

THE MAJESTY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY:
MARITAIN AND MARCEL CONTRA CARTESIAN SUBJECTIVITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a non-philosopher, I would not claim to have fully understood *The Degrees of Knowledge*. It is a truly difficult book that requires a great deal of intellectual spade work. And yet, an important facet of Maritain's genius is his ability to speak the language of people in many academic fields, as well as to poets and artists. So, as a student of language and literature and a person of faith, I have found his epistemological masterpiece to be unusually valuable for sorting out questions that bear upon the interrelation of various domains of intellectual inquiry: art and morality, science and religion, and empirical science vs. philosophy of nature. Published over threequarters of a century ago, it remains an invaluable resource in distinguishing the degrees of knowledge in order to understand how they may ultimately be united in human consciousness.

Jacques Maritain considered René Descartes one of the most deleterious of philosophers and a key figure in all that has gone wrong in Western thought since the seventeenth century. He singled him out along with Martin Luther and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1927 book that traced some of the more significant modern philosophical errors (*Three Reformers*). No wonder then that, when he published his response to Jean-Paul Sartre (*Existence and the Existent*, in 1947), he swiftly homed in on Sartre's clear embrace of Cartesian subjectivity. As you will soon see, this paper could easily have been entitled "The Majesty of Intersubjectivity and The Poverty of Sartrian Existentialism." In these remarks, I wish to explore the post-World War II confrontation of existentialism and Thomism in an effort to focus our attention on the crucial role that intersubjectivity must play in any viable ontology.

*Existentialism Is a Humanism*¹ is the transcript of a public lecture given in Paris by Jean-Paul Sartre on 29 October 1945 at the invitation of the Club Maintenant and published (with only minor revisions) as a book by the Editions Nagel the following year. The author of *Being and Nothingness* had been accused of grim pessimism and a lack of human solidarity by both communists and Catholics. Thus, he was seeking to present his particular version of existentialism in a constructively humanistic light.

Jacques Maritain, for his part, was eager to respond to Sartre's philosophy with a more ontologically complete picture of human existence, one that would reveal the poverty of Sartrian thought and compete successfully for the minds of young Frenchmen, who were looking for a sound philosophical foundation for reconstructing their cultural identity in the wake of the long, hard years of the German Occupation. So, just one year after Sartre's little popularizing book appeared in print, Maritain published his *Existence and the Existent* (1947). It is probably safe to say that this "short treatise" (his original title in French) represents a direct response to Jean-Paul Sartre's public defense of atheistic existentialism.

A third major text that I shall be using in this analysis can be considered another pointed response to Sartre, and one that harmonizes admirably well with Maritain's thought. Gabriel Marcel's two volumes on *The Mystery of Being* were the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1949 and 1950. The first volume is entitled *Reflection and Mystery* (Chicago: Regnery, 1950) and the second *Faith and Reality* (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway, 1951). So, within the space of the five years immediately following WWII, three of France's most important philosophers were engaged in a very public dispute over the nature of being, and I believe the role that intersubjectivity played in that confrontation is worth revisiting. In this brief essay, then, I combine Maritain's Thomist metaphysics with Marcel's notion of intersubjectivity in an effort to demonstrate how they correct Sartre's Cartesian subjectivism. I quote here from the English translations of Maritain's *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932) and the two volumes of Marcel's *The Mystery of Being* (1950), but for Sartre's

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1946).

L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme and Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*, I provide my own translations of the original.

II. SARTRE'S CARTESIAN SUBJECTIVISM

In the very beginning of his text, Sartre acknowledges that his own version of existentialism takes its departure precisely from pure subjectivity, that is, the Cartesian *cogito*, or “the moment in which man apprehends himself in his solitude.”² “There can be no other truth at the point of departure than this one: *I think, therefore I am*, that is the absolute truth of the conscience apprehending itself.”³ The very foundation of Sartre's philosophy—the proposition that existence precedes essence—means everything must begin with subjectivity. Hence, for him, there is no human nature, no natural law, and there are no moral or ethical norms that guide us in our choices. “Man is nothing else than what he makes himself.”⁴ This radical freedom that Sartre embraces in his Cartesian subjectivity is a direct consequence of his taking Ivan Karamazov literally. “The point of departure of Existentialism [is that] everything indeed is permitted if God doesn't exist, and consequently man is abandoned.”⁵ The communist critics to whom Sartre wished to respond had seen clearly that such an approach, imprisoning the Existentialist within Cartesian subjectivity, would necessarily entail a profound philosophical solipsism out of which it would be impossible to achieve genuine solidarity.

Maritain says: “It's one thing to know that God is a transcendent and sovereign Self, but it's an altogether different matter to enter oneself, with all one's baggage and one's own existence and flesh and bones, into a vital relationship where created subjectivity is confronted with this transcendent subjectivity and waits for one's salvation from it, in

² *Ibid.*, 11: “Le moment où l'homme s'atteint dans sa solitude.”

³ *Ibid.*, 64: “Il ne peut pas y avoir de vérité autre, au point de départ, que celle-ci: *je pense donc je suis*, c'est là la vérité absolue de la conscience s'atteignant elle-même.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22: “L'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36: “C'est là le point de départ de l'existentialisme. En effet, tout est permis si Dieu n'existe pas, et par conséquent l'homme est délaissé.”

trembling and love. That belongs to the realm of religion.”⁶ Maritain’s rejection of the Cartesian subjectivity in Sartrean existentialism is grounded in this deep conviction that humans are able to relate to one another as subjectivities (rather than objectifying each other) and that the reason for that ability is the ultimate Subjectivity of the Divine. Because we are known by God as subjectivities, we are immersed in an existence whose profoundest meaning is created by the network of relating subjectivities that Gabriel Marcel calls “intersubjectivity.” Though Maritain does not use the word, he obviously agrees wholeheartedly with Marcel.

Sartre, with Descartes, can only be aware of his own existence through his awareness of his ongoing thinking process. He is a perfect subjectivity. But the only way he can know the subjectivities around him is by objectifying them, thus rendering them effectually lifeless. Each individual Cartesian or Sartrean subjectivity understands itself, then, as the center around which reality revolves. And Sartre has eliminated the possibility of the Divine Subjectivity, even as objectified. For this reason, when he says “Hell is other people,” he means that he is aware that they are objectifying him in just the same way he is objectifying them, making them functions of his own subjectivity.

III. MARITAIN’S METAPHYSICS AND CONNATURALITY

Maritain draws from St. Thomas his understanding of how each individual knows oneself. This self-knowledge is obscure, shadowy, non-scientific, experiential, and incommunicable. It is the intuition of being, such as Maritain describes it in *A Preface to Metaphysics*, as well as *Existence and the Existent*. “Subjectivity as subjectivity is unconceptualizable, it is an unknowable abyss—unknowable through notions, concepts, or representation, through any kind of science, introspection, psychology, or philosophy. How could it be otherwise, since all reality known conceptually, by notions or representations, is known as an

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Court traité de l’existence et de l’existant* (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1947), 120: “C’est quelque chose de savoir que Dieu est un Soi transcendant et souverain, mais c’est une tout autre affaire d’entrer soi-même, avec tout son bagage et sa propre existence et sa chair et ses os, dans la relation vitale où la subjectivité créée est confrontée à cette subjectivité transcendante, et attend d’elle son salut, et tremble et aime. C’est l’affaire de la religion.”

object, not a subject?”⁷ Thus, Sartre’s knowledge both of himself and of others is a form of objectification.

Maritain had already demonstrated this insight in “The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics,” the opening chapter of *The Degrees of Knowledge*. There he asserts that the poverty of “incurably nominalist” philosophers is that “while having a taste for the real indeed, they nevertheless have no sense of being.”⁸ The majesty of metaphysics lies in its ability, by means of abstract conceptualization, to arrive at notions that he says are analogous to humans’ knowledge of the Divine. Its poverty lies in its inability directly to name the Divine name, since “metaphysics makes God known to us only by analogy.”⁹ Thus it is that “the most perfect fruit of the intellectual life still leaves man unsatisfied.”¹⁰ In fact, it awakens a desire for union with God in the direct experiential way that is opened by intersubjectivity, which Maritain mostly refers to as charity or sometimes “*l’amour fou*,” mystical mad love. “Here below, intellect can enter the realm that lies beyond all method only by a renunciation-of-knowing in which God’s Spirit, by making use of the connaturality of charity and the effects produced in affection by the Divine Union, grants the soul a loving experience of that very being which no notion approximates or can approximate.”¹¹

One of the more central tenets of Gabriel Marcel’s argument in both volumes of *The Mystery of Being* is that Sartre’s pure subjectivity is a perspective from which he can never adequately account for being. He proclaims that a genuinely robust metaphysic must be anti-Cartesian. The only perspective from which to apprehend being in its rich, mysterious fullness is a relational one. It is precisely in the relatedness to other subjectivities that our subjectivity can hope to apprehend its full meaning. In what I consider a stroke of aphoristic genius, Marcel puts it this way: “It is a metaphysic of *we are* as opposed to a metaphysic

⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Scribner’s, 1959), 1.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 14.

of *I think*.¹² Marcel's analysis of Sartre is a devastating exposé of the latter's inadequacy to define being. He notes that Sartre "is himself obliged to take the other only as a threat to my liberty...or as a possible source of seduction."¹³ When Sartre wrote his famous line in *No Exit* ("Hell is other people"), he revealed "his impossible position; ...he can have no understanding of *philia* or *agape*. In the end it is only on the one hand the domain of *eros*...or, on the other...that of a community of work."¹⁴ And the community of work, he goes on to say, is only solidarity as viewed from the outside.

Maritain sheds light on the problem of the metaphysic of *I think* by recalling Pascal's thinking reed rather than Descartes' thinking subjectivity. He finds a 20th-century version of Pascal's famous metaphor in a quote from Somerset Maugham's *The Summing Up*: "To myself I am the most important person in the world; though I do not forget that, not even taking into consideration so grand a conception as the Absolute, but from the standpoint of common sense, I am of no consequence whatever. It would have made small difference to the universe if I had never existed."¹⁵ Maritain says such a consciousness causes us to vacillate between the two Pascalian infinities of our miserable inconsequentiality on the one hand and our astounding nobility on the other and that the only way to resolve the antimony is to escape this solipsism by transferring the center of the universe from ourselves to God.

IV. MARCEL'S INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Just specifically what does Marcel mean, then, by intersubjectivity? And is it really in complete harmony with Maritain's metaphysics? First of all, Sartre holds that I am nothing more than my acts, my life. Man, he asserts, "only exists insofar as he realizes himself, thus he is nothing

¹² Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. II: *Faith and Reality*, tr. René Hague (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway, 1951), 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1938), quoted in *Existence*, 123.

else than the sum total of his acts, nothing other than his life.”¹⁶ Marcel insists that “I ought to say both that I am my life and that I am not my life; the apparent contradiction tends to vanish away if we understand that I am weighing the actual life I have been leading in the balance of the potential life I carry within me, the life that I aspire to lead, the life that I would have to lead if I wanted to become fully myself; it is into this life of potentiality and aspiration that I penetrate when I turn inwards....It is in the name of a [personal] vocation...that I may be led to condemn a life which is the very life which, up to the present, I have actually been leading.”¹⁷ Hence, while agreeing with Sartre in emphasizing the moral responsibility for owning up to one’s actions and how they engage the rest of humanity—which, by the way, is clearly the most valuable contribution that Sartrean existentialism has made—Marcel also avoids the idealist trap that made Sartre’s philosophical system a dead-end.

A further example of the way Marcel gives the lie to Sartre’s bald assertion that a human being is nothing other than his or her life is his consideration of the apparent narratability of an individual’s life. “My life presents itself to reflection as something whose essential nature is that it can be related as a story,”¹⁸ he observes. To narrate, however, is necessarily to summarize, and “the summarizing of the parts of a tale is in a certain sense obviously an opposite kind of operation from the unfolding of the tale as a whole. ...We have the naive idea of the story as reproducing life—we talk, for instance, of some story as a ‘slice of life’ or praise its ‘documentary’ exactness—but anything like a reproduction of life, in the strict sense, is just what a story cannot provide.”¹⁹ It’s hardly surprising to note that Gabriel Marcel here evokes Proust’s quixotic project “in search of lost time (*à la recherche du temps perdu*).” For, in Proust’s effort to recapture the past, he himself eventually realizes that he is actually ending up with something new, rather than reconstructing what is hidden in his involuntary memory.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Existentialism*, 55.

¹⁷ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol I: *Reflection and Mystery* (Chicago: Regnery, 1950), 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

The real story in Proust's great novel is the forging of a new self for the author. The past, he discovers, cannot be reconstructed nor narrated with any degree of accuracy or completeness. The narration itself comes to have the supreme significance for him.

Gabriel Marcel's meditation on being is able to preserve the ineffable mystery of ontology that Sartre had buried under his Cartesian subjectivist perspective. In the course of Marcel's quest to uncover the true nature of being, he broods for pages and chapters over the question of identity. Who am I? he wonders. Am I my body? A beautifully revealing reflection on the question produces the insight that "I am my body only in so far as I am a being that has feelings."²⁰ From there he proceeds to explore feeling as a mode of participation. Now Marcel's notion of participation is closely akin to Maritain's philosophy. Participation in an enterprise, he suggests, is a matter of feeling more than thought. "This will to participate is itself metaphysically possible only on the basis of a kind of human consensus (and a consensus, of course, is literally merely a thing felt, rather than something thought)."²¹ He speaks of the peasant's deep attachment to the land, comparing it to the artist's deep contemplation of the landscape she is painting. Both, he suggests, are forms of participation, and they point toward the "intimate relationship that exists between participation and the creative spirit."²² One is immediately reminded of Maritain's notion of connatural knowledge. Even empirical knowledge, according to the Thomist, is immaterial, in that the known is made present within the knower and the knower becomes by participation, in some measure, the known. Maritain cites an example of this affective union in the artist who enters into a profound communion with the subject of his or her painting. But with Marcel's "metaphysics of *We are*," Maritain would no doubt already see a nascent affective union with God unattainable by reason alone. The soul in a state of grace becomes a "partaker of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4) and grows into an experiential knowledge of the Divine. Such a mode of knowing is wedded to the creativity of the human spirit in its various ways of living out the connectedness of intersubjectivity. Here we are entering

²⁰ Ibid., 101.

²¹ Ibid., 115.

²² Ibid., 117.

what Maritain calls the *suprarational* degrees of knowledge, inhabited by theology and mystical wisdom.

In "The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics," Maritain evokes in soaringly lyrical terms the analogous roles of the metaphysician and the poet (a description, by the way, that echoes the parallel callings of Jacques as philosopher and his wife Raïssa as poet).²³ "The metaphysician breathes an atmosphere of abstraction which is death for the artist. Imagination, the discontinuous, the unverifiable, in which the metaphysician perishes, is life itself to the artist. While both absorb rays that come down from creative Night, the artist finds nourishment in a bound intelligibility which is as multiform as God's reflections upon earth, the metaphysician finds it in a naked intelligibility that is as determined as the proper being of things. They are playing seesaw, each in turn rising up to the sky. Spectators make fun of their game; they sit upon solid ground."²⁴ Marcel would probably have said that Sartre was one such spectator, neither a true metaphysician nor a true poet. For Marcel, the analogy is between not only the metaphysician and the artist but also the contemplative mystic, and elsewhere Maritain too brings these three functions into intimate relationship. Contemplation, says Marcel, "must be considered as a mode of participation, and even as one of participation's most intimate modes. But, on the other hand, a true artist, a Vermeer, a Corot, a Hokusai, is also a contemplative—he is anything but a superficial spectator and nothing if not a deep participant."²⁵ The awareness of the ultimate Subjectivity as God, then, is the means of escape from Sartre's Cartesian trap. "I am known by God," declares Maritain, and "God does not need to objectify me in order to know me."²⁶ Objectification betrays the subject, thus creating the agonizing Sartrian definition of hell as other people. Intersubjective relations, made possible by God's first knowing us as subjectivities, are grounded in the divine nature of self-giving love. "To

²³ It would not be exaggeration to say that they both were called to mystical contemplation.

²⁴ Maritain, *Degrees*, 2.

²⁵ Marcel, *Reflection*, 123.

²⁶ Maritain, *Existence*, 127: "Je suis connu de Dieu. ...Il n'a pas besoin de m'objectiver pour me connaître."

say that the union of love makes of the beings whom we love another ourselves for us is to say that it makes them for us another subjectivity, another subjectivity of our own. Insofar as we truly love them, that is to say, not for ourselves but for themselves...we know them in their very subjectivity, at least to a certain degree."²⁷

The Human Knower	The Mode of Knowing	The Knowledge Attained
A) artist/poet/mystic	intersubjectivity/agape/caritas	Connatural Knowledge of the Divine [or dimly intuiting the Divine]
B) metaphysician	abstract/conceptual notions directed outward	Analogies of the Divine
C) Cartesian thinker	abstract/conceptual notions directed inward	"L'enfer c'est les autres" or, I am objectified by others, or I am alone in my subjectivity

Diagram of relationships

²⁷ Ibid., 139: "Dire que l'union d'amour fait de l'être que nous aimons un autre nous-mêmes pour nous, c'est dire qu'elle le fait pour nous une autre subjectivité, une autre subjectivité nôtre. Dans la mesure où nous l'aimons vraiment, c'est à dire non pour nous, mais pour lui...nous le connaissons dans sa subjectivité même, du moins dans une certaine mesure."

By now it seems to me that we can accurately say that Gabriel Marcel's notion of intersubjectivity is one that works harmoniously in Maritain's Thomist metaphysics. When we put Maritain's *Existence and the Existent* together with Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*, we have a strongly complementary corrective to Cartesian subjectivity, a rich metaphysics of *We are*, which contrasts clearly with Sartre's metaphysics of *I think*. Ultimately, this study has suggested to me that intersubjectivity, rather than actually being included in metaphysics, probably should be characterized as adding to and completing it. Like connaturality, it is most at home in poetic or mystical experience. I thought I would try to draw a kind of schematic or diagram, the way Maritain sometimes did, to express these relationships.

My conclusion from this graph: It takes both A & B to counter C. Gabriel Marcel was both; Maritain, with Raïssa, amounted to both. Sartre, in his efforts to avoid being objectified by the other, remained imprisoned in his own subjectivity. Jacques Maritain showed us how to escape that prison through the analogies of the Divine that are accessible to the metaphysician who seeks beyond his own subjectivity. Gabriel Marcel—along with poets like Raïssa and contemplatives like her husband—opens us to the intersubjectivity that enables us to commune, both with God and with other humans, in a rich connaturality.

In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain concludes his chapter on "Subjectivity as Subjectivity" with a meditation on the grand fulfillment of subjective connatural knowledge in the beatific vision. "When we arrive at the terminus where we as subjects shall see ourselves in God and in divine eternity, all the moments of our past life will be known to us in the immediacy of the instant in which they were lived, and all our acts (even the bad ones, now not only pardoned but no longer leaving any trace or shadow) as emanating presently in the freshness of subjectivity, this time transluminous itself. And in the virtue of the vision in which our intelligence possesses the *Ipsium esse subsistens*, we shall know not only ourselves and all our life in a sovereignly existential way, but also the other creatures, whom in God we shall finally know as subjects, in the unveiled depths of their

being.”²⁸ It is a passage reminiscent of Revelation 2:17, where Jesus says, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

²⁸ Ibid., 132: “Mais quand parvenu au terme le sujet se voit en Dieu et dans l'éternité divine, tous les moments de sa vie passée lui sont connus dans l'actualité et la préstantialité de l'instant où ils ont été vécus, et tous ses actes (même les mauvais, maintenant non seulement pardonnés, mais ne laissant plus ni tache ni ombre) comme émanant présentement de la fraîcheur de la subjectivité, cette fois translumineuse elle-même. Et dans la vertu de la vision où son intelligence possède l'*Ipsum esse subsistens*, il ne connaît pas seulement lui-même et toute sa vie d'une manière souverainement existentielle, mais aussi les autres creatures, qu'en Dieu il connaît enfin comme sujets, dans les profondeurs dévoilées de leur être.”