. In the face of mystery one is committed in one's whole being in this way or that, again unlike the problematic, which one confronts in one's limited capacity as a jobholder perhaps or as the bearer of a particular role. One does not confront evil as any kind of specialist but as a whole human being, and the same may be said of mysteries in general. The worst proposition that we can entertain regarding human evil, then, is that it is a problem which, like any problem, is solvable in principle by means of appropriate techniques of one kind or another.

Marcel would cite with approval a short statement by R. P. Jouve that "Mysteries are not truths that lie beyond us; they are truths that comprehend us."<sup>19</sup> One might say of such truths what Augustine said of God, that they are "more intimately present to me than my innermost being," or their form of appearing is so wrapped up in who one is as a whole being that no separation is possible between what I comprehend and what has already comprehended me.<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon is not merely psychological but, as Marcel would always insist, ontological. In his important essay of 1933 titled "On the Ontological Mystery," he would speak, for instance, of the "mystery of cognition" as follows: "knowledge is contingent on a participation in being for which no epistemology can account because it continually presupposes it." Knowledge presupposes being as the mystery of wonder or joy presupposes something in which one again stands as a participant and not a spectator. The same essay would find him saying of mysteries in general that "I cannot place myself outside it or before it; I am engaged in this encounter, I depend upon it, I am inside it in a certain sense, it envelops me and it comprehends me—even if it is not comprehended by me."<sup>21</sup> Love, joy, suffering, evil—what do we understand about any of these things apart for some particulars, and even here, as the apostle said, "through a glass, darkly"?

Central to Marcel's rather sprawling analysis of the modern era and the nihilism that hangs upon it bears upon our "complete inability to think of evil as evil, or sin as sin." As he added, "Here again we see the technical approach at work. The world is treated as a machine whose functioning leaves much to be desired" and whose defects are the responsibility of no one in particular.<sup>22</sup> This is the language of the engineer, and it has become ubiquitous in modern secular worldviews. If an existential vacuity lies at the center of our culture and our lives, we need only adjust the machinery in a more optimal way, or such is the view that echoes repeatedly throughout modern culture. The center formerly occupied by a spiritual order is now occupied by the self and its desires or by an ideology that transforms the kingdom of God into the classless society or its contemporary equivalents. In Marcel's later work he would employ the term "lived atheism" for a way of life "where everything is subordinated to a kind of individual self-interest or the satisfaction of the appetites," where mysteries are reduced to problems and ideology fills the void left by an absent God.<sup>23</sup>

For Marcel, then, the sense of mystery is not limited to an awareness of finitude, be it cognitive, technical, or otherwise, but is a matter of being alive to what transcends and encompasses each one of us. What he spoke of as "the urgent inner needs for transcendence should never be interpreted as a need to pass beyond all experience whatsoever; for beyond all experience, there is nothing." The transcendence to which he was referring is both immanent to our experience and a "mode" of it which is distinct in a sense of relative purity and also verticality.<sup>24</sup> In Marcel's own life, as he reported in his autobiography, "the call of the transcendent" is something "which I think I felt from the time of my childhood, through the trials of premature mourning, but which I also heard through the kind grace of music."<sup>25</sup> There need be no connotation of otherworldliness to this but of a height that is very much within our common

experience, and it is more a sensibility than a matter of knowledge. A sense of mystery or of the sacred is more felt than conceptualized, and it has little to do with propositions or hypotheses. It is not obvious that attaching an “ism” to the phenomenon—whether “mysticism” or any other—adds anything but misunderstanding to the sense itself, as may be said of a musical or poetic sensibility. To say that one has a sense or sensibility for much of anything is not to say that one possesses any great knowledge in this sphere—although one may—but something else which appears to bear more on the affective, the dispositional, and the habitual than the informational. One has a musical sensibility when one has an “ear” for music, when one is at home in this realm of experience and is able to make fine distinctions and judgments and perhaps compose original works, all of which bear only an indirect relation to knowledge, depending of course on what we intend by this word. Marcel’s reflections on mystery do not add up to a doctrine of mysticism, and endorsing such a doctrine (if this is quite the word for it) might be likened to adding a fifth wheel to a car. Whatever is it for, this “ism” which the sense itself neither has nor appears to require?

At the heart of this sense, as Marcel would describe it, is an inner and urgently felt “need for transcendence” which “presents itself above all, is deeply experienced above all, as a kind of dissatisfaction.” Not every dissatisfaction, of course, implies a need (he preferred the French word *exigence*) for transcendence or for the kind of elevation of which he was speaking, and his decided preference was to keep his descriptions of this experience “as concrete as possible” and “to dramatize, that is, to imagine, as precisely as possible, the situation, the sort of situation in which I may find myself involved.” This should not be taken as a generalized imperative to “go beyond” X, in the many ways that we use this phrase, but as a perception of “certain experiences as ‘high’ and others as ‘low’ [which] appears in a sense to be a fundamental thing, linked, as it

were, to our very mode of existence as incarnate beings.” In certain aesthetic experiences, for example, “When I look at or listen to a masterpiece, I have an experience which can be strictly called a revelation. That experience will just not allow itself to be analysed away as a mere state of simple strongly felt satisfaction.”<sup>26</sup> Our perception of the work of art is of a height within our experience and not of anything going beyond it. Our perception of a human being likewise is of a being who “must still retain a certain character of sacredness” or dignity which renders that being inviolate and above the order of utility.<sup>27</sup> As Paul Ricoeur would remark in a published conversation with Marcel in 1968, the latter’s opposition to what he called “the spirit of abstraction” is closely bound up with his “denunciation of the techniques of debasement” in which “one word returns incessantly, the word ‘sacrilege.’” In all human debasement, as Ricoeur added, “a certain core of the sacred in man has been violated,” where again the philosopher must invoke a theological terminology for an experience that is very much of this world while of a height within it, rather as a mountain peak is nothing apart from the general landscape but is the land itself in one of its manifestations.<sup>28</sup> A major portion of Marcel’s critique of modern nihilism bears directly upon the phenomenon of the mass—mass society, mass thinking, the ubiquity of an agglomerated humanity which no longer knows itself as humanity but in a spirit of abstraction whose constant tendency is toward the debasement of the person. A pronounced tendency in our times, as he frequently lamented, is to regard the human being primarily and indeed exclusively in their capacity as a functionary of one kind or another and thus to eliminate the mystery that belongs to each one of us.

Part of the explanation for why Marcel was so adamant about refusing labels and “isms” is that a good part of his thought bears less upon hypotheses than dispositions, less upon philosophical problems as these are usually understood than mysteries which in most instances

are better spoken of in concrete rather than abstract terms. There is a reason why the mysteries to which he referred are so elusive to explanation, and it is that whatever understanding we gain in this sphere resists translation into propositions and is often more felt than known, more revelatory than conceptual, and more habitual than doctrinal. The at least partial suitability of “neo-Socratism” is owing to the fact that there is no theory of “Socratism”; insofar as the term holds any intelligibility at all, it would appear to point more to that thinker’s questions, actions, and dispositions than to any doctrines he espoused, but for the *docta ignorantia* which is hardly a doctrine at all. Is there a Marcellian doctrine of mystery? He managed to shed a good deal of light upon this theme, yet his reflections do not add up to any ordered set of statements or arguments that purport to account for the phenomenon in anything like its entirety or essence. There are matters that must be understood concretely if they are understood at all, and as he would state in *Problematic Man*, “when it is a question of spiritual things, one can at bottom only limit oneself to specifying directions, far from formulating dogmatic statements which would run a great risk of deforming the subtle realities which one intends to treat.” Speaking in the same context of neo-Socratism, he would add, “Interrogative thought is opposed in the last analysis to everything which presents itself as assertion or, to use an English term which has no equivalent in French, as *statement*.”<sup>29</sup> Once again, the word “sense” well suits the phenomenon of which we are speaking for we are not hypothesizing or conceptualizing here so much as claiming in a sense of testifying and illuminating, questioning and saying what is telling while asserting little or nothing. What is to be positively asserted about love or joy apart from clichés whose abiding tendency, even when true, is to miss the point and to conceal more than they reveal? When we speak of mystery, as he would express this point, “[t]he responsibility of the philosopher is much less to prove than to *show* ... where to show is to make ripen and thus to promote and transform.”<sup>30</sup>

When Marcel spoke of the “broken” quality of the modern world, he was describing a malaise indistinguishably cultural and personal which is consequent upon lost values brought on by a worldview the main tenets of which are metaphysical materialism, scientism, egoism, political ideologies of both left and right, and ubiquitous technology—ways of thinking that eliminate mystery or any sense of the sacred before which human life stands and which it serves for reasons that transcend the language of utility.<sup>31</sup> That our existence is a participation in an order of which the self itself does not stand at the center is an idea that cannot be absorbed within the general worldview to which the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had given rise. A conception of human existence as a perilous journey toward something that defies knowledge in the connotation of modern epistemology and technique may, as he believed, be retained in a philosophy that is both phenomenological and concrete, whose sense of life partakes of Christian theology without “presupposing” this in the sense that philosophers typically use this word. In none of Marcel’s works did he either overtly rely upon or seek to demonstrate the truth of any religious doctrine, and it would be a stretch to categorize him as a theologian. He was a philosopher, phenomenologist, and dramatist with what one might describe as a religious sensibility and whose analysis of modern times is informed by all of this. His cultural diagnosis reflects a conception of the human being as “*homo viator*,” a view “of man making his way along that very narrow path which runs along a high and dangerous mountain ridge” toward an order of which we catch no more than glimpses.<sup>32</sup> In his words, “Perhaps a stable order can only be established if man is acutely aware of his condition as a traveler, that is to say, if he perpetually reminds himself that he is required to cut himself a dangerous path across the unsteady blocks of a universe which has collapsed and seems to be crumbling in every direction.

This path leads to a world more firmly established in Being, a world whose changing and uncertain gleams are all that we can discern here below.”<sup>33</sup>

What is it to participate or to be “established in Being” in this sense but to adopt a sensibility in which the self is not at the center but is drawn beyond itself toward a transcendence that he would variably describe as mystery, existence, or being in the sense of “a sacral reality.” As he would articulate this, “I can find my true self again only on condition that I become attuned once more to the reality in which I participate.” If, as so many were observing, the modern landscape is characterized by a growing alienation and vacuity, Marcel’s conviction was that the cause for this lies in the thorough reduction of existence to material being and the consequent elimination of transcendence and the subordination of the person to its function in a socio-economic order which is governed by techniques the continual tendency of which is to get away from us and to assume a life of their own. The world of human experience as he saw it is steeped in mystery but has been flattened into an assortment of problems defying solution because they are not problems at all but conditions of our existence. The desire to escape such conditions had come increasingly to define the age and to transform “*homo viator*” and “*homo particeps*” into “*homo spectator*,” a being defined by technology and the satisfaction of mass needs.<sup>34</sup> To the question of what it is in which *homo particeps* participates, the only answer is that “the more I actually participate in being, the less I am capable of knowing or of saying in what it is that I participate, or more precisely, the less such a question has any meaning for me.”<sup>35</sup> If Marcel’s view of the person and its existential condition as “rooted in ontological mystery” contains theological undertones, his conviction was that when we do not invoke this idea or something very much like it we are left with a material order wherein the human being is conceived as some form of what Hobbes termed a “system of matter in motion.”<sup>36</sup> The nihilism

that Marcel regarded as pervasive in twentieth-century culture would crucially bear upon the decline of the conception of the person as “participat[ing] in the inexhaustible fullness of the being from which it emanates.” It is in the essential relatedness of the human with the sacred that Marcel located the ontological mystery at the heart of our existence, and as all formulations of this notion have gone into eclipse, “this supra-personal reality” gives way to “its rivals, I should rather say its caricatures, which are no more than idols, and have led to the incredibly numerous false religions so prevalent, alas, in our time.”<sup>37</sup>

Among the ways that one “participates in being” in this sense is a kind of contemplative activity which Marcel believed to be disappearing in the modern world. This form of contemplation or reflection crucially involves a “receptiveness [that] cannot be considered as something merely passive.” One is receptive in a sense of welcoming and uniting oneself with an order that again one comprehends less than one is comprehended by it, and nothing about it is passive or uncreative. This activity is the veritable antithesis of spectatorship and “must be considered as a mode of participation, and even as one of participation’s most intimate modes,” as in the contemplation of a landscape “a certain togetherness grows up between the landscape and me.”<sup>38</sup> Contemplation in this sense involves what he would call “creative fidelity” or a synthesis of conservation and creation which is exemplified in artistic creation among other areas of human activity. The artist is receptive and faithful to the phenomena not passively but in an act of original creation, and a creation that “is conceivable,” as he put it, “only ... on condition that the world is present to the artist in a certain way—present to his heart and to his mind, present to his very being.” Creative fidelity, he went on to say, “is ontological in its principle, because it prolongs presence which itself corresponds to a certain kind of hold which being has upon us.”<sup>39</sup> Our hold upon the world and being’s hold upon us are as one, as the example of the



artist illustrates. “We are too much inclined,” as he would write elsewhere, to regard fidelity as “an inward resolution which purposes simply to preserve the existing order. But in reality the truest fidelity is creative.”<sup>40</sup> Human creation by the same token is never an act of pure production but is a reception of what is present; “any creation is a response to a call received” and is misunderstood as originating wholly within the agency of the artist.<sup>41</sup> More than a little mystery is involved here as well, as all creation “implies an active receptivity” where the questions “of what?” and “from where?” again exceed our grasp.<sup>42</sup>

We are participating in an order—and the phenomenon is not limited to artists and mystics, although for Marcel it is a disappearing reality in our times. The “broken world” that he saw about him was purporting to follow Nietzsche and Sartre in creating values seemingly out of thin air where for Marcel “I find that I do not ‘choose’ my values at all, but that I *recognise* them and then posit my actions in accordance or in contradiction with these values.”<sup>43</sup> Wonder, astonishment, humility, reverence, hope, trust, piety, community, compassion, service, creativity, freedom—this general family of values, he believed, emerges from an order of being that transcends utility and without it human existence is in a perilous condition. One who participates in it “places himself at the disposal of something which, no doubt in one sense depends upon him for its existence, but which at the same time appears to him to be beyond what he is and what he judged himself capable of drawing directly and immediately from himself.”<sup>44</sup> Creativity here has every appearance of the unconditional and is in no way an act of sovereign subjectivity. It is closer to an act of humility and is the opposite of *hubris*, for what it places at the center is not oneself but that in which one participates. We are back to Schelling’s “The angst of life drives creatures away from their center”; so too, for Marcel, does the mystery of life, and we are encompassed by it at every step of our existence.

Let us return in closing to Gadamer's provocative remarks that should any "new self-understanding of humanity" be possible at all, it will require that we "enter into a conversation with the world religions" and that the bearing of this conversation must turn upon the "longing for transcendence" and the myriad questions to which this longing gives rise. To call this a tall order is to understate the matter in spectacular fashion, yet those of us who take Gadamer's point seriously might gain at least a clue as to what trajectory such a dialogue might take from Marcel's reflections. His thoughts show clear traces of the theological tradition in which he stood, but the kind of questions to which his reflections give rise might nonetheless be capable of orienting the conversation for which Gadamer somewhat wistfully called. An ecumenical dialogue whose focus is the sense of mystery itself and the "urgent inner need" of which Marcel spoke is a different matter than one organized around truth claims, and the family of values that he recommended, being more dispositional than propositional, more sensibility than doctrine, is not limited to a particular theological camp but partakes of a larger spiritual tradition. The implications of Marcel's reflections give rise to no end of speculations, and his own include the view that "in the world that we know ... human beings can be linked to each other by a real bond only because, in another dimension, they are linked to something which transcends them and comprehends them in itself."<sup>45</sup> His accent on wonder and humility together with Gadamer's allusion to "transcendence as 'the great unknown'" place us on the threshold of religion and hold more promise, or so it seems to me, than what so often comes to mind by a dialogue of the world religions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 86, 149.

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori, *A Century of Philosophy*, trans. Rod Coltman (New York: Continuum, 2004), 129.

<sup>3</sup> In 1993, as Jean Grondin notes, Gadamer was asked by a newspaper interviewer whether he believed in an afterlife; his answer: “‘Not personally, no. At least not in the sense the religions do.’ Here, however, he opened up a significant ambiguity, because he immediately added, ‘I believe that in our spiritual and personal world none of us can know our boundaries—neither what speaks to us before we came to be, nor what perhaps might still be said when we are no more. This beyond always exists as the future that we have not yet lived and the past that has already receded into the distance. We know nothing of either. The flicker of light that our consciousness traverses is not the whole of our existence.’” Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 22–3.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 140-1.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Gary B. Madison, *On Suffering: Philosophical Reflections on What It Means to be Human* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 376.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Grondin, *Gadamer: A Biography*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 142.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 17, 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 126.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Oeter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 237.

<sup>14</sup> As he would express it in one place, “We must not bring in here the religious beliefs which a philosopher might privately hold, if, *as well as* being a philosopher, he were also, for instance, a

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Roman Catholic. The problem that we are discussing has no meaning at all unless we consider the philosopher either as a non-believer or as a man who, when he sets himself to philosophizing, puts his private religious beliefs aside.” Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2008), 88. All italics in quoted material is in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (London: Legare Street Press, 2022), 117.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2021), 83.

<sup>21</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 18, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, 194.

<sup>23</sup> Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 172, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, volume 1: *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Marcel, *Awakenings* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, volume 1, 52, 49, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, volume 2: *Faith and Reality*, trans. René Hague (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), 182.

<sup>28</sup> Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 247. I borrow this metaphor from John Dewey: “Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish.” John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Later Works volume 10, 1934 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> Marcel, *Problematic Man*, trans. Brian Thompson (Providence: CLUNY, 2022), 65, 54.

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<sup>30</sup> Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 31. He would speak of God as well in the text just cited along similar lines: “But it is not at all certain that the affirmation of divine reality is anything like a hypothesis” (159). Also, “An affirmation about God cannot be reduced to any kind of hypothesis at all” (162).

<sup>31</sup> See especially “A Broken World,” Chapter 2 of *The Mystery of Being*, volume 1.

<sup>32</sup> Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 143.

<sup>33</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 153-4.

<sup>34</sup> Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 56.

<sup>36</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, volume 1, 179, 152, 158.

<sup>39</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 90.

<sup>41</sup> Marcel, *Awakenings*, 126.

<sup>42</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, volume 2, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, 87-8.

<sup>44</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 194.