GABRIEL MARCEL’S METAPHYSICS OF HOSPITALITY
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Abstract

This project emerges at the intersection of Gabriel Marcel’s metaphysics and philosophical anthropology, centered upon his understanding of the metaphysics of hospitality and how it can heal the broken world. I present a phenomenological inquiry of Marcel’s notion of hospitality and explain his understanding of the broken world – characterized by alienation and despair – as the existential situation of man today. To illustrate this notion of the broken world, I place Marcel in dialogue with the social philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, showing how antithetical it is to Marcel’s healing notion of hospitality. The thesis also explores the concept of hospitality as it is understood from a sociological and historical perspective and as it is considered in the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. I explore the ontological framework of these two recent thinkers in order to prove that their accounts of absolute alterity and unconditionality have problematic implications for their claims regarding hospitality. By presenting Marcel’s ontological framework and his belief that alterity is relative, I show how his metaphysics of hospitality offers an attitude of reverence for the human person. The Marcelian concepts of disponibilité, presence, participation, sacredness and human dignity enrich the understanding of a metaphysics of hospitality, which both respects the value of otherness and fosters genuine communion.
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Approved by the Examining Committee:
Dedicated to my father, Stephen Dietrich Schwarz, whose example of wonder at the mystery of being and of welcome toward all persons has always inspired me.
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Acknowledgments

When I began my journey to obtain a doctorate in philosophy back in 2011, I didn’t know the extent of work (or sacrifice) that lay in store for me, but I also didn’t know how much this experience would enrich me, both academically and personally. Although I came to love philosophy as a teenager on my own, it is worth mentioning that I am the third generation in my family to pursue this study. My grandfather, Dr. Balduin V. Schwarz (1902-1993) was a German phenomenologist who taught philosophy at Fordham University and the University of Salzburg. My father, Dr. Stephen Schwarz, taught philosophy at the University of Rhode Island for almost fifty years. Both pursued philosophy from the phenomenological perspective and both have inspired me with their love for truth and deep reverence for the human person. The personal background of a thinker always has an influence on her philosophical views, and I would say this is unreservedly the case with my own life. I am thankful to God, above all, for granting me the gift of being born into the loving family that He gave me, and to both my mother and father for always making me feel that it is good that I exist!

I also wish to thank the many colleagues and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. A special thanks to Dr. Chad Engelland, my dissertation director, for his unswerving dedication and accompaniment, as well as the timely and helpful comments he has provided throughout the process. I am grateful also to the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr Jonathon Sanford and Dr. Robert Kugelmann. I also extend my appreciation to Robert E. Wood for his guidance and support during my doctoral studies, and for enhancing my appreciation for Marcel’s thought during the
directed readings course I took with him in the summer of 2013. I would also like to thank my friend Hannah Venable for introducing me to Marcel’s concept of the metaphysics of hospitality, and for showing me also by her example, what it means. I thank her, as well as Patricia Camarero, Laura Meyers, Grace Sullivan and my father for proofreading parts of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Maria Reinagel, Lorli Pregel, Jacquie Lustig and all those I cannot name because of space who encouraged and coached me through some of the rougher months when I needed accountability and motivation to keep going. Lastly, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the community of consecrated women in Chicago who allowed me to stay in their beautiful home to work many hours on this dissertation. I feel a special debt of gratitude to Marial Corona whose generous dedication to the task of helping me complete this project in its final weeks was a true testimony of what Marcel would call, *disponibilité*. 
List of Abbreviations
for Frequently Cited Works of Gabriel Marcel


INTRODUCTION

“[There is no] deeper human darkness [than] the darkness of not feeling truly welcome in human existence.”

– Henri Nouwen

This dissertation presents a study of the metaphysics of hospitality of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) and shows how this notion offers healing for, what he calls, the broken world. Ultimately, I argue that Marcel’s vision of hospitality – which is inherently related to his view of intersubjectivity – shows us that human fulfillment is found by overcoming alienation through love.

Before discussing the nature and method of this project, I would like to give a little background on how I became interested in the topic. Having deeply appreciated the works of Marcel over the course of my graduate studies in philosophy, I had already decided to focus my doctoral thesis on his work, yet I did not have a clear theme. One day, after attending a spiritual retreat, I was reflecting on which Marcelian ideas most attracted me, and for some reason, I recalled a line that the preacher of the retreat had said, which was this: the two greatest mysteries in all of existence are the Trinity and the human heart. This statement resonated deep within me and made me reflect on what chord it had struck. What did these two mysteries have in common? What is the connection between the communion of persons within the Trinity and a human heart? The answer, I realized, was this: the mystery of ontological communion. On that very...

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same afternoon in which I pondered this insight, I also discovered the theme for my dissertation, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality.

When one first hears it, the phrase sounds uncanny and rather oddly assembled. For a non-philosopher, the word “metaphysics” is synonymous with things that are abstract and obtuse while the term “hospitality” might make one think of the hotel industry or perhaps a particular Southern lady known for her warmth in entertaining visitors. What, then, do hospitality and metaphysics have to do with one another? This is the question which we will explore in the pages of this thesis. As we will learn, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality describes an attitude of reverence toward other persons, especially the most vulnerable and unprotected – an attitude that he believes is sorely missing in today’s world.

To approach this existential theme from another angle, let us consider an example from literature that can provide us with a palpable glimpse into the nature of Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality (or, rather, its lack thereof). In Mary Shelley’s gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, the knowledge-hungry scientist Victor Frankenstein creates a monster from a collection of dead human body parts. This monster, which the doctor brings to life in the name of scientific progress, is so ugly and frightful that Dr. Frankenstein immediately regrets his experiment and deliberately abandons him. The anguished creature is not evil from its inception, yet as the story unfolds, the reader comes to see how the monster’s sense of rejection at the “birth” of his existence extinguishes his ability to feel loved and thus find fulfillment. Many readers have recognized in Shelley’s story the theme of social alienation and how a lack of love and belonging, on the deepest level of existence, brings only destruction and despair. The creature bemoans:
I was dependent on none and related to none .... [T]here was none to lament my annihilation.... Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.²

Having been brought, albeit brokenly, into the world of humanity, the creature is cast away from all society and expected to survive alienated and alone. Through the harrowing experience of this fictional monster, Shelley presents a character with universal human longings: a desire for family, connection, love and a home. Although rejected by his creator, the creature attempts to find his place among other people and overcome his alienation. He secretly observes a particular family and yearns for the love he sees they have for one another. Describing the deep existential needs that he feels, the creature laments:

I turned with more attention towards the cottagers .... The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition. I dared not think that they would turn them from me with disdain and horror. The poor that stopped at their door were never driven away. I asked, it is true, for greater treasures than a little food or rest: I required kindness and sympathy; but I did not believe myself utterly unworthy of it.³

The creature tells us that his highest ambition, his deepest desire, is to have others look upon him “with affection,” i.e. to love him. Shelley’s description of the alienation and anguish of the rejected monster in her novel bespeaks of the universal brokenness experienced in the human condition when alienation replaces love. The monster describes the metaphysical hospitality he is longing for, something “greater” than “a little food or rest;” it is kindness, sympathy and love he needs. Because the monster is denied these

³ Ibid., 94.
gestures of belonging and acceptance by others, he becomes broken from within and ends up destroying himself and those around him.4

Dr. Frankenstein’s lonely creature offers us a vivid example of the kind of anguish that floods the heart of a human person when he does not feel welcomed into existence.5 These experiences of loneliness, alienation and despair are the nucleus of what Marcel is referring to when he speaks of the broken world. Although his concern is deeply philosophical, it is also profoundly psychological, since Marcel proposes his metaphysics of hospitality as an answer for the human heart’s deepest needs. I am convinced that the wisdom Marcel has to offer with this topic touches upon the deepest desires – the need for affirmation and love – that all people share.

I chose this topic not only because I appreciate the insights which Marcel’s phenomenological approach offers about being human, but also because I have always found the idea of hospitality delightful. Moreover, I deeply resonate with Marcel’s diagnosis of the world’s brokenness being the result of alienation and rupture in communion among persons. Even though society today suffers no lack of technological advancements, more and more people are lonely, alienated and unhappy. Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality offers not a band-aid solution, but genuine healing. I am convinced that this insight holds value for academic discourse as well as for the flourishing of concrete human lives.

4 Several scholars have recognized that Shelley’s novel about the alienation suffered by the rejected monster lends itself to a fruitful interpretation in respect to the theme of hospitality. For example, see Peter Melville, “Monstrous Ingratitude: Hospitality in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” European Romantic Review 19, no. 2 (March 2018): 179–85.
Marcel coins the term metaphysics of hospitality in his work, *The Mystery of Being*, to describe the ontological framework of intersubjectivity proper to the human condition. Moreover, he argues that being hospitable toward others is constitutive of our ontological makeup because we are created for interpersonal communion. As the terms suggest, the metaphysics of hospitality is as much about metaphysics as it is about hospitality. As a personalist thinker, Marcel devoted his life to promoting his belief that human persons are made for communal relationships and ultimately for love. In the present study, I will argue that the phrase, “metaphysics of hospitality,” touches on all the major themes of Marcel’s philosophy, as it provides a unique insight about the human person’s dignity and ethical calling. I will explore how Marcel’s notion of hospitality provides a fundamental key for understanding his whole philosophy, and more specifically, show that it offers the antidote for the broken world.

Marcel’s philosophy offers profound insights about the human person which hold perennial value. Some Marcelian scholars have focused on the valuable contributions he makes in the realm of ontology, since he, unlike the majority of postmodern phenomenologists, subscribes to a metaphysical realism. Another area that Marcel scholarship has focused on is his ethical categories of availability, creative fidelity, faith, hope and love. Like so many of Marcel’s ideas, his notion of hospitality seems to encapsulate the countless other messages he wishes to express through his works. Joe McCown remarks, “Marcel’s writings, while they do not exhibit a formal logic of argumentation, do contain a certain interior logic: a logic of coherence. All of Marcel’s

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7 Metaphysical realism is the view that the world and its objects exist independently of the minds of those who perceive and claim to know them. Metaphysical realists believe that we can know reality as it really is.
categories of analysis are intimately interconnected, and an understanding of any one of them will elucidate all the others.”8 Marcel’s philosophical reflections blend together like the notes in a symphony. It is from within this context that I will argue that his metaphysics of hospitality expresses the heart of his philosophical project.

Multiple studies have been done on the main themes of Marcel’s philosophy, such as his conception of love, his notion of ontological mystery and his reflections on the broken world.9 However, there have been no comprehensive studies specifically focused on his metaphysics of hospitality.10 This project aims to address this need.

Hospitality has become a hot topic in recent philosophical discourse. With the publication of his work Totality and Infinity (1961), Emmanuel Levinas is often credited with inaugurating the rising academic trend in hospitality studies; he also has served as a major influence on Jacques Derrida, who lectured and wrote extensively on hospitality in the 1990’s. Although much attention has been given to the philosophy of hospitality in Levinas, Derrida and their commentators, Marcel’s contributions seem to be overlooked.11 Although the theme of our study focuses primarily in the area of

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11 Cf. Manu Bazzano, Spectre of the Stranger: Towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012). In this work, Bazzano discusses several “Phenomenologies of hospitality” yet Marcel is not mentioned, nor is he mentioned in any other major literature on hospitality as discussed in chapter two.
philosophical anthropology, it also contributes to the areas of metaphysics, ethics, and hospitality studies, as well as provides helpful insights for psychology.

**The Influence of Marcel’s Background on his View of Hospitality**

When we consider Marcel’s own journey as a philosopher, we discover that hospitality had always had a personal significance for him. Although he was an only child, from his earliest memories, he tells us that family always “had a large place in [his] life.”

His mother died when he was just a toddler, an experience which marked him deeply, as he remembers watching his father weep at her tomb. After the death of his mother, his father remarried his aunt, although the stepmother’s sternness led Marcel to suffer from a sense of inadequacy during his early years. His years as a schoolboy were unhappy for the most part, and he felt plagued by a sense of having to prove his worth to his parents by getting the best possible grades. Reflecting back on his experience of this, he writes:

> The intolerable thing was to feel that my parents’ judgment of me depended at least to some degree on the results I obtained in tests, whereas I felt, obscurely at least, that these results really had nothing to do with my essential being. But I must add that I had only a vague awareness of this essential being and that on the whole I was a question to myself.

As the words of his memoirs illustrate, Marcel intuited from a young age the importance of the affirmation of other people to help him recognize his own goodness and worth. As a highly intuitive child, he recognized that the results of his academic performance were not the source of his identity or self-worth, yet he struggled to believe this. He could see

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13 Ibid., 15.
that his “essential being,” of which he only had a vague sense, was not contingent on his academic success or failure, nor the judgment of his parents. Marcel’s experiences of loneliness and confusion regarding his self-worth from a young age would prove to be influential on his philosophy later in life, in which the ideas of belonging and feeling “at home” become prominent.

Similarly, Marcel’s lifelong interest in the “mystery of the family” developed from his personal experience of this profound reality. As a boy, he felt a longing for a unified family to which he could experience belonging, acceptance and love. While being shy and highly sensitive, he always felt a profound desire to be connected to other people. Reflecting on moments when other relatives came to visit their small family, Marcel remarks how enriching it was for him, since he recalls suffering, “almost unconsciously from some sort of insufficiency, some deficiency, about [their] little family foursome.”

These memories of the importance of family bonds and connections would go on to significantly shape his thought. Remembering the joy that he felt when others would visit causes Marcel to remark: “Deep down I wanted with all my being to be part of an abundant, a substantial, family community.”

This longing for connection with others, for love, affirmation and community emerged in Marcel’s soul from the raw soil of personal experiences of loneliness, isolation, and anxiety. He notes that “it can be no surprise that my having been an only child was literally a mortifying trial for me.” Although he would come to enjoy many

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15 Marcel was raised in a home with his father, his aunt and his “granny,” who moved in with them when he was two years old. Cf. Marcel, “An Autobiographical Essay,” 5.
16 Ibid., 13.
17 Ibid., 14.
good friendships throughout his life, his boyhood experiences of friends was difficult, as he notes: “I had comrades, certainly, but I did not seem to relate to them effectively.”

Feeling inadequate in his academic performance and in his family/social connections, Marcel came to find solace in music, which would remain throughout his life – a zone in which he could always breathe freely.

What the young Marcel found in the transcendent beauty of music was not so foreign to what his heart longed for in bonds of family and friendship – an experience of communion with the *mystery of being*. Eventually, he tells us, it was through his relationships with friends and ultimately his wife, with whom he adopted a son, that Marcel speaks of his life emerging “at last into plenitude and light.” These preliminary reflections on Marcel’s own personal journey illuminate why the metaphysics of hospitality would be so meaningful to him. He not only had grown up wondering what meaning his personal existence would have, but he also felt an ardent longing for connection, belonging and to feel welcomed in this world. As Keen remarks: “there were certain tensions within the home which gave shape to Marcel's philosophical quest.”

Now that we have gained this background of how Marcel’s personal journey shaped the development of his metaphysics of hospitality, we need to understand the bigger picture of his philosophy as a whole. First of all, it is important to note that Marcel was not a “professional academic,” by which I mean to say that philosophy for him was primarily a passion and a way of life, rather than a career. Although he successfully completed his *agrégation* exam in philosophy at the age of twenty from the Sorbonne, he

18 Ibid., 15.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 6.
never completed a doctoral thesis, nor did he hold a long-term teaching position in a university. Rather, Marcel spent his career primarily as a drama critic, playwright, and occasional lecturer in philosophy. Although he considered his plays to be his best works, it is actually his philosophical writings (many of which are transcriptions of lectures he gave) that have won him the greatest attention and appreciation in the academic world.

Any reader of Marcel’s works will quickly discover that his philosophy is not one of rigorous systematic arguments or clear definitions and formal treatises. Marcel’s style is “circuitous and sinuous, characterized by windings and detours,” like a wanderer on a journey or search. Also, because most of Marcel’s published works are journals or notes from his lectures and conferences, he has a strongly conversational tone, which by definition, resists formality. Although some could consider this a defect in Marcel’s achievements as a philosopher, his style of reflection and insightful descriptions of human experience match the content of his philosophy. Marcel’s reflections avoid the technical jargon many philosophers use and are therefore accessible to a lay audience. It is for this reason that Marcel is also characterized as a phenomenologist – a philosopher who relies on descriptive analyses of human experiences rather than pre-set theories. Marcel’s phenomenological descriptions emerge more like a medley of notes in a symphony rather than a series of premises in a syllogism. Because Marcel’s approach seeks to reflect the experiences of concrete human reality, his positions are able to bridge ontology and ethical personalism.

22 McCown, Marcel and Human Openness, 1.
23 Cf. ibid. Although Marcel originally intended to gather his philosophy into one systematic work, he came to recognize his limitations in this area. Thus, after 1925 he abandoned this ambition of writing such a formal work and decided to publish his lectures and journals.
Definition of Terms

Having established the phenomenological and personal background for Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, I will now define the key terms that will be used in this project.

1. “Metaphysics”

In this project, “metaphysics,” refers to the study of the mystery of being. As will be expounded in chapter three, Marcel’s understanding of metaphysics is extremely difficult to define. He understands “being” (the name used for both the individual existents and the ontological framework of all reality) to be a kind of fullness or plenitude. Thus, metaphysics can be understood as a lens through which we see the world in its ontological mystery. Ultimately, the understanding of metaphysics that this project will be presenting cannot be separated from its connections with the interpersonal. As Sam Keen rightly notes, “Marcel directs his ontology toward the discovery of that which abides not as a substratum beyond the phenomenal world, but as a support and an assurance within human experience.”25 In other words, Marcel’s idea of metaphysics, rather than an abstraction, is a particular entryway into genuine personal experience. Following the penetrating analysis of the topic offered by Keen, this dissertation will uphold the view that Marcel’s understanding of being – his metaphysics – can best be described as an “ontological personalism.”26

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26 Ibid., 118.
2. “Hospitality”

I define “hospitality” as an attitude of welcoming another person from a place of abundance in the host that responds to a human need or desire in the guest. The “place of abundance” is not necessarily equivalent to material wealth or power nor does it even need to be a physical space; rather, it should be understood as a source of generous self-giving on the part of the host. Though the concept of hospitality has manifold dimensions, I believe this definition is broad enough to encapsulate the whole gamut of possible meanings of the term. The particular “human need” to which an experience of hospitality responds could vary from the basic needs of sustenance, shelter and safety, to other needs that are more spiritual, such as affirmation, belonging and love. As I will argue in this thesis, genuine hospitality is not only concerned with fulfilling needs of the human person, it is concerned with the flourishing of persons, both guests and hosts. Sharing Marcel’s conviction that we are ontologically wired for interpersonal communion, I hold that true hospitality – an attitude of welcoming another person – pays heed to certain needs of the guest, yet also reveals a certain fulness, or overflow, on the part of the host.

In chapter two, it will become evident that hospitality is a concept with many layers of meaning and nuanced characteristics. On the one hand, there is the whole realm of commercialized hospitality, so prevalent today, and on the other hand, there is the ancient Greek view of hospitality as the virtue of xenia, in which hosts would always provide for guests, including total strangers, with the understanding that such hospitality would always be given in return.
The definition used in this study covers the varied aspects of hospitality and manifests three of its major features. First, hospitality involves an “attitude of welcoming,” and thereby ratifies the dignity of the guest. Deeper than mere external actions, true hospitality always involves the idea that the host’s disposition is one of goodness and openness towards other persons. Secondly, hospitality frequently involves responding to a perceived need or desire in others. In many cases, like those in which one provides food or shelter for a guest, the acts of hospitality are principally external. However, in this project we will be speaking about hospitality as a disposition which responds to the emotional and spiritual dimension of the person, such as her desire for belonging and love. As we will see, hospitality is a form of the virtue of charity, and it is, therefore, not only motivated by a desire to fulfill a need in the other, it springs from an abundance of self-giving on the part of the host. Finally, this definition emphasizes a third major feature of genuine hospitality: its recognition of the invulnerability of the guest.


In this dissertation, the phrase “metaphysics of hospitality” has two distinct yet interrelated meanings. The first and primary sense of the “metaphysics of hospitality” refers to the disciplined examination of the nature or essence of hospitality and its conditions. It is a “metaphysics” in the sense that it is a study of the basic structures and categories pertinent to a richer understanding of hospitality. The secondary sense in which the phrase “metaphysics of hospitality” is used in this study is derived from the first and describes Marcel’s fundamental meaning of the term as he uses it in his Mystery of Being. Here the “metaphysics of hospitality” refers to a kind of perfected virtue of
hospitality, understood as an attitude of welcoming and reverence towards all persons. It is a matter of participating in the mystery of being.

4. “The Broken World”

The phrase, “the broken world,” refers to the existential condition of humanity in the face of alienation on three levels: 1) the person from herself, 2) persons from each other, and 3) persons from God. Marcel uses this phrase frequently to describe the alienating condition of man, particularly in modern society. This “brokenness” of the world is primarily related to a loss of what Marcel calls “ontological exigency,” the need that we have for ultimate meaning and fulfillment in human existence. Thus, Marcel suggests that the world is broken because people live their lives often without connecting to the ontological foundations of existence. Marcel holds that today’s fragmented state of human life results in large measure from the fact that the realm of ontological mystery is being eclipsed while people allow the level of the problematical to dominate. The over-functionalization of human life prevents or breaks human relationships and leads to alienation and despair.

28 In Homo Viator, Marcel gives this description of the broken world: “the danger arises of a most fatal disorder invading the very heart of existence, for the man who is apparently striving to become a machine is nevertheless alive, although he ignores more and more … his condition as a living being.” Marcel, HV, 81.
Another way to understand the broken world, as I shall argue, is as the condition to which the metaphysics of hospitality, or charity, is the antidote. Marcel argues that love is what ultimately unites the fragmented pieces of human existence.\textsuperscript{30}

**Overview**

Marcel is an adamant fighter against “the spirit of abstraction,” as he calls it, and his philosophy seeks to describe concrete human existence as we experience it.\textsuperscript{31} This dissertation examines his phenomenological explication of hospitality in its metaphysical implications. It will focus primarily on Marcel’s texts from the two volumes of *The Mystery of Being*, particularly the last section of the first volume where he provides the context and specific reference for “la métaphysique de l'hospitalité.” Through a critical examination of these and other prominent Marcelian texts which support the subject matter of our study, I will expose several of his themes which relate to hospitality including but not limited to: the distinctions between mystery/problem and primary/secondary reflection, the notions of presence, *disponibilité*, participation and love. Because Marcel insists that his dramatic works convey the essence of his thought in a way that is superior to his philosophical works, I will explore how the metaphysics of hospitality appears in his play, *Le Monde Cassé*. In addition to drawing from other relevant primary sources, including pertinent autobiographical material, this study will also draw significantly from various sources of Marcelian secondary literature.


\textsuperscript{31} Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 123.
This project consists of five chapters. The first and third chapters will focus on the area of metaphysics. The second and fourth chapters will focus primarily on hospitality. The fifth chapter will be a synthesis of the whole by focusing on the metaphysics of hospitality. The elaboration of these chapters will be as follows.

In chapter one, I show that Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is the remedy for the disease of the broken world. First, I present his description of this tragic situation and the reasons he gives for its brokenness. After that, I bring in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre with its alienating and hostile view of human relationships to serve as a foil to Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. I will argue, with Marcel, that Sartre holds a metaphysics of hostility rather than hospitality, and that his account is incomplete because his philosophy excludes genuine intersubjectivity and love. The chapter concludes with Marcel’s critique of the Sartrean position that the value of a person lies solely in what she does.

Chapter two is a survey of the meaning, scope and history of the concept of hospitality. First, I define the term hospitality and then present the etymological roots which reveal how the word has developed throughout history. After this, I explore the dispositions and motives connected with the practice of hospitality and emphasize the fact that Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is primarily an attitude or disposition of the heart. When discussing the kinds of motives in hospitality, I adopt Elizabeth Telfer’s classification, in which hospitality can be self-regarding, reciprocal, or other-regarding. However, following Marcel’s view, I disagree with her suggestion that the highest motive

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32 Marcel does not explicitly say this; although, as I aim to show, his writings unequivocally support his implicit understanding that a metaphysics of hospitality can bring healing to the broken world.

is “altruistic,” since altruism implies a kind of denial of all self-interest and is incoherent with Marcel’s view of hospitality as a form of love. Chapter two also includes a discussion of hospitality’s historical expression, as seen in Homeric Greece and developed through modern and contemporary times.

In chapter three, I present Marcel’s understanding of metaphysics, which can be expressed as the study of “ontological mystery.” After giving a description of Marcel’s notion of being, I will present his concern for the way in which man is losing a sense of ontological exigency. In order to present a thorough overview of Marcel’s metaphysics, this chapter incorporates an explanation of two of Marcel’s most well-known distinctions, problem/mystery and primary/secondary reflection.

Chapter four brings our discussion back to the topic of hospitality, but this time we consider it from the perspective of the contemporary philosophical conversation based on the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In this chapter, I present an exposition of the background and thought of each of these two thinkers in relation to their contributions on hospitality. I place Marcel in dialogue with Levinas and Derrida and center the conversation around the nature of alterity (otherness) in order to examine whether it is absolute or relative. I argue that the ontological framework which Levinas and Derrida bring to their view of alterity is largely Heideggerian and leads them to make alterity absolute. I also discuss, with Marcel’s thought as a corrective, some of the inherent difficulties which the Levinasian/Derridean view of hospitality presents.

Lastly, in chapter five, the project delves into the central theme of Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. This chapter begins with a presentation of key terms in Marcel’s thought – disponibilité (availability), presence, participation, and being-with –
which enhances our understanding of Marcel’s notion of the metaphysics of hospitality. 
In chapter five, I also consider the important Marcelian themes of sacredness and human 
dignity and discuss how these values are most saliently revealed in the weak and 
vulnerable. I then examine more closely the actual text of *The Mystery of Being*, in which 
Marcel describes the metaphysics of hospitality, and explore the context for arriving at a 
deeper penetration of its meaning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how 
Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality – as an aspect of love – brings healing to the broken 
world.

In closing, this project presents a focused study on a Marcelian phrase which has 
been little known and therefore underappreciated. The metaphysics of hospitality is a way 
of viewing other persons with openness, reverence and love. It is an attitude of respect 
and honor for the dignity of other persons. Marcel believes that a recovery of such an 
attitude is necessary for the restoration of our broken world.
CHAPTER ONE:
THE BROKEN WORLD

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.”
– Mother Teresa of Calcutta

As we begin this investigation of Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, we first need to understand the existential framework from which it arises. In other words, to appreciate how the metaphysics of hospitality provides a remedy, it is necessary to recognize the malady that it addresses. Marcel calls this wounded existential situation the *broken world*. In his opening words of the 1961-62 “William James Lectures,” Marcel refers to this troubling situation – “the problem of man considered in the anguished context of today’s world” – as the driving force behind all his philosophical undertakings. Although other thinkers have used the term, Marcel’s repeated references to the broken world in many of his works make it one of the most characteristic themes of all his philosophy. Ultimately, Marcel’s concern with the broken world expresses his profound disquietude regarding the situation of man.

In the following pages, I will sketch out the general concept of the broken world, as understood by Marcel. I will present how Marcel sees the world as broken on three fundamental levels, and I will discuss some of the causes which Marcel believes have led to its fracturing. After this, in part two, I will present the main aspects of Jean-Paul

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2 Marcel, *EBHD*, 3.
3 For example, Tim Mulgan uses this term to frame his introduction to ethics; cf. Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World: Imagining Philosophy after Catastrophe* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
Sartre’s philosophy, a philosophy which gives evidence of the broken world, yet differs from Marcel’s account in crucial ways. Sartre and Marcel agree that the world is broken; however, Sartre’s thought claims to offer no hope for a remedy while Marcel’s philosophy provides genuine healing for the fractured state of the world.

A. Marcel’s Description of the Broken World

Throughout his writings, Marcel tells us that we live in a “broken world” (un monde cassé). This term is not easily definable; rather, it is through Marcel’s multiple phenomenological descriptions that the reader comes to understand what he wishes to convey by it. Brian Treanor and Brendan Sweetman tell us that the broken world describes the fractured condition of humanity based on “observations about life and experience.”

One of Marcel’s best explanations of the broken world is in his work, The Existential Background of Human Dignity, where he presents it as “the undeniably tragic situation in which modern man finds himself.”

Modern man’s situation is tragic not only because he tends to ignore the transcendent but also because he is blind to the very fact of this condition. Similarly, Marcel depicts the broken world as characterized by a loss of the sense of mystery, ontological exigency and secondary reflection, three concepts which we will examine more fully in chapter three.

As a way to describe the human condition, Marcel’s le monde cassé is consonant with Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety (angst), Heidegger’s sense of falling prey

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5 Marcel, EBHD, 18.
(Verfallen) and Merleau-Ponty’s dislocated world (un monde disloqué). While all of these existentialist thinkers have clearly divergent approaches to philosophy, each shares the common belief that the human situation is something intrinsically fractured and anguished. Although such a depiction of the world is, perhaps, best articulated by existential and postmodern thinkers, it could be argued that philosophy has perennially concerned itself with the question of man’s search for meaning in the world, given life’s tragic dimensions. Referring to Socrates and the most genuine seekers of wisdom, David Cooper proposes that the “deepest urge” to philosophize at all is “the need to overcome, dissolve, or come to terms with… [a certain]... distorted stance towards the relation between man and world.” He explains:

Neither puzzlement nor awe, neither a thirst for knowledge nor a craving for clarity, has been the abiding inspiration for philosophy. Rather, this [need to overcome, dissolve and come to terms with] has been the perpetual threat posed by the sense that men are hopelessly alienated from their world.

As Cooper suggests, an essential feature of what can be called the broken world is an experience of alienation: a sense of being cut off from God, cut off from others, and cut off from oneself.

Similarly, Marcel believes that we find ourselves in a world broken on three major levels. First, there is brokenness “within” each human person, manifested, among other ways, in a lack of unity between body and soul. Second, there is disharmony between

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9 Ibid.
10 Critical of Cartesian dualism and the anthropological views which derive from it, Marcel holds that the human person is a unity of body and soul, an incarnated spirit.
human beings – between men and women, amongst families, and in interpersonal relationships in general. And third, the human person living in the broken world experiences a strain in relation with Being itself, which for Marcel, is God.\(^{11}\)

This overall human experience of being broken off or alienated from within and from without is what Marcel means by saying that we live in a broken world. In fact, the world (the experience of human life) may appear to be as intact as ever on a material level; yet the brokenness Marcel speaks of concerns our relationships with one another and with being itself. Moreover, one distinguishing aspect of Marcel’s understanding of the broken world, as Katharine Hanley points out, is that unlike certain postmodernist thinkers, Marcel consistently seeks to discover the “ontological foundations”\(^{12}\) at the heart of the broken world. Its concern for the metaphysical is part of the reason why Marcel’s philosophy of hospitality offers such a valuable and unique contribution in the realm of hospitality studies.

While maintaining his deep conviction that the cause of the world’s brokenness has metaphysical roots, Marcel also strongly upholds the experiential dimension of this phenomenon. In fact, it is interesting to note that Marcel does not think argument are necessary for believing that the world is broken; rather, human experience provides its own evidence for it. As he explains:

> But what we can affirm with absolute certainty is that there is within the human creature as we know him something that protests against the rape or violation of

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\(^{11}\) Cf. Wood, “Introduction to *Music and Philosophy*,” 15. Although Marcel repeatedly stresses that the fruits of his phenomenological investigations are independent of theology or religious creed. In certain places in his writings, he is more explicit in describing his belief that a Divine Being grounds all being. For example, he writes that: “Him whom we must call the Creator or the Father… to use a more metaphysical expression … is the unrepresentable and uncharacterizable Being who constitutes us as existents.” Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume II: Faith and Reality*, trans. René Hague (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 170.

which he is the victim, and this torn, protesting state of the human creature is enough to justify us in asserting that the world in which we live is a broken world.\textsuperscript{13} 

In this chapter of \textit{The Mystery of Being}, entitled, “A Broken World,” Marcel speaks about the lack of integration that man experiences within himself from living in an increasingly atomized and automatized world.\textsuperscript{14} Such dehumanizing trends in society contribute to what he calls a “rape or violation” of persons, i.e. a stripping of men and women of their human dignity. Although Marcel argues that this situation of man’s losing his humanity more and more can be affirmed with an “absolute certainty” by looking at history, he nevertheless wonders if the world was always broken, and if so, how did it get that way?

More than delving extensively into the primordial origins of our tragic condition, Marcel blames certain historical shifts, particularly those first brought on by the industrial revolution, the development of technology and its accompanying effects on the values driving human society. In his essay, “Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery,” Marcel diagnoses the historical conditions of the early part of the twentieth century as the most perilous influences behind the fracturing of the world. Describing the attitude of people today, Marcel laments the fact that they have lost “any sense of being or the ontological,” and if “a need for a sense of being affects them at all, it is only in a muted way, as some vague uneasiness.”\textsuperscript{15} As Marcel’s description illustrates, the broken world is this strange “uneasiness” that pervades modern culture, yet people are often not even aware of it, which is a large part of the problem. As Dwayne

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Marcel, \textit{MBI}, 33.
\item Cf. Ibid., 32.
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Tunstall notes, Marcel draws a significant connection between the experience of the broken world and the irruption of the Great War (1914-1918). Commenting on this historical influence, Tunstall notes:

World War I is the watershed event in which Europeans realized that they lived in a world where human life could be annihilated on a mass scale. It is with World War I that Europeans and their allies worldwide witnessed how apparently absurd human life could be as millions died horrible, gruesome deaths for a questionable cause.16

Marcel saw with vivid clarity the existential uncertainty and anguish that began to engulf the world as a result of the atrocities committed during the Great War. At the same time, however, it was actually Marcel’s own experience as a volunteer in the French Red Cross during World War I which allowed him to more consciously appreciate the uniqueness of each and every human life.17

Beginning in the fall of 1914, Marcel’s specific task for the Red Cross was to assist those whose son, husband, father or brother was missing in action. Marcel describes this work, to which he dedicated himself with unflinching fervor, in this way: “Whenever possible, I met personally with the unfortunate enquirers come in search of news, striving to the greatest extent possible to comfort them and to give them the feeling that they were not alone, that I was personally involved in this quest, far too often a hopeless one.”18 As he recalls the experience, Marcel reveals that even as a young man in his early twenties, he felt a great desire to show existential hospitality to those who suffer, helping them to feel that they “were not alone.” Moreover, describing how this experience of service with the Red Cross marked his philosophical thinking, Marcel

17 Cf. Ibid.
writes: “[This work] undoubtedly contributed to the development not only of a sense and need for personal contacts, but also of a boundless compassion for the distress to which each day testified anew.” Once more, we can recognize how the personal experiences of Marcel’s life deeply shape his philosophical mind.

Another significant reason why Marcel connects the outbreak of the First World War with the emergence of modern man’s sense of alienation and angst is because of the way in which technological developments enabled the tragic mass destruction of human life. For example, while the invention of the airplane at the turn of the twentieth century certainly brought conveniences for humanity, at the same time, it also enabled military warfare to take on new dimensions of barbarity. Marcel saw technological progress as a double-edged sword; while it brings countless benefits to humanity, it also brings certain negative repercussions. In the words of Bernard Gendreau, Marcel’s concern with technology “is how the condition created by the spirit of technology could become detrimental to the flowering of humanity and work adversely against the aspiration of the person toward its fulfillment in being.” Although, much could be written about Marcel’s profound, and even prophetic, critique of the advance of technology, I simply wish to point out for our purposes how Marcel considers humanity’s inordinate reliance on these techniques as contributing toward deep problems for the flourishing of the human person.

Marcel believes that there was an age when the world was actually “less broken” than it has become in modern times. From his perspective, medieval European society

19 Ibid., 20-21.
experienced a greater receptivity toward the mystery of being and thus experienced a deeper reverence for spiritual values. For this reason, the world then seemed to be a little less fractured. Marcel sees the unrestrained development of science and technology as a major contributing force in modern man’s alienation. He expresses this view of the contemporary situation of man as he writes:

[Whenever] circumstances … lead to men being … treated … as aggregates, whose elements are transferable according to the demands of temporal vicissitudes, it becomes more and more difficult to keep in mind the inalienable characteristics of uniqueness and dignity which have hitherto been considered as attributes of the human soul created in the image of God. To say that these characteristics are becoming more and more lost to view is not enough; they are being, if one may so put it, actively denied, they are being trodden upon. Man may end by … [proving] by his very behavior he is not such a being as the theologians have defined.

In this passage, Marcel is referring to the fact that, at least according to the classical Western tradition, the human person has been understood to possess an inherent dignity and value, in virtue of being made in the image and likeness of God. In our day and age, he writes, “there is probably no more urgent task for a philosopher conscious of his responsibilities and of the dangers threatening mankind, than the task of rediscovering those basic existential certitudes which are essentially inherent in the authentic human being, as ‘Imago Dei.’” These words reveal the fact that Marcel views his mission as a philosopher primarily as a way to articulate and defend the ontological dignity and value of the human person. Rather than assuming explicitly religious values, Marcel instead

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21 Marcel writes: “I am thinking of civilizations of the sacral type, like thirteenth century France, in which fundamental values commanding the very structure of institutions were still religious values.” Gabriel Marcel, Problematic Man, trans. Brian Thompson (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 139.

22 Marcel, MBII, 147–48.

begins with a fundamental openness to non-material, *spiritual* values. As Thomas Anderson explains, Marcel is convinced that reality is fundamentally spiritual which explains why so many of his works critique technology and the “rampant materialism” of Western culture. The spiritual goods involved in experiences of family, friendship and love are not values which can be measured or seen. Yet, Marcel will insist that these invisible realities are the ones that truly matter.

Certain modern historical trends and the increase of technological means that turn men into mere “aggregates, whose elements are transferable,” have been putting this understanding of the human person’s dignity in jeopardy. Because Marcel has such a strong conviction that man is made for communion with others, he recognizes that excessive reliance on technology inevitably makes us somehow less human, because, “being man means participating in one’s fellowman.” Thus, the breaking down of relationships remains at the heart of what Marcel means by the broken world. As he describes it:

I would say that we are living in a world in which the preposition “with” – and I might also mention … [the] noun “togetherness” – seems more and more to be losing its meaning; … [and] the very idea of a close human relationship (the intimate relationship of large families, of old friends, of old neighbors, for instance) is becoming increasingly hard to put into practice, and is even being rather disparaged.

What Marcel expresses here is that what has truly been “breaking” in our modern world are the bonds of communion and relational ties which bring people together in a meaningful way. Because Marcel sees man’s fulfillment as rooted in an ontological need

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for communion with others, a lack or impoverishment of genuine relationships is not inconsequential for a flourishing human life. Summarizing Marcel’s philosophical anthropology, Vincent Miceli writes:

All being is oriented toward ontological communion. All being is insufficient and frustrated if isolated and self-enclosed from communion with other being. This is especially true of man the self-conscious being, who eminently embodies within himself the ontological demands for fulfillment, for transcendence, for communal plenitude, yet who is free and thus dangerously capable of shutting himself off from any inspirations and hopes for intersubjective participation.27

As we will see in chapter five, Marcel has an unshakable conviction that human beings are made for “ontological communion,” and therefore, it is only through relationships with others that we become fully human.

Despite his uneasiness about the materialistic, techno-centric tendencies of modern man, Marcel never actually claims that technology is bad in itself nor does he deny that technological progress is inevitable and clearly brings significant benefits for humanity. Marcel defines the related terms technique and technology as follows:

[A] group of procedures methodically elaborated, and consequently capable of being taught and reproduced, and when these procedures are put into operation, they assure the achievement of some definite concrete purpose.28

He, then, adds: “the realm of the technical, as thus defined, is not to be considered as evil in itself.”29 In other words, as Kenneth Gallagher tells us: “There is no attempt on Marcel’s part to deny the legitimacy – even the splendor – of technics when they are pursued for proportionate goals.”30 In fact, Marcel sees technological advancements as

29 Ibid.
expressions of man’s goodness and dignity, since they reveal how he is able to use his intelligence to enhance human life.\textsuperscript{31} Marcel’s worry, however, is that the value of the person seems to be less and less revered the more that the technological outlook takes over a culture. Thus, it is not technology which Marcel objects to; it is its spirit. As Donald Traub explains, in Marcel’s opinion, the greatest danger for modern society is the temptation of absolutizing “the spirit of technology” which would end up terminating in a technocracy.\textsuperscript{32} Rather than condemning technology, Marcel urges us to “ask ourselves about the concrete relationship that tends to grow up between technical processes on the one hand and human beings on the other.”\textsuperscript{33}

Simply because something is good in one sense (like the conveniences and services technology allow), it does not necessarily mean that it is good in an absolute sense; might does not make right. Marcel recognizes that when man is dominated by a technological attitude, he becomes blind to other values since he begins to view the cosmos as “a matter for domination and he himself appears as an autonomous organizer.”\textsuperscript{34} As Gendreau explains, the person living in the “technical culture” becomes “an automaton requiring minimal involvement and participation.”\textsuperscript{35} Marcel’s concern is that technology will lead “to loneliness for the individual who possesses the ability to master and manage by himself the use of these instruments and be an independent operator … without any need of being in contact with other persons.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Marcel, \textit{MAMS}, 82.
\textsuperscript{32} Donald Traub, \textit{Toward a Fraternal Society: A Study of Gabriel Marcel’s Approach to Being, Technology and Intersubjectivity} (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 150.
\textsuperscript{33} Marcel, \textit{MAMS}, 82–83.
\textsuperscript{34} Gallagher, \textit{The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel}, 58.
\textsuperscript{35} Gendreau, “The Cautionary Ontological Approach.”
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
reveal, Marcel sees a frightful connection between the domination of technological thinking and a loss of interpersonal communion.

As the use and development of technology continues to grow exponentially, our brokenness becomes heightened. As an indication that the metaphysics of hospitality offers a solution for the troubles of the broken world, it is of the utmost importance to note that in the very passage where Marcel specifically coins this term as an attitude of reverence and respect for all people including the most vulnerable, he contrasts it with the attitudes prevalent in a technological culture, which are “dominated by the ideas of efficiency and output.” Referring to the way that modern man is increasingly losing the attitude of “reverence toward the guest,” Marcel explains how such an attitude of metaphysical hospitality seems to be more and more absurd to people. He writes, “in the world around us, we know that this assertion of the absurdity of forbearance and generosity is taking very practical shapes.” Not simply referring to the extreme atrocities of the Holocaust, Marcel also recognizes that traditional virtues like forbearance and generosity towards the weakest among us who may need our help are becoming increasingly absurd for the contemporary person, who can tend to value efficiency and productivity far above other values. In other words, as Marcel tells us, Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, numerous recent studies have shown a profound correlation between high uses of technology/social media and a sense of alienation and loss of human “connectedness.” Much of what Marcel describes in his own critique of the “technological attitude” concurs with these findings of contemporary culture. For two insightful examples, see Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2012). And Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?,” The Atlantic, May 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/; Marche states: “Within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation.”

37 Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, numerous recent studies have shown a profound correlation between high uses of technology/social media and a sense of alienation and loss of human “connectedness.” Much of what Marcel describes in his own critique of the “technological attitude” concurs with these findings of contemporary culture. For two insightful examples, see Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2012). And Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?,” The Atlantic, May 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/; Marche states: “Within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation.”
38 Marcel, MBI, 217.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 When composing the “Gifford Lectures” that were eventually published as The Mystery of Being in 1951, just a few years after the end of World War II, Marcel certainly has in mind the atrocities of both world
the world is becoming more and more broken the more that human persons lose the
ability to practice reverence and hospitality toward one another.

While Marcel firmly believes that the extent of the brokenness of the world seems
to be increasingly evident in modern society, he believes that the situation is not merely
the result of historical changes. In fact, he believes the world has been fractured since the
beginning — since the first man and woman inflicted humanity’s original wound by their
free choice in the Garden of Eden. For the Judeo-Christian tradition, this “rupture” for
humanity is known as original sin. Linking the cause of the world’s brokenness to a loss
of some kind of unity, Marcel explains that, “it would be rash to attempt to put one’s
finger on some epoch in history when the unity of the world [i.e. its lack of brokenness]
was something directly felt by men in general.”42 He continues:

If anybody accepts the dogma of the Fall, is there not implicit in that acceptance
an admission that the world is, in fact, broken? In other words, is it not the case
that the world is essentially broken... not merely historically broken, as we have
seemed to be saying, basing ourselves, as we have done, on a certain number of
facts about the contemporary world? Does not our talk about a broken world
imply that there have been periods when the world was intact, though this
implication contradicts both the teachings of the Church and all the showings of
history?43

As mentioned above, although Marcel is a Christian thinker, his approach to
philosophical investigation is consistently phenomenological and not theological, in the
sense that he first of all relies on the “showings” of history and human experience. Helen
Tattam expresses it well: “Marcel’s philosophical writings do not insist that the more
foundational, universal reality that humans must recognize, in order to engage

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42 Marcel, *MBI*, 22.
43 Ibid. My italics.
authentically with their own identity, should necessarily be equated with God.” For this reason, even though Marcel attributes the ultimate origin of the brokenness of the world to the Christian doctrine of the Fall, he believes that experience on its own reveals the fractured dimensions of the human condition. Thus, while historical factors have certainly played their destructive role in the brokenness of the world, Marcel is convinced that humanity has been fractured since the beginning of time. The world is essentially broken.

The notion of the broken world shows up in all of Marcel’s major works as an expression of his deeply felt experience of the human condition. As such, he proposes that the whole corpus of his theatrical works be summarized by the title, “a theater of a broken world.” Similarly, one of his more well-known dramas, Le Monde Cassé, bears the concept in its very title. In this play, Marcel uses the character of Christiane to provide an apt description of the subtle way in which our world is so deeply fractured. Referring to her experience of broken relationships, Christiane laments to her friend Denise how it all speaks of a “broken world,” like a watch that has all its parts in their proper place yet does not tick, because its main spring is broken; it seems to have no “heart.” Christiane woefully exclaims:

Don’t you feel sometimes that we are living ... if you can call it living ... in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear, and you don’t hear any ticking. You know what I’m talking about, the world ... it seems to me it must have had a heart at one time, but today you would say the heart had stopped beating.

Christiane’s words paint an accurate picture of the broken world, a world in which people “live” but don’t feel “alive” anymore. As we have shown, Marcel is a strong critic of the increasing functionalization of modern society, in which persons are seen primarily for their “use” or function, and not for their being and intrinsic value. Thus, we can affirm that the type of brokenness which Marcel sees plaguing the world does not consist in its parts malfunctioning or being “out of order,” but, rather, in the overall eclipsing of man’s connection with other persons, with spiritual values, with human dignity and being itself.

To sum up, the broken world, according to Marcel, is one that has “lost its inner unity, its living center,” and where “each person is concerned only with himself.” Marcel understands the world to be essentially broken, even though, as we shall see, he also firmly believes that hope exists and healing is possible. Let us now turn to a brief study of the philosophical anthropology of Jean-Paul Sartre, a thinker who, like Marcel, sees the brokenness of the modern world, yet who fails to offer hope of a remedy.

**B. Sartre and the Broken World**

Presenting Sartre and Marcel in dialogue has the advantage that not only did the two thinkers know each other personally, but Marcel explicitly engages with Sartre’s philosophy several times in his own works. It is important to recognize that although Marcel and Sartre end up having radically opposing views on certain matters like the nature of man, their philosophical interests actually coincide. Marcel is intent to point out that Sartre’s philosophy holds many penetrating and valid claims, and it should therefore be examined with the “utmost seriousness and objectivity.”

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follows, I will focus primarily on Marcel’s 1946 essay, “Existence and Human Freedom,” which is devoted to a critical survey of Sartre’s philosophy, and was published in Marcel’s collection of essays, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*. I will also note other Marcelian texts in which his discussion of Sartre is relevant.

One of the unique aspects of Marcel’s concept of the metaphysics of hospitality is that it considers the nature of hospitality from its deepest ontological level. According to Miklos Vető, no matter what philosophical theme Marcel is investigating, his goal is somehow to restore a primacy to the realm of the ontological. As this thesis will make clear, the richness and depth of Marcel’s vision of the human person is intrinsically linked to the metaphysical foundations he establishes.

With that connection in mind, I will argue that Sartre’s “social philosophy” (although it is arguably more accurate to call it an anti-social philosophy) suffers its most problematic errors as a result of the faulty ontology with which it begins. Even though it is known that Sartre’s philosophy evolved over his career and that there is a significant alteration from the ontology of the early Sartre to the ontology of the later, I will focus my comparison on the early (and more well-known) Sartrean views, particularly as put forth in his *L’Être et le Néant*, (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943) and *L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946).

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50 In Sartre’s later works, such as *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), and *Notebook for an Ethics* (1985, unfinished), he attempts to offer a more developed “social ontology,” in which he suggests the possibility of moving from objectifying, alienation relationships to a “positive receptivity” with others. Cf. Kenneth Anderson, “Transformations of Subjectivity in Sartre’s ‘Critique of Dialectical Reason,’” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 27 (2002): 267–80.
51 *L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme* was a lecture Sartre gave in October 1945. Although the literal translation to English is clearly rendered, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” for some reason certain English editions publish it with a less accurate title. I will retain the inadequately translated title, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” for future citations, since this is the edition from which I will be quoting.
As a starting point for our examination of the two thinkers, the best place to begin is with Marcel’s summary of his Sartrean critique. Marcel explains that the preliminary ideas which separates the two philosophers involve Sartre’s “concept of consciousness, taken almost as a lack or emptiness, and … his concept of freedom, conceived entirely negatively.” Let us unpack these concepts to better understand why Sartre serves as such an effective foil to Marcel.

As a background for comprehending Sartre’s view of human relationships, I would like to start with a brief discussion of his reductionistic vision of man, which will help to reveal Marcel’s striking alternative. Essentially, Sartre takes the Cartesian split between subject and object to an extreme conclusion and ends up adopting the belief that man is nothing but his consciousness. In the words of William Barrett, Sartre “merely draws conclusions from what is existentially implicit in the Cartesian doubt.” Just as Descartes sets out to doubt all his beliefs unless he can have absolute certainty about them, and thus ends up with only the certainty of his consciousness (and his existence), so too does Sartre follow a similar logic. For Sartre, man is “a nothingness, a negativity, existing outside of nature and history….” Barrett continues:

Thus, man cannot be interpreted, Sartre says, as a solid substantial thing existing amid the plenitude of things that make up a world; he is beyond nature because in his negative capability he transcends it. Man’s freedom is to say No, and this means that he is the being by whom nothingness comes into being.

54 Ibid.  
55 Ibid.
In other words, by reducing man to his consciousness, Sartre ultimately denies that the human person is a substantial being. As Hazel Barnes explains, for Sartre, consciousness is “not a thing, not an entity, not a substance.”

Moreover, Sartre takes the Cartesian dualism a step further by adopting the phenomenological principle of intentionality, the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something, but interpreting it in the extreme form in which the subject of consciousness, unlike the object, is not anything at all. As we shall see, Marcel also adopts the principle of intentionality, yet he believes that this strict subject-object dichotomy is false. Because Sartre’s self has no substantial being (only consciousness which is a kind of negation), he holds that if “consciousness were one with its object, there would be only the object,” identifying being with consciousness. Moreover, based on Sartre’s view that the human being is only his consciousness, he is forced to assert that our “existence is … a perpetual self-transcendence: in existing we are always beyond ourselves.” This reductionistic view of the person will have serious consequences for how Sartre understands the way human beings interact with one another and with the world.

Although he fundamentally rejects any kind of objective, transcendent metaphysics, Sartre does offer a kind of “ontology” in his magnum opus, Being and Nothingness. There, we recognize the traces of a Cartesian dualism, as Sartre describes the nature of all possible beings that exist in the world. Essentially, he claims that there are two irreducible modes of existence: being-in-itself (être-en-soi), which refers to all

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57 Ibid., 19.
58 Barrett, Irrational Man, 218.
unconscious, inanimate beings in the external world, and being-for-itself (être-pour-soi), which is conscious being, i.e. human beings.\(^{59}\) An object like a car or a house would be en-soi, a being in-itself, because it cannot change what it is or reflect consciously on what it is. Only this being (non-conscious being in-itself) has an essence, meaning it exists in a kind of fullness; it is “purely and simply what it is.”\(^{60}\)

Moreover, for Sartre, a being is either a subject (pour-soi) or an object (en-soi), and it is not possible for the pour-soi to relate to another pour-soi except by turning him into an object. As Thomas Busch explains: “Because the for-itself is ‘break in being,’ temporal self-surpassing, no transcendent objects belongs to the being of the for-itself. An object appears as reified, given, the same, in opposition to the being of the conscious self.”\(^{61}\) While a thorough examination of Sartre’s complicated ontology is beyond the scope of this study, it is sufficient to recognize that the Sartrean split between subject and object will have major consequences for his social philosophy.

When it comes to Sartre’s view of human beings, “existence precedes essence,” (l’existence précède l’essence).\(^{62}\) What this famous phrase ultimately means is that the Sartrean man is always a for-itself, a being that is “incomplete,” has no a priori “essence,” and therefore no pre-established human nature. Thus, the human person must create his own essence through his free choices. Sartre’s mantra that “existence precedes essence,” means that human beings do not have a God-given purpose; only by using

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\(^{60}\) Marcel, *PE*, 60.


one’s freedom can someone become who and what she is. There is, thus, no natural meaning to being human. As Sartre explains in *The Humanism of Existentialism*:

What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing.⁶³

As this passage makes clear, one of Sartre’s main tenets in *Being and Nothingness*, is that along with being pure consciousness, man is a nothingness (*le néant*). Although the claim can seem contradictory at first, Sartre’s logic is consistent. For, if it were true that only the *en-soi* type of beings (non-conscious) have real being, then the other types of beings (conscious, *pour-soi*) would be the opposite: lack, negation, emptiness. Commenting on this, Marcel writes:

The characteristic of consciousness, Sartre tells us, is that it is a decompression of being. It is of the essence of conscious being to be what it is not and not to be what it is .... [There is] a certain universal structure of being-for-itself, which is, as it were, alloyed with non-being.⁶⁴

Here again the language seems contradictory as it implies that the essence of conscious being is to be “what it is not.” Sartre’s overall claim is that all *non-conscious* beings are simply what they are; man, however, must create and make himself what he is. Marcel agrees that there is truth to the idea that our free choices shape and in a certain sense “create” who we are. However, the enormous difference is that Marcel sees the person’s consciousness and freedom as a dimension of who she is, while Sartre equates the person with her freedom, and thus non-being.

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⁶³ Ibid.
This brings us to mention that along with the belief that man is his consciousness and a “nothingness,” Sartre also holds a revolutionary view of human freedom. Perhaps no philosopher in history emphasizes man’s freedom to such a radical degree as Sartre, who famously declares that “man is free, man is freedom,” and that he is “condemned to be free.” Many philosophers have emphasized the inestimable value of human freedom, even declaring that this freedom makes us like God Himself. Sartre’s audacious claim, however, is that “God is dead,” and man has nothing to define himself except his freedom. As Anderson points out, Sartre “minimizes to the point of denial any limitations of human freedom and speaks of it as ‘absolute,’ ‘total,’ ‘infinite,’ and ‘without limits.’” In other words, to be human, for Sartre, means being an absolute freedom. Sister Mary Aloysius Schaldenrand phrases it well when she says, “whereas for other philosophers human freedom is in some way a function of the human essence, for Sartre the human essence is in every way a function of human freedom.”

While Sartre ascribes to human freedom a kind of “absolute value,” it is also important to note that his understanding of freedom is negative, in the sense that it is ultimately the freedom to say no. As Barrett suggests, Sartre’s view of freedom was

69 This move in itself is not coherent since Sartre argues that all values are relative since they are “created” by us. He writes: “my freedom is the unique foundation of values and … nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 76. Thus, according to Sartre’s own logic, who is to say that even freedom itself is a value?
70 For example, Sartre famously wrote of his fellow French people: “Never were we more free than under the German occupation,” meaning that in their resistance to the Nazi regime, they were employing the ultimate kind of freedom. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Paris Alive: The Republic of Silence,” *The Atlantic* 174, no. 6 (December 1944): 39.
strongly shaped by his experience of the French Resistance during the Second World War. Marcel would agree that an important aspect of man’s freedom is the ability to say “no” to evil and oppression; however, this is not the fullness of what man’s freedom is.

Marcel’s view is that we also have freedom to say “yes” to communion with others, and “yes” to a flourishing human life. In his work, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond (Pour une Sagesse Tragique et son au-delà)*, Marcel gives voice to his consistent view that life, despite its shadows, is also a path for freedom and joy:

> The central deficiency in existentialist philosophies of anxiety, I think, is the completely arbitrary overlooking of a fundamental experience I like to call the *gaudium essendi*, the joy of existing. A certain threat does in fact menace this *gaudium essendi*, a serious shadow is projected upon it. And there is the tragic aspect of our situation. But if this primordial fact of the *gaudium essendi* is overlooked, then we will have only a mutilated and deformed idea of our situation.71

Sartre’s ontology leaves no room for the *gaudium essendi*, since the *pour-soi* is fundamentally cut off from communing with its surroundings.

Marcel explains that Sartre “does not regard [freedom] as an instrument which is at the disposal of man and of which he can consequently make a good or a bad use; he regards it as man’s very being – or his lack of being.”72 Ultimately, Sartre’s exalted view of human freedom leads man to a situation of alienation. Juliette Simont comments on this aspect of Sartre’s view: “Fundamental alienation – prior to all conflict – comes from the upsurge of freedom in a material world that distorts it while being its only possibility.”73 To Marcel, genuine freedom is about affirmation and not alienation. In fact,

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71 Marcel, *TWB*, 42.
72 Marcel, *PE*, 86.
Marcel thinks Sartre’s analysis of human freedom deviates from genuine human experience. As Anderson notes:

[On] the basis of his own reflections on experience, Marcel denies that human reality is isolated from the things of this world and that worldly things have no impact on human beings and their consciousnesses. He insists instead on their ‘participation’ with each other, meaning by that that humans are neither isolated from things of the world nor from other human beings but are essentially connected to both.\(^{74}\)

Marcel’s notion of participation will be one of the most important concepts for us to understand in our study of the metaphysics of hospitality. At this point, it suffices to say that Marcel believes our participation in the world around us and with other people has the power to shape us in a positive way, not only the alienating way Sartre posits. Marcel suggests the idea that the world itself has a certain “hospitable” character to it, so much so that he compares our experience in it to being in a womb; he writes: “I am in the world only insofar as the world is something shaping me as in a womb and there is a kind of primordial bond which unites the human being to a particular, determined, and concrete environment.”\(^{75}\) Unlike Sartre who considers man to possess an infinite freedom to create himself, Marcel argues that we are free and yet are also constantly being *shaped* by the people, experiences and realities around us. We are not isolated consciousnesses.

Furthermore, while Sartre claims that another person’s freedom is a threat to my own, Marcel believes instead that we cannot develop our freedom properly without the presence of relationships. Jill Graper Hernandez writes: “At first glance, Marcelian freedom is paradoxical: the more one enters into a self-centered project, the less legitimate it is to say that the act is free, whereas the more the self is engaged with other


\(^{75}\) Marcel, *TWB*, 38.
free individuals, the more the self is free.” This is because, for Marcel, there is a metaphysical foundation of the human being who possesses freedom. For him, the human person is an *imago dei*, a being whose freedom finds its fulfillment in the gift of self.

According to Sartre, the presence of another person, another *pour-soi*, impedes one’s freedom because human freedom “arises in a world already permeated by the values of other people, hence in a world of competition among many freedoms.” Unlike Marcel’s vision of the human person, in which our freedom is enhanced through relationships that help us become more “ourselves,” Sartre sees the existence of other “freedoms” as a threat. The consequence of Sartre’s philosophy of freedom is “a kind of alienation – an alienation from everything other than one’s own consciousness and from one’s own past, present and future, for one cannot coincide with any of these.” This alienating loss of connection with others, and even with oneself, present in Sartre’s account of man’s existence, illustrates how broken Sartre’s world is.

In summary, given these two core Sartrean beliefs about man’s consciousness and freedom, we can surmise how diametrically opposed his philosophy of human relationships is to a personalist understanding like Marcel’s. Marcel explains that the origins of the errors in Sartre’s views on human interactions are deeply embedded in the Sartrean ontological division between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*. Just as Marcel’s contribution on hospitality is interwoven with his ontology, so does Sartre’s alienating view on social interactions derives from his metaphysical presuppositions. Within Marcel’s critique of

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77 Simont, “Sartrean Ethics,” 182.
78 Glenn, “Marcel and Sartre,” 540.
Sartre’s dualistic ontology, I would like to mention two significant errors in Sartre’s anthropology which accentuate how far removed his thought is from Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. These two problems which Marcel highlights in Sartre’s theory of human relationships are: 1) the belief that human beings necessarily objectify each other and thus inter-subjectivity and love are impossible; and 2) the belief that the value of the person is what she does.

1. Marcel’s Critique of Sartre’s Denial of Inter-Subjectivity and Love

In trying to expose Sartre’s “theory of inter-subjectivity,” we immediately encounter a major obstacle that verges on a contradiction – namely, Sartre does not think that two persons can genuinely interact as subjects. Thus, to speak of inter-subjectivity is oxymoronic. However, since the concepts that Sartre deals with in all of his writings involve the human person and his situation in the world and in relation to others, for our purposes here, it makes sense for us to at least speak of his “social” philosophy.80

Although Marcel eventually is at odds with Sartre’s analysis of how people interact with others, he does not easily dismiss it. To begin his considerations, Marcel asks, from the Sartrean perspective, “How can I really become aware of others as others?”81 He answers this question by turning to Sartre’s famous notion of the Look (le Regard).82 On a preliminary level, Sartre uses his concept of the Look in an attempt to dispute solipsism. He does this by claiming that the experience of shame which arises

80 As Hazel Barnes writes, Sartre’s philosophy is “a study of the human condition; for since ‘man is the being by whom Nothingness comes into the world,’ this means that man himself is Being and Nothingness,” Hazel Barnes, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), xxi.
81 Marcel, PE. 69.
82 Like Sartre does, I will capitalize the Look, to indicate it is being used in a precise, technical manner.
when we feel “looked at” by another conscious being, enables us at least to know that others exist, and at the same time it makes us aware of who/what we are ourselves – that is, that we are condemned to be a pour-soi, a being-for-another, and not a being which exists in its own right, an en-soi.

Marcel greatly admires Sartre’s description of the Look, saying there is “perhaps nothing more remarkable in the whole of Sartre’s work than his phenomenological study of the ‘other,’ as looking and of himself as exposed, pierced, bared, petrified by his Medusa-like stare.”83 For Sartre, the Look describes the context of the experience of shame which arises from any interaction between two or more human beings. We feel shame, Sartre argues, because another conscious-being, another pour-soi with an absolute freedom like my own, necessarily views me as an “object” of his consciousness, i.e. an en-soi. Whenever another person looks at me, Sartre believes, it causes me to experience the primordial feeling of shame, similar to feeling like an object being peered at through a keyhole.84 Sartre believes that through the experience of shame brought on by my encounter with the Other, I discover an “aspect of my being.”85 He continues:

By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. … Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.86

In other words, this look is “objectifying,” since it falsely attempts to turn the pour-soi into an en-soi. For this reason, Sartre insists that the experience of “being-seen,” both reveals who I am and yet threatens to strip me of my freedom. Thus, Sartre believes that

83 Marcel, PE, 71.
84 Cf. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 340–400.
85 Ibid., 301. Because Sartre employs the capitalized form of L'Autre, “the Other,” to indicate the objectified nature of the other as something external in the world, I will also capitalize it to preserve his meaning.
86 Ibid., 302.
the presence of the Other somehow allows the pour-soi to grow in its “identity,” which is essentially a negation, a “nothingness.” He tells us:

Between the Other and myself there is a nothingness of separation. This nothingness does not derive its origin from myself nor from the Other, nor is it a reciprocal relation between the Other and myself. On the contrary, as a primary absence of relation, it is originally the foundation of all relation between the Other and me.87

It is significant to note that Sartre asserts that “the fundamental relation between the Other and myself” is that of objectité, object-ness.88 As Sartre explains, objectité means more than a kind of “objectivity;” it refers to the tendency to make of the Other, an “object.”89 In other words, according to Sartre, the fundamental character of my relations with others is not an interpersonal communion, but rather a mutual objectifying of one another. Glenn summarizes Sartre’s view as such:

[The] dichotomy of for-itself and in-itself, subject and object, is unsurpassable. My basic relation to the other is not, as Marcel would suggest, positive but is rather an “internal negation.” When I have been objectified by the other’s Look, I must in turn objectify the other in order to regain my free subjectivity.90

Because the Other’s gaze turns me into an object, it also alienates me. Sartre tells us: “I grasp the Other’s look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities.”91 Moreover, for Sartre, shame is always “shame of self.” It is “the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object.”92 At this point, Sartre asks a question we all might be wondering:

87 Ibid., 312–13.
88 Cf. Ibid., 340.
89 Cf. Ibid., 632.
90 Glenn, “Marcel and Sartre,” 530.
91 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 352.
92 Ibid., 350.
And this self which I am – this I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me, for the Other’s look embraces my being …. What sort of relations can I enter into with this being which I am and which shame reveals to me?93

Sartre does not give much of an answer, other than to reiterate that all relations between persons are characterized by objectification. Moreover, his pessimistic vision also includes the idea that any human relationship, in turn, is a kind of possession of the Other. As he puts it: “The Other holds a secret – the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me, and this possession is nothing other than the consciousness of possessing me.”94

By claiming that the Other “makes me be,” Sartre is alluding to his view that I am precisely this being which is not an object (en-soi), but rather always a conscious subject (pour-soi). Because the other person continually poses the threat to turn me into an object, Sartre’s idea is that only through a flight from the Other can I retain my freedom. As David Mitchell explains, for Sartre, “the human must be a flight from anything which gives it substantial being itself. It is only through this movement away from its past self that the for-itself realizes itself as possibility ….95

As Marcel points out, Sartre’s claim that persons cannot do anything but objectify one another, leads to the fact that the other, by definition, is always a “menace” and threat to me.96 To use the language of Martin Buber, Sartre’s vision of man limits social acts to merely I-It relations and never to I-Thou relations.97 In Sartre’s understanding, the human person is to be regarded as “something altogether different from that of being-itself,” it

93 Ibid., 261.
94 Ibid., 364.
96 Marcel. PE. 71.
can “… never be in the relation ‘other’ to another being; indeed it can have no relationship with Another.”98 Thus, in the Sartrean world, human relationships are based on how one person sees the other, and inevitably this leads to a subject-object, rather than subject-subject, dynamic. The result is that there can be no genuine *inter-subjective* communion. There can be no *we*. As Marcel tells us, the whole Sartrean dialectic of subject-object relations “rests upon the complete denial of *we* as subject, that is to say upon the denial of communion.”99 In commenting on this, Marcel maintains that the word “communion,” has no meaning for Sartre: “This is because in his universe, participation itself is impossible…. There is room only for appropriation.”100

This denial of communion takes us to another major problem with Sartre’s anthropology: his denial that love exists. For him, the “aim of love is to appropriate the will of another.”101 Love, according to Sartre, is a kind of possession or use. Marcel, however, argues that the aim of love is fundamentally different from appropriation; love, he argues, is “a communion.”102 For Sartre, when two people come together, there will always be a kind of war between their wills, a battle of freedoms. Adopting a form of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic as the basis for human interactions, Sartre thinks it is impossible for there to be genuine love, because there can be no mutual give and take of freedoms.103 In contrast to this understanding, Marcel not only believes that love is possible; he thinks that it is what ultimately liberates man. Van Ewijk summarizes Marcel’s perspective of love as he writes:

98 Marcel, *PE*, 60.
99 Ibid., 77.
100 Ibid., 76.
101 Ibid., 75.
102 Ibid., 76.
Yes, man is a *free* being, he can shut himself off from the other man and look upon him and treat him as object. But what then does Marcel mean by the meeting between “I” and “thou”? The answer is: an invitation. Two human beings open themselves up for one another, *invocation, appel* (appeal), to one another in a free, inner movement of love, by which they break through narrow individuality and thus become themselves. A new subject originates, a “we.”

As Van Ewijk points out, Marcel does not deny that it is possible for human persons to use and “objectify” one another. However, such behavior, which is characteristic of our broken world, is a *deviation* from how human beings should treat one another. Marcel, in fact, will argue that the only proper way of relating to persons is with reverence and love. Anderson explains Marcel’s position:

> Love … is not an attempt to dominate others or to control their freedom, Marcel says, but an attempt to enter into communion with them, to participate in their very being. Love is a true subject-to-subject or intersubjective relation.

The fact that most of us fall short of this does not diminish Marcel’s conviction that love and not use is what should characterize interpersonal communion. Marcel holds to the belief that not only is love possible, but it is also what gives the fullest meaning to human life.

For Sartre, by contrast, any human experience that has the appearance of love is a mere deception. He says this because he thinks that the other person whom I encounter inevitably poses a threat to my freedom, as I to his. Accordingly, for Sartre, the two possible scenarios that are frequently mistaken for “love” are either: 1) *sadism*, in which the more powerful will of one person dominates and finds pleasure in overcoming the weaker one, or 2) *masochism* in which the weaker will of one person finds pleasure in submitting to the other person’s freedom and allowing that person to dominate. The only

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other option for how two people can be in a relationship, says Sartre, is a kind of
indifference or apathy, in which the two wills are left independent. But then again, this is
obviously not an experience of love. Glenn summarizes Sartre’s view of love as “an
attempt to overcome the alienation from myself, to become my own foundation, by
possessing the freedom of the other. But like other fundamental attempts to heal the rift in
my being that is opened up by the other’s alienating Look, love necessarily fails.”

This rift between Sartre’s bleak denial of love and Marcel’s full-throttle
affirmation reveals the crucial difference between them. Given the fact that Marcel’s
metaphysics of hospitality is arguably a philosophy of love, we can see that Sartre’s
philosophy stands in stark opposition to it since he ultimately adopts a *metaphysics of
hostility*. Rather than allowing for true intersubjective relations in which the other
person is viewed as a gift to be welcomed, the Sartrean view presents a world in which no
true interpersonal communion is possible and the other person is viewed as a threat who
cannot be trusted.

Having seen Sartre’s denial of inter-subjectivity, love and communion, it is fitting
to mention also what is perhaps his most notorious and indicting phrase regarding the
hopeless condition of human relationships: i.e. “hell is other people” (*l’enfer c’est les
autres*). These words, spoken by the character of Garcin at the end of Sartre’s play, “No
Exit” (*Huis Clos*, 1944), are sometimes taken out of context and used by people with no
philosophical background for why this is said by Sartre’s disgruntled character. I would
argue, however, that even the layman’s understanding of the phrase captures a good deal

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105 Glenn, “Marcel and Sartre,” 530.
106 I wish to acknowledge Chad Engelland for suggesting to me, in an email message on August 6, 2019,
the term “metaphysics of hostility” to describe the ontological frameworks of Sartre, Levinas and Derrida.
of its meaning. The play portrays three tragic characters who after their deaths are stuck in a room which is their “hell.” In this version of hell, there are no fiery flames, no devils with pitchforks, nor are there pools of sulfur. The three people discover that their very interactions with one another are what will constitute their “hell” for all eternity. This is because Garcin, Estelle and Inés, who did not know each other in their lives on earth, demonstrate through their interactions in this room the inevitable objectifying of the Other whose freedom is a threat. Each character makes one of the others an object for his or her use, and each experiences shame at the gaze of one of the others. Sartre’s play, “No Exit,” presents a synthesized version of his whole philosophy and how the existence of “other people” objectifies, enslaves and alienates. In a sense, Sartre is absolutely right that this scenario would be hell – not for the reason of being with “other people” but for the fact that there is no love.

2. Marcel’s Critique of Sartre’s Claim that a Person’s Value Lies in What She Does

A second error in Sartre’s philosophy, which Marcel critiques, is the idea that the being, or identity, of a person is equivalent to what she does. The basis for Sartre holding this view derives from his thesis that existence precedes essence, and therefore, man exists as an emptiness or lack of being until he “makes” his essence with his freedom. I quote here a passage from Sartre’s Being and Nothingness, to which Marcel has a particularly strong opposition. Sartre writes:

Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be. As we have seen, for human reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept. Without any help
whosoever, it [the human being] is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be – down to the slightest detail.\textsuperscript{107}

This passage is very significant for both Marcel and for our purposes in presenting Sartre as a foil to his metaphysics of hospitality. As the lines indicate, Sartre’s view is that human persons have no pre-given essence, no \textit{value}, and really no “being” other than their freedom, the power to “make” and “choose” themselves.

Thus, for Sartre, the human “being” is essentially a human “doing.” What this translates into, Marcel argues, is that man “reveals himself … as an organised unit of behaviors and comportments.”\textsuperscript{108} Just as a machine is a good machine if it functions well, a human being is good only in proportion to what it can do and achieve through its freedom. As such, the human person would seem to have no intrinsic value in itself.

Hernandez in her study, \textit{Gabriel Marcel’s Ethics of Hope}, speaks about Marcel’s notion of “problematic man,” which we will examine in more detail in chapter three, as precisely this condition of man, in which one’s value is found entirely in what he \textit{does}. Hernandez writes:

> There is a strange inner mutation spreading throughout humanity. People are being shut out of meaningful existence by reducing who they are to what they can do, or the functions they can perform. … [A person] thinks of herself only in terms of her own physical existence in the universe and soon she believes that \textit{what it means to be} is a problem that can be solved, just like any other mechanical difficulty …. This process culminates in the experience an individual has when she can only understand herself as a problem to be answered – when asked who she is, this person can only respond by enumerating all of the possessions she owns or the professions she engages in.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{107} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 568–69.
\textsuperscript{108} Marcel, \textit{PE}, 80.
The values of pragmatism and individualism often shape our understanding of what it means to be human more than the value of our common humanity and each person’s innate dignity and goodness. How many people are there around us who find no meaning in life if they have not succeeded in their careers or if they have not accrued the wealth and material possessions that they think will secure their happiness? Marcel’s conception of “problematic man” seems to offer an accurate description of how people live today more than ever.

Sartre’s view that *existence precedes essence* and its resulting idea that a person’s value is based on what she does only reinforces our contemporary culture’s extreme emphasis on *doing*. Moreover, because of the ontological presuppositions that he adopts, Sartre ends up concluding that the human person *receives* nothing from anyone else, whether it be from God or others. Man is entirely the “product” of his own activity. As Sartre says, “to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can *receive* or *accept.*”\(^\text{110}\) Later on, we shall see how important the reality of *receptivity* is for Marcel. The human person’s capacity to *receive* the other as a gift will be a central tenet in his metaphysics of hospitality. Sartre, on the other hand, rejects “the significance of receiving [and] the nature of gift.”\(^\text{111}\) In the fourth part of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre provides an analysis of *generosity*, which bears a certain resemblance to Nietzsche’s depiction of Christian “virtue” – i.e. the idea that a seemingly positive quality is fundamentally a selfish, corrupt behavior. Sartre writes:

> Actually, the *gift* is a primitive form of destruction …. Thus, generosity is above all a destructive function …. [To] give is to appropriate by destruction while utilizing this destruction to enslave another. Generosity then is a feeling structured

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\(^\text{111}\) Marcel, *PE*, 82.
by the existence of the Other and indicates a preference for appropriation by destruction.\textsuperscript{112}

This description certainly seems to undermine the traditionally recognized virtue of generosity. Sartre’s analysis of the behavior of gift-giving claims that acts of generosity are, actually, acts of destruction. This conclusion derives from Sartre’s core belief that man is a nothingness, an absolute freedom, “a useless passion.”\textsuperscript{113} Thus, it is not surprising that Sartre thinks that human beings have no hope when it comes to genuine inter-personal communion. Similarly, Marcel finds the Sartrean reduction of man to what he does and its corresponding denial of his capacity for receptivity and generosity particularly degenerate. He asks:

Can it be legitimate to say, for the human being, being is equivalent to doing? Is this not something more than a simplification? Is it not a misapprehension of what is deepest and most significant in the nature of man? How can it be right to ignore the distinction, commonly made, between what a man is and what he does? Does not this statement alone reveal the inadequacy of Sartre’s ontology?\textsuperscript{114}

Marcel’s questions here are incisive. By saying that man has no \textit{a priori} value and is equivalent to what he does, Sartre is denying “what is deepest and most significant in the nature of man.”\textsuperscript{115} Marcel says this because he thinks it is the nature of the human person to love and be loved, which Sartre’s ontology negates. In fact, Sartre denies that man even has a human nature. For him, a value such as the goodness and dignity of the human person is not inherent in human beings; rather, Sartre holds that values are realities that we choose to create solely by our own freedom. In the Sartrean universe, values are \textit{not discovered; they are created}. Critiquing this view, Marcel writes: “whatever Sartre …

\textsuperscript{112} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 758.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 784.
\textsuperscript{114} Marcel, \textit{PE}, 82. My italics.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
may have imagined to the contrary – and this no doubt is a very serious error in his philosophy, one fraught with consequences – what philosophers call “value” is essentially something which does not allow itself to be chosen.” Marcel believes that the “value” of the person is not something imposed on her from the “outside” as a result of her qualities or skills. The value and dignity of the person is innate, and Marcel maintains that it is only through love for the person that this value can be truly recognized.

In his unflinching conviction that love alone is what allows us to truly encounter other persons, Marcel anticipates the ethical personalism of the contemporary phenomenologist, Robert Spaemann, who also grounds his view of the human person in a realist metaphysics. Spaemann writes: “A person becomes known to us only through the medium of a bundle of qualities that are by no means unique. Real love is not directed to those qualities, but to the unique particularity of the other, even when he or she alters in some way.” Marcel, like Spaemann, understands that genuine love is not fundamentally oriented toward the qualities of the person (no matter how wonderful or many these are) but primarily at the being of the person – who she is, not what she does. Therefore, according to Marcel, to “love” someone only for the sake of what she has or what she can do is not really love. All persons are “equal” in the fact that we share a common human dignity, but each person is unique in her way of being a person. This is why Marcel insists that the hospitality that will heal the world’s divisions is not merely

116 Marcel, MAMS, 171.
on the level of practical services offered to others; rather, it is a *metaphysics* of hospitality. While Sartre sees all interactions between persons as tainted by use (and devoid of love), Marcel holds that persons are capable of love and of being loved for their own sake. This is because persons are never to be used as means to some other end, but rather, always as a subject and end in themselves.¹¹⁹

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Marcel considers one of the main characteristics of the broken world to be the increasing functionalization of man through the domination of the technological attitude. It is not hard to recognize the fact that Sartre’s correlated doctrines, *existence precedes essence* and man is equivalent to what he *does*, seem only to have exasperated the brokenness of the postmodern world in which man is more and more understood in terms of his function, and yet also suffers more and more from isolation and despair.

Sartre’s philosophy presents little hope for man. Because this stark reality of having no preexistent nature to guide us and therefore only our radical freedom to help us, Sartre thinks that human beings will often fall into what he calls “bad faith” (*mauvais foi*).¹²⁰ “Bad faith” describes the condition from which a person suffers when he is living inauthentically, i.e. trying to “play” a part, a role or function according to what the Other makes him think he is, rather than boldly creating himself through his choices. The authentic person who avoids *mauvais foi*, however, is even more vulnerable to despair

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and anguish, since he is not blind to the reality of his existential condition. According to Timothy Williams:

Such an individual [authentic man] is overwhelmed by the full implications of this radical freedom and experiences moral anguish and a sense of absurdity in recognizing that everything is ultimately arbitrary. The result is alienation from the great majority of people, who will not appreciate this freedom, and the free individual must endure a profound despair born of absolute moral solitude and from the certainty that there is no metaphysical hope.121

As Williams’ description of the Sartrean “authentic” man illustrates, the prospect for human fulfillment is far from optimistic. Sartre’s philosophy, as many have noted, is ultimately a philosophy of despair. In his own words, Sartre tells us:

The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.122

As this passage shows, Marcel and Sartre show themselves to be polar opposites. Ultimately Sartrean philosophy ends with despair, while Marcelian philosophy builds an affirmation of hope. Although for the purposes of this study we will not delve extensively into Marcel’s “metaphysics of hope,” it is worth mentioning that the fundamental orientation of the metaphysics of hospitality is one in which hope is a preeminent reality.123 Like Sartre, Marcel recognizes that we live in a broken world in which anguish and suffering pervade the human condition. Thus, Hernandez writes, “no problem is more important or more difficult [for Marcel] than that of determining how to overcome

122 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 140.
123 Marcel gives his work, Homo Viator, the subtitle, “An Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope.”
unhope [sic] in personal crisis.”124 In other words, Marcel is keenly aware that the human condition is fragile and prone to despair. In fact, he recognizes that it is because despair is a concrete possibility that hope even has meaning. He writes: “from the moment I reflect on hope in its specificity, I realize that hope is not hope unless it is surrounded by a sort of halo or fringe of possible despair.”125

Moreover, it is not mere coincidence, I think, that Marcel links hope to the experience of genuine community and relationships, while Sartre links despair to the experience of alienation and inability for authentic relationships. Hernandez comments on this as she writes: “[Hope for Marcel] drives a person into community with others – not in spite of despair, but on the account of the individual’s suffering. Hope in the ethical life, then, serves as a foundation for relationships that better the self, others, and (ultimately) true community.”126 Essentially, Marcel argues that without interpersonal communion, man cannot experience love, and without love, there can be no metaphysical hope. It is clear that Sartre’s thinking on these realities is entirely antithetical to Marcel’s.

C. Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that Marcel and Sartre describe the contemporary alienation of the human person in similar terms. Unlike Sartre, however, Marcel maintains a belief in the existential dignity of each human person and in the possibility of healing the broken world through love. In contrast, for Sartre, human beings are

124 Hernandez, Marcel’s Ethics of Hope, 74.
126 Hernandez, Marcel’s Ethics of Hope, 75.
incapable of love and intersubjectivity because they are always objectifying each other, and basically, using them for their own purposes. Although Marcel believes in the possibility of genuine interpersonal communion, he also thinks that modern man, especially when entrenched in technological thinking, can easily fall into a kind of alienation and objectification of others. When the realm of ontological mystery is ignored, Marcel thinks human relationships derail into a kind of use and manipulation of the other.¹²⁷ Likewise, Marcel thinks that the more the technological attitude prevails in society, the more destructive it is for human interactions, as we become more like cogs in a machine, simply valued for our function. Both thinkers see that postmodern conditions easily create a world in which man feels alienated from himself, God and others. Unlike Sartre, however, Marcel thinks there is a solution to the deteriorating world, a way somehow to mend the brokenness, and this way is through interpersonal communion.

Marcel argues that we cannot escape the broken world, but we can transcend it and find redemption through making it more human. Referring to the overfunctionalized, i.e. broken, world he writes: “a man may be involved in [such a] world and yet retain the power to reject it. He rejects it in the degree to which he succeeds in humanizing the relations which unite him to his superiors, to his equals and, most of all, to his inferiors.”¹²⁸ Marcel is implicitly referring to his metaphysics of hospitality in these lines. For, it is not merely those people who can “do something” for or “give something” to us with whom we need to foster relationships. Rather, as we shall continue to see, Marcel is advocating that we heal the broken world by welcoming the presence of others, even the ones who cannot give anything to us in return.

¹²⁷ We will examine this concept in chapter three.
¹²⁸ Marcel, MBII, 43.
In conclusion, Marcel and Sartre lend themselves to fruitful dialogue and comparison since both thinkers have profound existential concerns and both begin their investigations from human experience. Ultimately, as we have seen, the conclusions to which they arrive concerning the nature of human relationships are diametrically opposed. I would agree with Glenn’s summary of the two thinkers when he writes: “Marcel’s account of the human being’s transcendence toward being provides the foundation of a philosophy of communion, whereas Sartre’s analysis of consciousness as nothingness forms the basis of a philosophy of alienation.”129

As Glenn’s diagnosis reveals, Sartre’s vision of alienated man paints the picture of the broken world in a poignant way. We have seen that the broken world involves a fracture and alienation that exists on three different levels: separation from God, from oneself, and from others. And each of these types of alienation is found in Sartre’s vision. Man is broken because though he wants to be God he cannot be.130 Man is broken because his existence has no ultimate meaning or ground. Man is broken because he needs others to help him know and be himself as a being-for-itself, and yet all relationships with others are doomed to a kind of use, objectification and enslavement. Although the term broken world, does not seem to appear explicitly in Sartre’s writings, we can infer from the extensively negative depictions of human relationships that Sartre’s world is eminently broken.

129 Glenn, “Marcel and Sartre,” 528.
130 In Being and Nothingness, Sartre explains that the pour-soi inevitably desires to be an en-soi, but cannot because the only “Being” which could integrate both realities would be “God;” but Sartre argues that God does not exist so man, the pour-soi, is left frustrated.
CHAPTER TWO: MEANING, SCOPE AND HISTORY OF HOSPITALITY

“One might see in one's travels too that every human being is kindred to every other human being and a friend to him.”\(^1\)

– Aristotle

One of the reasons why Marcel’s notion of the metaphysics of hospitality is uniquely valuable is because he employs an age-old human phenomenon – the idea of welcoming another person into one’s home – to describe a deep existential reality. While Marcel’s interest in hospitality springs from an ontological basis, what hospitality means as a social reality must be well understood to grasp the profound significance of his contribution. His focus on hospitality was prescient. In recent years, academic interest in hospitality as a sociological and philosophical phenomenon has grown exponentially.\(^2\)

While this chapter does not aim to present an exhaustive look at the many nuances of Hospitality Studies, I will present a general background of the concept of hospitality in order to enrich our understanding of how Marcel uses the term with an existential meaning. I will first define the word *hospitality* and trace its etymological development. Secondly, I will examine the question of motives and dispositions for hospitality. Lastly, I will present an overview of the practice of hospitality as it has been expressed

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throughout history, from ancient Greece through contemporary times.

A. Definition and Etymology of Hospitality

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, hospitality is “the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill.” From this simple definition, we glean at least three basic features about hospitality: 1) it involves receiving another person (or persons), 2) it can be offered to a wide variety of recipients, ranging from family and friends to mere acquaintances and even strangers, and 3) it consists in more than providing external services; it must also include certain attitudes of openness and kindness. Stating it another way, all forms of hospitality seem to involve an affirmative, generous receiving of other persons who, for one reason or another, find themselves away from their homes, or perhaps without a home.

Since my primary concern in this thesis is to understand more deeply Marcel’s notion of hospitality as an ontological reality, I would like to provide my own baseline definition of hospitality that is not identical with the standard one. Our working definition will be this: hospitality is an attitude of welcoming another person from a place of abundance in the host that responds to a human need or desire in the guest. I am mindful that my definition could be disputed on the charges that it is too broad. In defense of this definition I would argue that, like Marcel, I conceive of hospitality – in its essential meaning – as a virtue, a disposition to behave in some particular way. For the virtue of hospitality, the particular behavior is that of welcoming, meaning offering to others a kind reception.

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The second aspect of our definition is also crucial. Hospitality is not just kindness and generosity (which it resembles); it also always exists as a response to some need that another person (or persons) has. Textbook definitions of hospitality, especially those involving its commercialized forms, tend to speak of it more often in terms of the food, drink, shelter and entertainment that is provided for people. Clearly, the definition we gave applies to these cases of hospitality, since people’s needs include eating, drinking, sleeping, and recreation. At the same time, however, the theme of this thesis is Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, which is a kind of hospitality that responds to the needs of the human person which are ontologically deeper than physical comforts. Marcel will actually tell us that his metaphysics of hospitality is, at its core, an “attitude of reverence” towards others, especially the most vulnerable. As we progress through our study, it will be important to keep our basic definition of hospitality in mind, as this welcoming attitude toward other persons which responds to certain human needs.

Although at first glance hospitality seems a rather straightforward word, when we reflect on its meaning more closely, it raises many important questions regarding the nature of concepts like host, guest and home. At this point, in order to further delve into the meaning of hospitality, let us look now at its intriguing etymological background.

We have just asserted that a measure of kindness and generosity is one of the defining marks of hospitality. Given this fact, however, it is surprising that when we trace the term’s origins, we discover it is etymologically related to the word *hostile*, a concept with nearly the opposite meaning. This connection rightly sounds bizarre since the word hostile, by definition, refers to a negative, antagonistic attitude toward someone.

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4 Marcel, *MBI*, 217.
(potentially or actually an enemy), while hospitality connotes the idea of a positive, welcoming attitude toward someone (potentially or actually a friend). How could two words with such contrary meanings derive from the same root? As Conrad Lashley points out, the reason for the term’s shared background is not as inexplicable as it may seem at first. The two words actually derive from a common Indo-European source, *hostis*, which means both “stranger” and “enemy.” In other words, any stranger could be a potential enemy (toward whom hostility would be an appropriate response) or he could be a welcomed friend (toward whom hospitality would be an appropriate response).

Simply put, the practice of hospitality concerns a relationship with other people who are somehow in a position outside of us, i.e. outside of our space. For this reason, Treanor describes hospitality as a “virtue of *place*, perhaps the preeminent virtue of place.” What he means by this is that for hospitality to actually occur, there must be a certain giving of place to another. He explains:

> Only an implaced person can be hospitable. A displaced person, qua displaced person, can be generous, can be the giver of gifts, can be forgiving, and can be responsible, but she cannot be hospitable because she cannot give place to another. A host is precisely a person who receives people into a given space or place as *guests*.

As Treanor rightly points out, a person can possess many virtues and be extraordinarily kind, but unless there is some “place” into which she invites her “guests,” she is not displaying hospitality.

What exactly are we referring to when we speak about places and spaces? In his

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7 Ibid.
book *Getting Back into Place*, Edward Casey offers an innovative study on the notion of “place,” which he thinks has been neglected by philosophy because so much inquiry has revolved around the scientific understanding of time and space. Casey argues that an investigation into the idea of place is long overdue, since human existence has always been “saturated” by the concept of “place.” He explains that a place is a space in which we dwell, a space in and from which we live. In other words, a space becomes a “place” when we become anchored and oriented somewhere; we move from being displaced to “implaced” and are transformed from being strangers to “inhabitants.”

In the common understanding of hospitality, the “places” into which hosts invite their guests would be locations such as houses, porches or gardens. But could hospitality be practiced without an entryway into some physical place? Yes. As we will be exploring throughout this thesis, when hospitality is understood as an interior attitude or disposition, the “place” of welcome becomes the actual person of the host. Perhaps this place could be called one’s heart or soul. Levinas and Derrida both build their views of hospitality on this premise, that the primary relationship of hospitality is between a self (the host) and another person (the guest). Furthermore, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is precisely about making room for the other in myself, as he tells us.

Although the virtue of hospitality certainly involves a spiritual dimension for Marcel, he also firmly believes that our bodies are always the place from which we live

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9 Ibid., 23.
10 As we will see more in chapter four, both Levinas and Derrida adopt a view of alterity that makes the other person absolutely other. For this reason, they both argue that hospitality must be non-reciprocal and asymmetrical, which presents challenges for genuine intersubjectivity. How can a person actually “receive” another “into” herself if the two persons are to remain absolutely separate?
out the virtues, and this certainly holds true for hospitality. As Treanor explains: “It is our bodies that allow us to actively participate in our implanation and orientation in the broader landscape … [and it is] ultimately our bodies that place us ‘here.’”¹² In summary, even though we normally associate acts of hospitality with being invited into someone’s physical home, a person, as a host, can also practice the virtue of hospitality by welcoming others, guests, into the “home” of her person.

Pondering the theme of place/space in hospitality brings us to another important question about the concept’s sociological evolution: to what degree has hospitality been understood to concern our relationships with strangers? From a historical perspective, depending on whether one finds himself on the side of hosting the stranger or being the stranger, he would develop different ideas of the concept. Anatoly Liberman explains this further:

Someone coming from afar could be a friend or an enemy. “Stranger” covers both situations. With time, different languages generalized one or the other sense, so that “guest” vacillated between “a person who is friendly and welcome” and “a dangerous invader.” Newcomers had to be tested for their intentions and either greeted cordially or kept at bay. Words of this type are particularly sensitive to the structure of societal institutions.¹³ Thus, whether the stranger is friendly or inimical, our treatment of him would vary accordingly, and such fluctuating experiences resulted in the etymological evolution of the word hospitality (and its associated terms of guest and host) alongside its sociological development.

¹² Treanor, “Putting Hospitality in Its Place,” 53.
Moreover, while *hostis* provides the basis for words like *hostility* and *host*(of armies) which carry antagonistic connotations, *hostis* also forms the root of words denoting more positive, welcoming concepts, such as *hostel* (a place for travelers to stay) as well as the simple word *host* which means someone who welcomes a guest.\(^{14}\)

Similarly, it is possible to render the Latin *hospes* (a slightly less ancient root which derives from *hostis*) as either “host,” “guest,” or “stranger,” depending on the context that it is used. As is evident, *hospes* is the origin of the terms *hospice*, *hospital* and *hospitality*.\(^{15}\) Another interesting fact is that the English words *host* and *guest* (the two sides of hospitality) come from the same linguistic origin, *hostis*, indicating that these terms are fluid and interchangeable; one day I may be the host welcoming a guest, and another day, I myself may be the guest who is welcomed by a host.

Understanding the multifarious meanings behind the etymological roots of the word *hospitality* helps us to glean better what the concept is in its essence. As Leon Kass explains in his book *The Hungry Soul*, the “problem of the stranger, whose solution is hospitality, is embedded in our very terminology.”\(^{16}\) This fact is evidenced when we realize that somehow a stranger (*hostis*) can become a guest (*hospes*).\(^{17}\) While the meaning of hospitality has varied from culture to culture and morphed throughout history, at least one aspect of its original sense remains – welcoming others. The who, the how, the when and the where all may vary.

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\(^{14}\) The very same word, *host*, could refer to the belligerent hosts of armies at war or the glorious choirs of angels, the heavenly hosts.

\(^{15}\) Cf. Liberman, “‘Guests’ and ‘Hosts.’”


\(^{17}\) This stranger (*hostis*) could also be an enemy.
In summary, as we delve more deeply into Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality in the remaining chapters of this thesis, it will be helpful to keep in mind the complex linguistic and sociological roots of hospitality. The fluidity of the terms surrounding it – concepts ranging from host to guest, stranger to enemy, and being welcomed to being rejected – suggests the idea that the practice of hospitality reveals truths about the social nature of the person. As Kass puts it, our language tends to have a way of giving “expression to the natural human ability and willingness to recognize natural sameness despite and beneath conventional otherness.”\(^{18}\) In studying the evolution of the term hospitality, we cannot fail to recognize the rich ways in which sociological developments shape our language.

**B. Dispositions and Motives of Hospitality**

Now that we have seen the meaning of the term *hospitality* and examined its etymological foundations, I would like to develop our understanding of the nature of hospitality by examining the various dispositions and motives which drive its practice.

**1. Dispositions for Hospitality**

First of all, by the word disposition, I understand a kind of interior habitual moral state, essentially equivalent to an attitude of the person, but on an ontological level. In this way, I am using the term in a way similar to the classical Aristotelian notion of virtue as a habitual disposition to do good. The reason that I would like to focus specifically on the interior dispositions for hospitality is because I believe that they are as significant for

understanding Marcel’s use of the concept of the metaphysics of hospitality, as any of hospitality’s external acts.

Marcel’s philosophical vision is both personalistic and phenomenological; therefore, the personal and interior experiences of the human subject are of prime importance for his reflections. The context in which he actually refers to his metaphysics of hospitality, which we will examine more fully in the last chapter, is in the first volume of *The Mystery of Being*. There, he speaks of the “mysterious invulnerability” of a sleeping child. When Marcel suggests that a sleeping child, truthfully one of the most vulnerable creatures possible, is actually *invulnerable*, he is referring to the profound attitude of respect one should have towards the sanctity of a human person, no matter her size, age or ability to defend herself. He is saying that the sleeping baby is *so* vulnerable that she is actually invulnerable (due to her intrinsic dignity and sacredness as a human person). In a way similar to Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of the human *face*, which reveals a trace of divinity and through this “legislates” a moral law of respect, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality presents the view that human vulnerability creates a moral duty. In fact, this normative inviolability is a function of the physical vulnerability of the person.

In this same passage, Marcel goes on to say, “there can be no doubt at all that the strongest and most irrefutable mark of sheer barbarism that we could imagine would consist in the refusal to recognize this mysterious invulnerability. *This sacredness of the unprotected lies also at the roots of what we might call a metaphysics of hospitality.*”

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As this text illustrates, Marcel’s use of the term hospitality is less about external “practices” of hospitality, like providing food and shelter, and more about an interior attitude of the person towards others, particularly the unprotected and vulnerable. Marcel’s sense of hospitality is metaphysical because he is concerned with how things really are, on the deepest of levels. And thus, for him, the metaphysics of hospitality is a kind of welcoming and available disposition of the human heart.

Marcel is not alone, however, in recognizing that hospitality can describe different levels of human experience and is often not so much about the practical acts of service as it is about the universal human duty to welcome and receive other persons. Lashley points out that hospitality, considered in its broadest sense, allows us to see that “the host-guest relationship has emerged as a metaphor for any setting where one person (guest) enters the space of another (host).”\(^{20}\) Within this dynamic of social relations, it is possible to decipher certain traits that manifest what Elizabeth Telfer calls the quality of “hospitableness,” a way of being hospitable.\(^{21}\)

In a similar line, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is also a way of being “hospitable.” It is ultimately about an interior attitude of the person, a disposition of the heart which recognizes the dignity of other persons. Metaphysics is not itself an attitude and disposition, but simply an account of the ultimate context of being. Marcel uses the term metaphysics of hospitality to describe his reflections regarding hospitality as an interior approach toward the being of other persons.

Because Marcel’s use of the concept of hospitality involves a subjective/personal turn, it is helpful to enhance our sketch of the background of the concept by briefly

considering the various motives which fuel hospitality’s practice. For as Telfer correctly points out, “genuinely hospitable behavior … requires an appropriate motive.”

2. Motives of Hospitality

As we gain a deeper understanding of this concept, we can ask: what compels people to show acts of hospitality? The answer to this question is of great interest for many hospitality scholars. In the Routledge Handbook of Hospitality Studies, Lashley seeks to answer it by offering an extensive analysis of the motives of hospitality. Combining the work of Heal (1984), Nouwen (1998), Telfer (2000) and O’Gorman (2007), Lashley names six possible reasons for practicing hospitality. He illustrates these reasons with a figure showing a continuum graph which lists the motives which are entirely self-interested on one side, and those which are entirely other-interested on the other. At the one extreme, he gives the name, “Ulterior Motives” hospitality, and at the other end, what he calls, “Altruistic” hospitality. Although Lashley’s six-fold distinction of motives for hospitality is helpful, for simplicity’s sake, I will focus instead on Telfer’s categorizations (which are similar to Lashley’s but more basic) into three general kinds of motives: self-regarding, reciprocal, and other-regarding.

As a preliminary note, when we are speaking about these three basic motives of hospitality, we can see that they fall under the broadly personalized or private sphere of hospitality, which will be dealt with below. To add just a word about the industrial sphere, however, it is safe to say that commercial hospitality, by its very nature, involves

22 Ibid., 59.
ulterior motives in its practice, for it obviously involves the host’s intention to make money. If this type of “host” (e.g. a store manager) did not have profit as a primary motive for offering hospitality, his enterprise would likely fail. Hotels and restaurants continue to exist only insofar as they continue to make money. At the same time, however, these entities provide goods and services for customers whose motives for staying or dining are not for the sake of spending money, but rather to enjoy some service. Thus, depending on whether one is on the giving or receiving end of commercialized hospitality, the motives may differ.

When I walk into a department store or a fast food restaurant and I am greeted by an employee who smiles and asks how she can serve me, I know that part of her friendliness stems from her interest in doing her job well, so she can stay employed and earn her wages. It “pays” to make customers feel welcome and have their needs met; therefore, commercial/industrial hospitality normally involves self-regarding motives. While this is true, it does not mean that those people who work in commercial and entertainment industries cannot also have other positive motives for practicing hospitality. It is likely that they have gone into this field of work specifically because they like to take care of other people and make them feel happy. It would be false, therefore, to attribute only self-interested motives to commercial hospitality, even if these motives are largely present. Telfer argues that, “maximizing profit may not be the main motive of those who sell commercial hospitality.”25 Moreover, a good host in the commercial sphere just like in the private sphere, is good because he or she is able to

25 Ibid., 63.
secure his or her guests’ welfare. As we are already seeing, the reasons why people act hospitably tend to be “mixed.”

Similarly, when turning to consider the private sphere of hospitality, we also find a whole spectrum of motives, which can best be divided into the three kinds Telfer mentions. Since we have already spoken of the self-regarding motive, in reference to commercial hospitality, let us begin with this least “pure” form.

Even in the private/domestic realm, there can be instances where the host is only seeking to please herself, without a genuine concern for her guests. Lashley describes this form of hospitality as those instances where “it is assumed that the guest is able to benefit the host, and hospitality is offered as a means of gaining that benefit.” For example, a couple may invite many guests to their luxurious mansion for an elegant dinner party, yet the reason for doing so might be the desire to impress people by their great wealth and to increase their social image. This would be an example of a self-regarding motive, even if it were mixed with more generous ones, like hoping the guests have a good time. Another example of self-regarding, or “calculative reasons,” for practicing hospitality would be “business lunches” offered for a boss or client, but organized with “the intention of creating a favourable impression that will ultimately benefit the host.” A similar kind of self-regarding motive is what Lashley calls “containing hospitality,” in the sense of keeping your enemies “contained” or “happy” so they do not give you trouble. Quoting Machiavelli’s famous line from the early sixteenth century, “Keep your friends close, but

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26 Cf. Ibid., 60.
27 Ibid., 62.
29 Ibid., 4.
30 Ibid., 5.
your enemies closer,” Lashley explains how this kind of hospitality is motivated by a fear of the stranger and is still largely self-seeking.\textsuperscript{31}

A second category of motives for hospitality is “reciprocal,” which concerns those cases where there seems to be a mutual benefit for hosts and guests. An example would be someone who really enjoys entertaining friends and guests as a pastime, and thus in seeking to please her company, is also deriving pleasure for herself. Lashley describes this type of hospitality which is given in order that it will eventually be received as he writes: “reciprocal hospitality involves hospitality being offered within a context whereby hosts become guests and guests become hosts, at different times.”\textsuperscript{32} As we will see in our discussion of historical expressions of hospitality, reciprocity was one of the essential features of hospitality according to the ancient Greeks.

Hospitality can be reciprocal in two senses: “Not only are hosts both giving and getting pleasure or company, they also entertain in the hope that the hospitality will be returned.”\textsuperscript{33} Mixed motives for practicing hospitality are found not only in contemporary societies but also in those ancient pre-industrial cultures which upheld hospitality as a religious and moral value. Scholars point out that reciprocal hospitality is, perhaps, the most prevalent kind practiced in ancient cultures. Although welcoming strangers was consistently valued in pre-industrial societies, the motives were not always solely other-regarding.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, as we will see in our discussion of hospitality’s value in Homeric Greece, the Greeks held a deep belief that hospitality should be offered even to enemies,.

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Telfer, “The Philosophy of Hospitableness,” 61.
because the gods would punish them if they did not. But if they showed hospitality even to their enemies, then the gods would show favor to them, a kind of “payment” for their own practice of it. In short, the Greek practice of hospitality relied on the surety of it being reciprocated.

When it comes to motives, pre-industrial cultures possess a built-in need for hospitality in their social dynamic, due to the frequent interchange between guests and hosts.35 For this reason, the relationship between the guest and the host, in the primitive sense, was one “frequently based on mutual obligations and ultimately on reciprocity.”36 Another example of an ancient culture which practiced hospitality for largely reciprocal motives was the culture of wealthy families in Augustinian Rome which, Lashley suggests, “was founded on the principle of reciprocity as an early form of tourism.”37 These elite Roman families would create social ties with other affluent families with whom they would stay as guests, and then they themselves would become the hosts for the others when it was their turn to travel.38

Reciprocity as a motive for hospitality is still very common today. Variations of the “Golden Rule” are found in all world religions and in almost every society.39 This principle motivates many of us in practicing hospitality, especially towards strangers who may be in need. If my next-door neighbor, whom I have never met, comes to my door asking to borrow a couple of eggs that she needs for a recipe, I will likely say “yes” and happily do her the favor. But I may also be thinking in the back of my mind, “the next

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 5.
38 Cf. Ibid.
time that I need some eggs or some other ingredients in the kitchen, I will feel free to ask since I have been a good neighbor on my end.” Margaret Visser points out that this interchange in acts of hospitality makes clear sense to us, in a rather practical way: “We remember that we too might one day need a stranger’s help, so we behave in the prescribed civilized manner.”

Although we have seen that hospitality can be practiced for self-regarding purposes, for gaining money, or for receiving a reciprocal treatment, there are also motives for welcoming others which are less self-seeking. Lashley refers to this third kind of motive as other-regarding hospitality and describes it as “an act of generosity and benevolence, and a willingness to give pleasure to others.” As Telfer explains, in this broad group of motives various sub-motives can be found such as: “The desire to please others, stemming from general friendliness and benevolence or from affection for particular people; concern or compassion, the desire to meet another’s need… or a duty to help those in trouble.” Because this motive is entirely “other-regarding,” Telfer and Lashley call all forms of hospitality practiced in this way, “altruistic.” They suggest that altruistic hospitality provides a “pure” form, one devoid of ulterior motives or personal gains for the host. Lashley argues that this kind of hospitality is primarily about generosity, and along with the general consensus of scholars on the subject, he considers hospitality practiced for altruistic motives to be the ideal type. This motive for hospitality is about doing the good for another, simply for the sake of the other. The only possible satisfaction “received” by the host on this level, Lashley explains, is the “emotional

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satisfaction” arising from the practice of hospitality, from the act of generosity, itself.\textsuperscript{43} In chapter four, we will consider an extreme form of this other-regarding and unconditional hospitality in the philosophy of Derrida, who calls it, “radical” hospitality.\textsuperscript{44}

While I agree that the highest motives of hospitality are other-centered, I do not agree with Lashley and Telfer’s view that the purest motives should be called altruistic. Altruism, as an ethical doctrine, implies a view that all self-interest should be avoided and only the other’s good should be sought. Marcel, like many other thinkers, would reject altruism as an ethical ideal because, in his ontological and anthropological vision, he sees that human persons are made for mutual self-giving and relationship. Thus, the idea that hospitality would be entirely one-sided and devoid of mutual self-gift would oppose Marcel’s vision of intersubjective communion. Marcel believes that in a genuine act of hospitality (which he conceives of as an act of love) the self (the host) can offer a total gift of self to the other (the guest) in a relationship that is not one-sided. Altruism is based on an incomplete view of the human person and fails to see that the being of the person is not impoverished by acts of love/hospitality but is actually enriched by them. As we will see in chapter five, Marcel’s term hospitality primarily refers to a kind of disposition leading to generous and welcoming behavior towards other persons. Deeper than the motives which drive the relationship of hospitality, Marcel thinks that what is most important is the attitude of openness and welcoming toward the other as an expression of his participation metaphysics. Having considered the dispositions and

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Lashley, “Research on Hospitality,” 5.
motives of hospitality, let us turn our attention to a survey of its manifestations throughout history.

**C. Historical Expressions of Hospitality**

Although academic interest in hospitality has been on the rise in recent decades, the actual practice of hospitality is as old as human civilization itself. In fact, nearly every known ancient society considered hospitality as an essential norm of behavior. Likewise, in certain primitive modern-day societies found in Africa, South America and Asia, “hospitality and the duty to entertain both neighbours and strangers represent a fundamental moral imperative.”\(^{45}\) For countless cultures throughout history, hospitality has existed as such a rudimentary value that “any failure to act appropriately is treated with social condemnation.”\(^{46}\)

Moreover, even though the meaning and practice of hospitality has evolved over the ages, there are clear elements of its nature that have not changed. As Aristotle wisely recognized, man is by nature a social animal, and therefore the exercise of hospitality appears intimately connected with the nature of humanity.\(^{47}\) Derrida, in his well-known writings on hospitality, suggests that “the means and rituals associated with the receiving of strangers into a community are a defining feature of all societies.”\(^{48}\) All people need to eat and drink, and we all need the help of others, making it in some ways a universal experience. According to Kass, “hospitality is one of the civilized and civilizing customs


\(^{46}\) Ibid.


at the foundation of most, if not all, political communities.” Since hospitality has such primordial roots, we can gain much understanding of it by examining its historical and cultural foundations. As Nouwen aptly remarks: “If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.”

Various cultures and ancient societies have been studied in regard to their practices of hospitality. Some prominent examples include: ancient Rome, ancient Israel, native tribes of Canada, the Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), medieval Provence, and early modern England. An extensive discussion of the customs of hospitality as seen in the countless cultures in which it has been practiced is beyond the scope of this thesis and not necessary for our purposes; it will suffice to discuss the understanding of hospitality held by one prominent culture which is often described as the birthplace of Western civilization: Ancient Greece.

1. Hospitality in Homeric Greek Culture

Perhaps no culture (past or present) has valued hospitality in the way that the ancient Greeks did. Moreover, perhaps no society’s practice of hospitality has been the subject of such extensive study as they have been, and for good reason. For the ancient Greeks, the duty to welcome strangers and guests into one’s home was so ingrained that it was much more than a custom; it was an integral part of their society and considered an indispensable moral and religious virtue. In fact, although normally referred to only as Zeus, the full name of the father of all the gods is actually, Zeus Xenios. The word xenia

49 Kass, The Hungry Soul, 106.
– a derivative of *xenos*, which means “foreigner” or “stranger” (from which we get the English word xenophobia) – is the ancient Greek term for the virtue of hospitality, understood as “guest-friendship.” As Kass points out, the Greeks had an “elaborate network of relations” based on this understanding of hospitality as *xenia*.\(^2\) Hospitality in ancient Greece was a way of life based on a mutual understanding that one can expect to receive *xenia* because one is equally obliged to offer it. Thus, hospitality was a “crucial part of the Homeric culture, and Zeus himself, as the god of strangers, Zeus Xenios, watched over these relations.”\(^3\) The fact that the king of all the gods was protector of hospitality shows how important this virtue of *xenia* was for the ancient Greek people.

Another interesting feature of ancient Greek mythology relevant to *xenia* is the fact that they believed that the gods themselves intermingled, often in hidden ways, among humans in ordinary life. Furthermore, the Greeks also believed that the gods could and *would* disguise themselves in the form of strangers, even beggars or paupers; therefore, the obligation to receive a visitor into one’s home was taken very seriously. For, if Zeus, the father of all the gods, could appear as a guest in “need” of *xenia* / hospitality, then certainly the obligation to welcome strangers and visitors into one’s home belonged to all. This theme in Greek mythology, known as *theoxenia* – i.e. showing hospitality to the gods – emerged from their religious ideas but came to imbue the entire Greek culture with the vital importance of showing hospitality to all. Thus, a primary motive for showing hospitality for the Greeks was piety, because it was what the gods demanded. Those who practiced it well could expect to be rewarded by the gods, while those who neglected or violated it, could expect to receive divine punishment.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.
In addition, as Kass tells us that, “given the powers of Greek gods to assume any shape or form, hospitality toward strangers would make prudence the better part of piety.”\textsuperscript{54} In other words, it would always be in one’s best interest to welcome any guest, even if he were someone totally unknown. Kass elaborates on this as he writes: “The stranger, one whom you have never seen before and may never see again, might in fact be a god. The Homeric poems are filled with examples of gods and goddesses appearing in the guise of beggars and suppliants. More often than not, it is only those who treat them kindly who are able to penetrate their disguises.”\textsuperscript{55} Thus, prudence or \textit{phronesis}, considered by the Greeks to be the highest of the moral virtues, demands upholding the practice of \textit{xenia}, for the gods blessed those who practiced it and punished those who violated it.

Kass also speaks of the less than pure motives that could nourish the practice of hospitality for ancient cultures. As he puts it: “One good turn lays claim to another, and among frequent travelers generosity might be the best policy, because it pays.”\textsuperscript{56} He also notes that Aristotle would categorize such a relationship as one of “utility” and therefore regard it as a less noble kind of friendship. For the Greeks, \textit{xenia} certainly held an element of utility, but this does not preclude the possibility that individuals could have practiced it for unselfish reasons—for example, to want to help someone in need, owing to a perception of his or her goodness or owing to a super-abundant generosity of spirit.

A helpful way to penetrate the Greek view of \textit{xenia}, and thus provide a broader context of the concept of hospitality for our study is to consider key instances where it

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 102.
appears in Homer’s works. Although examples of the importance of hospitality abound in the Homeric epics, we will only consider two cases. The first will be an example from the *Iliad* in which hospitality is violated, and the second will be an example from the *Odyssey*, in which hospitality is upheld.

*The Iliad* is the tragic poem about the decade long Trojan War and the events surrounding it. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the primary concern driving the entire plot of *The Iliad* could arguably be identified as hospitality – a violation of hospitality, that is. While the average reader is familiar with the idea that the cause of the Trojan War was a romantic breach resulting from Paris’s stealing of King Menelaus’s wife Helen – “the face that launched a thousand ships” – there is ample justification for interpreting the plot of the entire *Iliad* as revolving around a violation of the code of *xenia*.

Paris was a guest in the home of King Menelaus, and yet from that sacred position in which he owed honor and respect, Paris stole the wife of his host. For the Greeks, hospitality’s rules applied both to the host (to welcome strangers and guests) and to the guest (to show respect and leave a gift with the host if possible). Not only did Paris not leave a gift, he did something far worse; he took the prized possession of his host by stealing his wife. While it was certainly a violation of universal social customs, the greater crime for the Greeks was Paris’s breaking the laws of hospitality. Kass refers to this view, that the motive leading to the Trojan War was a response by the Greeks to a violation of *xenia*, as he writes:

> Zeus is protector of strangers, suppliants, and beggars, and guards all proper relations between host and guest. It was Zeus Xenios, according to some accounts, who sent Menelaus, Agamemnon, and the Achaean host against Troy in
order to avenge the violation of guest-friendship – in this case, a violation of host by guest in matter of wife-stealing, not food.\(^57\)

Essential for the Greek understanding of hospitality was the idea of reciprocity. The obligation, as a host, to treat the guest well was equally as important as the obligation, as a guest, to treat the host well. Paris ruptured this harmonious agreement by his inhosiptable actions.

This fact is poignantly described in Homer’s text with the dramatic words of King Menelaus after he has killed the Trojan warrior Peisandros in Book XIII. As he strips the armor from Peisandros’s body, the Achaean King vaunts over the fallen Trojan soldier saying:

So... shall you leave the ships of the fast-mounted Danaans [Greeks], you haughty Trojans, never to be glutted with the grim war noises, nor go short of all that other shame and defilement wherewith you defiled me, wretched dogs, and your hearts knew no fear at all of the hard anger of Zeus loud-thundering, the guest’s god, who some day will utterly sack your steep city. You who in vanity went away taking with you my wedded wife, and many possessions, when she had received you in kindness… But you will be held somewhere, though you be so headlong for battle.\(^58\)

As Menelaus’s words here describe, the disgrace and shame brought upon his people had its origin in a violation of xenia. The Trojans’ gravest crime of all was a failure to fear Zeus, the “guest’s god” or as it says in Butler’s classic translation of the same passage, the Trojans neglected to fear Zeus, the “avenger of violated hospitality.” Simply put, the other offenses and evils committed by the Trojans merely derive from this “original sin.” Thus, more than the stealing of Menelaus’s wife, the deeper driving force behind the plot of the Iliad and why the Greeks set sail for Troy was because of a breach in the laws of

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 102–3.

hospitality. In this passage, we glean the primacy of *xenia* as a virtue related to piety as King Menelaus calls upon Zeus to help the Achaeans win the war against Troy who had done the unthinkable crime.

Having seen the grave consequences of a violation of hospitality, let us turn to Homer’s other great epic *The Odyssey* to see an example of hospitality being expressed in its positive form. As is well known, the plot of *The Odyssey* revolves around the ten-year journey of the main character Odysseus after the Trojan War, during his adventures at sea and throughout the coastal lands of Greece to find his way back home to his wife Penelope and son Telemachos. Throughout the story, numerous cases of *xenia* (in both its positive and negative forms) are illustrated.\(^59\)

One instance in *The Odyssey* where *xenia* is practiced in an exemplary way is found in Book I in the encounter between Odysseus’ son Telemachos and the goddess Athena. This example is useful because it demonstrates how ancient Greek hospitality sharply differs from how it is practiced in most places today. I am referring to the fact that the duty to practice *xenia* implied welcoming the stranger as a guest immediately and taking care of her needs prior to any kind of interrogation about the person’s identity or reasons for coming.

Athena, protector of the Greeks and therefore a protector of Odysseus, is the one who intercedes with Zeus on behalf of Odysseus to allow him to return to his home in Ithaca after the decade-long war. However, Odysseus’ journey back to Ithaca takes him another ten years, making the absence from his wife and son approach twenty long years.

\(^{59}\) Examples of two grave violations of hospitality in the *Odyssey* are the suitors who pillage the home of Odysseus throughout the course of the story, and the behavior of Polyphemus, the Cyclops, who not only fails to practice *xenia*, but actually eats some of Odysseus’ men in Book IX. Kass refers to the cannibalism of the Cyclops as the “inversion of hospitality,” Cf. Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, 107.
Because it was reasonable for Penelope and Telemachos to think that Odysseus had died in battle, Athena wants to intervene and let them know that Odysseus is not dead and that they should wait for his return.

Athena, disguised as Mentes, an old friend of Odysseus, visits Telemachos to advise him to call a counsel to get rid of the suitors pursuing Penelope and to set out to inquire with King Nestor and King Menelaus concerning the whereabouts of his father Odysseus. Thus, from the first book of *The Odyssey*, we discover the capital importance of *xenia*, as Telemachos offers Mentes (Athena in disguise) hospitality. Although the young man does not recognize his guest (neither in her true identity as Athena nor in her disguise as Mentes), as soon as he catches sight of the stranger, he immediately shows her *xenia*. Homer tells us:

> [Telemachos] … went straight to the gate, and he *resented in his heart that the stranger stood so long at the door*. Standing near her, he took her right hand and received the bronze spear; speaking out to her, he uttered winged words: “Greetings, stranger, you shall be welcomed among us. And when you have eaten dinner, you will tell us what you need.”

As this example illustrates, a fascinating dimension of ancient Greek hospitality is that it was not proper for the host to ask questions about the identity nor the future travel plans of the guest until *after* he had provided for his needs. Such a concept seems absurd to our modern sensibilities in which we (if we are prudent) would at least determine if a stranger had good or bad intentions *before* allowing him or her to enter our house. We live in a society in which prudence demands locking one’s doors and exercising great caution before allowing a stranger into our home. But for the Greeks and many ancient, pre-industrial societies, the manner of interactions with strangers was very different. Kass

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rightly calls us to consider the way in which this approach to hospitality reveals a great deal about the ancient Greek understanding of the human condition; he asks: “what understanding of life and human relations informs a hospitality that would unhesitatingly feed strangers before discovering who they were and whether they bore you good or evil intent?” How odd it would be for us to allow people into our home and feed them, only to ask afterwards their names and why they had come.

Returning back to this passage in *The Odyssey*, we discover that Telemachos offers the finest welcome to Athena (who he now thinks is Mentes, his father’s old friend) and continues to show the highest forms of *xenia*, now that it is not a mere stranger but a friend. After Athena/Mentes tells Telemachos to get rid of the suitors and to search for news of his father, Telemachos says to his guest:

Stranger, you have spoken these friendly words wisely like a father to his son, and I shall never forget them. Come now, wait a while, though you are eager for the journey, so that once you are bathed, delighted in your own heart, you may board your ship rejoicing in spirit, with a gift, an honorable and lovely one that will be a keepsake from me, of the kind that fond guest friends give each other.

Because Telemachos duly practices *xenia* toward his guest (whom he never realizes is the goddess Athena), he will be blessed for his actions. He treats the stranger kindly and with great hospitality. Once he learns that it is Mentes (or at least the guise of Mentes) who is an old friend of his father, he shows even greater acts of *xenia*, such as offering a gift.

Although we have only examined a small sampling of hospitality’s significance for Homeric Greece, this survey hopefully has allowed us to glimpse more clearly how influential this virtue was for their culture. Even though the composition of Homer’s

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epics is believed to date back almost 3,000 years, the influence of these works is inimitable since they emerge from a culture that has been called the cradle of Western civilization. One reason why ancient Greek literature and philosophy has held such prominence in the shaping of culture is that their writings, arguably, offer insights that are universally true.

For this reason, I would agree with Kass’s assessment that these “views on hospitality are not only Greek, they are also Biblical, and shared by ancient societies in India, China, Japan, the Middle East, and Africa.” Hospitality is both a trans-cultural and trans-historical concept. Having considered the unique role of hospitality in ancient Greece, let us now offer a brief survey of hospitality’s historical development up through our current day.

2. The Evolution of Hospitality through Modern Times

It is not possible, given the scope of our topic, to present a thorough history of the concept of hospitality. We focused our attention on its prominence in ancient Greece, and now we will traverse several centuries of history and mention, what seem to be, the most significant ideas related to the development of hospitality in modern times. I am also limiting my historical survey to mainly Western cultures, as this will be most relevant for understanding Marcel’s notion of hospitality. As previously mentioned, historians tell us that nearly every ancient society practiced some form of hospitality. As we considered

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63 Kass, The Hungry Soul, 103.
the role of “Athens,” we might also say a word about the practice of hospitality in “Jerusalem,” i.e. as it was understood by the ancient Jewish people.

Similar to the Greeks, the ancient Hebrews believed that behind the appearance of human misery could be hidden the mystery of divine presence. A famous case of hospitality in the Hebrew Bible is the story of the patriarch Abraham, when he entertains three guests who come as strangers. Abraham shows them warmth and hospitality with a generous meal and kindness, only to find out afterwards that they were actually angels, (some interpreters say even God himself), who had visited him. Referring back to this important event for the Jewish people, the New Testament writer of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.”

This particular trait of hospitality shown by the Greeks and many ancient Eastern cultures – of welcoming the guest who may be a divinity in disguise – will prove to be a vital characteristic of the kind of hospitality upon which Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is based. It suggests a profound yet mysterious link which connects the human person, particularly in its states of weakness, with God himself. Kass comments on this aspect of the Greek practice of theoxenia, as he explains:

To us this belief of the Greeks about their gods probably seems silly. Yet, if properly understood, it embodies a profound insight, one that leads to the true ground of hospitality. What might it mean that the divine takes the form of the stranger or beggar?

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66 Hebrews 13:2.
67 Kass, The Hungry Soul, 103.
We see this notion of hospitality illustrated in more recent times in the example of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, universally acknowledged even during her life time as a living saint, who would often quote the words of Jesus from the Gospel: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”\(^{68}\) There is something both divine and human in the act of welcoming and receiving the poor, the one in need of food, shelter, and love. Every human is a creature of God and, therefore, belongs to God.

Another consequence of the ancient idea that the stranger might be a god in disguise is that it “prompts the host to remember and recognize the god-like possibilities in all human beings, and not only in those who are near and dear.”\(^{69}\) It is also likely that acts of hospitality to those most in need has a power to elicit in us a sense of our own blessings. According to Kass:

> Curiously, it is the vulnerable stranger who reminds us of providence, who makes us acutely aware of our own (relative) blessedness, who inspires us, in gratitude, to imitate and improve on nature’s beneficence with our gracious deeds of hospitality.\(^{70}\)

As we have seen in these examples, the ancient cultures highly esteemed hospitality to the extent that it held great significance on both an ethical and religious level. Moreover, the practice of \textit{theoxenia} – showing hospitality to others because they may be gods in disguise – is a characteristic that spans many cultures and sheds light on deeper meanings of the concept of hospitality.

\(^{68}\) Matthew 25:40.  
\(^{69}\) Kass, \textit{The Hungry Soul}, 103.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid.
One of the main differences between how hospitality was understood in ancient cultures and how it is understood in contemporary societies is that ancient cultures were invariably collectivistic, while Western cultures today are highly individualistic. In other words, the evolutionary journey of the concept of hospitality can be largely explained through tracing the development of various other societal changes, particularly the waning mutual interdependence of its members. For example, in the ancient world, if a person needed to travel far from home, he did not have the convenience of booking a hotel room with his credit card over the internet. In the ancient world, and in certain pre-industrial societies still today, one is entirely dependent on the hospitality of others when going away on a journey. Kass explains that this kind of domestic hospitality for travelers is naturally in decline in our society because “our way of life does not support it.”\textsuperscript{71} Hospitality has always existed among groups of people who are navigating the possible relations arising among strangers and guests, but the sociological conditions of a culture obviously influence the way hospitality is practiced.

Before saying more, it will be helpful to examine how the answer to the question, “who is the guest?” has evolved throughout history of hospitality. The notion of guest for the ancient cultures and even present-day pre-industrial societies includes the idea of \textit{strangers} as well as one’s kin. This is because in ancient cultures, people going on long journeys always needed to rely on the hospitality of others, while our modern, industrialized and individualistic society encourages us to be self-sufficient when it comes to traveling. In other words, we normally make provisions for ourselves by reserving hotel rooms and getting our own meals at restaurants or grocery stores,

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 102.
sometimes without ever needing to have any human interaction. If we happen to have friends or family in the places we are visiting, then, naturally, we might reach out to them in order to receive a free place to stay or at least a meal in their home. However, to expect a total stranger to allow us to come in and stay in his house or even to give us something to eat is almost unheard of in Western society. Cultural historian Theodore Zeldin speaks of this phenomenon when he writes:

Today in the rich countries, hospitality means, above all, entertaining friends or acquaintances in one’s home; but once upon a time it meant opening one’s house to total strangers, giving a meal to anyone who chose to come, allowing them to stay the night, indeed imploring them to stay, although one knew nothing about them. This kind of hospitality has been admired and practiced in virtually every civilization that has existed, as though it fulfills a basic human need.  

Instead of dealing with entertaining or providing for the basic needs of strangers, hospitality today is more readily concerned with a type of warm, welcoming treatment that people give to their family and friends. In our contemporary culture, we naturally welcome those who are relatives, friends, or neighbors. We feel obliged to take care of our “own,” and normally do not feel obligations towards those outside our world of family and friends. If hospitality is shown to strangers, then those strangers are usually paying customers. 

The truth is that most of us do not feel comfortable or safe bringing “strangers” into our homes or cars, and this is for good reasons. We have obvious connections to our blood relatives, “connections that are absent toward strangers.” Thus, what is different about the ancient understanding of hospitality compared to today’s is that its current

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expression is normally either “bought” or it is provided by someone whom the person knows, not usually a stranger.

With that said, however, it would be inaccurate to conclude that all non-commercial, private hospitality in contemporary society is only among friends and acquaintances. There are still plenty of cases even today in which hospitality is shown to someone who is not a friend or family member. For example, there are countless “charitable organizations” such as soup kitchens and homeless shelters, which fall under the category of domestic hospitality because they give provisions for free, even though their primary recipients are strangers, i.e., anyone who is in need.

A contemporary example of hospitality towards strangers is what may be called, “Good Samaritan” hospitality, the “activity of entertaining people because they seem to have … a need of hospitality – either a need for food, drink or accommodation as such, or a psychological need of a kind which can be met particularly well by hospitality.”74 Many of us have experienced the kindness – or hospitality in this broad sense – of a stranger who stops by the side of the road to help us change a flat tire. Telfer broadens these possible acts of kindness that a “Good Samaritan” could offer to the fulfillment of certain psychological needs that people could be suffering, such as “loneliness or the need to feel valued as an individual.”75 Even though the idea of hospitality originally designated the idea of “affording welcome, entertainment, and generosity to strangers and visitors,” it may also signify more generally, the idea of being “disposed to receive or welcome kindly.”76

75 Ibid.
With this description, we come closer to Marcel’s meaning when he speaks of the metaphysics of hospitality. As we saw in our previous chapter, one of the “wounds” of the broken world, which Marcel diagnoses and wishes to treat with his metaphysics of hospitality, is this reality of loneliness that so many people experience, despite being surrounded by a crowd. Moreover, based on the definition of hospitality which I presented at the beginning of this chapter as an attitude of welcoming another person which responds to a human need, I will argue that Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality aims to respond to the deepest and most fundamental need of the human person, which is the need to be loved.

3. Types of Hospitality in Contemporary Times

As a way of framing our discussion of the evolution of the concept of hospitality, I would like to say a few words about the different types of hospitality which have always existed but whose differences today appear more pronounced. Broadly speaking, hospitality can be divided into two main categories: commercial and non-commercial. Although there are multiple examples of sub-divisions, essentially all acts of hospitality seem to fall under these two possibilities: either you pay for it (commercial or industrial hospitality) or you do not (non-commercial or private/domestic hospitality). In the following pages, I will briefly explain each of these domains.

First, we have the commercial/industrial realm of hospitality. When the average person today hears the word hospitality, it likely evokes images of hotel suites, fancy cuisine, housekeeping, and other services associated with the tourism/entertainment

industry. This is because hospitality as a commercial enterprise plays a tremendous role in our present society. This prevalent form of hospitality can be understood as the practice of providing food, drink and/or lodging for some kind of guests (i.e. paying customers) of a hotel, resort, restaurant, cruise ship, etc. As the name clearly expresses, commercial/industrial hospitality concerns itself with earning profits and is thus driven by economic motives. As many recent scholars have noted, contemporary society’s understanding of hospitality – especially in respect to its motives – has morphed over the last few hundred years, to the point that sometimes the earlier, broader meaning of hospitality is often eclipsed.78

In terms of gaining contextual understanding of his metaphysics of hospitality, it is only necessary to note that Marcel would definitely think that the consumerism of contemporary Western society – which has given rise to the fact that hospitality itself is something that is primarily “bought” and “sold” – is a contributing factor toward making the world more broken. Moreover, the growing academic interest in hospitality has largely developed because of the commercial industry, and the fact that many universities today offer students opportunities to major in hospitality management parallels this growing philosophical interest.79 Although commercial hospitality could seem foreign to its other dimensions, it has been the catalyst for probing deeper into the concept as a whole. As Lashley points out, hospitality as a social science has been primarily stimulated by an interest in the study of the relationships between hosts and their guests, a dynamic which holds true even in commercial hospitality.80

80 Cf. Ibid., 3.
It seems that an essential element in hospitality, even on the commercial level, is the feature of making people feel *at home*. As we shall see in chapter five, this aspect, of making a visitor or guest feel at home on the *affective* level, is one of the essential aspects of the term’s meaning which Marcel wishes to preserve.

The second domain of hospitality is what most scholars refer to as the private or domestic realm, or the non-commercialized forms. I would like to suggest that this domain could be referred to as *personalized* hospitality because it is normally more centered on the person to be served than on the profit to be earned. Lashley describes this broad category of private hospitality as involving the “issues related to the meaning of hospitality, hosting, and ‘hospitableness.’”\(^81\) Before the rise of industrialization over two centuries ago, “commercial hospitality” was virtually non-existent. Hospitality, in whatever form it was expressed, was always private, personal and domestic. Even though inns existed for paying travelers in ancient times, these were generally private homes offering travelers temporary lodging, and not commercialized in the sense of modern hotels.\(^82\) In the Middle Ages, Benedictine monasteries, still today known for their hospitality, provided lodging for countless travelers throughout Europe. It is likely that guests staying with the monks would offer tithes and donations, but the services they provided belonged to the domestic, rather than commercialized, realm of hospitality.

The fact that hospitality in the private sphere today is found commonly among people who know each other and less frequently among strangers reflects the individualistic character of Western society. While the term “guest” in ancient times

\(^{81}\) Ibid.

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would have had a broad meaning, our contemporary culture seems to have an increasingly narrow concept of who might count as a guest.

Even those of us today who may wish to show hospitality towards strangers experience a certain conflict; on the one hand, we wish to welcome the stranger, perhaps give him food or help him with some other need, yet on the other hand, we wish to be prudent and therefore cautious toward the stranger at our door who could be a thief or worse. Most people today are accustomed to locking their doors and being wary of strangers appearing on their doorstep asking for provisions; we tend to see the homeless, the stranger or the needy as a threat to our security and the prospect of opening our homes to them appears justifiably risky. Normally, those who have the money and the security of providing for themselves only need “hospitality” services in a more superficial way, for example, when going on a cruise ship or staying at a hotel.

Ultimately, this tension points out a further, deeper question in regard to the broadest meaning of hospitality, and that is “who is the stranger?” It is a question which yields some pondering. As Kass asks, what are the limits to this preference for “one’s own”? Are we not, somehow, connected through a common humanity? Then what is the “proper treatment of the stranger”? It is here that the discipline of Hospitality Studies moves beyond sociology and into ethical philosophy and metaphysics.

The question about the proper treatment of the stranger is one that any sound philosophy of the human person needs to consider. If we examine more deeply the existential question, who is the stranger? we can penetrate more deeply into what it

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83 Kass, The Hungry Soul, 118.
84 Ibid., 101.
means to be human, for the flipside of being a stranger is being a welcome guest who belongs. Christine Pohl gives a helpful description of this as she writes:

Strangers, in the strict sense, are those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community … work, and polity. This condition is most clearly seen in the state of homeless people and refugees. Others experience detachment and exclusion to lesser degrees.  

If we believe that humans are social beings, as Marcel does, then we recognize the importance for individual persons to experience “a secure place in the world.” Moreover, as admirable as it is to make a relative or friend feel welcome and at home in one’s house, what does it mean to welcome the stranger? According to Pohl:

When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected – a space that has meaning and value to us. This is often our home, but it also includes … community, nation, and various other institutions. In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations.  

As Pohl tells us, a place is a space that has meaning and value to us. As discussed earlier, the “places” of hospitality need not be physical buildings or locations. It begins first with making a “place” in one’s heart for receiving others.

As we continue our journey of examining Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality in the remaining chapters, we should keep in mind the idea that hospitality, in its rudimentary form, involves an attitude of kindness and openness towards others. Marcel affirms that the human person is made for community and for relationship. Inherent in this fact is the obligation that we have toward one another to show hospitality. But this

86 Ibid.
hospitality is not just on a practical level; it includes how we view and treat the other person in his or her very being. Furthermore, Marcel’s concept, as we shall see, is not only about welcoming other persons into one’s physical space and providing for their material needs, it is about welcoming other persons into one’s very self and seeking to provide for their spiritual and emotional needs as well. According to Pohl, hospitality is one of the most life-giving human activities: “In joining physical, spiritual, and social nourishment, hospitality is a life-giving practice. It is both fruitful and fertile.”

As I have mentioned and as Marcel would agree, the industrialization of societies has profoundly affected the manner in which hospitality is practiced. Pohl expresses this well as she writes: “Whereas in ancient times all strangers depended on someone else’s hospitality, today, it is those without resources who depend most on the free provision of food, shelter, and protection that characterizes hospitality.” Pohl argues that hospitality, in most areas, has lost its moral and spiritual dimension. A product of our post-industrialized society, current understandings of hospitality mirror the fact that our culture is driven primarily by economic values. Similarly, Zeldin finds the modern-day impoverishment in practices of hospitality a regrettable loss for civilization. Hiring others to deal with sociological problems such as housing and finding food and drink when away from home has led to dealing with many aspects of social distress “impersonally” and personal hospitality has been “superseded by the hospitality industry.”

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 4.
D. Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, hospitality is a social concept as old as human civilization itself. We have looked at how even its etymological background reveals its complex sociological roots, and we have given a definition that captures its essence and provides a helpful basis for understanding Marcel’s notion. Thus, we defined hospitality as an attitude of welcoming another person from a place of abundance in the host which responds to a human need or desire in the guest. We have also looked at hospitality’s motives and have argued that ultimately what is essential is the disposition with which it is carried out. We have also seen historical aspects of hospitality as well as the two primary domains into which it falls. All these reflections bring us closer to the essence of what Marcel wishes to express in his metaphysics of hospitality.
CHAPTER THREE: THE ONTOLOGICAL MYSTERY

“It would be possible to describe everything scientifically, but it would make no sense. It would be a description without meaning – as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure.”
– Albert Einstein

In chapter one, we examined Marcel’s notion of the broken world, a term he uses to describe the human condition insofar as it is marked by estrangement, alienation and despair. In chapter two, we saw how the concept of hospitality – historically, socially, and philosophically – promises a significant contribution for bringing healing to our existential condition, and yet the term all too easily reflects practices that reaffirm rather than challenge the broken world. In this third chapter, I will begin to show how Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality provides a powerful remedy for the broken world. The particular value and richness of his contribution come from his insistence that true hospitality is only lived and fully appreciated in connection with ontological mystery. Similarly, Marcel holds to the belief that the human person, in her ontological being, bears an innate value and dignity. Therefore, persons cannot be properly seen or known except through the lens of the mysterious, and it is in their being, not just in their doing, that their intrinsic dignity and value exist.

Because the theme of this entire study is not simply Marcel’s concept of hospitality, but rather, his metaphysics of hospitality, it is necessary that we ask

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2 Although some thinkers (such as Levinas) make a clear distinction in their understandings of the terms “ontological” and “metaphysical,” Marcel tends to use the terms interchangeably.
ourselves, what is Marcel’s understanding of metaphysics? As we will see, Marcel’s ontological vision, while being uniquely phenomenological, is nevertheless consistent with the traditional Western notion of metaphysics. This fact will be important for our discussion because, as we will see in the next chapter, the two most well-known philosophers of the twentieth century who deal with the topic of hospitality, Levinas and Derrida, hold ontological positions significantly different from Marcel’s and these deeply shape their understandings of hospitality.

In order to address the importance that the ontological dimension has for a proper understanding of hospitality, I will present a background of Marcel’s view of metaphysics. First, I will discuss what he means by the term metaphysics as well as how it relates to his notion of ontological exigency. Next, I will present a few of Marcel’s most well-known concepts – i.e. his related distinctions of problem/mystery and primary/secondary reflection – which are key for understanding his metaphysical vision. By providing a background in these foundational principles, I will set the stage for better understanding his metaphysics of hospitality and how it offers answers to the questions postmodern man faces in the midst of the broken world.

A. Marcel’s View of Metaphysics

Marcel’s musings on the nature of metaphysics permeate his entire corpus to such an extent that he could be said to have an “obsession” with being. This intrigue into the question of being emerged from the earliest years of his philosophical quest and developed and matured throughout his life. In many of his works, he speaks of this
passion, saying that the drive behind all of his philosophical investigations has been “the necessity of restoring to human experience its ontological weight.”

Even as crucial of a theme as the question of being is for Marcel, we are hard pressed to discover in his writings – not even in his published lectures, *The Mystery of Being*, which are considered to be the most “systematic” presentation of his philosophy – a “definition” or any sort of straightforward explanation of the concepts of metaphysics, ontology or the notion of being. In fact, Marcel’s use of the term “being” (*l’être*) is not consistent. He sometimes uses it to refer to the whole of being, i.e. being in general, or *being qua being*. Yet other times, he uses it to speak of individual beings or entities. The confusion is furthered by the fact that his explanations of how *being qua being* relates to other kinds or degrees of being is unclear, although his doctrine of participation, scattered throughout his writings, provides a sense of how beings relate to being. In some places when he speaks of being, he is referring to “incarnate being,” i.e. the human person, while in other cases, he is referring to ontological being as the ground of all existence. Because of these ambiguities, Arthur Luther characterizes Marcel’s notion of being as “rather vague,” and Anderson remarks that there are few terms in his philosophy more ambiguous than being.

This lack of clarity in Marcel’s treatment of the concept of being is not surprising, considering the unsystematic nature of his philosophy as a whole, as well as the fact that the subject of metaphysics itself is “notoriously hard to define.” From the time of

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3 Marcel, *EBHD*, 74.
Aristotle, the term *metaphysics* has referred to the science or study of *being qua being*, or *being as such*, and this included the study of individual beings and their “essences.”

Building on the Aristotelian foundation of metaphysics, the great scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas also understands metaphysics as an examination of *being* in general as well as the study of *essence* – that which make a being *be what it is*. Marcel does not spill much ink talking about “intelligible essences,” although he does emphasize his conviction that we *can know* the essences of the things that we experience. At the same time, however, a crucial element in Marcel’s view of metaphysics is his belief in the “impossibility of thinking of being as object.”

Throughout the centuries, philosophers have held differing opinions about what metaphysics is and in what its proper object of study consists. In fact, there have been such divergent viewpoints about metaphysics in recent centuries that beginning around the time of Hume’s empiricism (mid-eighteenth century), many philosophers have claimed that metaphysics – as it had been traditionally understood as a study of being and knowledge of essences – is impossible, “either because its questions are meaningless or because they are impossible to answer.” It is important to acknowledge that Marcel’s concern with metaphysical questions does need to be understood in the historical context

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7 It is common knowledge that Aristotle himself actually never used the term, “metaphysics.” Rather, the term was probably first used by the ancient editor who compiled Aristotle’s works and determined that the books he wrote on the nature of being, a topic he called “first philosophy,” were “after” or “beyond” *The Physics* – i.e. “*Ta meta ta phusika,*” meaning the books after the physical books. Thus, the name *Metaphysics* comes from the Greek words describing Aristotle’s writings that are, μετά (after) φυσικά (the physical), i.e. after the books on physics/nature.

8 In his work *De Ente et Essentia (On Being and Essence)*, Aquinas argues for the real distinction between the existence and essence of individual beings and claims that the perfect Being, God, is pure Act; thus, it is God’s essence to exist.


11 Sullivan and van Inwagen, “Metaphysics.”
of a larger debate. For our purposes, however, I wish to present a simple overview of Marcel’s ontological stance in order to suitably probe his insights about hospitality.

Marcel holds to a view of metaphysics that could be described as phenomenological or experiential, yet he does not break with the classical Western ontological tradition; rather, he attempts to enrich and articulate it in an innovative way. Ultimately, Marcel’s metaphysics is built on a view that modes of being exist and participate in a sort of hierarchy such that it is “possible to be more or less fully.”¹² Unlike many moderns (e.g. Kant) and postmoderns (e.g. Derrida), Marcel would be classified as a “metaphysical realist.”¹³ This means that Marcel holds to the view that it is in and through human experience that we participate in and come to know reality as it is. However, as Sam Keen points out, even though Marcel follows the essential aspects of Western philosophy’s traditional understanding of metaphysics which is grounded in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, Marcel also deviates from what he considers to be their overly intellectual approach to being. In other words, Marcel is not an Aristotelian nor is he a Thomist, even though much of his philosophy is in line with theirs. The major difficulty that Marcel has with this traditional approach to metaphysics is not so much about what it posits for belief (the mystery of being, our ability to know essences/values in reality) but its intellectual method of arriving at and understanding being.

One clear example of Marcel’s disagreement in this regard is his contempt towards any rational proofs for the existence of God. Marcel is highly critical of the

¹³ For a summary of the historical development of Marcel’s metaphysical views, see Keen, “The Development of the Idea of Being.”
scholastic claim that philosophers can reach a “universal being… [through] their clumsy abstract denominations.” As mentioned earlier, Marcel is unflinching when it comes to fighting against the “spirit of abstraction,” because he finds it to be a great enemy of his phenomenological vision of reality which always seeks to present concrete experience; he “refuses to admit that there is any deductive path from the structure of thought to being.” In this regard, Marcel himself openly admits his disagreement with certain aspects of Thomism, most explicitly the Thomistic approach to the knowledge of God. Although the two Catholic philosophers have much in common, such as their passionate thrust to understand being, ultimately Marcel and Aquinas arrive at knowledge of God’s existence by taking different paths.

As Anne Maloney explains, whereas Aquinas thinks that human reason has the power to obtain knowledge of God’s existence, Marcel is critical of an approach to God which claims to be demonstrative. Because Marcel is so wary of reducing God, or any other personal being for that matter, to a mere object of our cognition – i.e. a concept or a “problem” – he is skeptical of any approach to being that begins with conceptual knowledge. Marcel’s epistemological views are deeply woven into his ontological

14 Marcel, MBII, 50.
17 Cf. Anne M. Maloney, “Gabriel Marcel’s Critique of the Thomist Proofs for God’s Existence” (PhD diss., Milwaukee, WI, Marquette University, 1988), 1, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
18 Whether or not Marcel is fair to the actual thought of Aquinas is a matter that takes us beyond the scope of our discussion. However, it is worth mentioning that, as Maloney points out, Marcel tends to base his critique more on commentaries and interpretations (particularly those of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange) of Aquinas’s thought, rather than the actual Thomistic texts. Garrigou-Lagrange tends to present “an Aquinas of propositions and conclusions, principles and abstractions,” Maloney, “Gabriel Marcel’s Critique of the Thomist Proofs for God’s Existence”, v. Ultimately, Maloney argues that Marcel’s critiques of Aquinas are unfairly based on indirect sources and that “Marcel’s general critique of Aquinas’ route to knowledge of God does not give enough credence to the role of analogy in Thomas’ philosophy,” Ibid., 212.
conviction that “being” must be approached as a mystery, not as an object or a problem. In other words, Marcel holds that “being cannot be approached directly by purely conceptual means because it belongs to the realm of the mysterious rather than of the problematic.” When Marcel repeatedly insists that “ontology transcends all logical predication,” he is not saying that logic has no relationship with ontology; rather, he is arguing that metaphysics transcends the domain of categories and propositions.

How is being to be approached if it is not possible to start with intellectual concepts? The answer that Marcel gives, and which I will develop further in chapter five, is through love. Keen tells us that according to Marcel: “Being is not revealed at the end of a process of judgment, deduction, or analogy but is mediated through our encounters with individual beings as they become present to us in love. Love, not knowledge, leads to being.” This idea that love is prior to knowledge, situates Marcel in the tradition of thinkers – like Augustine, Duns Scotus, Blaise Pascal and Max Scheler – who understand the human person to be, fundamentally, an ens amans, i.e. a being who loves. As Augustine puts it: “There is nobody who does not love. But one must seek out what one loves. We are not asked not to love, but to choose what we love.” Contrary to Descartes who said the human person is primarily a res cogitans (a thinking thing), Marcel claims that the human person is primarily a lover. By emphasizing the primacy of love, Marcel is in no way denigrating human rationality; in fact, he holds to a view of rationality that is much broader than many modern philosophers have.

19 This important Marcelian distinction between problem and mystery will be explained in more detail in the next section of this chapter.
21 Marcel, MBII, 154.
Even though Marcel’s philosophical analyses are eminently phenomenological, he still consistently grounds his experiential insights in a realist ontology. This makes him unique in comparison to the majority of the well-known phenomenologists of the last century. One example of a contemporary phenomenological philosopher who emphasizes the primacy of love while rejecting traditional metaphysics, is Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946).²⁴ Marcel, along with other “phenomenological realists” such as Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Karol Wojtyla, does not divorce the phenomenological insights he gains through experience from the classical notion of truth and reality. Rather, he seeks to retain “the treasure of subjective depth without losing hold of the universal validity of man’s experience.”²⁵ When I examine Marcel in dialogue with Levinas and Derrida in the next chapter, I will return to this question of the place of metaphysics in relation to human experience and argue that it is wrong to regard ontological realism and phenomenological fidelity to inter-subjective experience as mutually exclusive. Marcel shows us that the two are in fact complementary.

Before moving on, allow me to say a few more words about Marcel’s understanding of ontology. True to his “method” and philosophical vision, instead of defining metaphysics in neat and compact propositions, Marcel offers numerous descriptions, metaphors and reflections, which little by little, reveal his approach to being. Keen writes:

²⁴ Marion argues that traditional metaphysical concepts (like being) must be overcome to adequately express the God of Love; thus, Marion proposes a “Dieu sans l’Être.” Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, God Without Being, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
²⁵ Luther, “Marcel’s Metaphysics,” 190.
Marcel’s ontology does not move toward any systematic understanding of being but rather [it moves] among those experiences that are the immanent assurances of the presence of being: love, fidelity, faith and hope.26 Because he considers “systems” to be inadequate to capture the deepest realities of our existence, Marcel discerns the presence of being not in a system but in concrete descriptions.

In the first chapter of his second volume of The Mystery of Being, Marcel explicitly raises the question of the nature of being as such.27 Before providing an answer to the question, he offers his reader two premises he considers foundational for any investigation into the nature of being. The first is that “this enquiry can be developed only if we take a certain fullness of life as our starting point.”28 By this, Marcel is referring to his vision of being as a plenitude, the mystery of being in which all other beings somehow participate. The second idea is that to be means essentially, to be-with. Marcel argues that this “fullness of life” which he calls being, is not an exclusively private experience; rather, it must be an experience “of a whole which is implied by the relation to the with [avec], by the togetherness … [by] intersubjectivity ….”29 Marcel maintains that there exists a mysterious connection, written into our nature, that links all people in the human family. In the fifth chapter, we will return to Marcel’s view that being and intersubjectivity are intrinsically united.

When he claims that interpersonal communion grounds ontology, Marcel reminds us that he is not asserting a “fact” nor is he expressing a “proposition” that can be “put

27 Cf. Marcel, MBII, 1.
28 Ibid., 8.
29 Ibid.
into the form of a logical principle.”  

Rather, this “intersubjective nexus,” as he calls it, is a “simple inexpressible intuition,” i.e. a kind of first principle. For this reason, it is impossible for Marcel to provide a strict assertion or definition of his approach to metaphysics. As he tells us: “Without doubt the intersubjective nexus cannot be in any way asserted: it can only be acknowledged.”

The French word, *reconnu*, which is translated as “acknowledged,” is a form of the verb *reconnaître* (to recognize, acknowledge or be aware of) and derives from *connaitre*, which means to know with an experiential familiarity (as opposed to *savoir*, which means to know *that* something is a certain way, i.e. to know facts). Because intersubjectivity lies deeply in the realm of mystery, we only “know” this reality in the same way that we know other mysteries, i.e. through acknowledging it in our experience. Although Marcel holds that human persons *do have* genuine knowledge of this phenomenon, he is clear to point out that it is not a propositional knowledge derived from a demonstration. In other words, the intersubjective nexus is the “consciousness of a living tie, supportive presence and a deep feeling of fraternity which unites men and women as human persons.”

It is a phenomenon that can be known with intuitive certainty, just not asserted propositionally.

In relation to this discussion, Marcel asks: “Can we admit that we have reached a point where we may identify being with intersubjectivity? Can we say that being *is* intersubjectivity?”

While Marcel raises this question because he thinks it is the logical conclusion to his reflections on being, he actually answers that, if taken “literally,” he

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30 Ibid., 10.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
34 Marcel, *MBII*, 16.
does not think being and intersubjectivity are identical. In other words, although he believes there is a kind of indissoluble connection between the two realities, he is wary of suggesting that the two concepts are interchangeable because it is important that we avoid taking “too dogmatic a tone” with these matters.\textsuperscript{35}

If this is so, then, practically speaking what is Marcel trying to express when he refers to the intersubjective nexus of ontology? The answer lies in his belief that human beings are made for relationships with others, and this is something true on the deepest level, i.e. the level of our being. Thus, the more isolated a person is from others, the less “being” she experiences, and similarly, the more in communion with others she is, the more “being” she experiences. Marcel tells us:

We could perhaps express it … by saying that the more the ego attempts to assert for itself a central or autocratic position in the economy of consciousness, the more the density of being is attenuated. Conversely, the more the ego realizes that it is but one among others … the more it tends to recapture the feeling of this density.\textsuperscript{36}

Marcel uses the word “density” in an analogous way. His point is that human persons find themselves more human and more “full” in their own being, the more that they are connected to others and not isolated. This “fullness,” he believes, is something metaphysical.

Perhaps Marcel’s most direct explanation of his understanding of metaphysics is when he writes that the only concern that he has with being is in respect to interpersonal relationships. He writes: “I concern myself with being only in so far as I have a more or less distinct consciousness of the underlying unity which ties me to other beings of whose

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 16–17.
reality I already have a preliminary notion.” Another way of phrasing Marcel’s ontological vision is to say that for him, being is always being-with. Since Marcel’s understanding of mystery is closely connected to his metaphysical and personalistic beliefs, he thinks it is impossible to consider the question, “What is Being?” without exploring more deeply the existential question: “Who am I?” The reason he connects these two questions is that the question of being always involves us human beings. I agree with Reeves when he suggests that the central theme of all of Marcel’s philosophy is personal experience. This reality of personal experience drives every other area of his philosophy, from his ethics to his epistemology, to his ontology. Thus, for Marcel, morality is personal, knowledge is personal, and reality itself “is profoundly personal.” Marcel boldly suggests: “except for the problem of ‘what am I?’ there are no other metaphysical problems, since in one way or another, they all lead back to it.” By saying that this is the only metaphysical question, he reinforces his view that reality itself is personal and that the question of human existence needs to be the fulcrum

37 Ibid., 17.
38 Marcel was familiar with Heidegger’s use of the term being-with [Mitsein] from having read Being and Time. While appreciating the emphasis on Dasein’s inherent relationality, Marcel is critical of the Heidegger’s notion of being-with, judging it to be undeveloped and leading the person to greater solitude [Einsamkeit], rather than human flourishing. Cf. Heidegger, Being and Time, 153-163; Cf. Chad Engelland, “Marcel and Heidegger on the Proper Matter and Manner of Thinking,” Philosophy Today, no. 48 (2004): 103.
41 Ibid.
42 Marcel, EBHD, 16. Clearly, Marcel’s use of the term “problem” to describe metaphysical concerns is not to be confused with his distinction between problem and mystery. In other words, he is not saying that the profound ontological question of “what am I?” is a mere “problem” that can be examined and possibly solved by a technique. Rather, he is using the term in the broader etymological sense of a conundrum, a difficulty that we encounter, such as the “problem of evil,” which also is strictly speaking, a mystery.
around which all other philosophical questions revolve. The mystery of being and the mystery of the human person cannot be separated.

The fusion of ontology and intersubjectivity in Marcel’s philosophy is evident in his notion of the metaphysics of hope. Rather similar to his idea of the metaphysics of hospitality, Marcel’s metaphysics of hope refers to his belief that hope is always a response to alienation, and ultimately it is not possible for the human person to hope by herself.\textsuperscript{43} Hope, being obviously a remedy for despair, can also be understood as “the remedy of communion.”\textsuperscript{44} In other words, in Marcel’s view, alienation is equivalent to despair and communion is equivalent to hope; this is because of the fact that, ontologically, we are made for communion. In conclusion, Marcel’s concept of metaphysics makes no sense without his philosophy of intersubjectivity.

**B. The Loss of Ontological Exigency**

Now that we have gained an understanding of Marcel’s view of metaphysics, we should comment on why Marcel deems ontological matters so essential. His primary reason is his concern for man’s condition of living in the broken world. Moreover, this brokenness is not a superficial situation; it is a very real, existential crisis.

As we have seen, when Marcel speaks about the broken world, he is referring to the fact that human beings today are feeling more and more isolated, more fractured and cut off from the whole. Marcel observes that “this feeling of a world divided grows stronger and stronger at a time when the surface unification of the world (I mean of this

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Marcel, \textit{HV}, 60.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
The connections and bonds that unite families and communities seem to be progressively disintegrating, leading to human beings feeling more and more alienated from each other. Marcel is convinced that the ultimate malady afflicting postmodern man is the dissipating sense of what he calls, the ontological mystery. The recovery of this sense of the mystery of being, then, is the remedy for healing the world’s brokenness. As Marcel states:

It can never be too strongly emphasized that the crisis which Western man is undergoing today is a metaphysical one; there is probably no more dangerous illusion than that of imagining that some readjustment of social or institutional conditions could suffice of itself to appease a contemporary sense of disquiet which rises, in fact, from the very depths of man's being.

Many people live disconnected from the mystery of being, and this blindness on the metaphysical level results in grave errors on the human and interpersonal one. In an essay entitled, “On the Ontological Mystery,” Marcel expresses this concern:

I should like to start with a sort of global and intuitive characterization of the man in whom the sense of the ontological – the sense of being – is lacking, or, to speak more correctly, of the man who has lost the awareness of this sense. Generally speaking, modern man is in this condition; if ontological demands worry him at all, it is only dully, as an obscure impulse.

Marcel is not simply saying that modern man is superficial and less inclined to ask the deeper, existential questions about the meaning of his existence. What he is lamenting most is the fact that so many people are blind to the mystery of being. Another way of understanding Marcel’s notion of ontological exigency is the idea that we have a need to participate in being, and this being is a kind of presence and plenitude. He tells us:

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45 Marcel, MBI, 22.
46 Marcel, MAMS, 37. My italics.
Being is – or should be – necessary. It is impossible that everything should be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other … or, in the words of Shakespeare, to "a tale told by an idiot." I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality – and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary.\textsuperscript{48}

By saying it is impossible that everything in this life could somehow be “reduced” to a series of successive units with no connections, Marcel is alluding once again to the fact that the brokenness of the world is a brokenness in a certain unity – a unity of being.

In contrast to those he calls the “pessimists” (we can assume he is referring primarily to Sartre) who claim that the ground of our existence is nothingness (le néant), Marcel holds that being simply is; or as he puts it, “being is what withstands – or what would withstand – an exhaustive analysis” or reduction of experience to empirical data.\textsuperscript{49}

This core conviction of Marcel, that all being is grounded on a fundamental mode of being itself, is an essential component of his view of inter-subjectivity, and consequently of his view of hospitality.

Similarly, Marcel believes that this diminishing of ontological exigency not only has repercussions on human inter-subjectivity, but also on how the human person relates to the world around her. For example, he believes that the loss of ontological exigency has led to a corresponding loss in the capacity for wonder. Speaking of the broken world in which we live, Marcel writes:

[The] ontological need, the need of being, is exhausted in exact proportion to the breaking up of personality on the one hand and, on the other, to the triumph of the category of the ‘purely natural’ and the consequent atrophy of the faculty of wonder.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 13.
In other words, Marcel is saying that purely natural philosophies, which are driven by values of technological progress, are the same ones that curtail both the ontological exigency as well as the richness of human relationships. The theories which Marcel criticizes here are those which continuously stress “the activity of verification” and end up “ignoring presence.”

Although we will examine this concept of presence more fully in chapter five, it is helpful to note here that this concept is crucial for Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. When we become aware of the dignity and goodness of another person, in her being, this “inward realization of presence through love … infinitely transcends all possible verification because it exists in an immediacy beyond all conceivable mediation.”

The genuine presence of another person cannot be “verified” and “quantified” like other “objects” of experience and knowledge. For Marcel, the person is never a mere “object” of consciousness; therefore, the realm of access to another person is not a “problem” to be solved or mastered but rather a presence to be lived and recollected.

Because Marcel fully acknowledges that metaphysics has often had the reputation of being a theoretical science of merely abstract concepts with no relevance for everyday life, Marcel argues that metaphysics must always be a metaphysics of experience. Thus, he asserts: “there is a metaphysical element at the heart of human experience.”

Moreover, he describes even every-day human experience as having a “metaphysical tenor.” While it could seem that ontological mystery and concrete experience are

51 Ibid., 15.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 126.
opposed to one another, Marcel shows us that the two are intrinsically united. Thus, Keen explains: “Marcel directs his ontology toward the discovery of that which abides not as a substratum beyond the phenomenal world, but as a support and an assurance within human experience.” Consequently, Marcel believes that one of the fundamental errors involved in certain metaphysical theories is to think that the realm of metaphysics is somehow “beyond” experience itself. He argues that it is false “to conceive the metaphysical as the meta-empirical, as transcending every possible experience;” consequently, he refutes any notion that metaphysics constitutes “a privileged sphere to which we would be given access by a special type of experience.”

Marcel’s conviction that ontological mystery and concrete experience are inseparably linked may seem radical and perhaps contradictory. A fairly common modern and postmodern notion of metaphysics holds that it deals with abstractions that do not touch our experience. For Marcel, however, human experience, with all its richness and complexity, reveals the mysterious presence of the metaphysical within it. Thus, he asserts: “the more experience appears unstable and diversified, the more is the metaphysical grasped as being immanent in it.” While it is true that concrete human experience can be distinguished from the metaphysical concepts involved in it, this is not because the two realities are entirely different, but rather, because the metaphysical consists in a type of “frame of an experience.” This image of a “frame” suggests Marcel’s belief that being is the foundation and ground of all human experience, and therefore, cannot be separated from it.

56 Marcel, PI, 135.
57 Ibid., 136.
58 Ibid., 135.
Marcel believes that man yearns for a sense of the transcendent within this realm of experience. Explaining that this word has been misused and misunderstood by many modern thinkers, Marcel clarifies:

When I myself speak here of a recourse to the transcendent, I mean, as concretely as possible, that our only chance in the sort of horrible situation I have imagined, is to appeal … to a level of being, an order of the spirit, which is also the level and order of grace, of mercy, of charity.\(^{59}\)

Marcel thinks man’s ultimate hope lies in a rediscovery of his own being and how it stands in relation to the mystery of being as a whole, its source. This ultimate being, which stands as the ground of all other beings, is identified by most religious traditions as God; Marcel’s philosophy is consonant with a Christian notion of God as a personal being: actually, a communion of three Persons.\(^{60}\) Robert Wood explains:

For thinkers like Heidegger and the Taoists, the mystery of Being is an impersonal encompassing; but with Marcel and in company with Buber and Levinas, the heart of the Mystery is a Thou, a confirming personal Presence we name ‘God’ or even dare to address as ‘Father.’\(^{61}\)

Marcel purposefully shies away from propositional statements about God. However, throughout his writings, he does express clearly his belief that an ultimate Being is the ground of all beings who find their existence in him through a kind of participation. In his essay, “Faith and Reality,” in the second volume of his work, *Mystery of Being*, Marcel speaks of the countless “gifts” which are granted to us in this life, “not by some external power… but by Him whom we must call the Creator or the Father.”\(^{62}\) Furthermore, using “a more metaphysical expression,” Marcel explains that the “source” of these “gifts” is

\(^{59}\) Marcel, *MAMS*, 22.

\(^{60}\) This understanding of God as Trinity will be the theological foundation for Marcel’s conviction that human persons (made in the image of God) are therefore ontologically made for relationship/communion.


\(^{62}\) Marcel, *MBII*, 170.
“the unrepresentable and uncharacterizable Being who constitutes us as existents.”

This “unrepresentable and uncharacterizable” Being is God. What is most consistent in all of Marcel’s language regarding “God” and “being” is that being is not some abstract “object” for us to put into categories. He writes: “to affirm being is absolutely to transcend ‘knowledge by genus and species.’”

The fact that Marcel’s understanding of being is a “personal Presence,” will be very important when we analyze more fully his notions of presence and participation in our final chapter.

In conclusion, Marcel’s “metaphysical” philosophy is simply another name for his ethical personalism. Marcel is interested in the ontological only to the degree that he is interested in the personal. Having given an overview of Marcel’s ontology, let us turn to a consideration of some of his most important contributions as a philosopher: his distinctions between problem and mystery, and primary and secondary reflection.

Through deepening our understanding of these helpful Marcelian concepts, we shall come to an even fuller appreciation of his passion to reconnect the world to the fullness of the ontological mystery.

C. Problem and Mystery

We have already spoken about Marcel’s deep interest in the question of being, what he also refers to as the mystery of being or the ontological mystery. But what does he mean by mystery? This question is best answered by understanding the conceptual distinction between problem and mystery, an idea which Marcel first conceived of while

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 51.
walking in Paris one winter day in 1932.\textsuperscript{65} Although the inspiration seemed to come in an instant, the insight remained an essential interpretive element for his philosophy the rest of his life. It is not surprising, then, that this distinction is one of his most famous and influential contributions. In fact, it has even appeared in a sundry of non-philosophical works, such as spirituality articles and psychology blogs, showing its practical and broad impact beyond academic philosophy.\textsuperscript{66}

Given the popularity of the insight, it is important for us to clarify what exactly Marcel means by the terms problem and mystery (problème et mystère), and what he does not. He laments that:

[This] distinction has been overused by the popularizers and their books, and it has become a sort of philosophical commonplace, losing thereby the original and challenging character which it had initially.\textsuperscript{67}

Although the sense in which he uses the terms problem and mystery resemble our common usage of the words, these concepts take on a particular nuance in Marcel’s philosophical parlance. To begin with, he clarifies that when he uses the word mystery, it is not in the ordinary sense of a puzzling crime or baffling situation like we encounter in a Sherlock Holmes novel. Similarly, Marcel explains that the mysteries he is concerned with are not equivalent to the contents of divine revelation; he remarks: “there is no question of confusing those mysteries which are enveloped in human experience as such with those mysteries which are revealed, such as the Incarnation or Redemption, and to

\textsuperscript{65} Marcel, \textit{EBHD}, 79.
\textsuperscript{67} Marcel, \textit{EBHD}, 70.
which no effort or thought bearing on experience can enable us to attain.”68 At the same
time, however, the concept of mystery, as Marcel understands it, is not entirely unrelated
to the “unexplained crime” or “revealed doctrine of religion” because all these mysteries
involve realities which we cannot fully understand. Ultimately, though, his notion of
mystery is best understood when contrasted with his notion of problem.

Marcel envisions reality as knowable from two different perspectives or levels:
the sphere of the problematical and the sphere of the ontological mystery. Simply put, a
problem is something that can be calculated and solved, while a mystery is something
with which we are so personally engaged that it cannot be solved but only experienced
from within. We are somehow always implicated and engaged in the mystery of our
being. Marcel explains his distinction in a number of places throughout his works but
perhaps the clearest description can be found in his book, Being and Having, where he
writes:

A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely 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 initial validity.69

As this passage illustrates, problems are things that we can control and reduce. We can be
detached from them because they seem to be “outside” of us. A mystery, on the other
hand, is something that we are involved with so intimately that we are not able to
disentangle ourselves from it. It is never completely “outside” of us.

68 Marcel, “OM,” 45.
69 Marcel, BH, 117.
Alister McGrath explains Marcel’s distinction in this way: “A problem is something that we can view objectively, and for which we can find a solution. A mystery is something that we cannot view objectively, precisely because we cannot separate ourselves from it.” For Marcel, the realm of the problematical is that of scientific inquiry, technical reasoning and objective certainty. Human beings, classically understood as rational animals, have always exercised their rationality by seeking to know and understand the world through concepts and definitions. While the conceptual and “objective” dimension of human rationality has certainly contributed towards the tremendous advances in science and technology over the centuries, Marcel believes that rationality cannot be limited to the realm of science and technological control. To see the world only through the lenses of logic, science and technical functions is to live on the level of the problematical. This modern tendency has led to an alarming depreciation of the sense of mystery.

Marcel believes that the eclipsing of the realm of mystery has its philosophical roots in Descartes’ famous method of inquiry – to doubt everything about which we cannot have absolute certainty. It is Marcel’s belief that Descartes, and the majority of modern philosophers after him, split the self and the body, and made a division between subject and object that is not consonant with what we actually experience. As Sweetman expresses it: “Although abstract thinking has an essential role to play in human life, it is not sufficient by itself to discover the fundamental nature of human existence.”

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70 McGrath, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” 23.
it simply, the Cartesian view holds that the self is inside (subjective experience), while the objects which he knows are considered outside (objective experience).\footnote{Cf. Ibid., 12.}

Rather than advocating a strict dichotomy between subjective and objective experience, Marcel holds to a holistic, integrative view of the world, an innovative, “third way.” Seymour Cain explains this alternative as he writes: “This is not a merely private psychic matter, for it refers to what is really there, nor is it a generally available capacity, for it requires a specific exigence and intuitive capacity.”\footnote{Seymour Cain, \textit{Gabriel Marcel} (South Bend, IN: Henry Regnery Co., 1979), xiv.} Marcel’s third way is a way of being present, a “sympathetic appreciation,” which is particularly adequate for dealing with one’s own being and bodily life in addition to other persons, as well as works of art. Marcel’s concern for the loss of openness to mystery echoes Heidegger’s desire to expand the domain of experience.\footnote{Cf. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1964); Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” in \textit{Poetry, Language, Thought}, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 87–140; Engelland, “Marcel and Heidegger on the Proper Matter and Manner of Thinking,” 94–109.} Like Heidegger and other phenomenologists who have grown disillusioned with the narrow confines of modern philosophy’s forms of rationalism and idealism, Marcel seems to be concerned with recovering a kind of “logic of the heart,”\footnote{Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” 125.} which Descartes’ method of absolute certainty seems to obscure.

More than being against Descartes’s analysis of the \textit{cogito} as such, Marcel is critical of \textit{Cartesianism} for its narrow epistemological view. In a published interview with his student, Paul Ricoeur, Marcel writes:

\begin{quote}
I do not want to say that I am against the \textit{cogito}; that would be absurd. What I wanted to say was that Descartes seemed to me precisely to have mistaken the
\end{quote}
indubitable character of existence, a character which in general seems prior to any
determination or to any intellectual act whatsoever.\textsuperscript{76}

In other words, Marcel thinks that the human person experiences himself as existing prior
to an experience of pure thinking.

The modern tendency to reduce reality to the level of a problem derives its
intellectual foundations from Descartes. Wood explains that Descartes “abstracted” the
mystery of the human person’s mind/body composite by speaking of “thought” and
“extension.” Describing the Cartesian anthropological vision, Wood writes:

Through empirical inquiry which attends away from the felt participation in one’s
own body to focus upon empirically available evidence … one is further led to the
notion of a signal-sending-and-receiving system that culminates in the interior of
awareness where the signal becomes heard-sound.\textsuperscript{77}

In other words, Wood is pointing out that the Cartesian view of the human person reduces
him to a mere functionary unit, a “signal-sending-and-receiving system” rather than a
unity of flesh and spirit.

So how \textit{do} we encounter the world? Sweetman explains Marcel’s view in contrast
to the Cartesian or strictly problematical view:

Our first contact with the world … is just that – \textit{contact}, without any mediation
from clear and distinct ideas (that is, abstractions), or clear representations.
Rather, our fundamental \textit{situation} in the world will define our ‘ideas,’ … and any
analysis or description of them must involve a reference to a human body and its
place or ‘situation’ in existence. This is what Descartes overlooked.\textsuperscript{78}

Marcel joins the ranks of thinkers who believe that the Cartesian rift between our
conscious world of ideas and our experience of being a lived body in the world is
artificial and not true to our experience. As Sweetman puts it so well, our first contact

\textsuperscript{76} Marcel, \textit{TWB}, 226.
\textsuperscript{77} Wood, “Introduction to \textit{Music and Philosophy},” 12.
\textsuperscript{78} Sweetman, \textit{The Vision of Gabriel Marcel}, 13.
with the world, is really just that – contact! Describing further what our experience of mystery is, Marcel explains:

In this sphere [mystery] everything seems to go on as if I found myself acting on an intuition which I possess without immediately knowing myself to possess it; an intuition which cannot be, strictly speaking, self-conscious and which can grasp itself only through the modes of experience in which its image is reflected, and which it lights up by being thus reflected in them.79

When Marcel speaks about the kind of “knowledge” that takes place in respect to mystery, he describes it as an intuition – an immediate and direct knowledge, that is so deep, I may not even immediately know that I possess it. Although Marcel seldom uses the word “heart” (le cœur) in his writings to describe the receptacle of the human person which encounters mystery, his emphasis on the role of intuition for grasping this sphere is clearly consistent with the notion of a heart-knowledge. He suggests that mystery involves a kind of intuition which “I possess without immediately knowing myself to possess it,” which suggests that it is so primordial, it is deeper than language and conceptual knowledge.

When it comes to the distinction between problem and mystery, it is not the case that one sphere is “right” and the other is “wrong,” or that one is eliminated and the other preserved. Rather, Marcel says, each sphere must be recognized and respected in its own proper domain, and never to the exclusion of the other. The difficulty which Marcel identifies, then, is that in our modern age, the realm of the problematical seems to be overtaking and even usurping the mysterious. As he laments: “this [modern] world is, on the one hand, riddled with problems and, on the other, determined to allow no room for

79 Marcel, BH, 118.
Thus, Marcel is concerned because the contemporary world suffers no lack of attention to the problematical sphere; what tends to be neglected or undermined, however, is the level of mystery.

While mathematical and scientific reasoning provide a clear and verifiable content for true beliefs, we can have genuine knowledge of realities even when they are not quantifiable or “certain” in the same way that an equation or formula is. Marcel remarks that there is an attempt in the functionalized world in which we live to disregard or even eliminate mystery. But this elimination of mystery can provide no meaning “in the face of events which break in on the cause of existence – such as birth, love, and death.”

Thus, Marcel argues that we must leave room in our experience for recognizing ontological mysteries, which includes realities which cannot be measured – spiritual realities like fidelity, hope, and love. He writes:

[The] concrete approaches to the ontological mystery should not be sought in the scale of logical thought, the objective reference of which gives rise to a prior question. They should rather be sought in the elucidation of certain data which are spiritual in their own right, such as fidelity, hope and love.

Marcel is calling for a renewed awareness of the ontological mystery, an openness to certain realities that lie beyond the scientific sphere.

Mystery, then, stands as the ground on which everything else, including problems, finds its existence. Only problems can be fully knowable or unknowable to our human intellects because they are, by definition, capable of being solved. In contrast, Marcel

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80 Marcel, “OM,” 12.
81 Ibid., 13.
82 Marcel, BH, 119.
would say that mysteries are certainly knowable, yet our human minds cannot know them fully in the way we can know that $2 + 2 = 4$. Gene Reeves explains:

> [In a certain sense,] … all of Marcel’s philosophical research attempts to penetrate and evoke mystery. [However,] … there is no [explicit] idea of mystery in the philosophy of Marcel because his idea of mystery and his philosophy are the same. But mystery here is not an idea – that is, an abstraction – so much as it is the central character and being of the concrete experiences Marcel seeks to explore.\(^{83}\)

As Reeves further points out, to attempt to write about the “idea of mystery according to Marcel” appears already to lead us down an emphatically non-Marcelian road: “if I abstract the idea of mystery from Marcel’s own explorations of concrete experiences, can I be faithful to the philosophy I am attempting to explicate?”\(^{84}\) Recognition of this dilemma regarding philosophy’s need to use language, which is by definition abstract and universal, to describe concrete realities permeates much of Marcel’s work. Like Reeves, however, I believe that Marcel is not against “abstraction” as such, but rather the “spirit of abstraction,” which can come to dominate our perception of the world and eclipse the primacy of concrete experience. If we are aware of the limits of language and recognize that the concepts which our minds are able to “abstract” actually derive from the fuller reality of the mystery of being, then Marcel would not object to the “idea of mystery.”\(^{85}\)

As we have said, the realm of the problematical deals with matters that are mathematical, scientific and considered more “objective.” This fact, however, does not mean that the realm of mystery is unknowable, non-objective or less true. Because a mystery always involves the person experiencing it, that experience is personalized and

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\(^{83}\) Reeves, “Marcel’s Idea of Mystery,” 246–47.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 247.
\(^{85}\) Cf. ibid.
unique to each person. This “subjective” dimension, however, does not diminish the connection that mystery has to truth. While a mystery is not something “solvable” by using a “technique,” as we have said, this does not mean that we cannot arrive at real knowledge and insight into it. Marcel writes: “We must carefully avoid all confusion between the mysterious and the unknowable.”

Although we tend to consider scientific knowledge more certain and objective, Marcel’s point is to emphasize that the knowledge we have of mysteries is just as objective as the knowledge we have of problems. In other words, even though the subject is personally involved in knowing the mysterious, this does not mean that the realm of mystery is “purely subjective” in the sense of make-believe or cut off from reality. Marcel would balk at such a conclusion. Accordingly, we can and do have knowledge of the mysteries we experience. This knowledge is not granted via syllogistic logic nor technical reasoning. Rather, it is a kind of inner perception, or heart-knowledge; yet this does not make it anti-rational. Marcel tells us that rationality is much broader than conceptual understanding. He insists that it would be a “degraded conception of reason which would amount to identifying it with understanding. The latter fills, in our spiritual economy, an indispensable but subordinate office, that of the calculable.”

What Marcel is emphasizing here is that philosophy faces a challenge in how it depicts the notion of reason itself. Marcel believes such reductionistic views of rationality limit its true scope and degrade our understanding of the human person. As we saw earlier, a mystery always involves the person experiencing it. Thus, we only come to encounter the realm of the ontological mystery when we recognize it “personally” by the “whole” of our being.

86 Marcel, BH, 118.
Another way to distinguish these two terms is to point out that a problem is something which can be solved using a “technique” while a mystery cannot. As mentioned earlier, Marcel defines a technique as a “group of procedures, methodically elaborated, and consequently capable of being taught and reproduced, and when these procedures are put into operation they assure the achievement of some definite concrete purpose.”\(^88\) Because a mystery is something which indissolubly involves the person asking the question, it cannot be solved or fixed by a technique the way that a problem can. An example of a problem is the question of how to alleviate someone’s physical pain from an infected tooth. It is likely that the solution for his ailment is a root canal. An example of a mystery would be the question of how the soul and body of the human person are inter-connected. The first one has a technical answer; thus, a procedure or technique can be employed to solve it. The second one can be probed and understood partially, but the kind of knowledge that one can have about it is always incomplete, because, insofar as the person is a unity of soul and body, she cannot be made into an object to solve. In fact, as Marcel understands it, the word mystery by definition, “applies to what cannot be conceived as a problem, to what is repugnant to problematizing.”\(^89\) A mystery, “by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.”\(^90\)

A helpful example of what Marcel means by mystery is the human family. He explains that the family cannot be properly grasped as a problem because we already find ourselves involved in this reality merely by the fact of our existence. It is an unmistakable case of mystery, a reality to which my existence is unquestionably bound.\(^91\) Surely, there

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\(^88\) Marcel, *MAMS*, 61.
\(^89\) Marcel, *EBHD*, 82.
\(^90\) Marcel, *BH*, 117.
\(^91\) Cf. Marcel, *HV*, 68.
are incidents in which people find themselves separated or abandoned by their families, but metaphysically, it is impossible to arrive into this world as a human person and not already be bound to a family.\textsuperscript{92} In a real but mysterious way, I am always connected to my family, and they are always connected to me. Marcel puts it this way:

\begin{quote}
At the very least … far from being endowed with an absolute existence of my own, I \textit{am} [I exist], without having originally wished or suspected it, I \textit{incarnate} the reply to the reciprocal appeal which two beings flung to each other in the unknown and which, without suspecting it, they flung beyond themselves to an incomprehensible power whose only expression is the bestowal of life. I \textit{am} this reply.\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

Not only do I share these bonds with those members of my family whom I actually know and communicate with, but I am also linked to my ancestors who lived generations ago. Describing this obscure yet intimate relationship that I share with those in my lineage, Marcel says that I participate with them in an invisible way; yet still, “they are consubstantial with me and I with them.”\textsuperscript{94} The mystery of the family, as Marcel tells us, is one of the deepest mysteries, because it is a reality which spans “between the intimate and the metaphysical” and is the axis upon which “my personal existence is centred.”\textsuperscript{95}

As we will explore more fully in the final chapter, Marcel believes human persons find meaning and fulfillment, ultimately, through love and communion with others, which explains why the mystery of the family is a paradigmatic example for him. This “inter-subjective” dimension of our existence is clearly “not a quantitative sum of human beings added together [as the lens of problem would conceive of it], any more than a

\textsuperscript{92} With recent advancements in reproductive technologies, moral questions continue to surround the issue of the production of human life outside the domain of traditional, natural families.
\textsuperscript{93} Marcel, \textit{HV}, 71.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
musical chord or melody is just a sum of notes which compose it.”

The same reality (e.g. human persons, musical masterpieces, etc.) can be considered under the gazes of mystery and problem, but the realm of mystery is always broader.

Based on his deep appreciation for the sphere of mystery, in addition to the more traditional visual metaphors of light and vision, Marcel often uses auditory images to describe how we know reality. The reason why he believes that “all optical representations of knowing” are limited is based partially on his critique of Cartesianism (with its emphasis on clear and distinct ideas), and partially on his high esteem for the aesthetic realm, particularly for music. In fact, Marcel believes that music transcends the domain of the problematical in a particular way. As he tells us, “in conditions that can only remain mysterious, music has always been for me, in the course of this hectic philosophical quest I have pursued, a permanent guarantee of that reality that I was attempting to reach by the arid paths of pure reflection.”

Marcel is saying that there is a kind of mysterious, integrating power in music that puts us in touch with reality so profoundly that it offers us a “permanent guarantee” of its existence.

Similarly, music for Marcel involves an “unshakable testimony of a deeper reality in which … everything fragmentary and unfulfilled at the sensory level would find fulfillment.” While beyond the scope of our study, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that Marcel considers the reality of faith to be a profound mode of encountering mystery, not unlike the Christian tradition which associates faith more with hearing than with

96 Thomas Anderson, A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel’s The Mystery of Being (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006), 121.
97 Cf. Marcel, EBHD, 82.
99 Marcel, EBHD, 21.

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Marcel explains his preference for the auditory metaphor over the visual as he writes:

I am not a spectator who is looking for a world of structures susceptible of being viewed clearly and distinctly, but rather… I listen to the voices and appeals comprising that symphony of Being – which is for me, in the final analysis, a super-rational unity beyond images, words, and concepts.¹⁰¹

This text shows how Marcel’s aesthetics is crucial to his entire philosophical project. He says that his experience of reality is one of listening to “the voices and appeals” of the great “symphony of Being.” He understands the world to be something dynamic, harmonious, creative, and ultimately, beautiful. Moreover, Marcel’s choice of the words, “viewed clearly and distinctly,” is an obvious reference to Descartes’ philosophy, by which only that which is understood with a conceptual certainty is considered valid and objective knowledge.

The creative dimension of human life has a stronger connection to the realm of mystery than to the problematical. In describing Marcel’s thought, Gallagher suggests that “being is only revealed to creative experience… [and] in fact being’s role in thought is not so much that of a concept as it is a creative intuition analogous to that of the artist.”¹⁰² Just as an artist gets an intuition that cannot be quantified or fully described but only experienced as it is poured out in the work of art, so too do we only fully recognize the presence of the being in which we participate by immersing ourselves in that existence. In short, Marcel affirms, “my participation in being is ultimately, then, a creative participation.”¹⁰³

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¹⁰¹ Marcel, *EBHD*, 81–82.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
Given Marcel’s appreciation for art to communicate truths, it is not surprising that we find one of his best descriptions of mystery in the text of one of his dramatic works, *L’Iconoclaste*. In one of the final scenes of the play, the character Abel remarks to Jacques:

No, you wouldn’t be content in the long run with a world from which mystery has been swept away…. Perhaps it is mystery alone which reunites. Without mystery, life would be unbreathable.¹⁰⁴

These words speak to the idea that Marcel believes that the brokenness of the world comes from a loss of connection with ontological mystery, with the wholeness of reality. As Wood explains, “[in] its most authentic form, relation to the mystery of being involves an all-pervasive sense of plenitude and cohesion.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, when Marcel’s character Abel says that, “without mystery, life would be unbreathable,” we get the sense that human life itself is more *human* when we leave room for mystery and not just stay in the realm of problems.

Thus, Marcel’s distinction between problem and mystery is not only important for understanding his view of metaphysics; it also has important ramifications for his philosophical anthropology. According to McGrath, when we look around our world only through the lens of the problematical, “we define real by what the mind can conceptualize as a problem and hence solve and represent in a mathematical formula.”¹⁰⁶ However, the fact that the problematical lens views the objects in reality as merely sum totals of a conglomeration of parts, this leads to serious consequences regarding how we see other persons. McGrath describes Marcel’s concern for this point:

¹⁰⁴ Marcel, *EBHD*, 82.
¹⁰⁶ McGrath, “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” 23.
In the world of the problematic, one … views human beings essentially as objects, statistics, or cases, and defines them in terms of their vital functions (biological) and their social functions; one thus considers the individual as merely a biological machine performing various social functions.\textsuperscript{107}

In complete contrast to this view that sees persons as means to ends and as objects for use, Marcel proposes his metaphysics of hospitality, which views each human person as a mystery and an end in herself. By seeing how the eclipsing of mystery and over-dominance of the problematical affects the way we treat other persons, we can realize why Marcel’s distinction between problem and mystery is important for grounding his metaphysics of hospitality.

\textbf{D. Primary and Secondary Reflection}

Closely related to Marcel’s distinction between problem and mystery is the way he differentiates between two levels of thinking: \textit{primary reflection} which applies to the level of the problematical and \textit{secondary reflection} which applies to the level of mystery. Treanor and Sweetman suggest that problem and mystery describe two realms of existence while primary and secondary refer to two modes of \textit{thinking}; the “problematic is addressed with thinking that is detached and technical, while the mysterious is encountered in reflection that is involved, participatory and decidedly non-technical.”\textsuperscript{108}

It would be accurate to say that primary reflection concerns itself with the scientific and technological realm, while secondary reflection bears upon matters that are philosophical, aesthetic and theological and is thus, the “means to deepening our participation in the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Treanor and Sweetman, “Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.”
mystery of being.”109 While primary reflection works to analyze and break down conceptual distinctions for our minds to grasp, secondary reflection, Marcel tells us, integrates, synthesizes and opens up our access to mystery.

According to Marcel, primary reflection is concerned with analyzing, dissecting, breaking down and dominating in order to understand, manipulate and solve. By its nature, primary reflection delves into the world as a set of problems and thus aims at knowledge which is “universal, abstract, objective and verifiable,” while ignoring that which is personal, particular, contingent and mysterious.110 It is an “objective” kind of knowledge that is detached, abstract and scientific, much like the Cartesian model of knowledge which seeks to obtain “clear and distinct ideas.” It parallels what Heidegger refers to as representative or calculative thinking.111

Secondary reflection, on the other hand, which parallels Heidegger’s meditative thinking, seeks to penetrate experience in a participatory way, such that, rather than breaking down and dividing the reality, it seeks to recover and restore a kind of unity and meaning that is beyond finite comprehension. It involves encounter and participation by the subject. Marcel explains:

Roughly, we can say that where primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity.112

As this text illustrates, Marcel would argue that as the modern world has increasingly lost sight of ontological mystery and its corresponding mode of secondary reflection, it has become more broken and disintegrated. In the words of Treanor and Sweetman,

110 Ibid., 18.
112 Marcel, MBI, 83.
“secondary reflection, which recoups the unity of experience, points the way toward a fuller understanding of the participation alluded to in examples of the mysterious.”¹¹³

The reason why the one is called “primary” and the other “secondary” reflection is because the latter presupposes the former. In other words, our natural way of thinking and being attentive to the world is “primary reflection,” which refers to our ordinary consciousness of the world around us gained through conceptual knowledge. Secondary reflection, however, builds on this first level of reflection by reflecting on experience itself and seeking to draw a higher meaning from it. Another way in which Marcel speaks of secondary reflection is “recollection” (recueillement) because it is a “re-collection of our self scattered into various functions.”¹¹⁴

Marcel’s distinction between primary and secondary reflection articulates two ways of focusing one’s attention on a reality. Primary reflection looks at the reality purely as an object “in front of me” and “outside of me,” i.e. a problem. Secondary reflection, however, “is directed at that which is not merely before me – that is, [it is directed at] either that which is in me, which I am, or those areas where the distinctions ‘in me’ and ‘before me’ tend to break down.”¹¹⁵ It is directed at our experience of mystery.

Marcel’s presentation of the etymological origin of the word “problem” serves to elucidate his explanation of primary reflection. A problem or object is what has been cast or thrown (blama and jectum) before (pro and ob) an observer.¹¹⁶ Marcel writes:

“Experience is not an object, and I am here taking the word ‘object,’ as I shall always be

¹¹³ Treanor and Sweetman, “Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.”
¹¹⁵ Treanor and Sweetman, “Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.”
taking it, in its strictly etymological sense… of something flung in my way, something placed before me, facing me, in my path.”\textsuperscript{117} For example, one can “consider a mechanical problem which stands before one’s physical eyes,” or a “mathematical problem which stands before one’s mental eye.”\textsuperscript{118} Either way, the \textit{problem} is an \textit{object} that is outside of me, which I can manipulate and control by trying to solve it through primary reflection. Because experience itself can never be an “object,” Marcel’s approach to philosophy inherently relies on the conviction that the scientific mode of knowing things cannot be the paradigm for understanding all of reality.\textsuperscript{119}

Rather than being a spectator who can calculate and control the pieces of experience, the human person, in Marcel’s view, is a being which participates in being itself. Moreover, as Wood argues, this theme of participation, which we will discuss further in chapter five, could be considered the fundamental theme in Marcel’s thought. Marcel speaks of “incarnate being” as the central datum for his metaphysical reflections. For this reason, Wood explains: “Human life for Marcel is characterized by participation, found at the most rudimentary level in the relation between one’s conscious life and one’s body.”\textsuperscript{120} Furthermore, Wood continues:

[Contrasted] with object and problem, there are \textit{presence} and \textit{mystery}, characterized as \textit{participatory}. Presence is capable of deepening and it’s correlated with concern. What is a living presence for me is something in which I participate, something without which I cannot properly conceive myself.\textsuperscript{121}

With its stress on participation and personal presence, Marcel’s notion of being is consonant with the Western tradition’s view of metaphysics. At the same time, however,

\textsuperscript{117} Marcel, \textit{MBI}, 46.
\textsuperscript{118} Wood, “Introduction to \textit{Music and Philosophy},” 14.
\textsuperscript{119} Sweetman, \textit{The Vision of Gabriel Marcel}, 8.
\textsuperscript{120} Wood, “Introduction to \textit{Music and Philosophy},” 14.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
Marcel attempts a new articulation of being by emphasizing that all beings, including persons, participate in the unified field of being.

Marcel’s point in making these distinctions between primary and secondary reflection, and problem and mystery, is not to deny that there is a plethora of problems in the world around us, or to undermine the need for primary reflection and conceptual knowledge. Rather, his goal is to stress the fact that the human person’s way of participating in reality (in being itself) is not limited to conceptual understanding. He writes: “We can only arrive at [the ontological mystery of knowledge] by a reflection … which depends upon an experience of presence.”122 This notion of presence, like participation, is one that is crucial for Marcel’s understanding of the metaphysics of hospitality. We will return to these concepts in more detail in chapter five.

Marcel believes philosophy itself is secondary reflection and must be restored to its proper role of engaging the reality of the person in her human situation, not merely as a role or function in the universe. Marcel stresses the need modern man has of recognizing the level of ontological mystery and the insights which are gained through secondary reflection. While science and technical reasoning can arrive at countless truths, they can never account for the most fundamental questions of human existence. He compares the intuitions into the realm of mystery to a kind of music which reveals the essence of something, although it is impossible to put that mysterious beauty into words. He writes:

\[T\]he distinctive note of philosophic thought, at least according to my conception of it ... is that not only does it move towards the object whose nature it seeks to discover, but at the same time it is alert for a certain music that arises from its

122 Marcel, BH, 115.
*own inner nature* if it is succeeding in carrying out its task .... [The] point about philosophic thought is that it is reflective.\(^\text{123}\)

The same way that the beauty of a symphony cannot be captured by the sheet music of the actual notes, so too does secondary reflection – or true philosophical thought – encounter the realm of ontological mystery, in which truth is beyond concepts and even words.

**E. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Marcel is not opposed to conceptual, scientific or abstract knowledge and he does not deny the need for problem-solving and technical progress for human advancement. His critique of these ideas of problem and primary reflection must be understood as an attempt to restore an imbalance. His concern is with the prevalent tendency to usurp the realm of mystery and allow the realm of the problematical to dominate and drive out man’s sense of the mystery of being. As Keen remarks: “When this happens, persons are reduced to mere objects, the world to a collection of things, science gives way to scientism, and the inexhaustible riches of a kaleidoscopic world are forced to conform to the logic of black and white.”\(^\text{124}\) Rather than such a reductionistic vision, Marcel “opts for a broader view of experience, knowledge and rationality,”\(^\text{125}\) a view that is open to seeing more than what concepts can encompass.

As we have seen, Marcel’s philosophical vision is both highly experiential and at the same time, metaphysical. At first glance, he may seem to contradict himself by

\(^{123}\) Marcel, *MBI*, 77. My italics.  
\(^{124}\) Keen, *Gabriel Marcel*, 19.  
\(^{125}\) Ibid.
suggesting that his highest priority in philosophy is both to penetrate the meaning of human existence and to articulate his quest for the mystery of being. In the end, however, his views on these matters are completely consistent. This is because he understands love to be the primary reality, “the essential ontological datum.” Therefore, human life and its “ontological weight” are indissolubly linked; intersubjectivity “is the presupposition of ontology.”

Marcel’s approach to the question of being is not a break from the main tenets of Western metaphysics since he fully asserts that we can know the truth about the reality around us, and our own beings are in some mysterious way a participation in being itself. Marcel does, however, use his phenomenological probings to offer a more interior, personal and experience-based ontological vision. As Keen explains:

The indwelling presence of being is experienced as the abiding assurance that something of eternal value is being wrought in the empirical conditions of human life. This assurance is not of the nature of an intellectual grasp; it is not conceptual in its essence but is the indwelling presence of the eternal …. The nature of the assuring presence that invades one in the environs of the mystery of being remains unclear, although it provides the clarity and illumination that makes creative, free, and loving existence possible.

As Keen rightly points out, Marcel’s ontology offers a clarity and assurance that is unique, in that our experience of being is not “of the nature of an intellectual grasp” or a concept but rather is a kind of presence that overflows from a fullness.

Marcel’s thought can be described as an integration of many approaches: existential, empirical, phenomenological and even psychological. To offer a simple, yet integrative, description of all of Marcel’s philosophy, I resonate most with Keen’s

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126 Marcel, BH, 167.
128 Ibid., 117.
characterization of it as an “ontological personalism.” This phrase captures Marcel’s deep concern for the ontological mystery as well as his constant preoccupation to elaborate on the “existential background of human dignity.”

Now that we have explored Marcel’s metaphysical foundations that will come into play for his metaphysics of hospitality, we want to examine two other philosophies of hospitality – that of Levinas and Derrida. By bringing these two authors into dialogue with Marcel, we can better highlight Marcel’s unique contributions to the ongoing discussion on hospitality.

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129 Ibid., 118. We can assume that Marcel was happy with this description of his “Idea of Being,” since he makes no critical comments in his reply to Keen’s essay, simply calling it an excellent paper. Cf. Gabriel Marcel, “Reply to Sam Keen,” in The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, ed. Paul Schilpp and Lewis Hahn (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1984), 121.

130 Published title of Marcel’s “William James Lectures” at Harvard University in 1961.
“There’s nothing as significant as a human face. Nor as eloquent. We can never really know another person, except by our first glance at him. Because, in that glance, we know everything. Even though we’re not always wise enough to unravel the knowledge.”

– Ayn Rand

There has been a notable bourgeoning, especially since the mid-1990’s, in the field of the philosophy of hospitality. Among the thinkers who have contributed to this area, two stand out: Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Through their respective philosophies, both have had far-reaching influence on hospitality studies, and ultimately both “contend that Western thought with its obsession with ontological concerns is a philosophy of totalization and sameness.” Due to the ontological framework through which Western philosophy operates, it would seem – at least for these thinkers – that a genuine hospitality, capable of welcoming the other as other, would be well-nigh impossible.

Although their philosophies differ from one another in several ways, Levinas and Derrida hold much in common, including similar metaphysical assumptions regarding their understanding of hospitality. Since the theme of this study is not only Marcel’s concept of hospitality but also its metaphysical dimension, I wish to present the main contributions on hospitality of these two thinkers, with a particular emphasis on their

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3 Some differences we can note are that Levinas is a firm theist and Derrida a loose atheist; Levinas rejects ontology but chooses to retain use of the word metaphysics, whereas Derrida rejects them both.
ontological framework, in order to compare their contributions with Marcel’s. I argue that because of their ontological presuppositions, Levinas’s and Derrida’s thought ends up proposing not a metaphysics of hospitality but rather a metaphysics of hostility. Ultimately, unlike Marcel who holds to a view of relative alterity which allows for genuine interpersonal relations, both Levinas and Derrida subscribe to a vision of hospitality that views otherness as absolute, and thus cannot account for genuine communion.

In the pages that follow, I will present the personal backgrounds and philosophical overviews of Levinas and Derrida as well as each of their respective views of hospitality. After this, I will expose the ontological framework of these two thinkers, which I will argue is largely shaped by Heidegger. After having critically examined their backgrounds, I will discuss their understanding of absolute alterity and its implications. Finally, I will bring in Marcel’s approach of relative alterity and how it seems to avoid the pitfalls that Levinas’s and Derrida’s understanding of hospitality entails.

**A. Levinas on Hospitality: The Face-to-Face Encounter**

Before delving into what Levinas has to say specifically about hospitality, it is necessary to understand the context of his thought and obtain an overview of his philosophy. While the personal background of any philosopher shapes his thought, in Levinas’s case, this principle applies in a particularly powerful way since the complex experiences of his early years unequivocally forged the concerns that he takes up later in life.
1. Levinas’s Personal Background

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) was born in Lithuania to a pious Jewish family. He discovered philosophy as an adolescent through reading Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, whose novels helped to inspire his life-long interest in the existential themes of human freedom and responsibility.\(^4\) In 1923, he moved to France to study at the University of Strasbourg and then, motivated by his interest in phenomenology, moved to Germany to study under Edmund Husserl at the University of Freiburg in 1928, where he also was a student of Martin Heidegger.

As a Jew living in Europe in the 1930’s and 40’s, Levinas experienced the evils of World War II in an acutely personal way. While his wife and daughter were spared from being imprisoned in a concentration camp through the help of friends who hid them in a monastery, Levinas himself was captured as a prisoner of war and sent to a work camp. Far less fortunate were his parents, his two brothers, and several other family members who died in Lithuania as victims of the Holocaust. Given Levinas’s harrowing background, it is not difficult to grasp his unrelenting denunciation of cruelty against human life and dignity. His remonstrations were not only directed toward the events which personally affected him but were also directed against other atrocities committed against human life in places like Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda.\(^5\) Michael Morgan notes: “To [Levinas], the twentieth century, from the First World War through the Rwandan


genocide, was a time of human abandonment, injustice of vast scope, inhumanity and suffering.”⁶ Keenly aware of “the horrors of which humankind is capable,”⁷ Levinas pursues both his philosophical and Talmudic writings as an expression of his deepest convictions about our vocation to protect and uphold our neighbor.⁸

His diverse background makes Levinas a “citizen” of many cultures; Adriaan Peperzak describes him this way:

[Levinas is] a Lithuanian-born Jew, a Russian, a French-educated citizen of Europe, and a philosophical member of contemporary humanity… [and therefore] … not only heir to (a certain) Greece and (a certain) Israel but also to the Roman Empire with the medieval and modern transformations of its law, to the Slavic and Germanic elements that entered into his transformation, and even to a certain form of Christianity that has marked and impregnated two thousand years of European history.⁹

While being immersed in such multifarious experiences of culture, language and religion obviously enriches Levinas’s approach to philosophy, the continual sense of being a foreigner, being different, and being the “other,” also marks Levinas’s thought, particularly by way of his appreciation for hospitality. Trying to discover, on the philosophical level, what could have led to the abominations committed in the twentieth century seems to have been a driving factor in his intellectual journey. As Peperzak further remarks: “at least some acquaintance with the personal and cultural background of

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Apart from Levinas’s many philosophical works, he also published and contributed significantly to Jewish religious studies, however he kept these two “worlds” separate, always maintaining separate publishers for the two genres of his writings.
⁹ Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005), 8.
Levinas’s thinking is useful, if not necessary, to understand his criticism of the Western philosophical tradition as well as his own very original thought.”

Since the predominant theme of Levinasian philosophy is the question of the human being’s relationship with the “other,” which we will also be referring to as alterity, it is helpful to understand how his personal experiences of discrimination, alienation, genocide, exile and orphanhood influenced and deeply shaped his philosophical ideas.

2. A General Sketch of Levinas’s Philosophy

Levinas’s thinking was shaped by various sources, yet his philosophical approach remains fundamentally phenomenological throughout his life. Even though he studied under both Husserl and Heidegger in the 1920’s and is largely indebted to them, his own philosophy diverges in significant ways from each of theirs. Although Levinas continued to develop his thought throughout his life, most scholars agree that Levinas’s later philosophy is more of an “intensification and radicalization” of his earlier work, rather than an actual rupture from it. Levinas himself defends the position that there had been no remarkable Kehre or “turn” from his earlier work to the later; as he told Edith Wyschogrod in an interview in 1982, “Je ne suis pas Heidegger.” Given this premise and the fact that, for this thesis, we are only interested in Levinas’s philosophy as

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\text{Ibid., 2.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Peperzak, To the Other, 7. A Levinasian scholar who posits an alternate view is Philip J. Harold, Prophetic Politics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Sanctification of Suffering (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009). Harold argues that in Levinas’s later work, Otherwise than Being, he displays a radical break from his earlier Totality and Infinity, particular in regard to the relationship between ethics and politics.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{Cf. Edith Wyschogrod, Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), ix. “I am no Heidegger,” by which Levinas was referring, of course, to the well-known “turn” in Heidegger’s philosophy that took place in the 1930’s.}\]
it relates to hospitality, the primary text we will focus on in this section will be his magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, which was first published in 1961.

As the subtitle indicates, *Totality and Infinity* is a work dedicated to the question of “exteriority,” or “otherness.” In this highly original and difficult work, Levinas’s central idea is that the other person in front of me can never be the object of my intentional consciousness, and therefore cannot be comprehended or grasped; she is totally and absolutely *other*. Therefore, Levinas proposes that the only proper relation with the Other is through a *face-to-face* encounter, in which her otherness is entirely respected.\(^{14}\)

From within the tension existing between the two concepts which compose its title, Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* presents the core of his ethical philosophy, what he calls a “defense of subjectivity.”\(^{15}\) He writes in the preface of his book:

*[Totality and Infinity]* will proceed to distinguish between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity and affirm the philosophical primacy of the idea of infinity. It will recount how infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) In the original French, Levinas uses the word *autrui* to signify the singular personal other (*tu*) and *autre* to refer to the plural other (*vous*). However, he also makes use of inconsistent capitalization to emphasize the radical “otherness” of the other, by writing *Autrui* in many instances, although there appears to be no particular consistency of criteria for which instances are capitalized. For this reason, I will adopt Alphonso Lingis’s usage of the terms in English, as found in his translation of *Totality and Infinity*. Lingis explains his system as follows: “With the author’s permission, we are translating ‘autrui’ (the personal Other, the you) (the noun) by ‘Other,’ and ‘autre’ (the adjective) by ‘other.’” Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1988), 24–25n.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
When Levinas speaks about “the relationship of the same with the other,” he is referring to the basic relationship of a self (the Same) with another person (the Other).\textsuperscript{17} Such a relationship, Levinas holds, is one that allows for genuine respect for the other person as a subject (rather than an object), similar to Buber’s \textit{I-thou} relationship. Yet what does Levinas mean by saying this relationship reveals the idea of \textit{infinity}?

Even though Levinas was schooled in the phenomenological tradition, he becomes highly critical of its understanding of intentionality, because he thinks it is objectifying when applied to persons.\textsuperscript{18} This objectifying stance constitutes the other as a “totality.” In place of a traditional understanding of intentionality in \textit{Totality and Infinity}, Levinas proposes an “intentionality of transcendence,” which he says happens through a face-to-face encounter, rendering us beyond all totalities and opening us to the infinite.

Levinas remarks further:

To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. But to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think .... The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding \textit{the idea of the other in me}, we here name face.\textsuperscript{19}

According to Levinas, the conceptual, objectifying way of “thinking” the other, which he believes has marked the entire history of Western philosophy, must be transcended.\textsuperscript{20}

If infinity refers to the transcendent ethical relationship of the self with the Other, then it follows that Levinas’s concept of \textit{totality} means the opposite; a totality is any kind

\textsuperscript{17} For the sake of consistency with the capitulation of “Other,” I will capitalize the term “Same” (\textit{le Même}) when it is used in conjunction with \textit{L’Autrui}.
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 67.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 49–50.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas,” ed. Edward Zalta, \textit{The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy} Fall (2019): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/>. Levinas believes there have been very few exceptions to this way of doing philosophy in the Western tradition. Two examples he gives of thinkers who glimpsed his vision are Plato with his notion of the Good “beyond Being,” and Descartes’s idea of Infinity.
of reduction of otherness (difference) to sameness. To understand better what Levinas means by the ideas of totality and infinity, it is helpful to consider some aspects in which his thought is influenced by Heidegger. Like Heidegger, Levinas holds that the entire history of Western philosophy since Plato has been dominated by a dualistic and excessively objective view of knowledge, truth and human existence; to use Heidegger’s term for describing the character of Western metaphysics, it has been logocentric. This logocentric approach, Levinas argues, has consistently favored the priority of the self, or the Same, over the Other, and thus has failed to give a proper account of alterity. Moreover, Levinas thinks that traditional metaphysics which he calls ontology, tends to reduce everything to a kind of unity, a “sameness,” subsuming everything under common concepts, themes and categories, like genus and species. This reduction to what can be “grasped” and comprehended is what Levinas means by the “concept of totality,” which he claims has dominated all of Western philosophy since its ancient Greek origins.

Because he adamantly denies the view that all reality can be reduced to a system of rational concepts (as proposed by Hegelianism), Levinas’s response to the age-old philosophical problem of reconciling identity and difference is to posit their absolute separation. This radical solution seems to be rooted in Levinas’s belief that Western

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21 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 42.
22 Cf. ibid., 21. Levinas offers the contrast between the ancient Greek hero, Ulysses, and the Hebrew figure, Abraham, as symbolic of the relationship between totality and infinity, respectively. Unlike Ulysses who “returns” to the “Same” reality after his voyage of the Odyssey, Abraham sets out on a journey to a “foreign land” and does not return to the “Same,” but rather, ventures beyond to a “transcendent” and “infinite” horizon. Cf. Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 320n92.
23 The relationship between the concepts of identity and difference (also called sameness and otherness) has been a prevalent topic in Western philosophy since the time of Plato. The terms are particularly associated with Hegelian rationalism since the reconciliation of difference in an identity is a pervading theme in Hegel’s philosophical system.
metaphysics is fully represented in a kind of Hegelian rationalism. Barry Stocker sums it up like this:

Levinas makes the bold claim that all Western philosophy is rooted in a Greek elevation of Being which finds expression in the Germanic tradition of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas was very familiar with this tradition, [since] he was a Husserl specialist, who had studied with both Husserl and Heidegger, and his texts are full of the language of all three. Levinas used the language of German philosophy against itself with a reading of Jewish tradition as primarily ethical, concerned with obligations to the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

As Stocker notes, Levinas’s Jewish religious convictions regarding the duty to protect strangers, orphans and widows spill over into his philosophy. He says that the most important philosophical questions are not epistemological or ontological; they are ethical. In fact, one of Levinas’s most famous claims is that ethics is *prima philosophia*, because, he says, “ethics is an ‘optics;’” thus *all* of philosophy is rooted in the ethical relation between the self and the other, and in particular, the relationship with the stranger, the widow and the orphan – i.e. the Other. Thus, Levinas argues that ethics — and *not* metaphysics — is “first philosophy.”

Earlier in our chapter on the “Broken World,” we examined the social philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and how it radically reduced the “other” into an object for use. Levinas is not only staunchly against the offensively negative Sartrean view of

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24 Simon Critchley explains that Levinas’s understanding of philosophy and the problem of identity/difference is largely shaped by his reading of Franz Rosenzweig, who argues that the “notion of totality is identical to the notion of philosophy.” In Rozensweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, he “argues that philosophy, from Ionia to Jena, from Thales to Hegel, is premised on the reduction of multiplicity to totality. Philosophy is based on the sameness of thinking and being that yields the conceivability of the All, of totality.” Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, ed. Alexis Dianda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.
27 Levinas states that the Other “has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.” Ibid., 251.
intersubjectivity, but he also aims to present a philosophy of “otherness” so radical that it revolutionizes our understanding of ethics. Levinas assigns such a primary role to the ethical, i.e. the relation to the other-qua-other, because he thinks any philosophy that starts with ontology or even epistemology as “first philosophy,” necessarily falls into a reductionist totality. In other words, although Levinas is doing a kind of “sociological ontology,” he seeks, by every means, to disentangle himself from the classical and even modern metaphysical tradition and its way of viewing otherness. Brian Treanor explains:

Levinas’s arguments assert that philosophies based on ontological foundations do not allow the self to encounter anything truly foreign, anything other than that which merely orbits the self as a satellite. Whether it is Platonic anamnesis, Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, or Heidegger’s clearing of Being, all philosophy ultimately thinks the other in terms of the same and thereby absorbs the other into the same. 28

Under the framework of a totality, Levinas argues, we are accustomed to relate to another person always in relation to ourselves, and we subsume the Other to the Same. The Same is each one of us, in our self, a “separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I.” 29 Levinas designates the language of ontology as a language of totality; he says it is a language which “thinks” the other, rather than truly respecting him in his alterity. 30

Moreover, Levinas even goes so far as to say the language of totality is a language of violence. Irina Polshchuk remarks:

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas … espouses the notion that the history of European philosophy represents a history of violence towards the Other insofar as

29 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 27.
alterity was always reduced to the same, in the sense of cognition intending to subsume the other into the sphere of absolute knowledge.  

Furthermore, Levinas argues that the problem with this ego-centric stance is that it forgets “the great richness of dimensions that I do not recognize or comprehend, and that are not under my control.”  

Because the self naturally reduces everything around himself to a totality, Levinas thinks the self is blind and deaf to the presence of other persons and realities beyond himself. All the persons and things in our experience will either be “like me” or “not like me.” Thus, according to Levinas, the self will tend always to exclude the alterity of the Other person.  

How is one able to escape this solipsistic, self-centered and objectifying existence?  

Levinas says we can do so through recognizing the face of the Other. In other words, in contrast to the reductive way of viewing the Other as a totality, the epiphany of the Other, given through encountering her face, is a totally new horizon of experience – it is the metaphysically transcendent, which means that “the Other” cannot be produced, reproduced, thematized or objectified.  

For this reason, Levinas declares that metaphysics precedes ontology and equates it with transcendence and the welcoming of the other by the same.  

Encountering the other also involves encountering the Infinite and wholly Other – God. Although he does not equate the word “infinity” with God, Levinas does argue that

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33 Cf. ibid., 235.

34 Although Levinas rejects “ontology” he preserves the term “metaphysics” to describe his own theory of intersubjectivity (which greatly differs from traditional Western metaphysics).

the face of the Other reveals a trace of God. Rudolf Bernet summarizes Levinas’s view as follows: “the face of the Other bears the trace of God and … the command expressed by the face of the Other comes from God: ‘Thou shall not kill!'” Every human face, says Levinas, elicits this primordial “word” to the one who encounters her: “you shall not commit murder.” Thus, this encounter with the infinite is the essence of both the ethical and “religious” dimensions for Levinas. In describing the experience that we have in the face-to-face encounter, Bloechl writes:

In the face of the Other person … the subject meets a dimension that defies comprehension. The face thus shocks, but also awakens and teaches. Whereas previously I had been absorbed in my own concerns, without cause to truly question their supremacy, now I am called to see that the other person, too, inhabits this world I had taken as my own.

While the subjectivity of the Same always reduces the Other to itself, the absolute difference of the Other is preserved in the face-to-face encounter, which shows me that the Other “inhabits this world” that I had taken as entirely my own.

Levinas believes that metaphysically prior to our existing alone and in solitude, we are in “community,” the Other has already “showed up,” and the “subject, as Same, has always already excluded and forgotten her.” In other words, Levinas holds that human beings are naturally selfish and ego-centric. We are absorbed in our own concerns inhabiting our own world, until the face (and the face alone) shatters this stance.

38 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 199.
40 Ibid.
Similarly, as Bloechl explains, “before self-indulgence is the need and desire of my neighbor, in fact already urging itself upon me in the disturbance that his or her nearness brings to the world I inhabit.”\textsuperscript{41} The Other breaks into my subjective world and disturbs me, by issuing a call of responsibility to me. The face awakes us to a responsibility for the other; it is a responsibility to render hospitality, to welcome, to receive.\textsuperscript{42} Prior to anything my neighbor does, I bear this responsibility to her because her mere “presence is a summons to answer.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, we “do not choose to be responsible. Responsibility arises as if elicited, before we begin to think about it, by the approach of the other person.”\textsuperscript{44} Thus, man’s fundamental stance is that of responsibility for others. Moreover, he believes that the face of the other is a “trace of the infinite,” which demands a response.\textsuperscript{45} For Levinas, the teaching from the book of Genesis rings pointedly true: I am my brother’s keeper!\textsuperscript{46}

Levinas holds that “the true meaning of the world is defined by relations of responsibility between a subject and her neighbor, or … between the Same and the Other.”\textsuperscript{47} Ultimately, he thinks that no theory of ethics or any philosophy up to his time has adequately accounted for the primordial ethical relation in human existence. As John Llewelyn remarks: “Levinasian ethical responsibility is pre-original and beyond

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas,”
\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 199.
\textsuperscript{46} Cf. Genesis 4:9; Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 117.
\textsuperscript{47} Bloechl, “Words of Welcome,” 234.
ontology.”

In other words, Levinas considers our ethical responsibility something that exists prior to any foundation, origin or language.

3. Hospitality According to Levinas

With these general remarks about the basis of Levinas’s philosophy, we can move into a more specific discussion of his understanding of hospitality. First, let us consider in more detail why it is that Levinas’s Totality and Infinity was termed an immense “treatise of hospitality” by Derrida.

The actual word hospitality appears only a few times in the pages of Totality and Infinity. One instance is in the preface, where Levinas tells us: “This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality.” It is not until about halfway through the book, however, in the chapter called “The Dwelling” (la Demeure), that Levinas mentions the term hospitality in a more significant way. He writes:

Recollection [recueillement] in a home open to the Other – hospitality – is the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent.

In speaking of the “dwelling” as an expression of hospitality, Levinas deliberately uses a Heideggerian term, but with a new meaning. Heidegger had spoken about man’s (Dasein’s) need to “dwell poetically” in this world, as opposed to the way modern man

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49 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 27.
50 Ibid., 172. The French word, recueillir (to recollect or meditate) is the basis of the term recueillement which means contemplation or recollection, as in the English. Yet, it is significant to note that the French word recueillir has the same root as accueillir, which means “to welcome.” Levinas writes: “Recollection refers to a welcome” (Le recueillement se réfère à un accueil) Ibid., 155; Totalité et Infini: Essai sur L’extérieurité (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 165. Just as cueillir means to gather or collect – such as picking up flowers – so would accueillir seem to indicate a kind of gathering up of others to be received into one’s person.
functions in a technocratic world of domination and control.\textsuperscript{51} Ultimately, however, Levinas is critical of Heidegger’s philosophy, for although it seeks to escape the traps of Western philosophy’s logocentrism, Levinas thinks Heideggerian phenomenology is still an example of a totality which is based on being. Levinas also criticizes Heidegger’s theme of dwelling, saying it is “anonymous, neuter … and ethically indifferent”\textsuperscript{52} and opposed to Levinas’s understanding of the dwelling as the possibility for transcendence and welcoming being. As he tells us in \textit{Totality and Infinity}:

To exist henceforth means to dwell. To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection [\textit{recueillement}], a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome.\textsuperscript{53}

If the human tendency towards domination, control and totalitizing is ethically indifferent and \textit{neuter}, Levinas in turn will argue (rather controversially) that the primary mode of dwelling that is welcoming and receptive is \textit{feminine}. I quote Levinas in his original French, since his language is difficult to translate adequately:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Et l’Autre dont la présence est discrètement une absence et à partir de laquelle s’accomplit l’accueil hospitalier par excellence qui décrit le champ de l’intimité, est la Femme. La femme est la condition du recueillement, de l’intimité de la Maison et de l’habitation.}\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Although a deeper analysis of Levinas’s claims about the feminine nature of hospitality falls beyond the scope of our study, it is significant to at least mention it, since Levinas

\textsuperscript{52} Emmanuel Levinas, \textit{Collected Philosophical Papers} (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 53.
\textsuperscript{53} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 156.
\textsuperscript{54} Levinas, \textit{Totalité et Infini}, 166. Translation: “And the Other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.” Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 155.
refers to the “feminine being” as the “welcoming one par excellence.””\textsuperscript{55} However, in describing the Woman (\textit{La Femme}) as the prime example of hospitality, as the one whose presence is an absence (in the sense of having space to welcome), Levinas is not claiming that women are superior to men in offering hospitality. Rather, his discussion of \textit{La Femme} as “\textit{l'accueillant par excellence}” refers to a feminine principle, rather than to concrete feminine human persons. As Alison Ainley describes: “For Levinas, otherness and ethical care are already present in the structures of ‘interiority’ and ‘habitation,’ and already imply a feminine dimension, a dimension which disrupts the ‘virility of the force of Being.’”\textsuperscript{56}

Related to this notion of the feminine is Levinas’s conviction that our fundamental stance as human beings is toward “passivity” rather than “activity.” As we can see, this is consistent with Levinas’s critique of ontology and totalities, which prioritize knowledge and action over listening and receiving. Thus, Levinas is suggesting that “our being is not in fact defined by the activity that drives personal initiative and comprehension, but instead by a passivity that our most natural tendencies cause us to cancel out and forget.”\textsuperscript{57} This passivity, this event of being a “welcoming” for the other is Levinas’s idea of hospitality.

Bloechl states that whatever hospitality means for Levinas, it certainly includes this: “a responsibility for the Other person that would be prior to every form of responsibility for myself.”\textsuperscript{58} In several places, Levinas describes this responsibility for-

\textsuperscript{55} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 157. “\textit{L'accueillant par excellence, à l'accueillant en soi à l'être féminin.}” Levinas, \textit{Totalité et Infini}, 169.
\textsuperscript{57} Bloechl, “Words of Welcome,” 236.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 235.
the-other, as a radical giving of oneself. He writes: “To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-itself, is to take the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting.” Levinas is not simply saying that the human person is social and finds fulfillment in relationships with others; his view is much more radical. His ethics of radical alterity implies an “ethics of radical responsibility .... For Levinas, to be is to respond.”

For Levinas, hospitality is a “capacity and an accomplishment of … subjectivity insofar as ordered to responsibility and the Good.” Although Levinas identifies this capacity for radical “subjectivity” also with the notions of “Woman” (la Femme), and “language” (discours), it suffices for our discussion to point out that the notion of hospitality for Levinas encompasses this privileged ethical stance, the welcoming of the Other by the Same.

B. Derrida on Hospitality: Responsibility to the Other

Let us now turn in the following pages to a study of Derrida, looking at his formative personal history, a brief explanation of his theory of deconstruction and then finally his view of hospitality.

59 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 56.
62 Although the theme would take us beyond the scope of our study, Levinas’s view of language is important for his understanding of hospitality. Though he thinks language has the tendency to fall into thematization and totalizing, he believes “the essence of discourse is prayer.” More primordial than chronological, conceptual language, Levinas thinks human beings are called to a discourse which responds to a call from the absolute Other and obliges me in responsibility for all Others. Emmanuel Levinas, Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7.
1. Derrida’s Personal Background

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was born into a Sephardic Jewish family in El-Biar, Algeria, during the French occupation of the country. Similar to Levinas whose personal history indelibly shaped his philosophical ideas, Derrida’s first-hand experiences of alienation and exclusion in his early life deeply affected his intellectual convictions, especially influencing his ideas about hospitality. An event that was particularly significant and jarring occurred one day when he was around twelve years old; without warning, he was expelled from his public lycée, solely for the reason that he was a Jew. As a result, the young Derrida was required to continue his education at a specifically Hebrew school where a different language was spoken, even though his family did not speak Hebrew nor practice the Jewish religion. Later in life, Derrida refers to this bitter experience several times and expresses how it molded his sense (or more accurately, his lack) of cultural/linguistic identity and sense of belonging. The experience of exclusion and rejection which he suffered by the fact that he was a Jew was compounded by the fact that he never felt truly included nor assimilated into the local Hebrew community. Emilie Kutash describes Derrida’s predicament as a common experience of the classic “Marrano Jew,” meaning one who can identify himself as neither “Greek” nor Jewish. She writes:

Derrida is alienated both from the place of his birth and acculturation, including his only, but still foreign, native tongue and his Jewish heritage. Doubling this exteriority is his philosophical alienation both from the totalizing western/Greek

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65 Emilie Kutash explains: “The term ‘Marrano,’ narrowly defined, applies to Jewish people who were living in the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages and were forced to convert to Christianity. Marranos were expelled from the country in which they were acculturated, or they had to assume a position outside the Jewish religion of their ancestors. In either situation they were forced to exist at the margins of the culture in which they lived.” Emilie Kutash, “Jacques Derrida: The Double Liminality of a Philosophical Marrano,” Religions 10, no. 2 (2019): 1.
philosophical tradition of his educational nurture, and the Hebraic traditional archive…. Outside of both Athens and Jerusalem, he proclaims he is situated in neither.\textsuperscript{66}

The significance of Derrida’s experience of being a stranger even in his own land cannot be over emphasized. As we saw with Levinas’s personal history, Derrida’s biographical trajectory is essential for understanding his ideas. Andrew Shepherd explains: “Derrida’s unique form of writing blurs the boundaries of ‘academic’ philosophy and autobiography/self-exposure.”\textsuperscript{67}

In his work, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, Derrida remarks how the socio-political conditions of his youth made him subject to a “radical lack of culture from which [he] undoubtedly never completely emerged.”\textsuperscript{68} This experience of feeling himself to be “excluded” and “foreign” during his formative years also further impacted what would later become his unconventional views regarding philosophy of language and its connection with identity. Derrida recounts how in his youth he professed a love for pure French, even though paradoxically, this only reinforced his cultural alienation as an Algerian Jew.\textsuperscript{69} Derrida describes how a language shapes us into who we are, and for him, this was the French language, from which he was alienated at a key moment of his adolescent development. In writing about this relationship with language, Derrida poignantly remarks: “I have only one language; it is not mine.”\textsuperscript{70} We can discern a palpable sense of tension and paradox in Derrida’s statement. He identifies most with that

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 2.  
\textsuperscript{67} Shepherd, \textit{The Gift of the Other}, 46.  
\textsuperscript{68} Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 53.  
\textsuperscript{69} Cf. Shepherd, \textit{The Gift of the Other}, 47.  
\textsuperscript{70} Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 1.
which he is most excluded. Didier Maleuvre, paraphrasing Derrida’s project in *Monolingualism of the Other*, writes:

How … does it make sense to say that I have or own a native language? That I belong to a linguistic group or that such a group grants me an identity? Can one’s identity be so simple that it amounts to slotting this individual piece into that collective? ... Doesn’t anything the self may say about its circumstances first have to reckon with the fact that self-identity is necessarily split, hence is *yet to be achieved*, if it is able to talk about itself at all?\(^\text{71}\)

Derrida’s personal experience with language and its connection to his own self-identity brings him to emphasize the idea that language (for every human being) is not something we are born with but rather something we derive and inherit from *others*. Thus, he writes:

“The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable…. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia.”\(^\text{72}\) In other words, Derrida thinks that even those of us who grow up with a mother tongue that matches our native culture will still feel “in exile” because our language is always inherited from others. Therefore, according to Derrida, it is an experience of alienation that “institutes every language as a language of the other: the impossible property of a language.”\(^\text{73}\)

Because he believes that every language is a language of the other, Derrida holds that *alienation* is an intrinsic feature of being human. In “Circumfession,” his most autobiographical work, Derrida describes how a feeling of being illegitimate and like an exile without a home accompanied him through his life.\(^\text{74}\) Although this had certainly been Derrida’s personal story, he wants to argue that this is the experience of all people,

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\(^{72}\) Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 58.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{74}\) Cf. Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 47.
an experience characterized by a sense of not belonging, feeling marginalized, and of
being absent while being present.75

2. A General Sketch of Derrida’s Philosophy

Related to these paradoxical themes of binary tensions, such as being
“absent yet present,” is the kind of philosophy which Derrida is undoubtedly most
famous for — i.e., deconstructionism. Derrida is hailed as the founder of this
famous philosophical approach which he says is not definable and is neither a
method nor a system. Gary Rolfe explains:

There is no method to deconstruction because texts literally deconstruct
themselves in their impossible attempt to employ language as a ‘transcendental
signifier,’ … that is, as a way of ‘pointing’ at some eternal truth or other.76

One initial way to grasp what Derrida understands by deconstruction is to say it is a way
of reading texts, not to find traditional linguistic meanings but instead to discover
paradoxes and even contradictions inherent within them. In other words, what is
deconstructed has no underlying, stable bedrock. The foundation is itself a “limit.”

Furthermore, another tenet of Derrida’s deconstruction is the belief that
the Western metaphysical tradition has set up hierarchical binaries – such as
presence/absence, intellect/emotion, male/female, universal/particular, etc. – in
which the former is univocally set up as the standard. Shepherd explains:

Deconstruction operates by inverting these hierarchical structures thereby
revealing their ideological or strategic function; by engaging in an etymological
quest to find the hidden or suppressed trace within a word; and by playfully

75 Cf. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in Jacques Derrida (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3–315; Shepherd, The Gift of the Other, 47. Shepherd points out that
“Circumfession,” a biography of Derrida written by Bennington, strongly emphasizes the themes of exile,
marginality and alienation that he experienced especially in his early life.
pushing words to their semiological limits to reveal the multiplicity and paradox inherent within language.  

Rather than signifying “essences or givens,” philosophical language is itself “historical, contingent and temporary….” This means that paradox and even apparent contradiction is the goal of philosophical discourse, because ultimately there is no fixed meaning to any given reality. Derrida himself repeatedly says deconstruction is “nothing” and “impossible.” This is because part of the very nature of what deconstruction is aiming to uncover is the supposedly hegemonic use of the term “is” in Western philosophy.

On a number of occasions, Derrida himself attempts to offer explanations and even quasi-definitions to help clarify the term deconstruction. A few years before his death, he writes:

Each time that I say ‘deconstruction and X (regardless of the concept or the theme),’ this is the prelude to a very singular division that turns this X into, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and the ‘same’ X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account …. For example, here referring myself to demonstrations I have already attempted …. gift, hospitality, death itself (and therefore so many other things) can be possible only as impossible, as the impossible, that is, unconditionally.

As we see in this passage, deconstruction is a kind of process or “event” which seeks to make the impossible possible.

Grasping this notion of the impossible in Derrida’s works is central for arriving at a proper understanding of everything else. Derrida has a fascination with the notion of

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77 Shepherd, The Gift of the Other, 48.
78 Ibid., 47–48.
aporias, which have intrigued philosophers since ancient times. An aporia comes from the Greek “a + poros,” meaning, “without a passage.” The word has come to be understood as any kind of puzzle or paradox which presents itself as an impasse. Derrida argues that there are certain realities – such as hospitality, mourning, and gift-giving – in which the conditions for their possibility are also the very conditions for their impossibility. We should note that “hospitality” is one of the key concepts to which his deconstruction applies, for Derrida will say that its very possibility lies in its impossibility. Let us turn now to a more explicit examination of the Derridean notion of hospitality, beginning with his understanding of alterity.

3. Derrida’s Notion of Hospitality

In order to grasp better the Derridean understanding of hospitality, we must first understand his important notion of différance. A homonym of the word difference, Derrida coins the term différance as a play on the French word différer which means both to differ and to defer. In an interview with Richard Kearney, he presents the following explanation of his neologism:

The notion of “différance” … is a non-concept in that it cannot be defined in terms of oppositional predicates; it is neither this nor that; but rather this and that (e.g. the act of differing and deferring) without being reducible to a dialectic logics either. And yet the term “difference” emerges and develops as a determination of language from which it is inseparable. Hence the difficulty of translating the term.

He continues:

There is no conceptual realm beyond language which would allow the term to have a univocal semantic content over and above its inscription in language. Because it remains a trace of language it remains non-conceptual. And because it has no oppositional or predicative generality, which would identify it as this rather
Thus, Derrida thinks that between any given text and its “meaning,” we discover this idea of *différance*: a “non-concept” which is neither *this* nor *that*, but rather this *and* that. In other words, meaning emerges not so much as an *either/or* but rather more as a *both/and*. As we will see, the Derridean notions of alterity and hospitality arise organically from his more elementary concept of *différance*, which implies the underlying belief that “openness and temporality, not *essence*, are at the heart of both language and existence itself.”

Within this deconstructive framework, Derrida develops his philosophy of hospitality, which involves this characteristic of refusing to be closed or sealed off in order to remain continually open to the Other.

Rather than conceiving of philosophical language as descriptive of the way things are (or are not), a view he attributes to the logocentric system of philosophy, Derrida thinks that “meaning” is always contextualized, historical and fluid. Thus, part of the deconstruction of a text is to *defer* judgment on it, to remain forever open to the possibilities of meaning that might arise from it.

Implicit in Derrida’s deconstructionism is his assertion that the Western tradition of philosophy is a “totalitizing” and thus “violent” system, because it inevitably reduces the Other to the Same. Clearly, Derrida’s understanding of alterity bears many similarities to Levinas’s. As Shepherd points out,

[Both Levinas and Derrida] seek to overcome what they perceive as the fundamental fault of Western philosophy – its tendency to reduce the Other to the

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83 Cf. ibid., 53.
‘Same’ – by replacing ontological questions of Being with an analysis of the ethical encounter, thus giving philosophical priority not to essence but to heterogeneity.\textsuperscript{84}

Just as Levinas calls ethics “first philosophy,” Derrida considers the encounter with the Other to be the primary philosophical concern. In fact, Derrida’s overall philosophy of deconstruction frequently has been interpreted as simply a “philosophy of hospitality.” John Caputo illustrates how central a role hospitality plays in Derrida’s thought by suggesting that hospitality and deconstruction mean essentially the same thing. Caputo writes:

[It] would not be a distortion to say that deconstruction is to be understood as a form of hospitality; that deconstruction is hospitality, which means the welcoming of the other. Deconstruction would thus mean ... “let the other come!” “Welcome to the other.”\textsuperscript{85}

Part of Derrida’s understanding of hospitality, as we are beginning to recognize, is the fact that it involves a refusal to “close the door,” so to speak, on any particular interpretation or meaning of something. Hospitality, for Derrida, is a particularly potent term because its very meaning is something akin to deconstruction, which for Derrida, is another way of describing the true meaning of philosophy. More specifically, Derrida says ethics is hospitality. In his work \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}, Derrida writes:

“To cultivate an ethic of hospitality” – is such an expression not tautologous? … Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the \textit{ethos}, that is, the residence, one’s home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, \textit{ethics is}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 49.
hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality.\textsuperscript{86}

It is clear that Derrida assigns the utmost importance to the theme of hospitality, even suggesting it is interchangeable with ethics and philosophy/culture itself. But what does Derrida’s notion of hospitality actually entail?

Although Derrida’s seminal writings on deconstruction contain implicit connections to the theme of hospitality, it is not until the 1990’s that the concept becomes central in his thought. With the event of Levinas’s death in December 1995, Derrida gave a eulogy, “\textit{Adieu à Levinas},” at the actual service, as well as a public address honoring Levinas’s legacy a year later, entitled “A Word of Welcome.” In this address, Derrida states:

\begin{quote}
Has anyone ever noticed? Although the word is neither frequently used nor emphasized within it, \textit{Totality and Infinity} bequeaths to us an immense \textit{treatise of hospitality}. This is borne out less by the occurrences of the word “hospitality,” which are, in fact, rather rare, than by the links and discursive logic that lead to this vocabulary of hospitality. In the concluding pages, for example, hospitality becomes the very name of what opens itself to the face, or, more precisely, of what “welcomes” it.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

As this passage illustrates, Derrida has a deep respect for Levinas’s philosophy of the Other, which he memorably describes as an “immense treatise on hospitality.” Heavily indebted to Levinas’s idea of welcoming the “infinity” of the Other, Derrida’s notion of hospitality is highly Levinasian. Both hold that “the underlying structure of human


consciousness and subjectivity is alterity expressed in the act of welcome.” But what exactly does Derrida mean by hospitality?

Derrida understands hospitality to be a way of approaching the other who is the stranger. It is the question of l’étranger, the foreigner, the one who is Other. Building on Levinas’s belief that man feels like a foreigner in this world (l’étrangeté de l’homme au monde), Derrida considers the human condition one that is marked by a sense of estrangement. As opposed to Odysseus who left his homeland only to return to the same, both Levinas and Derrida consider the Jewish patriarch Abraham a kind of “saint of hospitality,” because he came to this earth as l’étranger and journeyed out into a foreign land, not to return to the familiar place from which he started out. Derrida goes even further than Levinas and posits that the face of the Other is always the “face of the Foreigner-for-me.” There can be no true intersubjectivity; the Other is always foreign to me because this is what makes him the Other. In the Derridean universe, hospitality arises within the tension between its practical forms and its ideal form, which is inherently impossible. Treanor explains Derrida’s paradoxical view:

Hospitality … exists in the tension between the unconditional law of hospitality and the conditioned laws of hospitality; the former demands open doors and borders, unconditional welcome, and radical egalitarianism, while the latter insists on some criteria for entry, rules of behavior pertaining to guests, and distinguishing between welcome and unwelcome guests.

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88 Shepherd, The Gift of the Other, 27.
90 Cf. ibid., 403. In the French, l’étranger is translated as either “foreigner,” or “stranger,” and can mean either a neutral, unknown person as well as “one who poses a threat.”
91 Ibid., 369.
93 Treanor, “Putting Hospitality in Its Place,” 57.
Because Derrida maintains that retaining power is the very meaning of what it means to be the host (l’hôte), he says it is impossible for the host to show true (unconditional) hospitality toward his guest. As Caputo remarks, Derridean hospitality means the host must make an absolute gift of the place, but this is impossible if one is to remain a host who is “master” of his house.94

On a number of occasions in his writings, Derrida refers to Kant’s political treatise, “Perpetual Peace” (1795), in which Kant mentions hospitality as essential for contributing to peace among nations. Kant is credited with being the first political philosopher to speak of hospitality in terms of a “right,” although he does not see it as an unlimited right.95 Derrida is critical of the Kantian “laws of hospitality,” for the very reason that they establish parameters and conditions for its practice. Although Kant believes it is a universal right of man not to be treated as an enemy when visiting in a foreign land, there is, nevertheless, no obligation for a country to receive the visitor. He writes:

[Hospitality] means the right of an alien not to be treated as an enemy upon his arrival in another’s country. If it can be done without destroying him, he can be turned away; but as long as he behaves peaceably he cannot be treated as an enemy …. [The] right to visit, to associate, belongs to all men by virtue of their common ownership of the earth’s surface; for since the earth is a globe, they cannot scatter themselves infinitely, but must, finally, tolerate living in close proximity, because originally no one had a greater right to any region of the earth than anyone else.96

Derrida argues that if the “laws of hospitality” allow that some foreigners could be “turned away,” as Kant’s philosophy proposes, then it is no longer appropriate to call this “hospitality.”

A depiction of Derridean hospitality in concrete circumstances is difficult to imagine for the simple fact that its existence is impossible. His unconditional hospitality is an ideal state of the world involving universal acceptance and open borders for all, with no questions asked nor judgments bestowed; all would be welcome, and all included. Such a model has a utopian appeal to it, but even he admits, its practice is unrealistic. At the same time, however, the questions Derrida raises through his treatment of hospitality – about the otherness, the stranger and the limits/conditions on her being welcomed – open up new horizons and present valuable insights for these topics.

C. Marcel in Dialogue with Levinas and Derrida

Now that we have a background in Levinas and Derrida’s views of hospitality, I would like to bring their views into a conversation with Marcel. Their metaphysical beliefs influence their conviction that otherness must be absolute, and by consequence they believe that hospitality must be unconditional. By explaining the Levinasian/Derridean view of absolute alterity, I will argue that ultimately it expresses a metaphysics of hostility rather than of hospitality. In the last section, I will present Marcel’s alternative approach of relative alterity and its ramifications on hospitality in light of Levinas’s and Derrida’s views.
1. Preliminary Considerations

The possibility of a fruitful dialogue between Marcel, Levinas and Derrida recommends itself for a number of reasons. All three twentieth century French thinkers develop their thought within the context of phenomenology, which means that they share a passionate concern to probe questions of human consciousness from a first-person perspective. Moreover, each shares a profound interest in the fundamental question of alterity and each of them, at some point, describes this relationship with the other as hospitality.

Although it is clear that Levinas and Derrida differ from one another in regard to important aspects of their philosophies, I believe their ontological presuppositions are fundamentally similar, and therefore, I will have Marcel address them together. This will allow us to see the Levinasian-Derridean philosophy of hospitality in stark contrast to Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. A discussion of the manner in which the views of Levinas and Derrida relate to one another extends well beyond the scope of this thesis; however, there is ample evidence to defend the claim that these two thinkers can be

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97 A number of studies have been done comparing Levinas and Marcel, most notably those of Brian Treanor which will be referenced frequently in this section. However, secondary literature comparing Derrida and Marcel is scarce.

98 Although, Derrida praises Levinas’s insights regarding alterity, he does offer certain critiques. For example, the main argument in Derrida’s Violence and Metaphysics is a criticism of Levinas’s claim in Totality and Infinity that the ethical relation with the Other is only found in the face-to-face encounter with persons. A second way in which Derrida formally disagrees with his friend is regarding Levinas’s claim that speech has primacy over writing. Derrida argues for the opposite view: “Is it not possible to invert all of Levinas’s statements on this point? By showing, for example, that writing can assist itself, for it has time and freedom, escaping better than speech from empirical urgencies.” Derrida, Writing and Difference, 102.

99 Treanor, to whom much of my discussion here is indebted, acknowledges that it may rightly seem like an oversimplified generalization to merge philosophers of “absolute otherness” like Levinas, Derrida (and he adds John Caputo) into one camp, but nevertheless such a “condensed version” of their view for the sake of time restraints is justified given the similar ethical and epistemological concerns which motivate these thinkers. Cf. Brian Treanor, “Constellations: Gabriel Marcel’s Philosophy of Relative Otherness,” American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly 80, no. 3 (2006): 371–72.

100 Scholarship in the area of Levinasian/Derridean comparison is so extensive it has generated its own secondary literature. Cf. Treanor, Aspects of Alterity, 140.
paired together for the sake of their similar belief in absolute alterity, which will be our main discussion point in relation to Marcel.

Speaking specifically of Levinas, Treanor remarks how hard it would be to read Marcel and Levinas in succession and “not feel that there was somehow a covert alliance between these philosophers.” The historian Samuel Moyn describes how there is a “striking convergence, along several dimensions, between the ethics Marcel presented … and the ethics Levinas would later defend.” Moreover, Levinas devotes two essays to specifically discussing aspects of Marcel’s philosophy, while also alluding to Marcel’s work several other times in his writings.

In his essay, “A New Rationality: On Gabriel Marcel,” Levinas reveals his sincere admiration for Marcel as a philosopher, and his deep appreciation for the insights he offers in his Metaphysical Journal. Calling Marcel’s philosophy “sublime” in its way of presenting “a new wisdom, a new rationality … a new notion of spirit,” Levinas fully agrees with Marcel’s “obsession with the inexpressible, the ineffable, the unsaid.” With regard to intersubjectivity, the Levinasian view deeply resonates with the Marcelian approach. Levinas tells us: “Under the spirituality of the I awakened by the thou in Marcel, in convergence with Buber, a new signifying is signified.”

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 63.
Another similarity that Marcel and Levinas share is that they both claim that the self-enclosed subject, caught up in his own desires and concerns is literally “not opened up to reality;” both express the encounter with the Other (Autrui) as intrinsically linked to the meaning of human existence. For Levinas, the breaching of this ego-centric totality is the encounter with the face of another person; for Marcel the process also occurs through a personal encounter and is marked by the subject’s interior attitude of disponibilité.

When it comes to a comparison between Derrida and Marcel, we can only speculate about what is common to them. There seems to be no evidence that either author wrote about the work of the other one. Because Derrida does reference the work of Ricoeur, it is certainly possible that aspects of Marcel’s thought arrived to Derrida via Marcel’s student, but there seems to be no citations suggesting Derrida actually read Marcel. Even though they seem not to have had a direct intellectual engagement, Marcel and Derrida nevertheless share an important common interest in questions of alterity and hospitality.

Perhaps the greatest similarity among all three revolves around their preeminent concern regarding matters of intersubjectivity, each particularly invested in presenting his ethical philosophy as one which ensures that the other person is fully respected as other. Each of these “philosophers of dialogue” shares a similar interest in defending the subjectivity of the other person, condemning any approach in which the other may be

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107 Moyn, Origins of the Other, 223.
108 Marcel does not use the term “totality” in his writings with the meaning which it has for Levinas. In fact, as we will see, Marcel explicitly denies that his metaphysical view is a philosophy of “totality.” Marcel, TWB, 179.
reduced to a mere object or shackled under our attempts to manipulate and control her.\textsuperscript{110} Furthermore, all three thinkers are drawn to the \textit{mystery} of existence and to the primacy of the ethical and the primacy of \textit{welcoming the Other}.\textsuperscript{111}

\section*{2. Absolute Alterity}

Even though Levinas and Derrida have definite ethical reasons for believing in absolute alterity, their metaphysical assumptions also clearly play a role in why they posit such a radical separation between the self and the other. In fact, how they understand the nature of otherness indicates how their ontological presuppositions shape their ethical philosophy.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Levinas interprets the history of ideas in terms of the two poles of totality and infinity. He is convinced that all “totalities reduce the other to the same; they make sameness out of otherness.”\textsuperscript{112} Based on his assumption that all philosophies (all rational understandings) of difference/otherness lead to some form of metaphysical reduction, Levinas proposes that the alterity of the Other, is absolute, meaning that the other person is entirely different and separated from the subject; Levinas writes, “The absolutely other, it is the Other” \textit{(L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui)}.\textsuperscript{113} For Levinas, the alterity of another person is \textit{entirely other}; she is not different from me in a relative sense, but in an absolute sense. Thus, Levinas claims that between myself and the

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\textsuperscript{111} Although Levinas and Derrida do not often use the word \textit{mystery} in their writings like Marcel, they both hold a deep reverence for the beyond, not fully known, and what cannot be fully grasped. This respect for mystery mirrors Heidegger’s notion of \textit{Gelassenheit}.
\textsuperscript{112} Morgan, \textit{Cambridge Introduction to Levinas}, 3.
\textsuperscript{113} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 39.
\end{flushright}
Other, there is no “common frontier,” for if there were, the Other would be limited to a version of the Same, and it would thereby lose its very nature as otherness. Levinas further express the absolute character of otherness when he describes the epiphany of the face. He writes:

The nudity of a face is a bareness without any cultural ornament, an absolution, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form. The face *enters* into our world from an absolutely foreign sphere, that is, precisely from an ab-solute …

What Levinas is saying here is that the human face is an “absolution” from all categories; it shares nothing in common with the self/same; it is entirely, absolutely other because it defies categorization and containment. Moreover, Levinas describes the Other as infinitely transcendent:

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is encompassed. … The Other remains *infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign*; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with *the world that can be common to us*…

In the effort to preserve difference and avoid subsuming the other person into a totality, Levinas’s view of alterity seems to put such a separation that there remains little in common between the two. This view of such heightened respect for otherness seems, at first, like a noble enterprise, but as we shall see, it presents some serious difficulties.

In much the same way that Levinas conceives of alterity, Derrida also believes that the Other must be absolutely other. In fact, one of Derrida’s most notable mantras is his tautological phrase, “*tout autre est tout autre,*” a play on words which means that the

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114 Cf. ibid.
115 Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 53.
totally/wholly Other (whether this be God or another person) is absolutely “other.”  

This clearly resembles Levinas’s “L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui.” Like Levinas, Derrida rejects ethical formalism and any notion that morality consists primarily in universal laws. Instead, Derrida sees ethics as the opening of transcendence to the infinite in the encounter with the Absolute other. Caputo provides a helpful explanation of Derrida’s catchphrase as he writes:

The tout autre, the wholly other: God, for example, or … any singularity whatever, whoever, whose thisness we cannot lift up, cannot generalize, cannot universalize, cannot formulize, any singularity which fixes us in this place so that we cannot look away, cannot look up to the eidos of which it would be “but an example” which would allow us to get on top of it, dominate it, enable us to envisage it instead of finding ourselves fixed by its gaze. Derrida here takes up a uniquely biblical sense of singularity, as opposed to a Greek sense of subsuming the less real particular under the truer universal. Tout autre – it does not matter what or who – est tout autre.

By saying that the Other is “tout autre,” i.e. entirely unique in its otherness, Derrida is simply re-emphasizing the conviction (central to Levinas’s philosophy as well) that the Other can never be completely known, comprehended or even spoken about. While not developing the notion of the face in the measure that Levinas does, Derrida agrees with

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117 Derrida gives the last chapter of his work, The Gift of Death, the title “Tout Autre est Tout Autre.”
118 As an orthodox Jew, Levinas does believe in the validity and universality of the Ten Commandments as ethical principles and as a source of Divine revelation. However, he nevertheless not only thinks that the primary “ethical” reality is the revelation of infinity through the face of another person, he also proposes to identify “religion,” with “the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.” Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 40; Cf. Jill Robbins, “Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas’s Totality and Infinity,” Yale French Studies, no. 79 (1991): 135–49.
120 Because they believe that language locks us into ontological categories, both Levinas and Derrida seek to develop their understanding of hospitality within a philosophy of language. For example, Levinas posits his notion of the saying/ansaying and the said/unsaid in Otherwise than Being in an attempt to respond to Derrida’s critique that his language in Totality and Infinity remains tainted by ontology. For a summary of how their positions on language develop from Heidegger’s thought, see Jack Rasmus-Vorrath, “Echoes of Unspeakable Silence: Heidegger & Derrida on Addressing the Unsaid,” in American Comparative Literature Association Conference (Heidegger, Derrida & the Ends of Philosophy, Utrecht, 2017).
the Levinasian view that the face reveals the absolute alterity of the Other. Commenting on the Face and its connection with hospitality, Derrida writes:

The face always lends itself to a welcome, and the welcome welcomes only a face, the face that should be our theme today, but that, as we know from reading Levinas, must elude all thematization. This irreducibility to a theme, this exceeding of all thematizing formalization or description, is precisely what the face has in common with hospitality. 121

In other words, Derrida holds that even to speak about the Other in any real way is already betraying the very meaning of the phrase that she is absolutely other.

A further dimension by which we can clearly see how Derrida’s ontological framework engenders his view of alterity is his belief that language is inherently “violent.” Because Derrida is convinced that traditional linguistic expression is universally ontological, he concludes that language is “the medium of comprehension, conceptualization and thematization, all of which, according to Levinas’ own analyses, constitute a reduction of alterity.” 122 Derrida tells us:

There is a transcendental and preethical violence .... This transcendental violence, which does not spring from an ethical resolution or freedom, or from a certain way of encountering or exceeding the other, originally institutes the relationship. 123

As this passage reveals, Derrida suggests that violence is somehow primordial; it is “preethical” and lays the original ontological foundation, so to speak, of the relationship with the other. 124 Although we are fully aware of the Derridean allergy to metaphysics, it

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123 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 128, 188.
124 Rick Elmore points out that scholarship on what Derrida actually means by la violence is scarce. Like other Derridean terms, “violence,” is undefinable. However, Elmore describes Derrida’s concept of “violence” in this way: “All appearing for Derrida contains a necessary moment of exclusion, and it is this exclusion that marks the beginning of the relationship between the openness of originary violence and concrete manifestations of violence.” Elmore, “Revisiting Violence and Life,” Symplekē 20, no. 1–2
is fairly evident that by claiming transcendental violence “originally institutes” alterity, he is putting forth a metaphysical view. Not unlike Sartre’s view that human beings are fundamentally pitted against each other, Derrida’s and Levinas’s vision ends up being a metaphysics of hostility.

The legitimate connection which Levinas and Derrida discover between reduction and violence has deep roots in European history. Both witnessed firsthand how totalitarian regimes so easily could reduce persons to mere numbers and commit heinous acts of violence and destruction against humanity. While such reductions as practiced by totalitarian ideologies are incontestably despicable, we need to ask if Levinas and Derrida are justified in claiming that the language of “being” is inherently violent. Furthermore, is traditional metaphysics necessarily the culprit in turning the other into a totality? I argue that these hypotheses are not correct. Instead, I would suggest that Levinas and Derrida have certain ontological assumptions (inherited from Hegel) that lead to this conclusion. I also believe that we cannot underestimate “the extent to which their [Levinas’s and Derrida’s] respective philosophies have been shaped by their own life experiences of inhospitality, exclusion and violence.”¹²⁵ Shepherd continues:

Such experiences have led them to the conclusion that not only is Western thought ill-equipped to respond to the inhospitable and unethical events of the … twentieth – and we could now posit, early twenty-first – century, but further, they

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¹²⁵ Shepherd, The Gift of the Other, 81. I am greatly indebted to Shepherd’s discussion of the ontological assumptions about identity and relationality inherent in the philosophy of Levinas and Derrida in Chapter 3 of The Gift of the Other, entitled: “Levinasian and Derridean Hospitality: Ethics beyond Ontology?” Even though his ideas are consonant with Marcel’s on these points, there is no mention of Marcel in Shepherd’s work.
assert that it is Western philosophical thought itself that is to blame for the quandary we find ourselves in.\textsuperscript{126}

By denigrating traditional metaphysics and endorsing a theory of alterity “beyond ontology,” both Levinas and Derrida seek to “respond to the inhospitable and unethical” events of their lifetime. This approach of absolute alterity, however, raises serious problems in real life applications for hospitality. One significant difficulty is the fact that in the Levinasian/Derridean framework, hospitality must be unconditional.

3. Unconditional Hospitality

When Levinas and Derrida speak of hospitality as a welcoming of the Other, this always implies that the other person is, in a real sense, completely (even ontologically) different than myself. Let us look at some of the consequences that this has for Levinas’s and Derrida’s understanding of hospitality, since it will allow us to further appreciate Marcel’s own metaphysics of hospitality.

For Levinas, hospitality must be entirely \textit{unconditional, non-reciprocal} and \textit{asymmetrical}. In other words, if I, as the subject or host, receive anything in the relationship, then it is not a genuine act of hospitality. Levinas writes:

The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face…. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger \textit{[l’étranger]}, the widow and the orphan, to whom I am obligated…. Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a “space” essentially asymmetrical.\textsuperscript{127}

Levinas is saying that human intersubjectivity, properly speaking, cannot be mutual and reciprocal because if it were, the Other in her difference would somehow get

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 215–16.
“reabsorbed” into a totality. Treanor explains why Levinas adopts this view of asymmetry:

[The] other person is absolutely other for Levinas. Qua other, I cannot distinguish between the various others I actually encounter. To do so would be to grasp them, or some aspect of them, with knowledge, in order to distinguish one from the other.128

Because he thinks the Other can never be “known” or in any way brought into a shared understanding with the subject, Levinas holds to the belief that the ethical relationship cannot be reciprocal. He writes: “the relation [between the subject and the absolute other] connects not terms that complete one another and consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another, but terms that suffice to themselves.”129 In other words, Levinas believes in the strict alterity of the other, and this leads to his assertion that each of us has an infinite responsibility toward every Other. At the same time, he posits a notion of 
fraternity which is the universal kinship between persons, based on our humanity. This fraternity is not primarily based on blood relationships but, rather, on face-to-face encounters.130

Treonor points out another difficulty in a theory of absolute alterity: the fact that responsibility is non-reciprocal. Because of the absolute separation between myself and the other, it is only I (the subject) who has a responsibility for them, and never any sort of mutual exchange. Treanor writes:

[If] responsibility is the individuating element of subjectivity, and we cannot say that the other person is also responsible, where are we to locate the uniqueness of the other person? It cannot be in any determinate characteristic, knowledge, or affective tie to the other person, for Levinas rejects these as grasping and totalizing. Nor can it be in the command or call to responsibility, for such a call

129 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 103.
130 Ibid., 214.
issues from every human face. *Any human face, every human face, calls me to responsibility and substitution.* Therefore, strangely, in terms of my status as responsible, other people are in some sense interchangeable.\textsuperscript{131}

Certainly, the last thing that Levinas and Derrida want to suggest is that persons are interchangeable and not unique. Yet, based on the metaphysical assumptions which inform their view of absolute alterity, their teachings on alterity, including hospitality, suffers from this incoherence, to which neither adequately respond.\textsuperscript{132}

Because this responsibility extends to each and all “Others,” Levinas holds that when I encounter another person, I become both a “host” and a “hostage” to her. I am held “hostage” by the infinite responsibility I have towards her, and I act like a host to her as my “guest.” But this relationship is always *non-reciprocal.* As he writes: “The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity.”\textsuperscript{133} In other words, for Levinas, human subjectivity is not rooted in autonomy (Kantianism) but in *heteronomy*, in our “infinite responsibility” for the other. I am “already” responsible for the Other even before our concrete relationship emerges. Shepherd summarizes this view of Levinas: “If one conceives that one understands or comprehends the Other, and if the relationship with them is based on correlation, reciprocity and equality, then one has actually totalized the Other.”\textsuperscript{134} Because the other is an absolute *other*, I cannot share anything in common with her; this is what Levinas means by naming her the Other.

Since Derrida shares a similar ontological framework as Levinas and makes otherness absolute, he also is obliged to say hospitality is unconditional. To go deeper in

\textsuperscript{133} Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117–18.
\textsuperscript{134} Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 22.
this theme of the asymmetrical character of hospitality as Derrida understands it, let us examine the Derridean notion of *gift*, which is also inherently nonreciprocal.

In his work, *Given Time*, Derrida presents the paradoxical view that for a gift to be considered a genuine gift, it cannot be regarded as a gift. This understanding of the impossibility of a pure gift is simply a fruit of what Derrida calls his deconstructive “law of hospitality.” As we mentioned earlier, deconstruction is an event that applies to all concepts. However, there are certain realities – with hospitality being at the forefront – which exceptionally express how deconstruction works. Derrida tells us: “Each concept opens itself to its opposite, reproducing or producing in advance, in the rapport of one concept to the other, the contradictory and deconstructive law of hospitality.”

The reason why the concept of hospitality provides such eminent material for deconstruction has to do with its unique etymological dimensions, which we discussed in chapter two. Derrida milks fully the intrinsically paradoxical language of hospitality, as it exists in the original French. Thus, he points out the intriguing fact that the whole relationship of hospitality is based on the interchangeability of the term *hôte* – one who is potentially offering hospitality (host) and one who is potentially receiving it (guest) – i.e. both the one who gives (*donne*) and the one who receives (*recoit*). From this juxtaposition that is centralized in just one word, Derrida posits the law of hospitality, also called the law of heteronomy; it simply states, “the other is my law.”

Shepherd summarizes this ordinance well:

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136 In fact, Derrida argues that the “law of hospitality” becomes insipid and loses its power if the French term *hôte* is translated into the two different English words, “host” and “guest.”
137 Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 54.
138 Derrida quoted in Ibid., 55.
Derrida argues that the offering of hospitality is not an act of autonomous, sovereign freedom, but rather is a response to the Other, who is already within us. Heteronomy and alterity, not autonomous freedom, are the basis of human existence.¹³⁹

This Derridean law of Otherness is highly reminiscent of Levinas’s idea that the practice of hospitality or welcoming the Other is a response to the call of the Other, who makes the subject, who is the host, a “hostage” to the other.¹⁴⁰ Thus, the invitation in acts of genuine hospitality, for Levinas and Derrida, is not offered by the “host” but rather by the “guest,” who somehow becomes like a host. Stocker points out how Derrida’s law of heteronomy is similar to Levinas’s primacy of the Other because in both cases, I as the subject “am held hostage to the Other, because I only exist in relation to the Other.”¹⁴¹

Furthermore, in French (as in English), the etymological root for the word “host” can be used to describe both a friendly person who welcomes others (a host) or an enemy (one who is hostile). Derrida rightly points out that there is an inherent tension and a seeming paradox within the vocabulary surrounding the notion of hospitality. Shepherd explains:

Through a simple etymological analysis … Derrida raises a number of intriguing and potentially unsettling, questions: in the act of hospitality, who is the “host” and who is the “guest”? … And, is it the “host” or the “guest” who poses a potential threat?¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid.
In connection with this last question regarding the origin of a potential threat, one of the main conclusions which Derrida derives from his etymological study of hospitality is his conviction that “inherent within hospitality is the potential for violence.”\(^ {143}\)

It is based on this conviction that Derrida coins another famous neologism: *hostipitality*, which is the idea that there is always some “hostility in all … hospitality.”\(^ {144}\)

But what does he mean by this strange term? Derrida agrees that this term is ripe with tension and paradox. He tells us in his own words: “Hospitality is a contradictory concept… which can only autodestruct (said in other words, producing itself as impossible, only possible on the condition of its impossibility) ….”\(^ {145}\)

According to Derrida, hospitality expresses an archetypal *aporia* — i.e. a concept which “deconstructs” itself because its “possibility” is at once the condition of its impossibility. Caputo summarizes Derrida’s thought on hospitality well as he tells us:

The *hospes* is someone who has the power to host someone, so that neither the alterity (*hostis*) of the stranger nor the power (*potentia*) of the host is annulled by the hospitality. There is an essential “self-limitation” built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one’s own and the stranger, between owning one’s own property and inviting the other into one’s home. So there is always a little hostility in all hosting and hospitality, constituting a certain “hostil/pitality.”\(^ {146}\)

In other words, Derrida believes hospitality is a self-limiting concept because included in the very meaning of the “host” are the concepts of power, control and mastery. It is for this reason that Derrida argues that “pure” hospitality is not possible if the host actually *invites* the guest.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{144}\) Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 110. In order to form this neologism, Derrida simply substitutes the grammatical root *hosti* in place of *hosp*, thus producing *hosti/pitality*.
\(^{145}\) Derrida, *Basic Writings*, 246.
\(^{146}\) Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 110.
Thus, Derrida explains that genuine, “uncontaminated” hospitality must be *unconditional* - i.e. without any limits nor expectations.\(^{147}\) It is not *invitation* but *visitation*. He remarks: “If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the *hôte* as invited, there is no hospitality.”\(^{148}\) For this reason, Derrida asserts that pure hospitality must have no set parameters. Derrida views the practice of a host “inviting” a guest into his home as a false concept of hospitality because the host still maintains a position of control over his guest. The host has the power to set limits regarding who can be a guest, when the guests can arrive and leave, and how long the guests can stay. Thus, the question of hospitality, for Derrida, involves the most fundamental ethical questions regarding one’s self as “host” in relation to the Other – i.e. the Other as potential guest or potential enemy.\(^{149}\)

Although Derrida seeks to avoid the violence which he thinks is inherent in ontological language, he nonetheless is aware that the paradigmatic intersubjective act of hospitality has an inherently violent dimension to it. He writes:

> [To] be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [*surprendre*], to be ready to not be *ready*, if such is possible, to let oneself be overtaken, to not even *let* oneself to be overtaken, to be surprised in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped, stolen … precisely where one is not ready to receive – and not only just *not yet ready* but *not ready, unprepared* in a mode that is not even that of the “not yet.”\(^{150}\)

As this passage so clearly illustrates, Derrida’s conception of unconditional hospitality involves the potential for a tremendously violent visitation of the Other to the subject. It is a kind of “*receiving without invitation*, beyond or before the invitation.”\(^{151}\)

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\(^{147}\) For a keen exposition on the role of “contamination” in deconstruction, see Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

\(^{148}\) Derrida, *Basic Writings*, 362.

\(^{149}\) Cf. ibid., 238.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 362.

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 360.
Before offering an analysis of the problems which the Levinasian/Derridean notion of absolute otherness presents, we should not overlook the “valid concerns” which their view of alterity addresses. In other words, it is important to recognize that when philosophers like Levinas and Derrida (and Caputo) argue that otherness is absolute, they are certainly not doing so willy-nilly. Rather, as Treanor suggests, there are at least two noble concerns driving a philosophy of absolute alterity, one ethical level and the other epistemological.

We have seen how ethically speaking, Levinas and Derrida are profoundly concerned about respecting and protecting the uniqueness of the other. Since they think that, “real otherness requires that the other remain absolutely other than the self,” they posit an absolute alterity, which views human relations including acts of hospitality as necessarily asymmetrical and without conditions. On the epistemological level, Levinas and Derrida both argue for absolute otherness in order to properly affirm the limits of human knowledge, which can never fully comprehend, understand or picture reality. Both of them consider philosophical claims to “know” or “understand” the Other to be overly optimistic and even “violent.”

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152 Treanor, “Constellations,” 371. In the following section, I am particularly indebted to the scholarship of Brian Treanor whose clear and insightful texts comparing Marcel and Levinas on alterity have guided my own discussion. My analysis is especially based on his book, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel and the Contemporary Debate*, and his journal article, “Constellations: Gabriel Marcel’s Philosophy of Relative Otherness,” both published in 2006. However, Treanor does not apply his analysis of alterity to the question of hospitality.


155 Ibid., 373.

156 Cf. ibid., 372.

157 Ibid., 374. Levinas uses the term violence to describe the encounter with the infinite, which “surprises, shocks and overwhelms” those to whom another human face is revealed. Cf. Peperzak, *To the Other*, 129.
The secondary literature on Levinas and Derrida frequently comments on the problems inherent in their view of non-reciprocity in ethical relationships.\(^{158}\) Merold Westphal, for example, is a thinker who questions the realism of such non-reciprocal and asymmetrical relationships. Referring to Levinas, Westphal asks: “Isn’t there a need especially in a thinker who evokes messianic peace as Levinas does, to talk about the kind of reciprocity that represents both a moral and social ideal?”\(^{159}\) In other words, would not the emphasis on so much separation, difference and division between the subject and the Other lend itself to greater violence and less peace? Even on a metaphysical level, Levinas’s and Derrida’s view would seem to suggest that “hostility and division constitute the ontological essence of hospitality.”\(^{160}\)

Treanor argues that alterity is relative rather than absolute. Describing another challenge inherent in the Levinasian-Derridean idea of otherness, Treanor thinks it is unable to provide a real, concrete and practical application to human life. It seems to speak of an abstraction. Of course, Levinas does not want the Other to be a generalized abstraction; he is arguing that the Other is “beyond” abstraction and reveals infinity. For this reason, Levinas responds to this criticism of the face being “abstract” by emphasizing the “performative” dimension of the ethical realm, in which the Other “shows up” through an encounter with her face. Thus, to Levinas, the face of the other person reveals


\(^{160}\) Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 74.
the trace of the Absolute Other and breaks past the realm of “totalitizing” into the realm of infinity.

When we consider the language Levinas uses to describe “the event” (i.e. hospitality, encounter with the Other, etc.), and its emphasis on separation and distance, we can wonder how intimate this relationship with the other could be, if for Levinas, “the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!”

We may assume, as do many commentators, that Levinas intentionally uses hyperbolic language here to emphasize the radical nature of human alterity. However, Levinas does say that to notice the other person’s nose, eyes, forehead and chin is to turn toward “the Other as toward an object.” The reason for this, he holds, is that if I were to notice that a person has red hair, for example, this would seem to reduce her to a kind of category, the category of “red-haired people.” In fact, when speaking about our tendency to observe and notice features of others, Levinas says that our sense of sight is not actually helpful in allowing us to experience the Other. This is because he believes that vision is “dominated by perception” which seeks to represent and categorize (colors, shapes, etc.) and thus, according to Levinas, reduces the other to an object. Instead of physically observing another person, Levinas believes the “authentic relationship with the

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164 Ibid., 86.
Other” is best described by “discourse, and more exactly, response or responsibility” for
the other.\textsuperscript{165}

It is not difficult to notice the inconsistency in the Levinasian-Derridean approach
which claims that every other is an “absolute other” and every duty is an “absolute duty.”
Shepherd explains: “Derrida’s move in absolutizing ‘absolute duty’ and calling the
Abrahamic sacrifice ‘the most common and everyday experience of responsibility,’ …
rather than affirming the singularity and particularity of the Other, reduces all Others to
the same level.”\textsuperscript{166} In claiming that every “Other” is absolutely “other” Derrida and
Levinas end up dissolving the uniqueness and singular concreteness of the individual
person. Mary-Jane Rubenstein reiterates this critique of Derrida (which would also apply
to Levinas):

It is astounding that a thinker so concerned with difference could efface it so
completely. If every other is just as other as every other, then God is different
from Fred in the same way that Fred is different from his cat in the same way that
the cat’s ball of yarn is different from God. And if all otherness is identical to all
other otherness, then every otherness is the same, the singular is no longer
singular, the finite no longer finite, and all difference is identity. Without different
kinds of difference, there is no difference.\textsuperscript{167}

Rubenstein’s point is this: if the absolute difference of each and every person applies to
all persons, then ironically, one instance of the absolute other becomes identical with all
the rest.

In other words, Levinas and Derrida’s noble search to avoid reductionism and
totalizing gets frustrated by their belief in an absolute alterity. As David Wood points out,
if every single Other, imposes on me an infinite obligation to respond to them as other,

\textsuperscript{166} Shepherd, \textit{The Gift of the Other}, 75.
\textsuperscript{167} Rubenstein, “Relationality,” 78.
this not only suggests an unrealistic scenario, as if each of us bears the weight of responsibility for every Other, but it also denies my situatedness, because “it seems to return us to occupy a universal space in which we could be anywhere.” If every other is totally other in the same radical way, then it follows that others are just like every other. Similarly, if the face-to-face encounter is to provide the most concrete, personal encounter with another person, is it not strange to think that the face of the absolutely other would not even seem to be an actual face? In attempting to avoid reducing the other to the same, Levinas and Derrida end up in the quandary of trying to show how the other’s irreducible uniqueness can be maintained.

As we have seen, both Levinas and Derrida put forth the view that for hospitality to be genuine, it must be unconditional and nonreciprocal, and they believe this based on their ontological view that alterity must be absolute. Based on these convictions, Levinas and Derrida propose “something of a Copernican revolution in Western thought;” they “seek to replace a metaphysic of transcendental ontology with a metaphysic of ethical response.” But as Shepherd legitimately asks, is such a post-metaphysical philosophy “really possible, or for that matter, ultimately necessary?”

As we will see, Marcel offers a fusion of these two alternatives through his metaphysics of hospitality. While still making the “ethical response” primary, Marcel remains within the realm of a “transcendental ontology.” Let us turn now to consider

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171 Ibid.
172 Ibid., 92.
some initial ways in which he would respond to Levinas and Derrida in terms of their view of alterity and its effect on hospitality.

4. Towards Marcel’s Relative Alterity

Marcel is certainly in agreement with the valuable concerns which the view of absolute alterity seeks to address. In fact, as we saw in chapter three, his distinction between problem and mystery touches these ethical and epistemological matters directly. Marcel argues that when we view human persons primarily through the lens of the problematical, then we are reducing them to an object. Similarly, Marcel is critical of epistemological strains – rooted in Cartesianism – which attempt to calculate and objectify reality in a narrow and reductionistic way. Thus, ontologically speaking, Marcel’s problem and mystery distinction seems to offer the same benefits which the Levinasian/Derridean account of alterity proposes, without their inherent difficulties.

Let us begin our discussion of how Marcel would respond critically to Levinas and Derrida by mentioning the simple fact that latent within the philosophy of both thinkers is already a kind of self-contradiction. As David Wood and other commentators have noted, the Levinasian/Derridean view of ontology has a built-in incoherence. The problem consists in this: when Levinas and Derrida “assert” a phrase like, tout autre est tout autre, we are still thinking and speaking using Western philosophical “logo-centric” language. Treanor points out this inconsistency as he explains: “the attempt to think or speak the other inevitably betrays him as other [because what is] ‘said’ of the other is
never adequate to what the other ‘is.’”

Although both Levinas and Derrida recognize this challenge, neither offers a satisfactory response.

In Marcel’s view of hospitality, the way in which persons encounter one another is not as absolutely different but rather as an experience of both sameness and difference. As Treanor explains: Levinas’s and Derrida’s view of absolute alterity is “not an account of the way things actually are. Yes, the other is absolutely other than the self, but he is also similar to the self.”

Treanor further explains:

[Any particular] autrui who crosses my path is encountered precisely insofar as he is not absolutely other. Any encounter with any other is made possible by the crossing of otherness with similarity. That is, any encounter with any other is an encounter with something or someone who is relatively, not absolutely, other.

Any encounter that I have with another person necessarily must be with someone who is not absolutely other; if she were so far removed, it could not qualify as an encounter.

Treanor points out:

[From] the Marcelian perspective Levinas is guilty of succumbing to the spirit of abstraction, even if he does so in an unusual way and for laudable reasons. He has “abstracted” (absolute) alterity from the chiasmus with similitude in which it is encountered, speaking of alterity as if it were both distinct from and independent of similitude.

As Treanor notes, Marcel’s view of alterity is chiastic, related to the Greek letter χι (X, χ), meaning it is a kind of intercrossing of two distinct things. Marcel will agree that the self and the other are distinct, yet he will also not separate the two realities to such an extent that there is no possibility for communion between them.
Marcel’s relative alterity means he believes that there needs to be a dual concern within interpersonal relationships; yes, I need to respect the otherness of the person, but more importantly, I need to foster communion with the other, which means discovering the aspects which we share in common. As Treanor remarks, unlike absolute alterity which posits a radical difference between the self and the other, relative alterity involves no ethical imperative to preserve this difference.\textsuperscript{177} Absolute otherness tends to be concerned with justice, while relative otherness tends to be focused on love. Treanor explains:

Marcel’s non-absolute view of otherness leads to a philosophy that puts a premium on intimacy and participation. If otherness is merely relative, understanding the other is a possibility and the ethical concern becomes one of trying to understand better … Because of the emphasis on bridging distance and understanding, philosophies of relative otherness tend to take love, rather than justice, as the model for relating to others.\textsuperscript{178}

As we will continue to see in the next chapter, the concept of \textit{disponibilité}, or availability, provides a bridge for reconciling the self and the other, and enables Marcel to avoid the difficulties that arise from holding to a view of absolute alterity. I quote a rather lengthy passage in Treanor which offers an excellent summary of Marcel’s alternative approach:

The mystery revealed in \textit{disponibilité} illustrates Marcel’s unique version of relative otherness, which is both non-absolute and non-totalizing. The self and the other can relate to each other in a manner that allows for real understanding; however, they can never form a totality. Things may be ordered within my field of attention and encompassed in my systems, but other persons remain their own “center” – even as they participate with me in relationships of presence. Beings who are their own centers “can no longer be introduced as simple unities in a totality” and, therefore, Marcel refers to such participatory relationships as “constellations.” This evocative word expresses the position that the self and the other are clearly distinct from each other, yet linked in a meaningful way. This

\textsuperscript{177} Cf. Treanor, \textit{Aspects of Alterity}, 8.
\textsuperscript{178} Cf. Ibid.
notion of otherness is an essentially chiastic one, which informs the philosophies of thinkers such as Paul Ricœur and Richard Kearney.179

In other words, Marcel’s ontology of communion allows him to posit a view that allows for both mutual participation and genuine alterity.

In one sense, the utmost respect for the other person as totally other and thus never an object to be manipulated or defined makes the Levinasian/Derridean account of otherness very attractive. In fact, in Treanor’s view, Levinas’s account of intersubjectivity accomplishes the “laudable goals – ethical selflessness and epistemological circumspection,” that a theory of absolute alterity aims to uphold.180 However, like Marcel, we do not believe that what Treanor mentions are, in fact, “laudable goals.” As a philosopher of participation and the concrete, Marcel would not agree with the language used by Treanor in this regard. While fundamentally agreeing that relative alterity is necessary for genuine communion, Marcel does not adhere to an “ethical selflessness” nor an “epistemological circumspection” because these describe philosophies of altruism and abstraction, respectively, both of which Marcel rejects. Marcel believes the human person is made for self-gift to others, which an ethical selflessness cannot support.

At this point, we can speculate that Marcel would ask questions along the lines which Treanor and Shepherd raise: “Do sameness and otherness have to be seen as mutually exclusive or in a constant state of oppositional conflict? Is it possible to conceive of an ontology in which sameness/unity and otherness/difference coexist peacefully?”181 As we will see in Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, it is possible to

180 Treanor, “Constellations,” 376.
181 Shepherd, The Gift of the Other, 95.
have both – full respect for the other’s difference and yet an understanding of our common humanity (rooted in ontological mystery).

Through his notions of mystery, presence, *disponibilité* and participation Marcel is able to avoid the pitfalls that the Levinasian-Derridean view of hospitality involves. As we will see, Marcel posits a view of *relative* alterity which fully respects the singular irreducibility of the other, and yet does so within the framework of being. Marcel’s understanding of being is always a “being-with.” For this reason, he is able to account for the coexistence of sameness/difference in reality because his metaphysical framework is an *ontology of communion*. To use the words of Ricoeur, Marcel’s ethics and ontology are always tied or “knotted” together (*éthique et ontologie se nouent*)."\(^{182}\)

**D. Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have examined the philosophies of hospitality of the two most prominent names on the topic, Levinas and Derrida. We have also considered the ontological framework guiding these two thinkers and in particular. With an understanding of their metaphysical assumptions behind us, we explored the ramifications of the Levinasian/Derridean view of absolute alterity. Finally, we examined one of the most problematic consequences of their view of absolute otherness, namely, the non-reciprocity of hospitality. We concluded that although Levinas and Derrida offer valuable contributions concerning the nature of intersubjectivity and hospitality, their

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views are not complete, primarily because of the ontological framework which guides their thought.

As we will see in the next chapter, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality provides a more complete picture because it involves a mutual gift exchange. In contrast to the idea shared by Levinas and Derrida that hospitality must be unconditional and asymmetrical, Marcel believes that in offering hospitality or any gift, there is still an openness for a mutual exchange of giving and receiving. Although the three thinkers discuss the nature of hospitality, Marcel’s view differs markedly from Levinas and Derrida, because his ethical personalism is firmly grounded in ontological mystery.
CHAPTER FIVE: MARCEL’S METAPHYSICS OF HOSPITALITY

“In every conceivable case love signifies much the same as approval .... It is a way of turning to [the other person] … and saying, ‘It’s good that you exist; it’s good that you are in this world!’”¹

— Josef Pieper

In the first four chapters of this thesis, we have developed the ancillary ideas for gaining a deeper understanding of Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. First, we saw Marcel’s concern for the plight of the broken world which has fractured relationships; then we looked at a survey of the concept of hospitality in its cultural and sociological dimensions; next we considered Marcel’s metaphysical terms which he uses to express his ontological personalism, and lastly, we discussed the two leading voices in contemporary philosophy of hospitality studies – Levinas and Derrida – and how their views on hospitality compare to Marcel’s. At this point of our journey, we are ready to dive into the center of our topic: the metaphysics of hospitality according to Marcel.

While Marcel only refers to the term (hospitalité) a handful of times in his works, I venture to agree with Mark Rozahegy when he suggests that for Marcel, “the issue of hospitality is not simply a passing concern;” rather, it is at the heart of his writings and is “that concept around which [his] work is organized.”² If the idea of hospitality lies at the heart of Marcel’s philosophical vision, as I believe it does, then it makes sense that we can discern its presence throughout his works. We will begin this chapter by describing

² Mark Pierre Rozahegy, “Between Being and Having: Incarnation and Corporeity in Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, Artaud and Hejduk” (Ph.D. diss., Montréal, Concordia University, 2003), 393.
several key Marcelian concepts which inform his view of hospitality. These concepts are: *disponibilité* and presence, participation and being-with, and sacredness and human dignity. Once I have prepared the groundwork with these foundational ideas, I will devote the final two sections to Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality in its context in *The Mystery of Being* and how it offers a remedy for the broken world, primarily through love.

A. *Disponibilité* and Presence

*Disponibilité* imbues everything Marcel aims to communicate with his philosophy. As McCown expresses it: “Reflection upon the notion of availability involves us increasingly in the full scope of Marcel’s philosophical adventure.”

Similarly, Marcel tells us that he considers *disponibilité* to be “the essential characteristic of the person;” this description speaks volumes when we recall the fact that the human person is Marcel’s primary philosophical concern. But what exactly does Marcel mean by *disponibilité*?

First of all, it is an *attitude* or disposition of the human person, which could also be called a virtue. *Disponibilité* is a kind of spiritual availability or readiness to receive other persons. Translator Robert Rosthal explains how the word resists translation:

> There does not seem to be any single word in English which adequately renders the French *disponibilité*. The term is generally translatable as availability –

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4 Marcel, *HV*, 23.
5 Bernard Gendreau summarizes the way in which Marcel makes the theme of man of paramount importance: “His lifelong philosophical reflection was dedicated to the task of developing a comprehensive existentialist, humanist, personalist, and Christian view of the human person in its integrity and its dignity as living in the world and as open in its being to a higher level of transcendence both within itself as open to the spiritual and beyond itself as open to other persons and to God.” Bernard Gendreau, “Gabriel Marcel’s Personalist Ontological Approach to Technology,” *The Personalist Forum* 15, no. 2 (1999): 234.
spiritual availability in this context, i.e. openness to the other, readiness to respond, forthrightness, etc.⁶

While some translations render it “ disposability,” I find this word undesirable because of its connotation with things that have little or no value, in the sense that a “ disposable” item is one that is designed to be thrown away. This, in fact, is completely the opposite meaning that Marcel intends with the term, which he understands as a kind of openness towards others that is actually based on their value. As Westphal explains, disponibilité is “ not, of course, in the sense of a disposable diaper but in the sense of being ‘ at your disposal.’ ”⁷ Marcel provides a helpful explanation of disponibilité when he is describing his related concept of presence:

It is an undeniable fact, though it is hard to describe in intelligible terms, that there are some people who reveal themselves as “ present” – that is to say, at our disposal [comme disponibles] – when we are in pain or in need to confide in someone, while there are other people who do not give us this feeling …. The most attentive and the most conscientious listener may give me the impression of not being present; he gives me nothing, he cannot make room for me in himself, whatever the material favours which he is prepared to grant me.⁸

As this wonderful passage enables us to see, Marcel conceives of disponibilité as a kind of hospitality. To be present and at the “ disposal” of someone else means to “ make room” for her in myself. Marcel elucidates this idea by the example of an outwardly attentive and conscientious listener (someone who conducts the external aspects of listening flawlessly), yet she gives off the vibe of being not present; she is “ distant,” and “ unavailable.” Marcel is talking here primarily about an interior disposition, a kind of interior space within the person which allows others to feel that she is truly present and

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⁶ Robert Rosthal in Marcel, CF, 57n1.
⁸ Marcel, PE, 39–40.
open to receive them. My being physically “there” and externally available is not sufficient.

To understand this better, let us consider how disponibilité is intimately tied up with Marcel’s other notions of presence and mystery. Marcel explains in his own words:

When I say that a being is granted to me as a presence or as a being (it comes to the same, for he is not a being for me unless he is a presence), 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 – or, rather, these categories are transcended, they have no longer any meaning.⁹

Presence, for Marcel, does not primarily refer to the physical proximity of an object or a person. Rather, it describes the metaphysical and spiritual closeness of one personal being to another. It means: “Even if I cannot see you, if I cannot touch you, I feel that you are with me.”¹⁰ In his essay, “Ego and its Relation to Others,” published in his work Homo Viator, Marcel attempts “as far as possible” to define what he means by presence. He writes:

Presence denotes something rather different and more comprehensive than the fact of just being there; to be quite exact one should not actually say that an object is present. We might say that presence is always dependent on an experience … the sense of existing, of being in the world. Very early in the development of a human being this consciousness of existing… is linked up with the urge to make ourselves recognised by some other person, some witness, helper, rival or adversary who, whatever may be said, is needed to integrate the self, but whose place in the field of consciousness can vary almost indefinitely.¹¹

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⁹ Ibid., 38.
¹⁰ Ibid., 39.
¹¹ Marcel, HV, 15.
Marcel’s wisdom here not only carries profound implications for philosophical
anthropology but also provides deep insight for psychology.12 Basically, he is saying that,
from the very beginning stages of life, a human being has an innate tendency to connect
his own existence with the experience of being recognized by another person, as a means
for integrating “the self.” Marcel holds that human persons are uniquely orientated
towards relationship, such that each of us needs another “self” to teach us that we are
each a “self” too.

Like Levinas, Marcel sees a profound difference between the presence of an
object and the presence of a person. Marcel states: “to be quite exact one should not
actually say that an object is present.” This is because presence is equivalent to a being-with
that is more than functional and certainly not only material. It is another way in
which Marcel understands what might be called his ontology of communion, i.e. that in
our very being, we are made for connection and relationship. Although we certainly
interact with objects (inanimate things) all the time, it is only with persons, that we can
experience their presence. Treanor points out that even though I can “encounter things in
a manner that is objectifying, grasping and frequently technical, the encounter with the
other person offers another, unique possibility, … a relationship ‘with’ another person.”13
Thus, the disposition of presence makes true encounters with other persons possible.

For Marcel the notion of presence brings us into the realm of mystery, because
presence is more than a physical closeness; it is a spiritual being-with which cannot be
conceptualized in an abstract way. Moreover, when I experience the presence of another

12 For example, see Jim Lantz, “Marcel’s ‘Availability’ in Existential Psychotherapy with Couples and Families,” Contemporary Family Therapy 16, no. 6 (1994): 489–501.
person, it is by way of encountering her as mystery, since her presence somehow involves me, unlike a mere object which I can view as a problem outside of me. We know when another person is especially present and available to us, an experience which is different than a physical proximity; it is a spiritual and metaphysical reality.

If the experience of presence is a mystery and therefore not a “characteristic” of persons that can be objectively quantified, then how can we “know” its reality? As we have seen, Marcel thinks there is a kind of knowing that is broader and deeper than what can be stated in logical propositions. It is the kind of knowledge we have of mystery which we come to know through our hearts, as Pascal famously rendered in his *Pensées*: “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.” Marcel argues that this reality of presence, even if it is unquantifiable, is no less real and recognizable when we experience it; “Presence is something which reveals itself immediately and unmistakably in a look, a smile, an intonation or a handshake.” It is notable that Marcel suggests that it is personal qualities – like a person’s smile or intonation – that best reveal her presence. How far this depiction of genuine inter-subjectivity is from Levinas’s statement that we should not even notice the color of the eyes of the Other whom we encounter!

Although the attitudes of *disponibilité* and presence cannot be equated with Marcel’s notion of hospitality, it is evident that these concepts are deeply intertwined. All genuine acts of hospitality, Marcel would say, necessarily imply being spiritually available and present to the other. Furthermore, it is fair to say that he would hold that no real hospitality is possible if this attitude of *disponibilité* is not present.

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As an ethical category, Marcel’s concept of presence is helpful, because like availability, it stresses the internal disposition of the moral agent, and not just external actions. Concretely, this gift of oneself is manifested in the degree of “being present to” and availability that a person is able to show by means of listening and being there for others. As Marcel tells us: “Everything depends on the attitude with which I have given myself.”

Similarly, when I am present to another person, I am saying: “I am opening an unlimited credit account in your name, you can do what you want with me, I give myself to you.” As this quote illustrates, Marcel’s view of intersubjectivity is remarkably close to Levinas’s, in Marcel’s claims that the person who is present offers an “unlimited” openness and availability to the other, implying a kind of “infinite” horizon.

Although Marcel adamantly believes that the proper ethical response to another person is a mode of availability and presence, he nevertheless acknowledges that often people live in a state of indisponibilité in which the other person is not a presence to him but merely “an object.” The simple fact of seeing the other individual only as a “him” rather than a “you” is already acting toward that person like they are “absent” even if they are physically present. Marcel cites the example of meeting someone on a train, “a Mr. so-and-so, the particulars of whose biography I get to know bit by bit.” Even though I may be addressing the man, it is fully possible that I am treating him as just “someone” with whom I exchange platitudes about the weather or other pieces of information; in other words, I am not present to him. Yet, on the other hand, Marcel tells us, there are

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16 Marcel, *CF*, 40.
17 Ibid.
18 Marcel, *PE*, 40.
20 Ibid., 33.
those cases when “a bond of feeling is created” between us, such as with the stranger on the train. It could happen that we somehow discover that we have experienced similar joys or sorrows in life, or have even “loved the same book.”\textsuperscript{21} When this occurs, “a unity is established in which the other person and myself become we, and this means that he ceases to be a him and becomes thou; the words ‘you too’ in this context take on primary value.”\textsuperscript{22} Marcel’s development of the concepts of presence and disposibilité give a fuller context to his philosophy of intersubjectivity, his belief that human persons exist to be in relationship and that the proper relation is the I-thou.

Marcel seems to come to an understanding of what disposibilité is by distinguishing it from what it is not, its opposite vice of indisponibilité. How many of us have had the experience of being physically in the same room with someone but spiritually and emotionally, the other is not felt as present? She seems distant and unavailable to me. This is what Marcel means by indisponibilité. Marcel explains: “The truth is that there is a way of listening which is a way of refusing, of refusing oneself; the material gift, the visible action, do not necessarily witness to presence.”\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, Marcel describes how the spiritually unavailable person is the one who simply cannot make room for the other in himself; he is not open to the personal gift of the other. Thus, as we have been saying, the material and physical proximity of two persons is not sufficient to guarantee an experience of genuine communion, intersubjectivity or presence. Marcel gives this example:

For instance, we can have a very strong feeling that someone who is there in the room, very close to us, someone whom we see and hear and whom we can touch, is nevertheless not present. He is infinitely farther from us than such a loved one

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Marcel, \textit{PE}, 40.
who is thousands of miles away or who even no longer belongs to our world. What then is this presence which is lacking?24 His answer is that the “presence” which is lacking is not because of an inability to communicate, for these persons are “not deaf, nor blind, nor half-witted.” Between me and this other person, a “certain material communication is assured, but only a material one.” Thus, Marcel laments that the essential thing lacking is *communion*. Because this scenario would be merely a “communication without communion,” it would not be a real communication.25

Furthermore, Marcel explains that the result of such an “encounter” (which is not a true encounter) is that even though we may exchange words and gestures with one another, I in my true self, am not received by the other: “The other hears the words that I say; but he does not hear me … By a singular phenomenon, the other interposes himself between me and my own reality; he makes me in some way a stranger to myself …”26

Similar to Levinas’s idea that the self is ego-centric and caught up in selfish satisfaction of his own needs (the natural state of *jouissance*) without the encounter with the Other, Marcel believes that the human person on her own naturally tends towards *indisponibilité*, i.e. self-centeredness. Paradoxically, the only way for a person to fully realize herself is to actually give herself to another. This act of self-giving, of genuine love, is at the core of Marcel’s phenomenological description of the moral concept of *disponibilité*. As Vincent Miceli explains, the self-centered person is unavailable as well as “uncommitted” to others. He writes:

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25 Cf. Ibid.
26 Ibid.
[The self-centered person who lacks *disponibilité*] is unable, because unwilling, to respond to the call made upon him by life, his own and fellowmen’s; he refuses to answer appeals for sympathy, shutting himself up in his shell, not daring to go beyond the secluded circle of his own petty experiences, engrossed in the trivialities that hold him enchained exclusively to his own sterile existence.²⁷

Marcel explains: “To be incapable of presence is to be in some manner not only occupied but encumbered with one’s own self.”²⁸ However, he tells us that this preoccupation with oneself could be over any number of different things – one’s health, one’s future or even one’s moral perfection: “This shows that to be occupied with oneself is not so much to be occupied with a *particular object* as to be occupied in a *particular manner.*”²⁹ In other words, Marcel is drawing our attention to the *attitude* behind the inability to be present or available. Writing about the sad condition of the person who is closed in on herself, Marcel says:

Let us say that the *ego*, as such, is ruled by a sort of vague fascination, which is localized, almost by chance, in objects arousing sometimes desire, sometimes terror. It is, however, precisely against such a condition that what I consider the essential characteristic of the person is opposed, the characteristic, that is to say, of availability (*disponibilité*).³⁰

Essentially, Marcel is saying that the person who lacks *disponibilité*, in some sense, becomes less of a human being in so far as her ultimate fulfillment is the gift of self and communion with others. Marcel states: “Unavailability is invariably rooted in some measure of alienation.”³¹

Another term, very similar in meaning to *disponibilité*, which Marcel uses to describe the attitude of openness and availability towards others is *receptivity*

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²⁷ Miceli, *Ascent to Being*, 106.
²⁸ Marcel, *PE*, 42.
²⁹ Ibid.
³¹ Marcel, *PE*, 40.
(réceptivité). He writes, “I hold in principle, that … receptivity can only be considered in connection with a certain readiness or pre-ordination.”

Speaking specifically of the act of hospitality, Marcel writes: “to receive is not to fill up a void with an alien presence but to make the other person participate in a certain plenitude.” As Marcel’s description illustrates, his notion of receptivity seems to bring us closer to his idea of hospitality since hospitality is an attitude of welcoming or receiving others. McCown provides a helpful summary of what Marcel’s understanding of receptivity entails:

Human receptivity refers to a certain interior state, or attitude, which corresponds to, attunes itself to, an action upon the self. The mode of this sort of receptivity is to receive, or to welcome (accueillir), a guest into a room or a home, or even into a garden. Persons do not receive on unknown terrain, as in a forest. We have to be ‘at home,’ as we receive – at home with ourselves or present to ourselves.

This attitude of being available so as to “receive” another into what is one’s own, whether it be an actual room or physical space, or into one’s “self,” is an essential ingredient for hospitality to take place. Similarly, only the receptive (disponible) person is actively open to the I-thou relationship, an openness that allows for genuine interpersonal communion.

Marcel tells us he is interested in probing the “specific complex human relationship” that is present when we say that one person has received another person. He goes on to say that we are dealing with a “mystery here,” since the genuine meaning of receptivity in the context of interpersonal relationships is “to admit in or welcome an outsider into one’s home.” This language clearly speaks of hospitality, this disposition of receiving “the other person, the stranger, into a region which has these qualities [of

32 Marcel, CF, 89.
33 Ibid., 28. I will explain the technical meaning which Marcel uses for his term participation in the next section of this chapter.
34 Marcel, MBI, 118; McCown, Marcel and Human Openness, 19.
35 Cf. Marcel, CF, 27.
36 Ibid.
feeling ‘at home’] and to admit him to participate in it.\textsuperscript{37} We are treading on the ground of \textit{mystery} with these realities because they are phenomena we can all relate to, yet they are realities which resist quantitative analysis. Marcel writes: “I suggest … that the intimate and mysterious relation expressed by the phrase ‘feeling at home’ has scarcely caught the attention of philosophers up to now.”\textsuperscript{38} When we consider more explicitly Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, we will return to this important, yet understudied, quality of “feeling at home.”

Another aspect of availability which Marcel is keen to point out is that it is not a stance of mere passivity, like the manner in which wax “receives” an imprint; neither is \textit{disponibilité} a static attitude before another person. It is, in fact, an \textit{active} disposition. This contrasts with Levinas’s view that “hospitality,” as the welcoming of the Other in the face-to-face encounter, is a \textit{passive} event.\textsuperscript{39} In speaking about receptivity, Marcel compares it with “feeling,” since he thinks that both concepts have wrongly been understood as “passivity” or “undergoing.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus, Marcel asserts:

When we have clearly understood that feeling is not reducible to undergoing although it is still a receiving, we will be able to discover the presence of an active element in feeling, something like the power of taking upon oneself, or better, of opening oneself to…\textsuperscript{41}

Although the concepts of feeling and receptivity are distinct and Marcel admits their connection is only indirect, he nevertheless considers the link between them as having great importance.\textsuperscript{42} Marcel compares the two realities because he wants to

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{40} Marcel, \textit{CF}, 28.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 28–29.
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Ibid., 28.
emphasize the fact that even though each is ordinarily considered as something passive, in reality, both receptivity and affectivity include the “presence of an active element.” 43

McCown explains the paradoxical character of Marcel’s understanding:

The human meaning of receptivity, then, is to introduce the other into a qualified (and privileged) zone of our experience or life, a region which is uniquely our own, which we have readied or prepared by investing something of ourselves in it. Receptivity – at least in this human sense of a reception – is not passive. At its center is an active element, something like a power of taking upon ourselves or into ourselves … or better still, the power of opening ourselves to … [de s’ouvrir à …] Reception [in regard to human interaction] transcends the dilemma of activity versus passivity … ; it is no longer meaningful to speak in these terms. 44

Derrida argues that every act of hospitality must be unconditional and surprising for the host, (i.e. a visitation) because anything else would allow the host to remain in a position of power. Marcel’s view, however, is that if there is any type of power in us as hosts, it is a power of taking upon ourselves or into ourselves the other. It is a power to open ourselves to the other, because we share a common humanity. Receptivity and disponibilité are virtues which express themselves as deep, fundamental attitudes; they depict an internal and open disposition that a person has towards values.

According to Marcel, an experience of authentic receptivity transcends the categories of active and passive because our relationship with the world is not metaphysically flat; there are layers of meaning within human experience. Marcel tells us:

[What] traditional empiricism failed to see was that experience is not, in any sense, something which resembles an impermeable mass. I would rather say that experience is receptive to very different degrees of saturation. 45

43 Ibid., 29.
44 McCown, Marcel and Human Openness, 19.
45 Marcel, MBI, 55.
In other words, there is an ontological hierarchy of values in human life, ranging from material to spiritual with different degrees of “saturation” in between. Human life is not one-dimensional, for it is composed of many layers of values; these values – physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, aesthetic, etc. – are what “saturate” our experience with meaning.

Furthermore, Marcel consistently points out the importance of feeling, or affectivity, in how we experience the most essential values of human existence. He believes that to receive another person authentically has both a distinctively active and affective component. To be available for another person out of a merely Kantian sense of duty is not authentic disponibilité. Treanor and Sweetman elaborate on the fact that Marcel’s concepts of presence and availability have an undeniably affective component. They write: “Because disponibilité is only a philosophical way of describing what we mean by love and trust, disponibilité is inconceivable without this affective element.”

Marcel’s concern is to show that these human experiences – disponibilité as well as hospitality – are not about their merely external dimensions. If the heart is not involved, then these acts lose their meaning.

In speaking about the experience of “feeling at home,” which he connects very much with receptivity, Marcel reveals even further how the affective dimension is

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48 Treanor and Sweetman, “Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.”
essential. In the case of hospitality, it is not enough to provide all the external elements (a house, a bed, food, etc.) for someone if they do not “feel” at home. Marcel would fully agree with the sentiment behind the cliché: “home is where the heart is.” Moreover, Marcel’s interest in the meaning of “feeling at home,” lies also in the fact that such an experience is precisely one of intersubjectivity and communion on the level of ontological participation. He declares, “There is only a ‘feeling at home’ with respect to a self (soi), and that self can be the self of another person, a being capable of asserting I.”

Similarly, in an attempt to describe the very real, but elusive, experience of what it means to “feel at home,” Marcel writes:

I cannot refer to my feeling at home unless I grant or imply that the self does or can seem to itself to impregnate its environment with its own quality, thereby recognizing itself in its surroundings and entering into an intimate relationship with it.  

Marcel captures here a glimpse into an experience all humans can understand. The more that I feel “at home” somewhere (e.g. our mother’s warm kitchen as opposed to a hotel restaurant), the more I feel a certain connection with myself. Moreover, Marcel is pointing out the valuable observation that when I feel “at home,” such as simply being with people I love and who love me, I feel most “myself.” Marcel, unlike Levinas and Derrida, holds to the view that I actually need to “feel at home” with myself in order to properly welcome the other. For Marcel, hospitality in its ideal expression is not a visitation that violates us and takes us by surprise, but rather, it is an invitation that we can offer freely to the other, which not only enriches the other but also myself.

49 Marcel, CF, 27.
50 Ibid., 27–28.
B. Participation and Being-With

Integral to Marcel’s understanding of metaphysics and his idea of presence is his important concept of participation. Like so many of his insights, Marcel’s notion of participation is at once a metaphysical and an ethical idea. Although the concept permeates all of his writings, Marcel as well as his commentators tell us that participation is one of the most difficult of his notions to put into words.

To begin with, Marcel makes it clear that the meaning of this term is not to be understood in the Platonic sense, as if the things we experience in this world are merely shadows of ideal Forms. Rather, Marcel thinks that human beings participate in reality. Marcel tells us that his greatest difficulty in trying to explain the term participation is how to do so without “converting it into an objective relation,” which would sabotage the very meaning of participation. One simple way to understand Marcel’s idea of participation is that it is the manner in which human beings dwell in the world. Strongly rejecting idealistic philosophies such as Schopenhauer’s, Marcel declares: “I am in the world only insofar as the world is not a representation, but as something shaping me as in a womb.” In another place, he writes that our participation in the world is a “primordial bond, a kind of umbilical cord …[uniting] the human being to a particular, determined and concrete environment.” As we can see, these phrases in which Marcel compares our engagement in the world to that of a living child in the womb of his mother reveal at least two things about Marcel’s notion of participation: 1) he believes being is imbued with

51 Ibid., 21.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 29.
54 Marcel, TWB, 38.
personal presence and thus we are made for communion with others, and 2) our engagement with being is something active and creative, rather than abstract and lifeless.

Related to this image of being shaped in a womb, Marcel holds that our existence as corporeal beings is a prerequisite for our possibility to experience and to offer presence and disponibilité to others. McCown summarizes this idea that our sensing bodies are the ground for our availability as he writes:

The human body is a finitude and a facticity; it is also our point of view, that particular vision of the universe which, uniquely, is given to us. It is possible for us to see our flesh (the world of our embodiment) as a limit and restriction imposed upon us; or we can interpret “flesh” as a milieu of communication and communion, that region of the cosmos where word and presence become incarnate.\(^{55}\)

With these ideas, we are touching upon the reason why Marcel refers to his philosophy as one of “concrete existence.” Because our mundane and tangible bodies are the means for our experiences of all forms of transcendence, including personal intimacy, Marcel calls the fact that we are incarnate beings “the central given of metaphysics.”\(^{56}\) As Straus and Machado explain, in our concrete existence as persons, we are not primarily detached observers, but rather, we are participants. They write:

We are already engaged in and live off our existential situation before we can stand back and observe what has been going on prior to our thinking about it or taking note of it. Hence participation is the foundation of our experience of existing.\(^{57}\)

\(^{55}\) McCown, Marcel and Human Openness, 35.
\(^{56}\) Marcel, BH, 11.
As we saw in chapter three, Marcel is clear to point out that human beings are not mere “spectators” who are observing the world from some objective stance.\textsuperscript{58} We are, above all, participants in the mystery of being.

In his study on Marcel’s philosophy, Roger Troisfontaines explains that Marcel’s view of participation is intelligible on two main levels:

Given the fundamental analogy between the two levels of participation with regard to being, are we not justified in admitting that the sensory receptivity of the existing subject to surrounding influences already foreshadows or pre-forms the availability necessary for the personal being to concretely integrate herself into the spiritual universe?\textsuperscript{59}

In other words, the way that the bodily person receives sensory input from the world mirrors how she is made available to the realm of spiritual and personal values. The latter experience – to which Marcel gives the various names of communion, intersubjectivity and \textit{disponibilité} – is a “development of the submerged and pre-reflective participation of sensation.”\textsuperscript{60} Through our bodies, we immediately participate through our senses with the material world, and through our spirits we immediately participate with other spiritual persons.

Participation has different levels and degrees of saturation, since we already know that Marcel understands being as a plenitude or fullness. Thus, the spiritual act of participation “engages us at varying depths.”\textsuperscript{61} While our physical bodies specifically enable us to participate in the world around us, our incarnate spirits render us capable of

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. Marcel, \textit{EBHD}, 82.
\textsuperscript{60} McCown, \textit{Marcel and Human Openness}, 49.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 50.
communion. As McCown explains, “participation in the mystery of being is through communion.”

Marcel argues that to be human means to participate in the mystery of being, which only a spiritual subject can do. Thus, when I engage with the mysterious, I enter into “a participation on which my reality as a subject is based.”

Marcel explains that it is because individuals living in the broken world of today so often eclipse the realm of mystery and focus primarily on the problematical that they not only suffer impoverishment on the level of human relationships but also in regard to their own senses of self. This reality of participation in the realm of mystery also “gives me to myself insofar as I give myself to it; it is through the mediation of the act in which I center myself on it, that I truly become a subject.” In other words, I become who I am by means of my participation in the world around me, and in a particular way through communion with other persons. As Anderson explains, Marcel’s “point is that the self that I am is to a great extent the result of the particular circumstances in which I have lived and with which I have interacted throughout my life.” Thus, each one of us, through our concrete participation in the circumstances which are uniquely ours, is shaped into the unique personal being that she is. All the particular circumstances of our lives are “noncontingent” in relation to our person, since “the fundamental situation which is mine … shapes me into myself.”

Marcel’s notion of participation is rooted in his belief that “to exist is to co-exist,” or, as he likes to express it, coesse. Gallagher explains: “Esse est coesse” [to be

62 Ibid.
63 Marcel, CF, 56.
64 Ibid., 182–83.
65 Anderson, Commentary on The Mystery of Being, 61.
66 Marcel, EBHD, 83; Cf. Marcel, MBI, 133; Cf. Anderson, Commentary on The Mystery of Being, 63.
67 Marcel, PI, 68.
68 Marcel, PE, 39.
is to be with] is true not only on the plane of sensible being …. The tie which binds me to others gives me to myself.”

As we have seen, Marcel considers metaphysics and intersubjectivity to be two sides of the same coin. His very understanding of being relies on two premises: first, that being is a fullness or plenitude and secondly, that to be means essentially, to be-with. Thus, when a human person participates in being, she does not do so as an exclusively private experience; rather, being must be understood as “a whole,” and from our participation within that whole, we discover that we are with others; reality itself is ontologically imbued by a “togetherness…[by] intersubjectivity.”

Marcel notes that the word “existence” derives from the Latin ex-sistere which means to stand outside of. This suggests that we find meaning in human existence when we remember that we are born dynamically related to all that is around us. According to Marcel, I am born in relation to being and all that it entails. “My body inserts me into the world of real existence.” Ultimately, as we shall see, Marcel considers the goal of human existence to be intersubjective communion.

Marcel’s philosophical writings display his relentless desire to understand and promote interpersonal relationships. As Westphal describes it, the central theme and preoccupation of Marcel’s entire philosophy can be summarized by the word intersubjectivity. Even when he is dealing with other concepts, such as problem/mystery, disponibilité, hope, creative fidelity and witness, hidden behind his

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69 Gallagher, The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, 22.
70 Cf. Marcel, MBII, 8.
71 Ibid.
72 Cf. Miceli, Ascent to Being, 51.
73 Ibid.
74 Westphal, “Preface to Creative Fidelity,” xi.
explorations is his unremitting search to understand who we are as human persons and what it means that we are ontologically made for relationship with others.

Although Marcel recognizes and wishes to expose the ways in which human relationships can suffer moral and spiritual corruption, he is fundamentally hopeful about the possibility for them to achieve harmony and communion with others. As Westphal explains, Marcel’s account of the ethical in relationships is that of “being-with, as distinct from being-over-against.” Contrary to a Sartrean view of the human condition in which genuine motives of love and self-sacrifice are impossible, Marcel believes that relationships among persons do not need to consist in manipulation and calculation, but rather can and should be about sincere love and availability for others. For Marcel, human persons are created for relationship with others. As McCown expresses it: “a ‘we-territory’ (the territory of intersubjectivity) is more original in experience than an ‘I-territory.’”

As we can see, this inseparable link between being and intersubjective communion lies at the heart of Marcel’s doctrine of the metaphysics of hospitality. Moreover, his ontology grounds his notion of intersubjectivity, making it possible for the human person to be “open to the other, to welcome him in the deepest sense of the word.” What is this deepest sense of welcoming? We can assume Marcel is referring to the metaphysics of hospitality. It is a welcoming that touches upon and is rooted in being itself.

75 Ibid.
76 Cf. ibid.
77 McCown, Marcel and Human Openness, 43.
78 Marcel, MBI, 22.
Marcel elaborates his view as he writes: “It is not enough to say that it is a metaphysic of being; it is a metaphysic of we are as opposed to a metaphysic of I think.”79 As Marcel himself describes it, the “essentially anti-cartesian character” of his ontology goes directly against the view that the most foundational reality is the cogito, the individual conscious ego.80 Rather, he wants to advocate a “metaphysics of we are,” meaning that the ground of all being is actually inter-personal relationships, not isolated consciousnesses. Because Marcel’s ontological vision holds that being is always being-with he thinks genuine and meaningful human relationships are possible.

In conclusion, Marcel holds that we are not disengaged, isolated beings whose reality is shaped only by the external world. Rather, we are incarnational beings who become integrated within ourselves the more that we participate in the presences all around us and thus participate in the mystery of being.81

C. Sacredness and Human Dignity

In a lecture given in Heidelberg in 1963, entitled, “The Sacral in the Era of Technology,” Marcel refers to the over-technocratisation of the world as “one of the gravest problems of our day and age.”82 Given this context, he asks: “What are we to make of ourselves in face of the fact that we are gradually being … manipulated by a technology that we ourselves have devised?”83 What is to become of man? Although

80 Cf. Marcel, MBII, 8.
81 Cf. Anderson, Commentary on The Mystery of Being, 99.
83 Ibid.
Marcel does have concerns for environmental issues and the well-being of non-human life in respect to the growing industrialization of the world, the fact that he asks the question, “what are we to make of ourselves?” reveals that his deepest concern is the plight of man.\textsuperscript{84}

In order to fully understand Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality in its proper scope, we need to grasp his convictions regarding human dignity and the sacred character of all human life. He begins his essay, “The Sacral in the Era of Technology,” by attempting to distinguish between the concepts of the sacral and the holy. He appeals to the theologian Paul Tillich’s idea that strictly speaking “holiness” belongs only to God, while “a sacred realm is established wherever the divine is manifested.”\textsuperscript{85} Marcel accepts Tillich’s basic distinction while nonetheless pointing out that when we are talking about matters of “holiness” (\textit{sanctitas}), it is difficult to demarcate clear separations between the holiness that is found only in God and the holiness in which human beings partake. Because these distinctions are extremely nebulous, Marcel explains that he would rather concentrate his reflections on “what [the sacred] actually means to experience … and how it is that even non-believers, or more precisely, people who do not regard themselves believers, can also experience it.”\textsuperscript{86} Marcel thus turns to phenomenology to clarify theological terms.

Marcel’s notion of the sacred is deeply linked with his concept of human dignity (\textit{la dignité humaine}). What is important for Marcel is that dignity and sacredness are

\textsuperscript{84} For a study of Marcel’s environmental philosophy, see Oded Zipory, “Gabriel Marcel and the Possibility of Non-Anthropocentric Hope in Environmental Education,” \textit{Philosophy of Education Archive}, 2017, 107–21.
\textsuperscript{86} Marcel, “ST,” 42.
aspects of the being of the human person, and not just qualities that she has and thus could lose. As Marián Palencár points out, Marcel is critical of many of the modern theories of human dignity, not because he wishes to reject the notion of human dignity but because he wants to “re-formulate it from the position of the philosophy of existence.”

In its ordinary sense, the word *dignity* suggests a kind of “worth” or “value” which something or someone possesses. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this definition of *dignity*: “The quality of being worthy or honourable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.” Although Marcel would fundamentally agree with this definition, he would be quick to question from what source the worthiness derives. In ancient times and still to some degree today, dignity was associated with a certain noble rank in society, like that of the aristocracy. In the Renaissance and Enlightenment, greater emphasis was placed on the idea that man possesses a dignity because of his faculty of reason. Marcel is the first to agree that the human person’s rationality and ability to know the truth ennobles her and allows her to stand out from other creatures; however, Marcel ultimately repudiates such a rationalistic interpretation of the source of human dignity. He writes:

> We must admit that in current phraseology what is called the dignity of the human being is described in terms of Kantism (here, by the way, reduced to its simplest expression). We refer to the idea according to which the inalienable value of man lies in the fact that he is a rational being, that stress is placed on his faculty of understanding and comprehending the intelligible order of the world, or rather on his faculty of conforming to certain maxims considered as universally valid.

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89 Marcel, *EBHD*, 128.
The problem with identifying the source of dignity in the person’s ability to reason is that it binds it to some function or activity that she possesses. Some persons – young children and people with mental disabilities – are still fully human despite not being able to function rationally. Marcel rejects this view of human dignity because he thinks it views people under the gaze of the problematical rather than the mysterious. Marcel tells us:

  [This] spirit of abstraction cannot be separated from a certain lack of love, and by this I mean the inability to treat a human being as a human being…. [This spirit of abstraction can go] so far as to consider the individual within the framework of society as a mere unit of production and to judge his worth only in terms of productivity.90

As we will see in the last section of this chapter when we consider how the metaphysics of hospitality heals the brokenness of the world, Marcel thinks every human person has an inherent, inalienable dignity rooted in her ontological being, and this is particularly seen in the fact that even the most vulnerable and weak of humanity possesses this same value.

  Therefore, Marcel is clear in pointing out that this respect for the dignity of others is not exclusively for some and not for others; it is universal. Ultimately, for Marcel, human dignity is grounded in the fact that “the human soul [is] created in the image of God.”91 As Anderson remarks, these values “apply to all human beings, each of whom is a unique individual with inherent worth. Accordingly, the universality he is talking about here is, “a will for non-exclusion, … a kind of spiritual welcoming” of everyone.92 Let us take note of the hospitality language used by Marcel in his phrase, a spiritual welcoming,

90 Ibid., 123.
91 Marcel, MBII, 148.
92 Ibid., 172; Cf. Anderson, Commentary on The Mystery of Being, 177.
which sounds very much like his notion of *disponibilité*, being open and receptive to receive the goodness of every person.

Harkening back to our opening chapter about the broken world, we can recall Marcel’s disquiet concerning the way that technological growth has affected modern man, or, as he clarifies, “man belonging … to the transitional world in which we presently live.”

The reason why Marcel refers to the present world as “transitional” lies in the fact that he sees the values of modern man shifting:

[Until] now we have lived in a world with certain definite values, but at the moment we are facing a different world altogether – one … where the values of yesterday are going to be questioned radically, if not denied or rejected outright.

When Marcel spoke these words in 1963, he was certainly on target with his assessment considering the fact that most historians now agree that the 1960’s produced more extreme shifts in cultural and moral values than nearly any other decade in Western society.

When Marcel considers the values most at stake in this “transitional world,” he is intently focused on the dignity of the human person. In the rest of this essay, Marcel goes on to speak of the dangers which have begun and will continue to threaten our world, in regard to the diminishing sense of “the sacred character of life.”

Earlier in this thesis, we looked at the characteristics of the broken world – its loss of ontological mystery, its diminution of a sense of transcendence and its breakdown of genuine intersubjectivity

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93 Marcel, “ST,” 42.
94 Ibid.
96 Cf. Marcel, “ST,” 44. One of the specific topics which Marcel address in this essay is the issue of technology’s influence on procreation, specifically the use of contraception but he considers it as just one example of a broader problem.
between persons. Marcel reiterates his diagnosis of society, and explains the cause for the
brokenness more explicitly in terms of offenses against human dignity which he thinks
are leading us to “a state of unparalleled barbarity.”97 As we turn now to the actual text in
which Marcel speaks of the metaphysics of hospitality, we will see how he equates this
inability to recognize the sacredness of all human life as the clearest sign of an inhumane,
and thus barbaric, culture. Another text in which Marcel refers to the barbaric attitude
present in some spheres of modern society is the same passage where he speaks of the
metaphysics of hospitality.

D. A Contextual Look at Marcel’s Metaphysics of Hospitality

Although ample studies have been done on Marcel’s philosophy of
intersubjectivity, including the topics of disponibilité, human dignity and presence, far
less has been written about his philosophy of hospitality. Moreover, much has been said
regarding Marcel’s approach to being as ontological mystery, and yet up until this time,
Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality has yet to be adequately explored in a scholarly
way.98 Even though we have been elucidating this notion throughout the entire thesis,
now in this section we will directly examine Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. In the
following pages, we will look at the original French text from Le Mystère de L’Être in

97 Ibid.
98 Polk’s article is the only one in which the actual phrase “metaphysics of hospitality” is used. Cf. Danne
less formal level, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality has received recognition in the content of blogs. Cf.
Hannah Venable, “Marcel’s Metaphysics of Hospitality,” Through Wonder (blog), April 2013,
Existential-Humanistic Psychology (blog), October 2018, https://www.edmendelowitzphd.com/blog/79176-
the-mystery-of-being.
which Marcel discusses this phrase, examine its context and offer some reflections especially in light of his understanding of human intersubjectivity and the broken world.

Before concentrating our attention on the specific paragraph where Marcel describes the metaphysics of hospitality, I would like to say a word or two about the work, *The Mystery of Being*. As mentioned in my introduction, Marcel is not a systematic philosopher, and this makes summaries of his thought challenging. He himself was aware of this need to present a comprehensive vision of his philosophy, which he felt was achieved in the Gifford Lectures that were published as the two volumes of *The Mystery of Being*. In his *Existential Background of Human Dignity*, written ten years later, Marcel speaks of *The Mystery of Being* as the work which enabled him “to achieve the approximate synthesis” of his thought. The topics which Marcel discusses in the two volumes cover a broad range, from his understanding of philosophy as a “search,” to his notion of ontological exigency, to questions concerning hope and death. The location of Marcel’s concept of the metaphysics of hospitality in the very center of this comprehensive work, in my opinion, provides further evidence of how this idea lies at the heart of his philosophical vision.

In the first volume of *The Mystery of Being*, entitled “Reflection and Mystery,” Marcel establishes his phenomenological approach, presenting the image of a “search” or journey as the key to his understanding of philosophy. Philosophical reflection, he argues, is rooted in the human person’s interior disquiet, the universal restlessness which drives her to ask questions, many of which cannot be answered by a “yes” or a “no.” Each subsequent theme that he brings in speaks to Marcel’s preoccupation with the

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99 Marcel, *EBHD*, 3.
ultimate existential questions, which for him are both metaphysical and anthropological. Marcel’s medley of symphonic themes include “the broken world,” “transcendence,” “primary and secondary reflection,” “participation,” and “presence and mystery.” Volume II presents a continuation of Marcel’s reflections on being by developing its difference senses in relation to the concepts of faith, humility and hope. It is no coincidence that Marcel’s linchpin concept of the metaphysics of hospitality emerges in the final pages of Volume I, providing both a segue way to the second volume and the thread which unites the various components of all his philosophy.

The primary theme, common to both volumes of The Mystery of Being, is the link between being as fullness and intersubjective communion. This intrinsic connection between ontology and personal presence is further evidenced by the titles which Marcel gives to the chapters that transition the two volumes: “Presence as a Mystery” (Volume I, Chapter X) and “The Question of Being” (Volume II, Chapter I). The notion of being as plenitude and being as intersubjective communion converge masterfully in Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality. Anderson summarizes Marcel’s view as such: “Being as fullness … is a living intersubjective union of persons who acknowledge the intrinsic dignity of each human being.”

In a similar way in which the two volumes of The Mystery of Being provide a rich survey of Marcel’s entire thought, the concept of the metaphysics of hospitality, nestled at the center of the work, captures even more precisely the essence of his philosophical achievements.

Turning now to the actual passage where he presents the metaphysics of hospitality, Marcel describes the fact that he has always discerned “an organic connection

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100 Anderson, Commentary on The Mystery of Being, 188.
between presence and mystery [such that] every presence is mysterious.” He goes on to cite an example of presence which he had referenced before in recent conversations, the “mysterious character that attaches to the presence near one of a sleeping person, especially of a child.” He writes:

From the point of view of physical activity, or at least in so far as the notion of physical activity is defined in relation to the possible grasping of things, the sleeping child is completely unprotected and appears to be utterly in our power; from that point of view, it is permissible for us to do what we like with the child.

Marcel’s decision to present the example of a sleeping child as the most poignant image of what he means by the metaphysics of hospitality may surprise us at first. The child is utterly defenseless (désarmé) and vulnerable in the most profound sense of the word. At the same time, however, Marcel’s image effectively portrays the mystery of personal presence. Marcel uses the language of action to describe the way in which the child seems deficient, but we may easily infer that this first point of view is from the lens of the problematical. The child appears not only unprotected and vulnerable but also useless from the point of view of action. He continues:

But from the point of view of mystery, we might say that it is just because this being is completely unprotected, that it is utterly at our mercy, that it is also invulnerable or sacred.

At first, this claim seems absurd and paradoxical. How could this extremely vulnerable creature be invulnerable? The answer involves Marcel’s conviction that personal

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101 Marcel, MBI, 216.
102 Mendelowitz, “The Mystery of Being.”
103 Marcel, MBI, 216. French: “Du point de vue de l’action tout au moins pour autant que celle-ci se définit par rapport à une saisie possible, cet enfant endormi et parfaitement désarmé apparaît comme en notre pouvoir; il nous est loisible d’en faire ce que nous voulons.” Marcel, Le Mystère de l’Être, 232.
104 Marcel, MBI, 216–17. French: “Mais dans la perspective du mystère on pourrait dire que c’est justement parce que cet être est désarmé, parce qu’il est à notre merci – qu’il est invulnérable ou sacré.” Marcel, Le Mystère de l’Être, 232.
presence is a mystery, and is, thus, always sacred. It is true that the child is completely helpless and cannot protect himself from harm, yet at the same time, because the child is a being with a sacred presence, he possesses a mysterious power. Only when we understand Marcel’s view that human beings have an ontological predisposition for relationship does it make sense that the seemingly helpless child is, in fact, already connected to the broader human family.

In other words, Marcel can claim that such a defenseless creature is actually invulnerable because the child’s very being is a mystery that “commands” respect for his dignity. Moreover, the unprotected child is fully protected (from the standpoint of mystery) because his existence is connected to a family, not only his biological parents, but also the larger, human family. This family “ought to” love and cherish him, and because he “belongs” to them, they bear a particular responsibility to protect and revere him.

As discussed in chapter three, Marcel considers the family to be one of the richest examples of a mystery, but he thinks that philosophy has not sufficiently engaged in understanding it. Neither sociology nor biology are capable of probing deep enough into the core of this reality. Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality seems to provide his own response to the fact that “the family relationship is not one which up to the present has sufficiently engaged the attention of metaphysics.” Marcel tells us that the mystery of the family is “only a particular expression of [the] general mystery of being.” This statement reveals Marcel’s deep conviction that human beings share a common humanity, and we are all vulnerable and interdependent. Human weakness, limitation and need for

105 Marcel, MBI, 196.
106 Ibid., 197.
the help of others not only does not detract from our dignity as person, but it also
demonstrates our sacred and interconnected humanity. Marcel continues:

And there can be no doubt at all that the strongest and most irrefutable mark of
sheer barbarism that we could imagine would consist in the refusal to recognize
this mysterious invulnerability. This sacredness of the unprotected lies also at the
roots of what we might call a metaphysics of hospitality. In all civilizations of a
certain type (not, of course, by any means merely in Christian civilizations), the
guest has been regarded as all the more sacred, the more feeble and defenseless he
is. In civilizations of a certain type, I say: not, I might have added, of the type
dominated by the ideas of efficiency and output .... The more ... the ideas of
efficiency and output assert their supreme authority, the more this attitude of
reverence towards the guest, towards the wounded, towards the sick, will appear
at first incomprehensible, and later absurd. 107

In this passage, Marcel provides the closest thing to a definition of his metaphysics of
hospitality, describing it as an “attitude of reverence.” The metaphysics of hospitality is
not a set of practices or ideas; it is a personal attitude of love and respect toward all
human beings. Marcel would agree with Von Hildebrand who describes reverence as the
mother of all virtues, because it is a “silent, contemplative disposition toward being as
being.” 108 The virtue of reverence speaks of hospitality since it implies an open, receptive
attitude toward the values inherent in reality, particularly toward the value of human
dignity.

107 Ibid., 217. French: “Sans doute n’y a-t-il pas de marque de barbarie plus caractéristique et plus
irréfusable que celle qui consiste à ne pas reconnaître cette invulnérabilité-là. Là est d’ailleurs la racine
d’une métaphysique de l’hospitalité. L’hôte, dans toutes les civilisations d’un certain type, qui n’est
daussi d’ailleurs pas du tout nécessairement chrétien, a toujours été regardé comme d’autant plus sacré qu’il était
plus démunie et plus faible. Les civilisations d’un certain type, ai-je dit : ce sont celles qui n’étaient pas
dominées par les idées d’efficacité et de rendement .... Plus les idées d’efficacité et de rendement
affirmeront leur primauté, plus deviendra incompréhensible, plus apparaîtra même comme absurde cette
attitude réverentielle envers l’hôte, envers le blessé, envers l’infirmé.” Marcel, Le Mystère de l’Être, 232–
33.
Moreover, Marcel points out that this attitude of hospitality is the complete antithesis of barbarism, which by definition, is the absence of civilization and culture, i.e. an absence of humanity. Marcel suggests that contemporary society is becoming more and more barbaric (broken), as it loses its sense of the metaphysics of hospitality. He correctly points out that the more that the ideas of efficiency and productivity are given primary importance, the more that this reverential attitude towards the most vulnerable will seem absurd. A sleeping child is the epitome of inefficiency and nonproductivity. He appears quite “useless” if considered only from this problematic lens. However, as Marcel has wished to emphasize throughout his writings, a society which cares only for such “functional” values, is a broken society. While not being opposed to technology with its emphasis on efficiency and productivity, Marcel seeks to diagnose this disquieting situation for mankind when it loses its connection with the mysterious and the sacred.

Ultimately, the crucial value that Marcel ascribes to his metaphysics of hospitality – this attitude of reverence towards the guest, the wounded, the weak – revolves around the fact that it describes the conditions for humanity to remain humane. As Marcel states, when speaking of these same ideas a few lines down from the above-quoted passage: “Here, it is truly something essential which is at stake,” (Ici c’est vraiment l’essentiel qui est en jeu.) Marcel does not speak of barbarism as a mere lack of manners; rather, Marcel connects the metaphysics of hospitality to the question of human dignity, to this ability to recognize the sacredness of human life, even of the most defenseless.

When we examined hospitality as a practice for the ancient Greeks, we discussed the concept of theoxenia, which is understood as the practice of welcoming others in light
of the possibility that they could be a god or goddess in disguise. When Marcel speaks in this passage about the mysterious invulnerability present in a vulnerable person, it recalls something of *theoxenia*. Marcel does not shy away from acknowledging his belief that man’s dignity is ultimately rooted in his being made in the image of God. We discover, even in the weakest and poorest of human beings, a spark of the divine.

Marcel captures an apt description of the meaning of his metaphysics of hospitality when he describes it as the disposition to respond to “the sacredness of the defenseless.” It is not a humanitarian aid program nor a sociological recognition that the poor and needy ought to be helped by those who are more fortunate. Marcel does not deny the necessity nor benefit of practical solutions to the world’s problems, like feeding the poor and sheltering the homeless. Yet, he is talking about something that cuts deeper than superficial remedies. The perfected virtue of hospitality is an existential attitude capable of healing the most profound rifts in the human condition.

E. The Metaphysics of Hospitality as Healing for the Broken World

The metaphysics of hospitality involves all of the most poignant themes in Marcel’s philosophy: ontological mystery, *disponibilité*, personal presence, human dignity, the broken world and the primacy of love. This phrase captures the essence of his entire philosophical vision in a unique way. Now that we have looked at what Marcel means by a metaphysics of hospitality, we wish to consider how it provides a remedy for the brokenness of the world: 1) through its recognition of human dignity, and 2) through its movement in love from alienation to participation.

1. Recognition of Human Dignity

One of the symptoms of the brokenness of the world is the fact that human life is seen as expendable; thus, a heightened awareness of the value of each person would serve to alleviate this. Marcel tells us that at the root of une métaphysique d’l’hospitalité lies the recognition of the sacredness of human life, especially the most unprotected. Because Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality refers to an attitude rather than a set of external practices, let us examine the qualities which compose this attitude in relation to human dignity.

A first characteristic of this attitude would be the ability to recognize the goodness and supreme value of human life. Although this ability could seem inconsequential at first, Marcel argues that belief in the inherent goodness of the person is becoming increasingly questioned. A key feature of the desacralization of the world, he tells us, is that human life itself is rarely thought of as something good, a “benefaction.” He adds, “I am almost tempted to speak in stock market jargon about a devastating ‘drop’ in the price of life.”

The connection which Marcel makes between the intrinsic value (goodness) of human life and its being is extremely significant. If human life were just another commodity among the material things in the universe, then what sense would there be to preserve or uphold its value beyond what it can pragmatically offer? If human life is not intrinsically worthwhile and has no ultimate meaning, then it is ultimately absurd, and the logical response is despair. Commenting on modern man’s waning belief in the goodness and gift-character of life, Marcel writes:

\[\text{100} \text{ Cf. Marcel, “ST,” 48.} \]
\[\text{111} \text{ Ibid., 49.} \]
People [today] are more inclined to underscore what life implies in the way of revealing absurdity and precipitating despair. Hence, parents look upon themselves as having unjustifiably destined someone who did not ask for life to share the same unintelligible and too often disastrous gamble in which they themselves are implicated.\textsuperscript{112}

Marcel’s description certainly reminds us of Sartre’s pessimistic view of the origin of human life, in which man finds himself thrown into existence yet still condemned to be free.\textsuperscript{113} Marcel’s concern is that the more we allow the process of desacralization to set in, the more ignorant our culture will become of the authentic human condition.\textsuperscript{114} And in what does the authentic understanding of the human condition consist? Human persons have intrinsic goodness and are valuable for \textit{who they are} and not primarily for what they do or have. Furthermore, the person is not \textit{thrown into existence}, but rather \textit{is loved into existence}.

At the heart of Marcel’s understanding of the person is his belief in the \textit{gift-character} of existence, which further underscores the immense value belonging to human life and the undeniable link between existence and gift.\textsuperscript{115} Marcel believes that the person in herself is loveable and has value, not because she has certain qualities or gifts; but because she herself is a gift. Marcel would wholeheartedly applaud Josef Pieper’s suggestion that “what the lover gazing upon his beloved says and means is \textit{not}: How good that you are \textit{so} (so clever, useful, capable, skillful), but: It’s good that you are; how wonderful that you exist!”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 48–49.
\textsuperscript{113} The “thrownness,” [\textit{Geworfenheit}] of Heideggerian philosophy also considers man’s coming into the world to be arbitrary and void of any teleological significance.
\textsuperscript{114} Cf. Marcel, “ST,” 51.
\textsuperscript{115} Cf. Marcel, \textit{PI}, 213.
\textsuperscript{116} Pieper, \textit{Faith, Hope, Love}, 170. In this same work, Pieper explicitly cites Marcel’s famous dictum: “to love a being, is to say you, you in particular, will never die.” Ibid., 169; Marcel, \textit{HV}, 147. It is clear that
This kind of affirmation of the other person, in her being, is precisely what Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality entails. It is related to his conviction that the life of each one of us is a gift, and we are each called to be a gift for others. He tells us: “Each one of us is in a position to recognize that his own essence is a gift – that it is not a datum; that he himself is a gift, and that he has no existence at all through himself.”

Marcel believes that we are not only incapable of conferring our intrinsic value on ourselves, but our very existence is also dependent on an Absolute Thou.

Marcel explicitly tell us he believes that human life is “a gift of God,” and in fact, an “infinitely precious gift.” Although Marcel does not hide the fact that he maintains a “theocentric perspective” in respect to the idea of human dignity, he does not start with faith to arrive at his philosophy, but rather seeks to probe what experience reveals to him about the question. The source of human dignity is found in the fact that we are created by God, and our existence and our goodness derive from Him. Anderson summarizes Marcel’s perspective as follows:

[Only] if we experience an absolute Thou can we make sense of our feeling that something of imperishable value, something or someone deserving our total, unconditional love and fidelity, is present in our fellow human beings and in the causes to which we commit ourselves.

Nonetheless, if someone lacks faith in the existence of God, it is possible to experience human life as a gift.

Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality proposes recognizing human dignity by seeing the gift character of existence. Another way in which this attitude fosters healing for the broken world is that it teaches us to appreciate human dignity even in its weakest, most vulnerable forms. As with the case of the sleeping child, a metaphysics of hospitality means that not only are the defenseless members of society not discarded, but their dignity and sacredness is also respected and revered.

To demonstrate his “case for the inviolability of the sacral” as existing in all instances of human life, Marcel presents the example of those people who are the most weak and defenseless among us. He writes:

I want to show it [the sacred] to be there where we face whatever is in itself defenseless. For a person who has been totally absorbed by the technical and, let us say, dehumanized world, contemplation of the most frail of creatures is better suited than anything else to incite him to adoration.

Why does Marcel dare to suggest that the contemplation of the most frail of creatures, the defenseless, is actually an act akin to worship? Marcel’s consistency on this point is notable. He has already told us that human dignity does not consist in a quality or skill of the person, but rather, is ontologically inherent in her. In a strange but real way, the most vulnerable human persons reflect this truth of the ontological goodness and dignity of the human person in a particularly salient way.

This recognition of the value and sacredness of each and every person as would be understood in a metaphysics of hospitality, brings us to the heart of hospitality and what all its authentic versions have in common: an openness and welcoming towards others, especially those who are most in need. It is no coincidence that Levinas

123 Marcel, “ST,” 50.
124 Ibid.
understands hospitality’s primary recipients as the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. Not only are these groups of people given a special primacy in Biblical writings, but they also represent all humanity insofar as we are limited and in need of others.

If we return to Marcel’s image of the enfant endormi, Marcel tells us, *dans la perspective du mystère*, the child is invulnerable or sacred. The reason, why Marcel can claim this is because to look at a person from the “perspective of mystery” is to look at her through the lens of the ontological framework of communion. In other words, the only reason why this sleeping child is utterly protected, from the perspective of mystery, is because in her *being* she is part of the human family which is connected by ties of metaphysical hospitality. The helpless child, the elderly widow, the suffering stranger each elicit a call to the other who might encounter them, and this call is a plea to be respected and ultimately to be loved.

At first glance, Marcel’s claim that human dignity is particularly expressed through weakness seems paradoxical. Are not the strong and capable human beings the best archetype for what gives humans their worth? Marcel disagrees. While not diminishing the importance of the human person’s high capacities for wisdom and strength, Marcel wants to show that human dignity is rooted in something more profound: the *being* of the person. He asserts, “dignity must be sought at the antipodes of pretension and rather on the side of weakness.”\(^{125}\) A pretentious person, by definition, is one who makes an exaggerated claim to possess some kind of merit or dignity worthy of respect. Marcel tells us that true human dignity is not rooted in such showy displays of apparent worth, but rather, in the essence of what it means to be a human being, which he

\(^{125}\) Marcel, *EBHD*, 134.
ultimately places in the person’s being “created in the image of God.” As Anderson remarks that “human life has inherent dignity and meaning – and it has that because it comes from God, and so can be considered sacred and absolute.”

Marcel is aware that many individuals, such as adherents of a certain kind of naturalistic philosophy, could also find themselves moved by the very presence of the defenseless person or touched by the little child, yet still claim that these experiences have no objective foundation, but are, rather, a matter of sentiment. Marcel vehemently objects to this idea, telling us that “the word sacral ceases to have any meaning” if one denies that the sacred refers “to an actuality that absolutely transcends the levels of simple emotion.” Here we are reminded of why Marcel insists on basing his anthropology on solid ontological foundations.

We are not only moved to an affective experience (of mercy or compassion) at the vulnerability of a defenseless person as a biological instinct. Marcel would say that this affective experience occurs because we are oriented in our personal being to respond to values, such as the deep value of the person’s sacredness. Those persons who are weakest and most vulnerable – whether it be the child, the homeless man or the woman with mental disabilities – seem to convey a clearer sense of being human, whether or not they possess any particular quality or ability. This simplicity reveals human dignity in a unique way. Marcel writes:

It is my own profound belief that we cannot succeed in preserving the mysterious principle at the heart of human dignity unless we succeed in making explicit the properly sacral quality to it, a quality which will appear all the more clearly when

127 Anderson, *Commentary on The Mystery of Being*, 172.
129 Ibid.
we consider the human being in his nudity and weakness – the human being as helpless as the child, the old man or the pauper.\textsuperscript{130}

Palencár comments on the fact that Marcel’s theory of human dignity is rooted in a deep consideration for human weakness. He writes:

Criticizing this rationalist (Kantian) conception of dignity as a particular kind of power, Gabriel Marcel produces an original conception of existential dignity as weakness – the fragile vulnerable finitude of the human individual. But it is an active weakness/finitude that lies in the ability of the individual to creatively resist attempts to humiliate him and in his effort to recognize his unique human values. Part of this finitude, on the inter-subjective level, is an encounter with the neighbour in love, which is a service to others in defense of man’s weakness.\textsuperscript{131}

Palencár rightly points out that this weak and vulnerable dimension of humanity is tied to our condition as beings who are made for communion. Similar to Levinas, Marcel believes that human persons have a moral responsibility toward one another, and especially toward the weak. Unlike the figure of Cain who rebelliously shirked his responsibility to be his brother’s keeper, Marcel believes that each human person is fundamentally connected to and responsible for every other person in the human family.

In conclusion, Marcel holds that human dignity, characterized by sacredness, is a universal value inherent in all persons. This is why Marcel’s theory of intersubjectivity is no mere sociology of connections between people but rather an \textit{ontology of communion} – its foundation is in being itself. Thus, we can grasp more fully why Marcel’s vision of hospitality is a metaphysics of hospitality, because it is rooted in a welcoming of the being of the person.

\textsuperscript{130} Marcel, \textit{EBHD}, 128.
\textsuperscript{131} Palencár, “Gabriel Marcel and the Question of Human Dignity,” 116.
2. Love as the “Essential Ontological Datum”

In addition to the recognition of human dignity, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality offers our fractured world the mystery of love. Love and hospitality have a very strong connection for both can be described as making a gift of oneself to another. We will now consider how Marcel understands love in this context. First, we will look at how love, for him, is the essential ontological datum and what that implies. Secondly, we will examine how love, as a de-centering of the self, allows others to feel welcomed and accepted. Lastly, we will say some words on how love is the force that best unifies the fragmented pieces of the broken world.

For Marcel, the paradigm of communion is love, for it is love alone that he calls the essential ontological reality, and thus, I would add, love alone that redeems the broken world. In fact, whether it is disponibilité, presence, hospitality or intersubjectivity that he is talking about, behind all these concepts Marcel seems to have one real concern: the primacy of love. Moreover, we discover that for Marcel, love is not simply one idea or virtue among others; for him “it is the very destiny of each of us as creatures.”

In order to develop a definition of what Marcel means by love we have to recognize how closely he links love to being itself. Love is a kind of “subordination of the self to a superior reality, a reality at my deepest level more truly me than I am myself.” He insists that love is the only proper way to treat another person. O’Malley explains that for Marcel, love is “the fulfillment of ontological exigency and … the adequate recognition of presence.” To love another person is to affirm his or her

132 Marcel, *TWB*, 212.
133 Marcel, *BH*, 167.
existence as good. For this reason, he explains, an experience of hatred, as the opposite of love, occurs when:

I disbelieve in [this person’s] participating in any true sense of being. I despair of his deriving from that participation any value. I reject any bond between him and me …. Far from recognizing the person as a person, hatred may be said to see in him a dispersion reduced to mere object of my hatred, if that hatred be, in fact, consistent. 135

Through a description of the very antithesis of love, Marcel helps us better understand the way in which love and being imbue one another. The more I am able to love other people, the more I can believe and hope in their participation in the goodness of being itself. Furthermore, Marcel asserts that “being cannot … be indifferent to value.”136 Since he has said that the highest of all values is love, it follows that being is not indifferent to love.

As we mentioned in chapter three, Marcel considers reality itself to be imbued with a plenitude and fullness of being, which can be characterized as the jouissance essendi – the joy of existing. Marcel also sees a strong connection between joy and love. O’Malley tells us:

The relevance of joy to our understanding of the concept of personal love is clear, once we grasp its relevance to the themes of presence and fulfillment. Happiness, Marcel pertinently remarks, is a mode of self-presence and … to act joyfully is to enter into one’s activity with one’s whole self …. Joy, in fact, is expansive – a being with.137

The connections between joy and love, and love and being, help us to see that Marcel’s account of human existence is a positive one. Because Marcel holds to such a rich and value-laden ontological foundation, he can offer a view of interpersonal relationships that

135 Ibid., 127.
136 Marcel, MBII, 44.
137 O’Malley, The Fellowship of Being, 126.
is restorative for our broken world. Commenting on the connection between the gift character of existence and the joy found in loving, O’Malley writes: “Love is a way of being present that is joyful and generous, that delights in giving. More importantly, what is given in love is not this or that particular gift but … the giver himself.”\textsuperscript{138} As Marcel himself tells us: “Any gift is in some way a giving of oneself.”\textsuperscript{139}

As we saw in the last chapter, other philosophers, among them Levinas and Derrida, have developed their understanding of hospitality from the perspective of absolute alterity, because they are intent to preserve the unique and inviolable otherness of the other person. One of the presuppositions behind absolute alterity is the idea that any kind of relative alterity would jeopardize the dignity and identity of the other. Marcel would agree that respecting the Other fully in herself is of the utmost importance. However, Marcel can also speak to these thinkers about the fact that relative alterity does not automatically involve a violation of otherness. Moreover, philosophies of absolute alterity seem unable to offer anything more than justice and respect between persons. This is because there is no common ground in being by which to share in communion. Marcel, on the other hand, holds that: “What really matters is spiritual commerce between beings, and that involves not respect but love.”\textsuperscript{140}

According to Levinas and Derrida, a reciprocal hospitality would take away from the other person’s otherness. Their ontological vision prevents them from recognizing that if the offering of hospitality by the host is received and reciprocated by the other, this does not lessen the experience of hospitality but actually enriches it. Marcel holds that the

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Marcel, \textit{MBII}, 119; Cf. O’Malley, \textit{The Fellowship of Being}, 126.
\textsuperscript{140} Marcel, \textit{MJ}, 211.
more we give ourselves to others out of love, the more we find our true selves and help others find themselves as well. Believing that reality itself is ontological communion, Marcel argues that the human person not only can experience true intersubjectivity through relative alterity, but also that this is the only way in which true communion is possible. O’Malley summarizes this Marcelian vision rooted in love as he writes:

Love is the final and most effective closing of this gap [which separates myself from being]. And since the person is essentially a “being more” through being more with other persons, love is the essential creative act. Love, we can say, is the meaning of the person. The person exists to love. Within the fellowship of being that love creates and sustains, the person is most fully.141

In other words, when we share in mutual self-giving, I do not “lose myself” nor does the Other “lose herself.” Marcel’s vision – identifying love with being itself – registers the fact that the more I love, the more fully a human being I become. As a human person who loves, I become a “being more.”142

According to Marcel, human beings share a common humanity. He speaks about this in an early section of the second volume of The Mystery of Being, when talking about “The Question of Being,” in which he explains that, throughout his writings he has laid such stress on intersubjectivity because he wishes to “emphasize the presence of an underlying reality that is felt, of a community which is deeply rooted in ontology.”143 He goes on to say, “without this [community] human relations, in any real sense, would be unintelligible.”144 If human persons are not somehow connected on a deeper metaphysical level in a kind of common family, then authentic human relationships would have no meaning.

141 O’Malley, The Fellowship of Being, 130.
142 Ibid.
143 Marcel, MBII, 17.
144 Ibid.
Another very important insight that Marcel offers is this: “I concern myself with being in so far as I have a more or less distinct consciousness of the underlying unity which ties me to other beings of whose reality I already have a preliminary notion.”

These lines show us how Marcel thinks each one of us can achieve a kind of intuition of sharing something with all other human beings. Because being is a plenitude, to relate with another person does not take away from the person’s fullness of being but actually increases it.

Love can be understood as making a gift of oneself to another person. For this reason, the primary obstacle preventing love from being present is having an ego-centric spirit. A person who is self-centered is closed off to the presence of others, and this disposition, in turn, centers him in his own ego. Although Marcel believes human persons are made for communion and love, he recognizes that because we are broken, it is easy to slip into self-centered modes of living. Whenever we are preoccupied primarily with ourselves, such attitude acts as a barrier between us and others.

When we are self-enclosed, Marcel says, we not only shut out other people and their lives and experiences, but we also do harm to ourselves. Marcel explains that if this barrier were somehow overthrown and I were able to open myself to others, “it is also my own personal experience that I rediscover.” Recalling Buber’s terminology, the person becomes an I through a you. Marcel’s point is that the human condition is so deeply rooted – ontologically rooted – in interpersonal relationships that even if I were to try to affirm my own authentic existence without the presence of others, it would be

145 Ibid.
146 Cf. Ibid., 7.
147 Cf. Ibid.
148 Ibid.
impossible. Marcel writes: “I cannot be cut off from the one [my relationship with others] without being cut off from the other [my relationship with, or sense of, myself].”¹⁴⁹ He believes that each one of us finds her true identity only in relation with others. Since our natural tendency will be to stay centered in ourselves, Marcel emphasizes that for genuine communion to take place, there must be a decentering of the self to make room for the other:

I must somehow make room for the other in myself; if I am completely absorbed in myself, concentrated on my sensations, feelings, anxieties, it will obviously be impossible for me to receive, to incorporate in myself, the message of the other.¹⁵⁰

In this description, Marcel compares his interior capacity for relationship to that of a house. If there is no space inside a physical home for visitors to stay, then they are not welcome. Similarly, unless a person is available to receive others into herself, she cannot enter into communion.

Philosophers of absolute alterity worry that to share something in common with the other (which genuine love seems to require) would imply reducing the otherness of the other person. How is it not a reduction of my own person, as a subject, to “make room” for the other in myself, as Marcel’s view of hospitality suggests?

The answer lies in a proper understanding of the nature of love. Marcel agrees with Levinas’s view that the human person is naturally self-centered. At the same time, however, Marcel asserts the human person finds her meaning and fulfillment through love, both in receiving and giving it. Because we are naturally self-centered (a feature of the broken world), we do not naturally make room for others inside ourselves. We

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
¹⁵⁰ Marcel, CF, 88.
naturally seek our own interests, and often use others as means for our own ends. For this reason, Marcel argues, we need, in a sense, to “dethrone” our egos in order to find our true freedom, which is to love. Spaemann, once again, expresses what Marcel’s view of intersubjectivity and love entails, as he writes:

Only the affirmation of other centres of being, through recognition, justice, and love, allows us the distance on ourselves and the appropriation of ourselves that is constitutive for persons – in sum, “freedom from self.” This we experience as a gift. It is simply the emotional and practical side of that opening up, that light in which persons see themselves placed and in which they see whatever encounters them as what it is in itself, not merely as an element in their world serving their organism and their interests.151

Spaemann’s words resound deeply with Marcel’s view that love is a gift to be received, which does not reduce either of the subjects involved in the relationship. On the contrary, in a paradoxical way, love grows the more it is given. Spaemann’s description of the “opening up” resembles Marcel’s “making room for the other” – interior postures which allow the ego to be de-centered from itself and love to be possible. As we have said, hospitality as Marcel understands it, is a form of charity.

Love brings healing to the broken world because the broken world is shattered and love is the unifier, par excellence. As we have seen, the tensions and fractures of the world are on every level, but above all, they are interpersonal. Marcel is convinced that intersubjective communion, as expressed in a metaphysics of hospitality, brings unity to realities that otherwise seem divided.

In Creative Fidelity, Marcel describes how a genuine I-thou relation takes place when I am able to make room for the other’s presence within me, and through this experience of communion, the being which was just a “he” for me becomes a “you.” In

151 Spaemann, Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something,” 216.
other words, the other person, “allows me to discover myself; my outer defenses fall at the same time as the walls separating me from the other person fall.”152 As this experience of intersubjectivity takes place, “a unity is established in which the other person and myself become we, and this means that he cease to be him and becomes thou.”153 Thus, through the experience of communion and love, an ontological transformation takes place. Although I and the other person whom I love remain separate individual persons, my “self” has somehow “fused into the living unity he now forms with me [and the] path leading from dialectic to love has been opened.”154

Love not only creates a unity in the sense of healing of divisions, but it also helps overcome the epistemological divisions which afflict the broken world, such as the subject-object dichotomy. Critical of the rigidity found both in Cartesianism and Scholasticism, Marcel advocates a philosophical vision rooted in the primacy of love. He tells us:

[Love] as the breaking of tension between the self and the other, appears to me what one might call the essential ontological datum … [T]he science of ontology will not get out of the scholastic rut until it takes full cognizance of the fact that love comes first.155

When Marcel distinguishes between being and having, he points out that having describes how we relate to things while being relates to how we relate to persons. However, whenever our treatment of other persons falls into the level of having, which is more or less the same as the problematical, then we fail to treat the other as a subject, a

152 Marcel, CF, 33.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
155 Marcel, BH, 167.
thou, and there is more brokenness (division) in the world. Rozahegy summarizes Marcel on this point as he writes:

In terms of one’s relation with others, it is possible to transcend the order of having, and the division between self and other in which that order is rooted …. Beyond the tension between interiority and exteriority that constitutes the phenomenon of having, both love and charity involve the decentring of the self, the giving of myself to a reality that is not centered on myself but on the other – not as other but as Thou. What characterizes these states for Marcel is the fact that they work to dissolve the frontier separating the self from the other as other, thereby breaking the tension that maintains relations with others within the order of having. ¹⁵⁶

While the world of having tends to separate, divide and break apart, the realm of being, rooted in mystery and love, unifies. Even the distinction between subject and object dissolves in a genuine relation of communion between persons.

Marcel’s broken world is one in which alienation and disintegration mark the human condition. Since a breakdown in relationships has contributed to the broken world, its healing must come through a mending of relationships, which ultimately must come through love. Marcel does not present a simplistic view of the situation which has caused the world to be so fractured nor does he think it has an easy solution. What he is convinced about, however, is that the nature of the remedy for its healing/redemption lies fundamentally within the realm of human relationships.

I have argued that a metaphysics of hospitality can bring restoration to the broken world not because Marcel says it explicitly, but because his teachings on these matters consistently suggest it. Throughout his writings, Marcel describes the negative symptoms of the broken world – the loss of ontological exigency, social alienation, treating other

¹⁵⁶ Rozahegy, “Between Being and Having,” 141.
persons as objects for use and manipulation. The metaphysics of hospitality is an “attitude of reverence towards the guest,” with that guest being each person whom I encounter, even the most vulnerable and defenseless.

F. Conclusion

In his play Le Monde Cassé, Marcel offers a helpful description for what needs to happen to restore the broken world. The basic story line ends with the main character, Christiane, finally being honest with her husband in the hopes that they could restore their fidelity to one another. Commenting on the significance of the way the drama concludes, Marcel writes:

[At] least during a brief moment … these two human beings feel as one. With this instantaneous realization the work ends, and … nothing guarantees that this accord will last. But at least they will, at the apex of their life, have achieved true unity: they will have freed themselves from the broken world.157

As this text affirms, the broken world is healed through its unification. And its unification is possible only through a metaphysics of hospitality, in which persons are loved and revered for who they are and not only what they do. The feeling of oneness that Christiane and Laurent experience in this scene indicates a further dimension of the healing which hospitality brings in the midst of the brokenness of the world. This unifying experience, resulting when two or more persons mutually accept and revere one another, seems lacking in the accounts of hospitality found in Levinas and Derrida. The metaphysics of hospitality suggests that we engage more deeply in the unity and fullness of being, the more we participate in mutual self-giving with another person.

157 Marcel, EBHD, 92. My italics.
As we have seen, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality describes the attitude of persons who are able to see the inherent goodness and dignity of others and are thus open to receive them into themselves. Marcel’s ontological framework – rooted in value and in love – enables him to posit a view of relative alterity in which two human persons, though different in many respects, share a common dignity and humanity which enables them to recognize the presence of goodness in one another and make a mutual gift of self. As we near the end of our study, we recognize that Marcel’s understanding of hospitality is another way of describing his view of intersubjectivity, and his notion of intersubjectivity is another way of describing his philosophy of love. As he tells us, “we cannot fail to see that intersubjectivity, which … is the cornerstone of a concrete ontology, is after all nothing but charity itself.”

\[158\] Marcel, MBII, 170.
CONCLUSION

“A society will be judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members.”

− John Paul II

During the final weeks of writing this dissertation, I came across an opinion article in *The Washington Post* repining the fragmented state of political discourse in America today. Speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast, Harvard professor Arthur Brooks entreated his audience to probe the attitudes of their hearts for solutions to the current hostile political climate. In fact, Brooks argues that at the root of many of our societal problems is a caustic attitude, which he narrowed down to one particular vice – contempt. Referring to the definition given by nineteenth century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, Brooks explains that contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”

As a social scientist, Brooks has done extensive research on the negative effects that contempt has on the family and society. He explains that the largest predictor of a marriage ending in divorce is not number of arguments between the couple but whether the spouses habitually treat each other with contempt. This behavior includes gestures like eye-rolling, sarcasm and other belittling actions, all with the intention of making the other person feel worthless and despised. If such contemptuous behavior lies at the root

3 Cf. ibid.
of broken marriages, it is evident that this attitude contributes significantly to the brokenness of the world at large. Contempt toward the being of another person is completely antithetical to Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality.

The remedy that Brooks invites his audience to consider is that of a change of attitude, in order to become “missionaries for love in the face of contempt.” The diagnosis he gives and the antidote he offers are consonant with Marcel’s view, since both the sociologist and the philosopher recognize a brokenness in the world arising from a lack of love and reverence toward other persons. Brooks’s words even mirror Marcel’s by the fact that both speak of the change of hearts and attitudes as the remedy and healing for the fragmented condition. Brooks states:

In politics today, we treat each other as worthless, which is why our fights are so bitter and cooperation feels nearly impossible …. If you see the world outside this room as mission territory, we might just mark this day, February 6, 2020, at the National Prayer Breakfast, as the point at which our national healing begins.

The prevalence of contempt in the attitudes of the members of our society – and not just politicians – continues to support Marcel’s opinion that our world is essentially broken. At the same time, the idea that its healing begins with the embracing of counter dispositions such as openness, kindness and love reveals the perennial wisdom of Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality.

The state of political discourse and family life may seem more fragmented today than ever, yet Marcel would argue that the current situation is simply a more potent expression of the same broken world. Although he would fully agree with Brooks’s words, Marcel would also insist that the healing has to happen on the metaphysical level.

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
The metaphysics of hospitality is about recognizing the sacred character of each person and affirming others in their ontological goodness.

This project has examined Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality as an attitude of welcome and loving respect for the sacredness of the other person, especially the vulnerable and unprotected. Contrary to the other versions of intersubjectivity which we have considered – Sartrean, Levinasian, and Derridean – Marcel holds that human persons can enter into communion with each other in a way that respects differences yet also relies on a shared metaphysical basis. The reason that a sleeping child – vulnerable and unprotected – is actually invulnerable and safe is because the child is a human being, made in the image of God, and therefore, sacred. In other words, a spark of the divine lies hidden in the mysterious presence of this helpless creature and the rest of us who might encounter the child are required – through our shared humanity – to show him respect, protection and love. Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality has no greater meaning than expressing the truth that as human persons, we are ontologically made for relationship with others.

Through the foundational concepts such as participation, presence and *disponibilité*, Marcel presents a vision of reality in which all persons, in virtue of being human, are connected by a common participation in the ontological mystery; we are members of a common human family. Marcel tells us that individual, personal relationships based on love and welcoming reverence will bring the balm of healing to the larger community.

Essential to this healing, as we have seen, is shifting how we view other persons. Marcel challenges us to ask this question when we encounter another person: do I see this
her as if she is a *problem* to be solved, or do I see her as a *mystery* to be revered? To treat a person like a problem is to degrade her. Marcel tells us: “there is nothing which is more important to keep in view … [than the fact that] the knowledge of an individual being cannot be separated from the act of love or charity by which this being is accepted in all which makes of [her] a unique creature or, if you like, the image of God.”

In this same line, Marcel would fully echo the words of Joseph Ratzinger who writes: “Humans are dependent. They cannot live except from others and by trust. But there is nothing degrading about dependence when it takes the form of love … [because to love someone means saying,] ‘I want you to be.’ Humans are dependent – that is the primary truth about them. And because it is, only love can redeem them.” As Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality makes clear, we are made for interpersonal communion because we are made for love. Only love can bring healing to our broken world.

This project has explored Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality and shown how it offers a healing remedy for the broken world of today. Although there is still much more to develop in Marcel’s rich understanding of the metaphysics of hospitality, the present study has contributed to several fields.

First of all, the phenomenological investigation of hospitality offers a unique contribution in the field of Marcel studies. Marcel’s ontological personalism abounds with rich themes ranging from the dignity of the human person to creative fidelity to the metaphysics of hope. Many Marcelian scholars have examined these well-known topics, yet none seem to have focused in an in-depth way on his metaphysics of hospitality.

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Another area in which this study contributes is Marcel’s philosophical anthropology. We started out with an examination of the broken world, which Marcel argues has been breaking more and more as the technological proficiency of modern man has increased. It also presented what could be called the metaphysics of hostility of Sartre whose ontological framework allows no space for genuine intersubjective relations or love. Similarly, this study looked at Marcel’s critique of Sartre’s understanding of freedom with its corresponding idea that the value and identity of a person lies not in the being of the person but in what she does.

This project also contributes valuable reflections in the realm of Marcel’s metaphysics. It explored Marcel’s ontological framework and considered his claims that being is a plenitude or fullness and that being always means being-with. Moreover, in this discussion it presented Marcel’s concern for the loss of ontological exigency and how this has added to the fragmentation of the world. Lastly, by presenting the Marcelian distinctions of problem/mystery and primary/secondary reflection, it showed how his ontological tools help to provide necessary clarifications for allowing intersubjectivity to be immersed within a metaphysical context.

In addition to this, my project adds important material in the field of the philosophy of hospitality. It gives us an insight into the nature of hospitality and its perennial and universal significance throughout history and culture, presenting a panorama of its facets, describing it as a sociological concept, and also enriching this analysis with examples from Greek literature. Hospitality studies have become an important field of academic research today especially due to the growing enterprise of
commercialized hospitality, the need for which Marcel would say is a contributing factor in the fractured condition of man today.

This thesis offers more significant insights for hospitality studies in chapter four where I presented a discussion of the thinkers Levinas and Derrida, who are considered to be the most prominent experts in this area of philosophical study. It looked at their common understanding of absolute alterity and its implications for their views on hospitality. This was considered in dialogue with Marcel’s account of relative alterity. Levinas’s face-to-face encounter has been profoundly influential not only in philosophy but also in psychology. Derrida’s philosophy of hospitality has influenced social and political philosophy in major ways, particularly for questions of migrants and refugees. The dissertation centered the discussion on Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality and how the related Marcelian terms of disponibilité, presence, participation and sacredness, all interconnect and imbue his teaching on hospitality.

Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality has significant implications in the area of the social sciences, particularly psychology. This was mentioned when discussing Marcel’s concept of availability and how the field of psychology has seen benefits in applying it within therapeutic practices. Moreover, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality, as an attitude of welcoming the other and responding to their needs, is an important disposition for a flourishing human life.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I presented my own definition of hospitality as an attitude of welcoming another person from a place of abundance in the host which responds to a human need or desire in the guest. I believe that this description is fully consonant with Marcel’s understanding in his metaphysics of hospitality. Included in this
definition is the important fact that the practice of hospitality must involve a warm and welcoming disposition or attitude. Moreover, the definition is effective because of the second condition that it describes, namely, that hospitality responds to a human need. Ordinarily, we are inclined to think of hospitality meeting the needs of travelers or people seeking food or entertainment. These needs are all real and services of hospitality certainly do respond to them. However, what we have looked at in this dissertation concerns how hospitality meets needs that run ontologically deeper than a place to stay or a meal to eat.

Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality offers healing for the broken world because it is human hearts that are wounded and in need of restoration through love. The emotional, psychological and spiritual needs of the person include a sense of belonging, a need for community and the conviction that one’s life has meaning. Ultimately, as we have aimed to show in this thesis through presenting Marcel’s wisdom, the human person is made for love; she is made for this relationship of being welcomed and received by another in order to reciprocate love.

In conclusion, today’s broken world – as seen in the climate of political discord and contempt – needs a remedy which goes deeper than mere changes in societal structures or institutions. The world needs to recover its heart, as Christiane pensively concludes in Marcel’s Le Monde Cassé. At the center of its restoration lies a recognition of the dignity of each and every person, beginning with the most vulnerable and fragile of our race. When the hearts of all people can recognize the sacred presence of a sleeping child, then the world will be a better place.


———. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005.


